



# Differences Between Founder-Led and Non-Founder-Led Congregations: A Research Note

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## Abstract

While sociologists have had a longstanding interest in religious leadership and congregational authority structures, most of the research in this area ignores the fact that many congregational leaders started the congregations they lead. Being in this unique position, founding pastor, likely gives them unusual authority to shape church policy and practice in, as yet, unexamined ways. Using three waves of the National Congregational Study, we examine differences between congregations led by their first (i.e., founding) pastor and congregations led by subsequent pastors hired by or assigned to those congregations. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these differences.

**Keywords** Congregations · Clergy · Church planting · Culture · Social services · Worship styles · Women leaders

Religious leadership and authority have been longstanding concerns for scholars studying a range of congregational dynamics, including conflict (Becker 1999; Chou 2008), civic engagement (Schwadel 2005; Brown and Brown 2003), and congregational culture (Kim 2010; Nauta 2007; Ammerman 1997). New models of congregational structure and culture created by innovative congregational leaders have attracted the attention of religion scholars as well. Clerical innovation has been at the heart of important research on megachurches (Ellingson 2009; Thumma and Travis 2007); multiracial and multiethnic churches (Marti 2009; Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006); neoliberal and Emerging church models (Packard 2012; Marti and Ganiel 2014; Sargeant 2000); and televangelism (Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Walton 2009).

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With few exceptions, most of this research either assumes or takes for granted that these clergy have been hired and placed in those positions by congregational or denominational leaders. For example, Burns and Cervero (2004) highlight the degree to which the politics of pastoral practice are shaped by a pastor's ability to negotiate relationships with influential members of the congregation. Whether pastors can successfully (re)negotiate how extensive their authority as a church leader is, with all the ways that authority might be invested in (or divested from) them, is important for understanding how effective pastors are at managing congregational programming and resources. Certainly, it would be important to know if clerical authority is less constrained if the pastor feels she does not have to answer to congregational or denominational leadership because she planted the church. Nevertheless, like most research on power in congregations, this research included only testimonies of pastors who were hired by the congregations or placed in the congregation by some other body (e.g., presbyters) after the congregation's founding.

This short article is intended to draw attention to the need to move beyond such samples in order to better understand the who and what of religious leadership. Simply stated, not all pastors are hired by congregations or placed in them by denominational leaders. There are thousands of entrepreneurial men and women who accepted a call to plant/start a church (i.e., founder-led) rather than accept an established congregation's call to lead one (i.e., non-founder led).<sup>1</sup> We know virtually nothing about these religious leaders or the possible distinctions between churches they lead and those overseen by clergy hired to do so. While many of the most influential clerical innovators of the last half century have been founding pastors, much of the research on either them or their innovations ignores this fact. Even the growing literature on non-denominational congregations, where it is clear that a denominational infrastructure played no role in the church's beginnings, ignores the possibility that founding pastorates may differently shape the policies and practices these congregations adopt.

In the pages that follow, we will examine differences between congregations led by their founding pastors and congregations led by subsequent pastors hired by or assigned to those congregations. First, we use bivariate analyses of these two kinds of congregations to show the range of differences that exist between them. Then we turn to multivariate analyses to specify the relationship between leadership by founding clergy and some major cultural characteristics of congregations. Specifically, we will examine differences among congregations in three key areas that have

<sup>1</sup> Certainly, some new congregations are also planted either by denominations or larger, more established, congregations. For example, mainline denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church) that operate an itinerant system of clerical appointments, may place a new pastor in a congregation the denomination plants. In these cases, broader institutional culture and priorities may shape the kinds of characteristics described here. But given the degree of autonomy enabled by both non-denominational foundings and foundings in those denominations with weak top-down authority structures (e.g., the Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, Southern and National Baptists), the possibility, may likelihood, that a new congregation will be established by an individual with a unique and essentially sovereign vision for what the congregation should be in terms of culture and priorities is high. While we can't prove with certainty that every founding pastor represented in this analysis is this kind of religion entrepreneur, these dynamics are certainly suggestive that this is the case for most of them.

been explored in other research using the National Congregations Survey: informal worship practices (Chaves and Anderson 2008; Edwards 2009; Baker 2010), provision of social services (Tsitsos 2003; Brown 2006a, b; Stewart-Thomas 2010), and attitudes towards female leadership (Adams 2007; Audette et al. 2018; Hoegeman 2017).<sup>2</sup> We conclude with a discussion of the need to consider foundings and founder-led leadership in future research on congregational demographics, cultures, and economics.

