**Abstract**

Researchers in several academic disciplines have begun to take an interest in group character traits, including the character traits of religious congregations. This paper reports results of the first known empirical studies of congregational virtues. Researchers developed an instrument, the Congregational Character Questionnaire, for measuring twelve different congregational virtues. They then studied the relationships between congregants’ perceptions of their congregation’s virtuousness and their evaluations of their congregation, participation in their congregation, and features of their individual well-being with an online sample (*N* = 530). Perception of congregational virtuousness was significantly positively related to congregants’ satisfaction with their churches, evaluations of their churches, participation in their churches, as well as their individual spiritual well-being, satisfaction with life, and presence of meaning in life. There was some evidence that different dimensions of congregational character related differently to these variables. These results support the conclusion that congregational character may play an important role in the experience of congregants, deserving further attention in research. Directions for future research in this area are outlined.

*Keywords:* collective character, church, spiritual well-being, satisfaction with life, congregational climate

**The Congregational Character Questionnaire: An Initial Empirical Investigation of the Significance of Collective Church Character Traits**

It is a commonsensical idea that an individual’s well-being depends in part on the character of those communities in which the individual participates. This truism applies to Christian churches as much as to other organizations. A church’s character presumably makes a difference to those who regularly interact with the church—whether church members or others.

Yet, this commonsensical idea is highly understudied. While there has been a well-documented explosion of academic research in multiple fields focused on character traits in recent decades (Miller & Knobel, 2015), this research has focused almost exclusively on the character traits of individuals. It has only rarely addressed the character traits of groups, including Christian congregations.

Given recent developments, it is a good time for this to change. Researchers in multiple fields are beginning to turn their attention to the study of collective character traits (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Fehr et al., 2017; Fricker, 2010; Gowri, 2007; Lahroodi, 2007). This includes some interest in the topic of congregational character in particular, discussed in scholarship in theology and philosophy of religion (Brown & Strawn, 2012; Byerly & Byerly, 2019; Healey, 2000). It also includes psychological research on organizational virtuousness that can provide a model for studying congregational character (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). Building upon this work, we aimed to develop a theoretically well-grounded instrument for measuring a variety of dimensions of congregational character, and we used this instrument to assess the relationships between congregants’ perceptions of their congregations’ characters and other significant variables pertaining to their own experience in the congregation and well-being as congregants.

**Conceptualizing and Measuring Congregational Character Traits, Virtues, and Vices**

Previous research defines collective character traits as character traits possessed by a group of people, as opposed to character traits possessed by an individual person (Lahroodi, 2007). It is a widely recognized fact that we describe groups and not only individuals using characterological language. We might describe a group, for example, as “open-minded” or “cruel” just as we would an individual. Recognizing that we do describe groups using characterological language, the question becomes: how do we make sense of this practice? What is it for a group—and in our case, a church—to possess a character trait, a virtue, or a vice?

A comparison to character traits, virtues, and vices of individual people has proven illuminating to some extent for purposes of answering these questions. When it comes to character traits of individual people, we find broad agreement among scholars that a character trait is a tendency to display a wide range of characteristic behaviors under characteristic triggering circumstances, out of characteristic motivations or values (Battaly, 2015; Miller, 2014). Thus, for example, Christian Miller (2018) defines the character trait of generosity as a tendency to give things of value to the giver to others in circumstances in which doing so is supererogatory rather than obligatory, out of altruistic motivations.

Scholars have argued that collective character traits, too, can be conceptualized as having this same basic structure (Byerly & Byerly, 2016). A group character trait will consist in the group’s tendency to display a wide range of characteristic behaviors under characteristic triggering circumstances, out of characteristic motivations or values. If Miller’s account of generosity is correct, for instance, then a generous group may be a group that tends to give things the group values to others in circumstances in which doing so is supererogatory rather than obligatory, out of altruistic motivations or values. Other collective character traits will exhibit a parallel structure. What individuates particular character traits, making them the character trait they are and not another character trait, are the details about which behaviors are characteristic of the trait in question, which circumstances characteristically trigger these manifestations, and which motivations are characteristic of the trait.

This parallelism between the basic nature of collective character traits and the basic nature of character traits of individual people raises the question of the exact relation between the two. This question has been a focal point of interest for philosophers working on collective character traits (Byerly & Byerly, 2016; Fricker, 2010; Lahroodi, 2007, 2019). When a collective character trait is possessed by a group, is this only because the members of the group themselves possess this trait? Summativists answer ‘yes’; anti-summativists answer ‘no’.

