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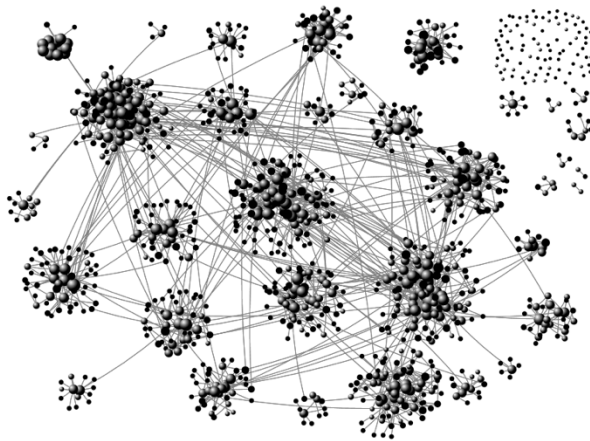
Helping Chart a Course to Thriving Ministry

**Connected and Fragmented:
Introducing a Social Network of Congregations**

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Thank you for participating in our study of local congregations in 2017 and 2018! We are excited to begin sharing some of what we are learning. In the study, we asked you about different congregations to which your congregation has connections. We asked about four different types of connections – joint events, friendships between ministers, ministerial groups, and pulpit exchanges – and we created networks of congregations and relationships for each type. Here is what we have learned so far about these types of relationships. We present the networks, from *most interconnected* to *most fragmented*, below.

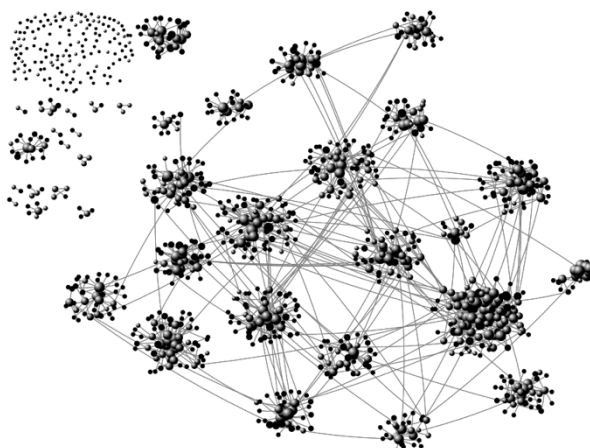
Friendships between Ministers



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Compared to the other three types of relational connections, the network for friendships among ministers is the most interconnected and the least fragmented. This is encouraging because friendships among ministers are beneficial for ministers' and congregations' wellbeing. In *God's Potters*, Jackson Carroll says: "Without the support, companionship, mutual critique, and joy that friends offer, without those with whom one can be vulnerable and share deeply, it is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain ... [an] excellent ministry." (p. 212) Most congregations in this study have ministers who are seeking and hopefully finding support, encouragement, and accountability through relationships with other ministers.

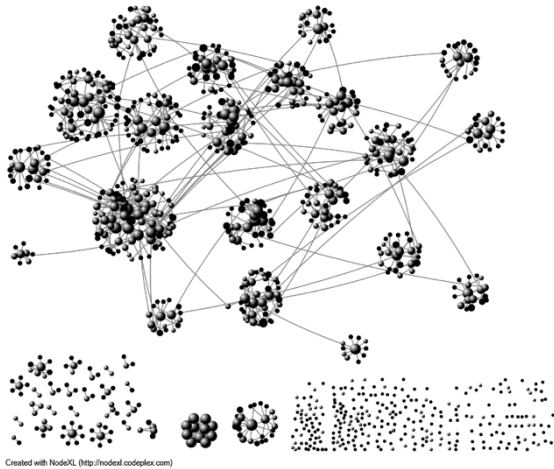
Joint Events



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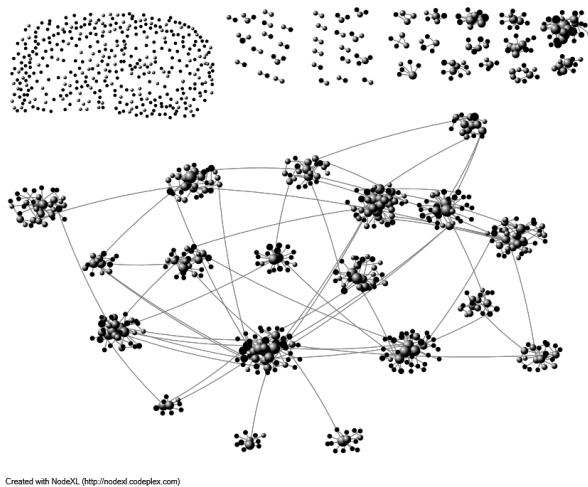
Many congregations have joint events with other congregations, like worship services, community service projects, mission trips, children's and youth programming, retreats, conferences, and others. Joint events are beneficial for congregations because they allow them to share resources, staffing, and space in order to minister in a way that they could not have alone. This network is interconnected with moderately low levels of fragmentation. This network suggests that many congregations are using joint events with other congregations to increase their capacity for ministry.

Ministerial Groups



Congregations can also be connected through ministerial groups, where ministers regularly gather to learn together and support each other. These groups are beneficial not only for ministers' wellbeing but also for congregations' as well; through these groups, ministers can network and learn about new resources and partnerships that can be beneficial for their broader congregation. Compared to the first two networks, this network is less interconnected and more fragmented, and fewer congregations are able to access the benefits of these groups.

Pulpit Exchanges



Many congregations have pulpit exchanges, where a minister from a different congregation speaks or preaches during the service, at least occasionally. These exchanges allow ministers to speak to a wider range of people and provide attendees opportunities to hear different perspectives and ideas. Unfortunately, however, the social network for pulpit exchanges in this study is very fragmented, and the numerous congregations not engaged in pulpit exchanges may not experience these benefits.

Questions? Please contact Dr. McClure at jmccclure@samford.edu or 205-726-4253.

Questions to Consider

- What types of connections does your congregation have? What benefits have you experienced because of these connections?
- What types of connections would you like to develop?
- What congregations would you like to connect with in these ways?
- How can you develop these connections (in ways that account for Covid-19 precautions)?

Helpful Resources

- *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee
- *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* by Jackson W. Carroll
- *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* by Nancy Ammerman
- *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive* by Penny Long Marler and her colleagues

Free access to the full article will be available at <http://www.religjournal.com/>.