## Methods

In order to determine differences between founder-led and non-founder-led Protestant congregations, we used all three waves (1998, 2006–07, 2012) of the National Congregations Study (NCS 2012), a survey of a nationally representative sample of 3809 congregations in the United States. A key informant in each congregation was interviewed in order to gather a broad range of data about the congregation, including aspects of its demographic composition, culture and structure, and finances and programming. Further details about the NCS can be found in Chaves and Anderson (2008, 2014) summaries of the survey findings. All regressions used appropriate weighting to account for the probability that larger congregations were selected for the NCS sample (Chaves and Anderson 2008).

For our research note, we operationalize founder-led congregations as those congregations founded in the same year the head religious leader took that position. Non-founder led congregations have head religious leaders who began in different years than when the congregation was officially established. While the oldest congregation in the NCS sample was founded in 1687, the oldest Protestant church led by its founding pastor (i.e., the clergy person who began leading the congregation in the year of the church's founding) was founded in 1938. Our analytical framing endeavors to compare churches that *could* be led by a founding pastor to churches that *are* led by founding pastors. As the oldest leader of any congregation in the NCS is 89 (a founding pastor, incidentally, who started his church in 1951 when he was 33 years old) and the youngest is 21, it is unlikely that churches founded prior to 1940 are led by their founders and impossible for churches founded prior to 1930 to be. Therefore, in order to compare only those congregations which are capable of being led by a founder, we selected only those Protestant congregations founded

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<sup>2</sup> The only other characteristic studied as consistently as these three (using the NCS) is political engagement (Audette and Weaver 2016; Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Brown 2006; and Todd and Houston 2012). We chose not to examine the relationship between founder-leadership and this characteristic because, unlike the three we used, the nine variables that might make up a scale are difficult to scale together (e.g., like informal worship) or add up as a continuous variable (e.g., like social service offerings). An analysis of each of the nine variables revealed that founder-led congregations predicted some political engagement (e.g., invitations for government officials to speak) and not others (e.g., invitations for election candidates to speak).

after 1929. This reduced the sample from 3809 to 1390 congregations, 376 (27%) of which are led by their founding pastor.<sup>3</sup>

The first of the three dependent variables used in the analysis is informal worship. Some version of this variable has been used as a measure of ecstatic worship (Edwards 2009; Baker 2010) or informal worship (Chaves and Anderson 2008). Following Chaves and Anderson (2008), we used the broader concept—informal worship—as increasing informality seems like a trend that is reflected across congregations rather than almost exclusively associated with African-American and Pentecostal congregations. The NCS includes nine variables representing some form of spontaneous or informal worship activity: calling out amen, playing drums, jumping and shouting, raising hands in praise, applause, visual projection equipment, greeting time, speaking in tongues, and no written program. These 9 possibilities were combined in a scale ranging from 0 to 9 ( $X=5.19$ ) and treated as a single factor: informal worship ( $\alpha=.79$ ).

The provision of social services has been measured a couple of different ways in prior research, from specific types of support (e.g., long-term vs. short-term) to a simple count of a congregations' total number of programs. Following Chaves and Tsitsos (2001), we combine nineteen possible activities into a scale ranging from 0 to a maximum of 13 at any given church ( $X=2.61$ ). This scale was treated as a single factor in the models: social services ( $\alpha=.58$ )<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, we test the correlation between a founder-led church and whether a woman can preach at a main worship service and serve as full-fledged members of a congregations' main governing body (e.g., deacons, trustees), two roles routinely denied to women in more conservative congregations (Audette and Weaver 2016; Pitt 2012). Of the two, fewer women could preach (69%) than serve on governing boards (84%). Thirty-five percent of congregations that allowed one didn't allow the other. The two questions that ask whether women can serve in those roles were combined into a single dummy variable—woman leaders—assigned a “1” if they could serve in both positions ( $X=0.67$ ).

We control for seventeen factors that may covary with these three dependent variables. These factors are added into the models in two sections: twelve common congregational demographic covariates and five cultural variables often found

<sup>3</sup> We did an analysis that included all 2500 Protestant congregations. As expected, the findings remained the same (i.e., founders were significant and positive in all three models), but having nearly 1100 congregations in the model who could not possibly fit the primary scope condition (i.e., being led by their founding pastor) skewed the findings towards the “0” on the founders variable. As a result, cultural characteristic such as nondenominational and pentecostal that were relatively rare prior to 1935 (e.g., 95% of pentecostal congregations were founded after the Assemblies of God denomination began in 1914) take on significance disproportionate to their actual presence in the congregational ecology measured by the NCS. We believe a constrained sample comparing only “possibly founded” congregations produces the cleanest analysis of this particular phenomena.