The trend in philosophical work on collective character has been toward anti-summativism. The main kind of argument given in defense of anti-summativism appeals to cases in which group members tend to behave in a markedly different way in the group context than they would outside of it (see Lahroodi, 2019 for a review). In these examples, a group appears to display a character trait while the group members in their private lives appear not to display it, or a group appears not to display a character trait, though its members do appear to display it in their private lives. Often, what plays a key role in these examples are the group’s policies or procedures, whether formal or informal.

A second argument for anti-summativism is also relevant for this paper. This argument focuses on cases in which a group appears to manifest a character trait that just isn’t available as a character trait for individuals, because of differences between groups and individuals (Byerly & Byerly, 2016). The most obvious example of a relevant difference between groups and individuals is that groups have members who may interact in the group’s activities, whereas individuals do not. As such, if there are any character traits concerned specifically with the regulation of group member interaction in group activity, these may be good candidates for distinctive group character traits that cannot be possessed by individuals. Potential examples of such “distinctively collective” character traits include a group’s tendencies regarding the division of group labor, or regarding training and resourcing members to contribute to group activities (Byerly, forthcoming). These are characterological tendencies that only groups, and not individuals, can possess.

Both of these arguments for anti-summativism contain an important lesson for operationalizing collective character traits. They both reveal that it will not always work to operationalize a group’s possession of a character trait as a summation of group members’ individual possession of this trait. We can’t always just assess whether the group members privately possess the trait of interest, and then reliably draw a conclusion on this basis about the extent to which the group possesses it. In some cases, this will not work because, while both the group and its members can possess the trait, there is divergence between the group’s possession of it and group members’ possession of it. In other cases, this will not work because only the group and not its members can possess the trait. It is better instead to attempt to assess the group’s possession of the trait more directly, if possible.

This lesson helps to motivate the use of the referent-shift model for measuring collective character in general, and congregational character in particular. This model involves using statements formulated at the organizational level of analysis, rather than at the individual level of analysis, in order to measure organizational features (Chan, 1998). Such a model has been used in the study of organizational climate in order to measure a wide variety of climate features (Schneider et al., 2013), including climate features of religious congregations (Pargament et al., 1983, 1987). It has likewise been used in a small number of studies to measure various dimensions of organizational virtuousness (Cameron, Bright & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). In these studies, it is character features at the group level, rather than at the individual level, that are the focus of measurement and evaluation. The studies presented below employ this methodological approach as well.

While there is a close parallelism between the basic nature of collective character traits and individual character traits, this parallelism is not as close when we compare collective virtue and vice with individual virtue and vice. According to a common consensus, what makes a character trait of an individual person a virtue is that it makes them better as a person; what makes it a vice is that it makes them worse as a person (Baehr, 2011; Battaly, 2015). Yet, it has been argued, this account of the nature of virtues or vices is not very attractive when it comes to groups (Byerly & Byerly, 2019). The idea that a virtue for a group is a character trait that makes the group better as a person is problematic. An important indicator of this is that while we do use our evaluations of individual people’s characters to inform our estimation of them as people, this is not how we use our evaluations of the characters of groups. Instead, we use our evaluations of groups’ characters to inform our estimation of them in comparison to other groups of their kind. We use these to determine how good or bad they are as a group of their particular kind. This suggests that what makes a collective character trait a virtue is that it makes the group that possesses it better as the kind of group that it is (rather than better as a person). And, what makes a collective character trait a vice is that it makes the group that possesses it worse as the kind of group that it is (rather than worse as a person).

This observation has important implications for studying collective virtues and vices, including the collective virtues and vices of Christian congregations. There may be different traits that are collective virtues or vices for different groups. Whether a trait is a virtue or vice for a group depends upon what sort of group it is, and whether possessing this trait makes it better or worse as that kind of group. For example, certain traits that may be virtues for a teaching-focused academic institution or unit may not be virtues for a research-focused academic institution or unit, and certain traits that may be virtues for each of these may not be virtues for a troupe of comedians or for a church.