<sup>4</sup> The nineteen possible social services identified in the NCS are: rape and domestic violence, cleaning highways and parks, clothing drives, non-religious education, senior citizens, feeding the hungry, non-specific gender-focused, physical health needs, homelessness, home repair/maintenance, immigration and refugees, jobs, children and youth, incarceration, crime prevention, substance abuse, and housing/utility financial support, and young adults.

to shape congregational differences. The first group includes ten continuous variables for each congregation: percentages of members by race (White, Black, Latinx, Asian), percentage of BA degrees, members over 65, members under 35, members in households under \$35 k, members in households over \$100 k, and members who are female.<sup>5</sup> It also includes six dummy variables: the congregation is in the South, is rural, has more than 250 members, has an annual income above \$250 k, is 5 years old or younger, and has a female pastor. We then control for three cultural variables: if the congregation is nondenominational, if its religious tradition is Pentecostal, and if the congregation considers the Bible to be the literal and inerrant word of God. The models include a dummy variable (“1” for yes) for each characteristic. Our final control is a variable representing the year (1998, 2007, 2012) the survey was completed.

We also include versions of these variables and others in Table 1, which presents bivariate analyses of the differences between founder-led and non-founder-led congregations. In that analysis, we provide mean or median figures, weighted by the congregational (rather than attendee) weighting variables. In those cases where there are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences between the kinds of congregations, the larger of the two means is indicated with an asterisk.

## Results

### Bivariate Differences Between Founder-Led and Non-Founder Led Churches

Very few (10%) Protestant pastors are female. This number is the same for both founder-led and non-founder-led congregations. The average age when pastors founded their church is 40 years old, while the average age when non-founding pastors assumed the pastorate of their current church is 44. The oldest founding pastor in the NCS is 89 years old while the youngest is 27 years old; he started his church at age 24. Contrary to the popular belief that clergy—like physicians, lawyers, and other professionals—are well educated with both bachelors and advanced degrees, many clergy have not completed college. In fact, 18% of them have not completed even a year of college and only have a high school diploma or less. Only 59% of pastors have a bachelors’ degree. Partially because some denominations (e.g., United Church of Christ, African Methodist Episcopal Church) require a college degree for ordination, non-founding pastors are more likely (66%) to have bachelors’ degrees than founding pastors (47%).<sup>6</sup>

The average church has about 100 members attending main worship services. Founder-led and non-founder-led congregations do not seem to differ in this regard.

<sup>5</sup> These age and income cut-offs are based on the categories used in the NCS. Mean incomes and average ages were not available to us.

<sup>6</sup> Forty-nine percent of nondenominational pastors have bachelors’ degrees while 65% of pastors serving within denominations do.

**Table 1** Clergy and congregational characteristics (National Congregations Survey, N = 1308)

	Non-Founder Led Church	Founder Led Church
<b>Pastor's Characteristics</b>		
Percentage of congregations with female pastors	8%	10%
Age of pastor when they assumed the position	44*	40
Churches with pastors holding BA degrees or more	66%*	47%
<b>Congregants Attending Main Service</b>	102	95
<b>Racial Composition (Congregation and Clergy)</b>		
Predominately (80%+) White congregations	78%*	22%
Predominately (80%+) Black congregations	55%*	45%
Congregations led by White pastors	75%*	25%
Congregations led by non-White pastors	56%*	44%
<b>Socioeconomic Status of Congregants</b>		
Working class and lower households†	33%	38%*
Upper-middle-class & higher households††	6%*	5%
Congregants with bachelors' degrees	27%*	22%
<b>Age of Congregants</b>		
Congregants over the age of 60	32%*	14%
Congregants under the age of 35	27%*	39%
<b>Urban congregations</b>	51%	58%*
<b>Religious Tradition Characteristics</b>		
Nondenominational church (41% are founder-led)	21%	49%*
Mainline denominations (1% are founder-led)	22%*	2%
Pentecostal (37% are founder-led)	21%	31%*
<b>Political and Theological Characteristics</b>		
Congregations that are politically more conservative	66%*	56%
Congregations that believe in biblical inerrancy	85%	97%*
<b>Church Finances</b>		
Percent with a formal written budget	75%*	65%
Congregations with pastors who receive pay	86%*	65%
Congregations with bivocational pastors	38%	53%*
Congregations who own the building they worship in	90%*	56%

\* Asterisks indicate the statistically-significant ( $p < .05$ ) larger figure

† In the 1998/2006 NCS waves, this was measured as under \$25 k. In 2012, it was measured as under \$25 k

†† In the 1998/2006 NCS waves, this was measured as over \$100 k. In 2012, it was measured as over \$140 k

The differences between founder-led and non-founder-led congregations do not lie in the number of people who attend them, but in who those people are.

Martin Luther King's statement that Sunday is the most segregated day of the week holds true for both kinds of churches: nearly 90% of congregations are

composed mostly of one race.<sup>7</sup> Most predominantly White congregations are not led by their founding pastors; only 22% are. Forty-five percent of predominately Black congregations are led by their founding pastors. Another way of looking at this—recognizing that pastors often reflect the racial composition of their congregations—is to look at the percentages of White and non-White pastors in each category. Only 25% of White pastors head founder-led churches while 44% of non-White pastors founded the congregations they lead. More than a third (36%) of founder-led congregations have Black pastors while only 19% of non-founder led congregations do. Non-White clergy are planting congregations at a rate disproportionate to their numbers in the clergy population.

There are socioeconomic differences between founder-led and non-founder-led congregations. A greater percentage (38%) of the households in founder-led congregations has incomes less than \$25,000–\$35,000 a year; 33% of those in non-founder-led congregations do. Very few people who attend congregations live in upper-middle-class or higher households (i.e., making more than \$100,000 a year), but non-founder led congregations have more of these people (6%) than do founder-led congregations (5%). Non-founder led congregations also have more educated members. Twenty-seven percent of their members have bachelors' degrees. Twenty-two percent of founder-led congregations do.

There are also age differences between founder-led and non-founder-led congregations. Founder led-churches have significantly more young people (39% are 35 and younger) and far fewer old people (14% are 60 and older) than non-founder-led congregations whose congregations are, on average, 27% people under the age of 35 and 32% people over the age of 60.

Fifty-eight percent of founder-led congregations exist in urban areas and another 23% are located in the suburbs around them; the remaining 19% are in rural communities. Non-founder-led congregations are less likely than founder-led congregations to be urban (51%) and much more likely to be located in rural communities (31%).

Congregational culture is another important variable when analyzing churches. One way to think about congregational culture is to think about it in terms of its denominational membership and its religious tradition. The two most significant differences between founder-led and non-founder-led congregations in these characteristics are whether congregations are affiliated with denominations and whether they are Pentecostal. These differences are revealed in Table 1 as well.

Not all Protestant congregations are formally aligned with established denominations (e.g., the Assemblies of God) even if their religious orientation (e.g., Pentecostalism) is reminiscent of or even historically drawn from denominational traditions. They are formally unaffiliated and nondenominational. Twenty-one percent of the country's congregations are nondenominational; 18% of Americans attend such

<sup>7</sup> Social scientists consider a congregation to be “segregated” or “predominately one race” if 80% or more of the congregation is one race. Using NCS data, Chaves and Anderson show that the percentage of people attending congregations in which no ethnic group makes up 80% of more of the regular attendees increased by about 4% between 1998 and 2012. Much of this change is a result of non-White parishioners joining White congregations, not the inverse. There has been no increase in diversity in predominantly Black congregations, for example.

congregations. Few (21%) non-founder-led congregations are nondenominational, while nearly half (48%) of founder-led congregations are; alternately, 41% of nondenominational churches are founder-led congregations. Virtually no (2%) founder-led congregations are affiliated with mainline denominations (e.g., PCUSA, ELCA, UMC, and the Episcopal Church) and very few mainline congregations (<1%) are led by founding pastors. Some of this is, undoubtedly, due to their tradition of itinerant pastorates.

The other religious-tradition-related characteristic important for understanding religion entrepreneurship is Pentecostalism. While the theology/practices associated with Pentecostalism have always been present in some form in the American religious landscape, the emergence of Pentecostalism in the United States represents one of the fastest-growing, entrepreneur-driven, movements in the religious ecology. Much of this is driven by two large Pentecostal denominations: the predominantly Black Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and the historically White Assemblies of God (AOG). Both denominations are composed of thousands of mostly independent and autonomous congregations.<sup>8</sup> Overall, more founder-led congregations (31%) than non-founder led ones (21%) are Pentecostal; 38% of the founder-led Pentecostal congregations are either COGIC or AOG. More than a third (37%) of Pentecostal churches are led by founding pastors; nearly 60% of COGIC congregations are led by their founder.

A congregation's political and theological characteristics are often reflective of its religious traditions and denominational moorings. Most Protestant congregations lean towards political conservatism (63%) and a belief that the Bible is the literal and inerrant word of God (89%). While founder-led congregations are less politically conservative (56%) than non-founder-led ones (66%) ones, more of them (97%) believe in biblical inerrancy than their non-founder-led peers (85%).