Given this conception of the nature of collective character traits, virtues, and vices, it makes sense when investigating the collective character traits of Christian churches to focus on candidates for traits that would make a church better or worse as a church. A character trait that would make a church better as a church is a good candidate for a congregational virtue; a trait that would make a church worse as a church is a good candidate for a congregational vice. If we could identify and measure traits that would make a church better as a church, this would provide a pathway for studying congregational virtuousness empirically.

These observations help to motivate the development of a new instrument for measuring congregational virtues. As noted above, there has been previous research on both organizational virtue and research on congregational climate. Both of these bodies of research are relevant to the present studies, and will be discussed in further detail when relevant below. Yet, the observations just made about the potential distinctiveness of congregational virtues suggest that these bodies of research may not contain appropriate instruments for measuring congregational virtue. The congregational climate tendencies measured, for instance, such as emotional expressiveness and orderliness, are not conceptualized as virtues or vices of churches. In fact, they are not conceptualized as tendencies distinctive of Christian congregations at all, but are supposed to be common to many different religious congregations. Likewise, research on organizational virtuousness has not focused specifically on churches, but has attempted to identify collective traits that may be virtues for a variety of organizations, and has largely modeled its approach to conceptualizing these traits on accounts of virtues at the individual level. Thus, given the interest here in examining collective virtues of Christian churches, which as theorized may include both distinctively collective virtues and virtues distinctive to churches as opposed to other kinds of groups, the development of a new measurement instrument appeared well-motivated.

**Study 1**

Accordingly, researchers sought to develop a new instrument for measuring congregational virtues. Initial development of the instrument required two steps. First, researchers needed to identify and conceptualize candidates for particular congregational virtues. Second, once these candidate virtues were identified, researchers needed to create a questionnaire with items that could be used to measure the extent to which a church possesses each virtue. In order to accomplish these goals, we undertook a sorting task study with three external experts.

**Method**

***Participants***

The three participants were individuals with advanced training in Christian theology and multiple years of ministerial experience in Christian congregations. One was a male Anglican priest in the UK, one a female regional Baptist minister in the UK, and one a female Episcopal priest in the USA.

***Materials and Procedures***

Researchers developed an initial list of 109 items for measuring congregational character. These items were formulated on the basis of a careful reading of two kinds of texts in the New Testament. The first kind is a text in which a church is described in a value-laden way. A description is given of the way the church was, and it is suggested or implied in the context that this was a good or bad way for the church to have been. An example of this type of text is: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV). The second kind is a text in which a church is instructed or encouraged by an apostle to display or not display a certain character trait. Many of these examples come from the New Testament epistles. An example is: “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you” (1 Thess 5:12 NIV). After collating a large list of these texts, we attempted to group them thematically. This led to the identification of thirteen potential congregational virtues. We drafted items for each category on the basis of relevant New Testament texts, formulating these items in accordance with the reference-shift model discussed in the Introduction, thus focusing on patterns of behavior at the organizational level. Item writing was guided by biblical texts, but researchers also attempted to rephrase biblical language that might be difficult for participants to understand.

The three participants were asked to complete a sorting task in which they matched items from the initial item pool to the thirteen virtue categories, with the requirement that they put at least four items in each category on the basis of their perceived fit with the category. Notably, this kind of methodology has precedent in that a similar approach was used in the initial development of the Congregational Climate Scales (Pargament et al., 1983), which identified ten dimensions of congregational climate. In our sorting task, two of the participants also sorted the items they placed within categories into tiers. For any category that these participants had assigned more than four items, they could create up to three tiers for these items reflecting their views about the items’ fit with the category. The top two (best fitting) tiers could have no more than four items each. The third participant did not complete this part of the sorting task.

Once participants completed the task, a scoring procedure was used to select the items that participants agreed best measured each of the thirteen virtues. Total scores for the items were computed by summing the scores the items received from each of the participants. Items given the highest total score were selected for inclusion in the final version of the questionnaire, with the aim of including at least four items for each virtue category. In cases where there was a tie for fourth-best item, all items with the tying score were included.

***Results and Discussion***

For ten out of thirteen virtues, all of the highest scoring items were selected by all three participants as fitting the relevant virtue category. For all but one of the virtue categories, at least two participants agreed on four or more items fitting that category. Because of the lack of agreement for best items to measure one of the candidate virtues, this virtue was cut from the final survey. The resulting version of the questionnaire, which was used in Study 2, measured the following twelve congregational virtues using a total of 56 items, with between four and seven items per virtue:

*Clinging to Apostolic Teaching*: a congregation’s tendency to hold fast to the central teachings delivered by the early Christian apostles.

*Honoring Teachers*: a congregation’s tendency to honor and support those who fulfill teaching functions in the congregation.

*Prayerfulness*: a congregation’s tendency to be devoted to prayer.

*Hopefulness*: a congregation’s tendency to maintain Christian hopefulness for the future, including the eschatological future.

*Discipleship*: a congregation’s tendency to support congregants’ growth in the Christian faith.

*Emotional Supportiveness*: a congregation’s tendency for members to offer one another emotional support.

*Material Supportiveness*: a congregation’s tendency for members to offer one another help satisfying their material needs.

*Spiritual Equality*: a congregation’s tendency for members to treat one another as spiritual equals.

*Unity*: a congregation’s tendency to maintain unity in pursuing congregational aims.

*Submission*: a congregation’s tendency for members to submit to one another, putting the interests of other members ahead of their own.

*Peace with the world*: a congregation’s tendency to maintain good relationships with individuals and institutions outside the church where possible.

*Spreading the faith*: a congregation’s tendency to support the growth of the Christian faith beyond the congregation.

The complete Congregational Character Questionnaire (CCQ) is included in Appendix 1.

**Study 2**

Study 2 focused on congregants’ perceptions of their congregations’ character traits, using the CCQ. There were two purposes for this study. First, researchers tested the reliability of the CCQ as well as the fit of the twelve-factor model for it derived from Study 1. Second, researchers tested whether congregants’ perceptions of their congregations’ characters—both in total and with respect to particular character traits—had meaningful relationships to other variables of interest.

**Method**

***Participants***

Five hundred and thirty participants were recruited using Qualtrics online panelist service. All participants self-identified as members of a Christian church who had attended the church for at least six months and participated, on average, in at least one church activity per month. Participants were from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds, but caps were put on the percentages of participants that could be from Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical denominations so that these groupings could be compared with each other in research. 47% of participants were male, and participant ages ranged from 18 to over 65 with a median age between 35 and 44.

***Materials and Procedures***

Participants completed the CCQ, responding to its items using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by *Very much like us/ Very much unlike us*. They answered demographic questions and questions about their church’s denomination, size, their length of membership, and their frequency of participation in church activities. They answered questions about their satisfaction with eight dimensions of congregational life identified as important in previous research (Silverman et al., 1983), using Liker-type responses; and a question about the extent to which they judge that their church is what a church should be, using a 100-point sliding bar. They also completed several widely used measures concerned with their own individual well-being. These included the religious well-being subscale of the spiritual well-being scale (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982), α = .83; the satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1985), α = .86; and the presence subscale of the meaning in life questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), α = .82.

To test the reliability of the CCQ and the twelve-factor model for it, researchers computed the Cronbach’s α for the total scale as well as the twelve subscales, and they conducted confirmatory factory analysis using the twelve-factor model. Goodness of fit was determined based upon the Chi-square (X2) test, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

To examine the relationships between the CCQ and its subscales, on the one hand, and the dependent variables of interest, researchers examined correlations and semi-partial correlations between these variables. In the case of semi-partial correlations, researchers examined the correlations between the CCQ or its subscales with the relevant dependent variables when controlling for other variables, such as church denomination and size and participant age, sex, and length of attendance in the congregation. Sizeable, statistically significant semi-partial correlations between the CCQ or its subscales and the dependent variables of interest, especially when controlling for multiple other variables in the study, were taken to indicate the potential unique significance of the CCQ or its subscales for these variables.

***Results and Discussion***

The α for the full CCQ was .98. The α scores for the twelve individual subscales were also high, with a range from .84 to .9. Participants tended to rate their churches highly across all congregational virtues measured, with a mean score of 2.25 on a scale running from -3 to 3, and a mean standard deviation of .89 on this scale. Thus, in general, participants tended to view their churches as “somewhat”, “mostly”, or “very much” like the virtues measured in the CCQ. Given this tendency toward positive evaluation, CCQ scores exhibit a high negative skew. While some authors suggest possible transformations to reduce distribution skewness (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019), we decide that the meaning of the transformed scores would be more difficult to interpret. So we proceeded in the analyses with the actual scores. Table 1 gives descriptive statistics for the subscales of the CCQ.