Finally, we provide bivariate means for selected financial characteristics. Most (72%), but not all, congregations have a formal, written budget that they operate from each year. Founder-led congregations (65%) are less likely than their non-founder-led peers (75%) to have one. The income range for congregations is wide: the bottom 10% of congregations report less than \$5000 a year in annual income while the top 10% report bringing in more than \$330,000 a year. The median income is about \$177,000 a year. There is little difference between the money received or spent by founder-led and non-founder-led congregations, but non-founder led congregations (56%) are more likely to have a rainy-day fund than founder-led ones (38%). So, how do congregations spend this money? We analyze two expenditures: staffing and buildings.

The congregations differ in whether or not the pastor of the church is paid for their work in the congregation and if they hold another job besides working for the congregation. Eighty-six percent of non-founder-led congregations pay their pastors;

<sup>8</sup> The Assemblies of God is governed by a body of national fellowships led by a chairman. While officially "episcopalian" in its polity, in practice, the Church of God in Christ has an unusual mixture of three polities: an episcopalian bishopric, a presbyterian general assembly, and congregational autonomy (Pitt 2012).



only 65% of founder-led congregations do. These differences, and the likelihood that this pay may not be enough to fully support them, may explain the additional finding that more than half of founding pastors (53%) have second jobs while only 35% of non-founding pastors do. Where congregations gather for worship may have some impact on the resources they expend. Ninety-one percent of non-founder-led congregations worship in conventional sanctuaries and 90% own the building they worship in. Far fewer (68%) founders worship in conventional religious buildings and only 56% own the building.

In summary, in virtually every category one might use to compare them—from demography to culture to finances—we find significant differences between congregations led by their founders and congregations that are not led by their founders. In the next analysis, we look at the relationship between founders and three variables—informal worship, provision of social services, and sexism related to congregational leadership—that have either been highlighted by Chaves et al. (1999), Chaves and Anderson (2008, 2014) in their introductions to each wave of the NCS or by other scholars studying congregations using the NCS (Edwards 2009; Baker 2010; Tsitsos 2003; Brown 2006a, b; Stewart-Thomas 2010; Adams 2007; Audette and Weaver 2016; and Hoegeman 2017).

### Multivariate Differences Between Founder-Led and Non-Founder Led Churches

Our first multivariate analysis of congregational culture looks at worship. In their analysis of congregational change over the three waves of the NCS, Chaves and Anderson (2014) show that worship practices have become more informal over time. More people than ever attend congregations where exuberant worship (e.g., jumping, shouting, dancing, raised hands in praise, speaking in tongues) is common and the usual structural components (e.g., choirs, written programs) are less common.<sup>9</sup> On nearly every measure of informal worship Chaves and Anderson use, we find that more founder-led congregations than non-founder-led congregations have these activities as part of their worship services. While the differences are minimal for some behaviors (e.g., having a greeting time, using visual project equipment), the differences for other behaviors are quite large. In virtually all founder-led churches, services include someone calling out “amen” (93%), people applauding (98%), and congregants raising their hands in praise (90%). Less than three-quarters of non-founder-led services include these behaviors. Some worship behaviors are slightly less routine in founder-led churches—speaking in tongues (70%), using drums (64%), and jumping and shouting spontaneously (61%)—but are even more rare in non-founder-led congregations. Less than 31% of non-founder-led services incorporate those worship activities.

In Table 2, we estimate the relationship between being a founder-led congregation and informal worship controlling for a range of congregational characteristics.

<sup>9</sup> When analyses only include Protestant congregations, some of these worship practices—for example, planned times when people greet each other in service—have become less common in services over time. Others—people calling out amen, applauding, or speaking in tongues—have not changed at all.

**Table 2** Multivariate regression models of founder-led congregations on congregational characteristics (standardized coefficients)