Confirmatory factor analysis revealed good or fair fit for the twelve-factor model, with a non-significant X2 statistic, .055 RMSEA, .036 SRMR, and .91 CFI. There are, however, two cautionary notes to report about the twelve-factor model, despite these supportive statistics. First,

the twelve subscales were all highly intercorrelated, with a range between .68 and .88. These high correlations between subscales reduce the likelihood that the subscales will uniquely explain variance in variables of interest, even if they are distinguishable in other ways. This finding is not necessarily surprising, as this level of multicollinearity between multiple virtues has been found in previous research on organizational virtuousness (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher & Calarco, 2011), where correlations between virtue subscales ranged from .57 to .93.

Second, exploratory factor analysis did not support a twelve-factor solution. Rather, a scree plot suggested three factors. The nature of these factors is discussed further below. However, it is worth noting here that when running a confirmatory factor analysis using this three-factor solution, the indices of fit were not better than for the twelve-factor model.

There are different ways that researchers could proceed on the basis of these results. On the one hand, researchers might conclude that there is enough support for the twelve-factor model that it is worthwhile to further explore the full scale and/or its subscales in research. It is worth highlighting here that churches themselves may take an interest in assessing their positions on all twelve of the subscales, even if these subscales are not each individually related in

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| **Table 1** | | | |  |
| *Descriptive Statistics for the Congregational Character Questionnaire* | | | |  |
| Congregational Virtue | Cronbach’s α | Meana | SD | Skew |
| Clinging to apostolic teaching | .86 | 2.39 | .87 | -2.65 |
| Honoring teachers | .86 | 2.16 | .98 | -1.76 |
| Prayerfulness | .89 | 2.43 | .84 | -2.79 |
| Hopefulness | .9 | 2.43 | .89 | -2.61 |
| Discipleship | .89 | 2.34 | .88 | -2.37 |
| Emotional supportiveness | .84 | 2.23 | .92 | -2.06 |
| Material Supportiveness | .88 | 2.15 | .96 | -1.97 |
| Spiritual equality | .87 | 2.08 | .97 | -1.82 |
| Unity | .84 | 2.25 | .91 | -2.19 |
| Submission | .84 | 2.09 | .96 | -1.51 |
| Peace with the world | .85 | 2.11 | .93 | -1.85 |
| Spreading the faith | .86 | 2.30 | .91 | -2.26 |
| *Note:* N = 530.  a Items were rated on a seven-point scale. In order to facilitate comparison among the virtues we used the mean of the item ratings rather than the total. So for each scale the possible range of the scale mean for the entire sample is from -3 to 3. | | | | |

distinctive ways to other variables of interest. Churches may simply want a more thorough view of their characters attainable through the full survey and it subscales. Moreover, the multicollinearity of the subscales is indicative only of general patterns of covariance and these may not hold in individual cases. Thus, while it may be true in general that churches that score high (or low) on one virtue will score high (or low) on certain others, there may also be exceptions to this pattern. This kind of variance, even if the exception rather than the norm, may be of interest both to churches and to researchers.

On the other hand, researchers may take an interest in shortening the scale on the basis of the exploratory factor analysis. This kind of analysis can reveal the aspects of the scale that are most unique and therefore have the most potential to relate differently to other variables of interest. Thus, for the sake of conserving survey space and for the sake of expanding explanatory capacity, some researchers may take an interest in adjusting the CCQ using exploratory and confirmatory techniques. Toward advancing this end, we note that the three factors indicated by our exploratory analysis of this data could be conceptualized as:

*Faithful Worship*: a congregation’s tendency to engage in faithful corporate worship (e.g., “We regularly remember together the basic facts about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection”)

*Management of Differences*: a congregation’s tendency for members to show each other respect despite differences (e.g., “We continue to hold in high regard congregants who hold different views from our own”)

*Helpfulness*: a congregation’s tendency for members to offer each other various forms of help (e.g., “We work together to help congregants who are vulnerable or in need”).

We discuss below the relationships between these factors and variables of interest.

We now turn to results concerning the relationships between the CCQ, its subscales, and other variables of interest, beginning with relationships between the CCQ as a whole and other variables. Total scores on the CCQ were not significantly correlated with church denomination (Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic) or age of the participant, but were correlated at .10 (p < .05) with church size and at .14 (p < .01) with male sex. They had a .46 correlation with the participant’s total satisfaction with their church, which was computed based upon a summation of the participant’s satisfaction with eight different dimensions of their church. CCQ scores were correlated at .49 with the participant’s judgment that their congregation is what a church should be; at .22 with their frequency of participation in church activities; at .43 with their own spiritual

well-being; at .30 with their satisfaction with life; and at .36 with their presence of meaning. All

of these correlations were at p < .001.

Examination of semi-partial correlations revealed that total CCQ scores explained unique variance in these variables when controlling for other variables. For example, the semi-partial

correlation between CCQ scores and satisfaction with church was .46 when controlling for church denomination and size and the sex and age of the participant. There was a .25 semi-partial correlation between CCQ scores and congregant spiritual well-being when controlling for church

denomination and size and the participant’s sex, age, satisfaction with church, length of membership, and frequency of participation in church activities. Table 2 reports several additional semi-partial correlations between CCQ scores and dependent variables of interest.

To investigate whether the different subscales of the CCQ relate in significantly different ways to the dependent variables of interest, we examined semi-partial correlations between each of these subscales and our target variables when controlling for all other subscales. We found that semi-partial correlations for the individual subscales were not statistically significant, and tended to be below .08. Nonetheless, we did observe some suggestive patterns in the distinctive behaviors of the subscales. Subscales more focused on “upward” dimensions of congregational

life—how the congregation relates to God—had stronger positive relationships with

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| **Table 2** | | |
| *Semi-Partial Correlations between CCQ and Other Variables* | | |
| Variable | Semi-Partial Correlation | Variables Controlled |
| Satisfaction with church | .46\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination |
| Judgment that church is as it should be | .29\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination, satisfaction |
| Frequency of participation | .10\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination, satisfaction, length of membership |
| Spiritual well-being | .25\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination, satisfaction, length of membership, frequency of participation |
| Satisfaction with life | .19\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination, satisfaction, length of membership, frequency of participation |
| Presence of meaning | .22\*\*\* | sex, age, size of congregation, denomination, satisfaction, length of membership, frequency of participation |
| *Note:* N = 465. Only participants who said they were members of a church that is classified as either Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, or Catholic were included in this analysis.  \*\*\*p < .001 | | |

congregants’ spiritual well-being and frequency of participation in church activities. These upward dimensions include clinging to apostolic teaching, hopefulness, and prayerfulness.

On the other hand, tendencies concerned with “inward” dimensions of congregational life—how congregants relate to each other—had stronger positive relationships with congregants’ satisfaction with the congregation and judgments that the congregation is what a church should be, as well as with congregants’ own satisfaction with life and presence of meaning in life. These inward dimensions included the spiritual equality, submission, and material supportiveness.

A similar pattern emerged when we examined semi-partial correlations using the three-factor exploratory model. We selected the four highest-loading items for each factor, and then examined semi-partial correlations between each factor and the variables of interest when controlling for the other factors. Faithful worship had a .14 (p < .01) semi-partial correlation with spiritual well-being and a .13 (p < .01) semi-partial correlation with frequency of church attendance, while neither of the other factors was significant for these variables. Management of differences had semi-partial correlations of .14 (p < .01) with satisfaction with church, .15 (p < .01) with judgments regarding whether the church is what a church should be, .17 (p<.001) with satisfaction with life, and .10 (p < .05) with presence of meaning, while neither of the other factors was significant for these variables.

These results suggest that, while the various dimensions of congregational character are highly interconnected, some of these dimensions may have stronger relationships to other variables of interest than other dimensions do. Upward dimensions, especially those displayed in collective worship practices, may be the most important when it comes to variables concerned with congregants’ spiritual well-being and frequency of participation in church activities. Inward dimensions, especially those concerned with managing differences among congregants, may be the most important when it comes to congregants’ satisfaction with church, judgments that the church is what a church should be, satisfaction with life, and presence of meaning.

**General Discussion**

The two studies reported here support the value of studying congregational character traits. Like other dimensions of virtuousness in other organizations, congregational character traits can be conceptualized and reliably measured using techniques that have been applied in psychological research focused on the organizational level of analysis. Moreover, these studies also suggest that congregational character may play an important role—at least for congregants. The studies suggest that congregants’ perceptions of their congregations’ characters are robustly related to other significant variables concerned with how they evaluate their congregations, how they participate in their congregations, and with features of their own individual well-being. Nonetheless, these studies have many limitations. Some of these will be identified and discussed here, and some possibilities for future research will be indicated.