	Informal worship (A)			Social services (B)			Leader can be female (c)			
	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III	
	Founder-led									
Nondenominational			.193***			.062*				.108**
Pentecostal	.059**	.308***	.026	-.061*	-.081**	-.071*	-.020	.314***	-.039	.303***
Fundamentalist	.126***	.126***	.126***	-.110***	-.110***	-.110***	-.278***	-.278***	-.278***	-.278***
% White	-.091	-.065	-.047	.026	.018	.022	-.181	-.166	-.161	-.161
% Black	.139*	.153*	.165**	.048	.052	.053	.013	.039	.043	.043
% Latinx	.073	.043	.056	-.068	-.063	-.060	.062	.026	.032	.032
% Asian	.005	-.003	.000	-.022	-.015	-.016	-.030	-.058	-.057	-.057
% BA degrees	-.214***	-.120***	-.109***	.188***	.134***	.137***	.010	-.026	-.019	-.019
% Old (> 64)	-.251***	-.202***	-.161***	.010	-.018	-.005	-.050	-.067	-.043	-.043
% Young (< 36)	.165***	.132***	.115***	.008	.021	.015	.009	-.016	-.028	-.028
% Poor	.074**	.057*	.056*	-.010	-.004	-.004	-.006	-.016	-.015	-.015
% Rich	-.001	.013	.016	-.035	-.042	-.040	.070	.072*	.071*	.071*
% Female	-.068**	-.090***	-.083***	.058*	.061*	.063*	.118**	.099**	.098**	.098**
Southern	-.024	-.002	-.005	-.058*	-.063*	-.064*	-.094**	-.060*	-.061*	-.061*
Rural	-.081***	-.090***	-.074***	.028	.035	.040	-.064	-.064*	-.055	-.055
Big church (> 250)	-.021	-.008	-.014	.100**	.097**	.095**	.047	.060	.060	.060
Rich church (> \$250 k)	.139***	.128***	.130***	.107***	.114***	.115***	-.080*	-.073*	-.073*	-.073*
Young church (< 6)	.045*	.052*	-.017	-.106***	-.097***	-.120***	.084**	.116***	.081**	.081**
Clergy is female	.036	.043*	.049*	.034	.023	.025	.162***	.106***	.109***	.109***
Year of survey	.160***	.108***	.078***	.169***	.199***	.189***	-.008	.029	.010	.010
Sample size	1346	1346	1346	1385	1385	1385	978	978	978	978
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.392	.485	.509	.156	.173	.175	.156	.294	.301	.301
F-score			62.79***			3.92*				10.17**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

In model A.II, we determined that fourteen of the controls are significantly associated with informal worship: Pentecostal (+), fundamentalist (+), percent Black (+), education (−), elderly population (−), young population (+), poorer population (+), percent women (−), rurality (−), wealth of church (+), age of the church (+), the presence of female clergy (+), and year of the survey (+). In most cases, these relationships are not surprising. When “founder-leadership” is added to the model (A.III), it is significantly ( $p = .0001$ ) and positively ( $\beta = .193$ ) correlated with informal worship. The strength of the standardized coefficient, relative to that of other significant covariates, suggests that founders are particularly instrumental in shaping the worship style of churches. Only Pentecostalism, as expected, has a larger coefficient ( $\beta = .293$ ). Congregational age becomes insignificant once a measure of founding leadership is added to the model. The “year of survey” variable’s significance suggests that churches have gotten more informal between 1998 and 2012. More than half ( $R^2 = .509$ ) of the variation between churches with and without informal worship is explained by these fifteen variables.

In the second set of models in Table 2, we estimate the relationship between a founder’s leadership and the congregation’s provision of social services—again, measured as a count of services (up to 13) provided. Fewer covariates are related to this congregational characteristic than to informal worship. Only ten—Nondenominationalism (−), Pentecostalism (−), fundamentalism (−), education (+), percent women (+), southern (−), congregational size (+), congregational wealth (+), congregational age (−), and year surveyed (+)—are significant in the reduced Model B.II. The addition of the “founder-led” variable adds some additional explanatory power to the model ( $R^2 = .175$ ) and the variable itself is positively associated with the provision of more social services in these congregations. When comparing the standardized coefficients, it appears that a number of other congregational characteristics—including Pentecostalism, and the congregation’s educational attainment, size, and age—are better predictors than whether the church is led by its founder. This does not mean that being led by a founding pastor doesn’t matter. It means it is less powerful a predictor of this particular congregational behavior than other variables. The “year of survey” variable’s significance suggests that churches have done more social service in 2012 than in 1998.