First, the current studies are only correlational in nature. They provide evidence that congregational character is correlated with other variables of interest; yet, they do not directly address the causal or explanatory order between these variables.

Now, there may be some reason to think that the fact that congregational character is related to several other distinct variables, including variables that are not very strongly related to one another, is suggestive that it is congregational character rather than these other variables that may be doing the explaining—or at least some of it. This hypothesis provides a more unified explanation of the relationships between these variables than the alternative, and unification has been taken to be an indicator of goodness in explanations (Kitcher, 1989). Nonetheless, more direct empirical confirmation of the explanatory order of the variables is desirable.

A natural next step for obtaining empirical evidence regarding this explanatory order would be a longitudinal study. In such a study, researchers would focus on changes over time in congregants’ perceptions of their churches’ characters and would assess whether these changes are predictive of changes in the other variables of interest. Notably, this kind of study design has been applied fruitfully to study how changes in employees’ perceptions of their organizations’ virtuousness are related to the organization’s performance (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004). This research found that increases in employees’ perceptions of their organization’s virtuousness over time were correlated with increases in the organization’s performance, and this was taken to indicate that the virtuousness of the organization helped to explain the quality of its performance. A similar study design may therefore be a fruitful way of extending the present research.

The present study is also limited in that it focuses only on individual congregants’ perceptions of their congregation’s character, rather than measuring congregational character directly. Of course, individual congregants’ perceptions of their congregation’s character are of interest in their own right. But, also of interest is the congregation’s character itself. And we may think that, even if individual congregants’ perceptions of their congregations’ characters are correlated with their congregations’ characters, they are an imperfect guide to these characters.

One way that organizations’ own levels of virtuousness, as well as other features such as organizational climates, have been studied in other research has been to aggregate the perceptions of multiple members of the organization together. In relevant research on organizational virtuousness, for example, this has involved computing scores for the organization on various dimensions of virtue based upon the reports of multiple employees concerning the organization’s relevant virtues (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). This research has revealed that members of the same organization do tend to converge in their perceptions of the organization’s character traits, and their aggregated perceptions of the organization’s character traits are significantly related to the organization’s effectiveness. Research on congregational climate has also been conducted using this approach, and has likewise revealed that congregants tend to converge in their assessments of climate features of the congregation (Pargament et al., 1991). A natural next step for research on congregational character, then, could follow a similar method using aggregated scores from multiple congregants to measure congregational character.

A final limitation of the present study is that the study did not investigate the relationships between congregational character and congregational climate. As indicated in a few places already throughout this article, research on congregational character is similar in several respects to research on congregational climate. Both topics are concerned with features at the congregational level of analysis. And both topics can be approached using similar empirical methodologies that have also been used in the study of organizational climate more broadly and in the study of organizational virtuousness. Moreover, there is some conceptual overlap between the dimensions of congregational climate that have been studied and the dimensions of congregational character that were the focus of this study. For example, the congregational character trait of spiritual equality, as well as the managing differences factor of the three-factor model for the CCQ, are similar to the climate feature of autonomy, which focuses on the extent to which the congregation encourages or allows individuality in its members. Notably, both autonomy and the managing differences factor in the present study have been found to be significantly related to congregants’ satisfaction with life (Pargament et al., 1983). This overlap therefore raises the question of whether congregational character does unique explanatory work beyond congregational climate. We might wonder, for instance, whether the spiritual equality subscale of the CCQ, or the management of differences factor of the three-factor model for the CCQ, predicts congregant satisfaction with life beyond congregational autonomy climate.

The results of the present study do supply some reason to think that congregational character explains unique variance in other variables of interest beyond what is explained by existing measures of congregational climate. For example, the aspects of the CCQ that are most closely associated with congregants’ frequency of participation and spiritual well-being are aspects that are closely tied to dogmas specific to Christianity—for example, concerning the remembrance of Jesus’ resurrection. These aspects are not well-reflected in the congregational climate scales, which were designed for assessment in non-Christian as well as Christian congregations. Also, speaking generally, it is important to note that while climate features have been found to differ significantly between mainline and evangelical Christian congregations (Pargament et al., 1987), church denomination was not a significant correlate of the CCQ or any of its subscales. This suggests that while there may be some conceptual overlap between climate and characterological features of congregations, these remain distinct from one another. Finally, the current study provides evidence for thinking that even spiritual equality, or the managing differences factor of the three-factor model for the CCQ, behaves differently from autonomy. For, autonomy has not been found to be significantly related to congregant satisfaction with church (Pargament et al., 1983), but the management of differences factor was.