The last set of Models (C.I–C.III) in Table 2 estimate the correlation between being a founder-led congregation and whether a woman can both preach at a main worship service *and* serve as full-fledged members of a congregation’s main governing body. In many denominations, particularly those characterized by a strong belief in biblical inerrancy (again, 97% of founder-led congregations do), women are barred from these roles. These policies flow from either a fundamentalist reading of religious texts (e.g., I Corinthians 14:34, I Timothy 2 and 3) or a liturgical sacramentalism which argues that priests and pastors operate as representations (*in persona Christi*) of Christ and, therefore, must be male. It is therefore useful to determine if, holding denominationalism and fundamentalism constant, a founder-led congregation would be more or less likely to hold such positions. As we would expect, Model C.II reveals that more fundamentalist, more southern, and more rural congregations tend to have more traditional attitudes towards female clergy. Other characteristics are also associated with a congregation’s policy to allow leaders to

be women: Pentecostal (+), percent wealthy (+), congregational wealth (–), congregational age (+), female congregants (+), and the presence of female clergy (+). “Year of survey” is insignificant, suggesting congregations have not become more egalitarian as a group since the late 90’s. Net of these effects, Model C.III shows that being a founder-led congregation significantly predicts whether congregations are liberal in their attitudes towards female leadership; founder-led congregations are more likely to allow it ( $\beta = .108, p > .01$ ). Fundamentalism still matters. Its standardized coefficient ( $\beta = .278, p > .001$ ) is both statistically significant and larger than that of founder-led leadership. Surprisingly, Pentecostalism—which is associated with positive attitudes towards female leadership, matters more ( $\beta = .303, p > .001$ ) than whether a founding pastor leads the congregation and fundamentalism.

## Discussion

Using pooled data from all three waves of the NCS (1998, 2006–07, 2012) our findings suggest something that seems obvious, but is underdeveloped conceptually in the research on congregations: differences between congregations may, in part, be a function of the pastor’s role in planting or founding the congregation. Our purpose in this research note was to lay out and suggest the necessity for a theoretical and empirical focus on church planters and their congregations. Overall, our study shows significant differences concerning pastoral characteristics, congregational demographics, congregational culture, and resources.

The differences described in this analysis suggest some value in looking more closely at the men and women who create, rather than just those hired to lead, Protestant congregations. Founding pastors are younger (nearly 20% were 40 or younger when they planted the church) and lead demographically different (i.e., younger, more diverse, less college-educated), culturally different (e.g., worship style, political/theological conservatism), and more autonomous (i.e., non-denominational) congregations relative to their hired colleagues. They are as successful as their peers at recruiting members and attracting financial resources. These patterns persist when we constrain the sample to young churches (15 years and younger) and when we constrain the sample to older churches (30–45 years old).<sup>10</sup>

Our study also finds that almost half (48%) of all founder-led congregations are non-denominational, compared to only fourteen percent of non-founder led churches. This finding presents an exciting new avenue for future research. While the relatively recent rise of non-denominational churches has been identified in previous research, the focus has often been on megachurches (Ellingson 2009; Tucker-Worgs 2011). This focus does not account for the many non-denominational founder-led churches which have fewer than 100 people attending their main service. It should

<sup>10</sup> Not everything in the bivariate analysis remains significant when we constrain the sample by age. Some of these differences are reduced by longevity (e.g., older founder-led churches are now capable of paying their pastors and those pastors are no longer bivocational). While most of the congregational composition characteristics (e.g., race, education, age) remain significant, social class does not.

be noted, that while non-denominationalism was accounted for in all three multivariate models, it wasn't consistently found to be a significant factor, and in the case of informal worship, when founding status was accounted for, it was no longer significant.

Also, founder-led churches are more fundamentalist and slightly less politically conservative than the churches led by their appointed peers. This finding—coupled with the fact that so many founder-led congregations are Pentecostal—highlights the complex relationship between religious tradition, political identity, and theological orientation. By obscuring or glossing over distinctions between founder and non-founder led congregations, researchers miss the ways theological and political identities are constructed and negotiated by congregational leaders. We likely miss the ways in which these cultural norms are reified and by whom.

In our multivariate analyses, we assessed the impact of church foundings on three aspects of church culture: informal worship, social service engagement, and attitudes towards female leadership. In these analyses, controlling for religious tradition, theological orientation, and various geographic and membership demographics, being a founder-led congregations predicted increases in informal worship, social service engagement, and positive attitudes towards women in leadership. However, its impact varied across all three aspects. As expected, Pentecostalism played a strong role in a congregation's worship, but whether or not a church was founder-led had the second largest impact on the degree of informality. Our analysis confirms Chaves and Anderson's (2008, 2014) evidence that congregations, writ large, became more informal between the first wave of the NCS and the last wave. At the same time, the percentage of founder-led congregations in the NCS grew from 27% to 39%. Similarly, the percentage of nondenominational congregations, nearly half of which are founder-led, grew from 27% to 36%. Some of the increases in congregational informality described by Chaves and Anderson (2012, 2014) and reflected in this analysis may be more a result of founding pastors creating informal (often non-denominational) congregations rather than non-founding pastors overseeing a shift towards informality in the churches where they are employed. Likewise, though founder-led congregations are more likely than their peers to be fundamentalist in terms of biblical inerrancy, this fundamentalism doesn't appear to lead them to sexist positions regarding women's roles in congregational leadership. That women in founder-led congregations, net of congregational fundamentalism or non-denominationalism, are able to serve in both administrative and clerical positions is an important finding and worth further investigation.