While there is this evidence for thinking that congregational character can be distinguished empirically and not only conceptually from congregational climate, it would be a desirable next step to study these constructs alongside one another. Some climate researchers have conceptualized congregations’ climates as akin to their “personalities” (Pargament et al., 1991). We suggest that, in the same way that it has proven fruitful to study individual personality alongside individual character as distinguishable aspects of individuals’ psychology, it may be fruitful to study congregations’ personalities alongside their characters as distinguishable aspects of congregations’ organizational psychology.

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**Appendix**

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| --- | --- |
| *The Congregational Character Questionnaire* | |
| Virtue | Items |
| Clinging to apostolic teaching | We regularly participate in sharing the Lord’s Supper (or Eucharist or communion), remembering together Jesus’ life and death on our behalf.  We prioritize in our teaching enabling all congregants to understand the hope of resurrection we have through Jesus Christ.  We prioritize in our teaching enabling all congregants to understand God’s offer of reconciliation available through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.  We regularly remember together the basic facts about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. |
| Honoring teachers | We seek to identify and train new candidates for fulfilling teaching roles in the congregation.  We generously invest in the work of our teachers.  We honor our teachers as fulfilling an important function for the congregation.  We express our gratitude to those who serve in teaching roles in the congregation. |
| Prayerfulness | We regularly communicate to God together.  We confess our failures to God.  We praise God for all the good things God has done.  We ask God to supply our needs.  We seek to be guided by God in making our decisions. |
| Hopefulness | We rejoice in the hope of resurrection we have through Jesus Christ.  We wait in anticipation of what God will do through us.  We are optimistic that God will do good in and through us.  We regularly remember together the hope of resurrection we have through Jesus Christ. |
| Discipleship | We try to help all members of the congregation grow in their faith in Jesus Christ.  We aim to ensure that all congregants encounter Jesus Christ personally.  We encourage each other to grow in our faith in Jesus Christ.  We try to help fellow congregants understand God’s will for their lives.  We help one another identify ways we can become more like Jesus Christ. |
| Emotional supportiveness | We seek to understand each other’s cares and concerns.  We rejoice with fellow congregants when things go well for them.  We express affection for each other.  We spend time with each other. |
| Material Supportiveness | We are willing to stretch ourselves in order to take care of each other.  We share our resources with each other.  We show each other hospitality.  We work together to help congregants who are vulnerable or in need.  We help one another identify ways we can become more like Jesus Christ.  We seek to supply each other’s material needs. |
| Spiritual equality | We consider fellow congregants to be equal members of the kingdom of God.  We avoid treating some congregants better than others on the basis of ethnic, social, political, or economic differences.  We don’t look down on each other.  We avoid pressuring each other to fit into a single mold that would eliminate our cultural and individual differences.  We continue to hold in high regard fellow congregants who hold different views from our own.  We respect each other’s consciences.  We spend time with fellow congregants who have a different ethnic, social, political, or economic status from our own. |
| Unity | We live in peace with each other.  We share a common purpose.  We refrain from adopting an “us versus them” mentality toward fellow groups of congregants.  We do not allow our differences with each other to prevent our working together for the life of the church. |
| Submission | We try to avoid offending each other.  We refrain from engaging in behavior that upsets fellow congregants when we are around them.  We don’t provoke each other.  We are quick to apologize to each other.  We prefer to please each other rather than to please ourselves. |
| Peace with the world | We try to live in harmony with social institutions and individuals outside the church.  We are tolerant of individuals and institutions outside the church that are unlike us.  We are quick to forgive individuals and institutions outside the church when they wrong us.  We are willing to be reasonable with individuals and institutions outside the church.  We obey our political authorities as long as doing so does not compromise our faith. |
| Spreading the faith | We generously support those who work to spread the Gospel around the world.  We gladly receive visitors who work to build up other churches in various parts of the world.  We generously support other churches in need.  We show hospitality to those who work to spread the Gospel around the world. |