Though novel, our research has limitations. To start, the NCS does not directly ask key informants whether or not the pastor founded the church. While it is unlikely that a significant portion of pastors would be hired the year the church was established but not be the founding pastor, this possibility still warrants mention. However, we argue that because this research investigates previously uncharted areas of congregational and organizational behavior/culture, it was nevertheless necessary to use the NCS—even without that specific question—given that no other databases, as yet, offers a more representative study of American Protestant congregations.

We have only scratched the surface in this analysis. A number of questions remain unanswered here that can either be examined using quantitative analysis of data like

the NCS or by using qualitative interviews of founders and their counterparts. We offer five suggestions for paths this research might take.

Often research that examines women clergy's experiences with their congregations (e.g., Ferguson 2018; Niemela 2011) is based on samples of women who followed a man in that position. How might the experiences of women who founded churches—35% of female clergy in the NCS are founders—be different from women hired to lead a church, especially if those women were hired subsequent to decades of male leadership?

We show that church-planting, while something engaged in by White pastors (25% of White pastors are founders), is disproportionately engaged in by non-White pastors. Forty-six percent of Black pastors, 42% of Asian pastors, and 37% of Latinx pastors founded their congregations. In most of these cases, their congregations reflect the race of their pastors; for example, Black founders' churches are 92% black on average. What are these patterns a reflection of? Is it a function of these clerics' lack of access to the pastorates of existing congregations? Are there different kinds of opportunity structures available in non-White communities that make starting a church easier than in White communities? In spite of the literature's focus on the efforts of White pastors to create racially integrated congregations (see Marti 2009 and Christerson et al. 2005), is there still an important market for the creation of new congregations that cater, exclusively, to Black, Latinx, or Asian parishioners?

While we control for the age of the congregation—young churches provide fewer social services and are more open to female leadership—the average founder-led congregation is 12 years old, with most of them (85%) being younger than 25. The NCS does not enable us to determine at what age the average founder relinquishes control of the congregation to a successor. When *does* this happen? What are the precipitating factors? If we imagine that founders of churches start congregations with the same kind of charismatic authority assumed present in founders of denominations (e.g., Weber's invocation of the Mormon leader Joseph Smith), what can these congregations show us about the (un)successful routinization of that charisma at succession?

If only 47% of founders leading founder-led congregations have bachelor's degrees, it is likely that very few have degrees from seminaries, bible colleges, and divinity schools. How does this lack of "religious education" factor into some of the differences (e.g., greater degree of biblical fundamentalism coupled with liberal attitudes toward female leadership) uncovered in this analysis? As one of the classical vocations and one of the first to create educational barriers to entry (Brubacher and Rudy 1997; Holifield 2007; Pitt 2012), what does it mean that so many men and women can now not only lead congregations (even 34% of non-founder-led congregations are led by people without BA degrees) but can successfully plant new ones without college degrees in religion or theology?

In the bivariate analysis, we show that founder-led congregations are as effective financially (i.e., they have very similar budgets) as their non-founder-led peers. How is this possible on both sides of the ledger? How do churches led by founders—again most of these congregations are 25 years and younger—have nearly the same number of members and bring in nearly the same amount of income as their counterparts? Alternately, how do they maintain the same level of financial expenditures

given the majority of non-founder-led congregations pay their pastors and worship in sanctuaries (rather than converted spaces) that they own rather than rent?

Moving forward, we propose that scholars began to seriously consider the impact church planting may have on congregational composition (e.g., age of members drawn to it) and church culture (e.g., level of informality engaged by it) as these entrepreneurs move us beyond solely thinking about church governance through the lenses of episcopalian, presbyterian, or even congregational polities. We suspect this blind-spot is largely a product of our sampling strategies as well as our continued focus on denominationalism, a focus that often leads us to examine episcopal and presbyterian polities. By default, analyses of clergy in either kind of polity will focus almost entirely on itinerant or permanent succession and miss founding pastors entirely. The structure of authority is essential in congregational studies (see Ammerman 1997; Ammerman et al. 1998); understanding the source of a leader's power is crucial for learning his or her role in shaping congregational composition, culture, and economics.

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