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Evaluation Research Team Report, Sept. 2021–Dec. 2022

John Mark Robeck

Isaac Voss

Makaela Brass

Zara Escamilla

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Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Research Team Report



Research Team: John Mark Robeck, PhD,
Isaac B. Voss, PhD, Makaela Brass, BA
and Zara Escamilla, BA

Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry (SRTM) Research Team Report, Sept. 2021–Dec. 2022

Executive Summary

This report was created by the Sacred Roots Research Team (SRRT), a multi-disciplinary research team based out of Vanguard University, that evaluated the Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Program (aka SRTM) from September 2021 through December 2022. The goals of the evaluation were, first, to assess the effectiveness of the congregant leader (“friend”) groups and, secondly, to evaluate participant’s level of engagement with the Spiritual Classics, and the effects of that engagement.

Key findings include:

- There were a wide range of cohort structures in terms of size, frequency of meetings and expectations with readings.
- While COVID-19 significantly disrupted many of the cohort’s interactions, a majority of participants found the groups to be a significant source of friendship (76%) and many participants plan to continue these relationships outside of the cohort meetings (88%).
- Many participants found that their engagement with the Spiritual Classics allowed them to “lead ministries more effectively” (75%) and to “thrive in ministry” (88%).
- English proficiency and limited availability (i.e. limited time, numerous commitments) were noted as significant challenges in cohort engagement.
- Most of the participants (76%) indicated that the Sacred Roots program “strengthened [their] system of beliefs, values, and virtues, which provides structure and guidance to [their] life and ministry.”

Introduction:

Between September 2021, and December 2022, the Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry (SRTM) research team conducted a variety of research strategies in order to evaluate participation in SRTM cohorts. These cohorts met on a regular basis around the reading of the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics. The purpose of the research was to determine the impact of group participation on members of the cohorts. First, the research team conducted a literature review in order to better understand the position of SRTM within the ever-growing research field related to the theme of thriving in ministry. Second, the research team evaluated the Thrive Plans associated with the first group of cohorts so as to understand the makeup of the groups and the method by which they would meet and read. Third, the research team created and conducted a survey for the purpose of setting a baseline for incoming cohort participants, while also capturing data related to cohort members who had already participated in a cohort for at least one year. Fourth, the research team attended the annual Evangel Conference as participant observers. Fifth, during the Evangel Conference the research team conducted interviews with cohort participants, some of whom were new to the cohorts and others who had participated for one or more years. One member of the research team facilitated small group sessions with participants who had been identified as potential cohort members/leaders. This report will provide findings related to each of these research components.

Literature Review:

Central to the SRTM project is the goal of facilitating cohorts that meet around the reading of spiritual classics. One of the desired outcomes of participation in these groups is that members will thrive in ministry as they engage in community with other like-minded women and men. While SRTM emphasizes the term, ‘thrive’, the research team noted an additional, synonymous term in the published research which involves participants “flourishing.” From the breadth of sources reviewed, some key findings continued to rise to the surface as contributing factors in what it means to thrive or flourish in ministry.

- 1) Collaborative leadership is key within the congregational setting.¹
- 2) Support systems and practicing self-care are related to pastoral success over time.²
- 3) Two important dimensions of pastoral wellbeing are happiness (the quality of our daily lives) and flourishing (the meaning and purpose we experience in our lives).³

Additionally, as observed in previous SRTM reports, COVID-19 had a significant impact on the ability of congregational leaders to flourish in ministry. Additional findings were observed in the literature specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

¹ Wollschleger, Jason. 2018. "Pastoral Leadership and Congregational Vitality." *Review of Religious Research* 60(4):575–585

² Bledsoe, T. Scott, and Kimberly A. Setterland. 2015. “Thriving in Ministry: Exploring the Support Systems and Self-Care Practices of Experienced Pastors.” *The Journal of Family and Community Ministries* 28:48–66

³ Adams, Chris, and Matt Bloom. 2017. “Flourishing in Ministry: Wellbeing at Work in Helping Professions.” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 36(3):254–259

- 1) Adaptive leadership is key for sustainable, congregational ministry, particularly during times of crisis.⁴
- 2) COVID-19 took a toll on congregational leaders in a variety of ways where it has caused a shift to a negative emotional experience and loss of rhythm for many.⁵
- 3) Though COVID-19 has caused heartbreak and unsettledness among many congregational leaders, it has also brought many of them closer to God. Being in a more internalized, individualized, and isolated lifestyle appears to contribute toward a heightened sense of God's presence and activity.⁶ This has the potential to aid in one's ability to flourish.

These findings prompted the research team to consider a framework for understanding what it means to thrive or flourish in ministry, which led to the adoption of T. J. Vanderweele's domains of human flourishing. Vanderweele is the Director of the *Human Flourishing Program* and Co-Director of the *Initiative on Health, Religion and Spirituality* at Harvard University. This framework was instrumental in the design of two surveys conducted over the past year, as well as the questions used in the interviews conducted with cohort participants. Based on an extensive literature review, VanderWeele proffers the following domains when articulating his framework for human flourishing:⁷

- 1) Happiness and life satisfaction.
- 2) Health, both mental and physical.
- 3) Meaning and purpose.
- 4) Character and virtue
- 5) Close relationships
- 6) Financial and material stability

Following the literature review, the research team used their findings to create and conduct two surveys. The first survey was for congregational leaders who had participated in a cohort for one or more years and had participated in the Evangel Conference in 2021 (aka "Paul's"). The second survey was for those congregational leaders that identified as potential cohort leaders for the next round of meetings and who participated in the Evangel Conference of 2022 (aka "Timothy's").

Key Findings

Thrive Plan Observations:

⁴ Thumma, Scott. 2021. "Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview". Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary.

⁵ Miller, J. A., & Glanz, J. L. (2021). "The Personal Experiences of Pastoral Leaders During the COVID-19 Quarantine." *Christian Education Journal*, 18(3), 500–518.

⁶ Miller, and Glanz.

⁷ VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A., VanderWeele, T. J., PhD. (2018). "Is forgiveness a public health issue?" *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(2), 189–190.

A cursory review of the Thrive Plans for the ten cohorts that met between the 2021 conference and the 2022 conference revealed several important findings. Each cohort represented a particular region or ministry (i.e., Reach Bangla Mission Church Movements in NY/BD, International Communion of the Charismatic Episcopal Church, TUMI Dallas Network, etc.). Each cohort consisted of a cohort leader and a cohort ‘Timothy’. The average cohort size was eight people, while groups ranged between five and ten members. The frequency of meetings ranged from biweekly, to quarterly with some cohorts meeting monthly. There could be multiple reasons for why such disparities in frequency exists, but the observation is important in terms of understanding why some cohorts might experience differences in outcomes following a year of meeting. In addition, meetings were scheduled to be held in various settings, including virtually, in-person church meetings, or retreat-type settings. Some groups began the program in early June of 2021, whereas others began in early September of 2021.

88% of the congregational leaders had a family member or close friend die from COVID-19 or related respiratory illness.

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic often dictated meeting methods or disrupted meetings altogether. As one indicator of the disruption caused by COVID-19, 88% of the “Paul’s” noted that they had a family member or close friend die from COVID-19 or a related respiratory illness since March 1, 2020.



Figure 1: Members of the Reach Bangla Mission Church Movements Cohort

Survey:

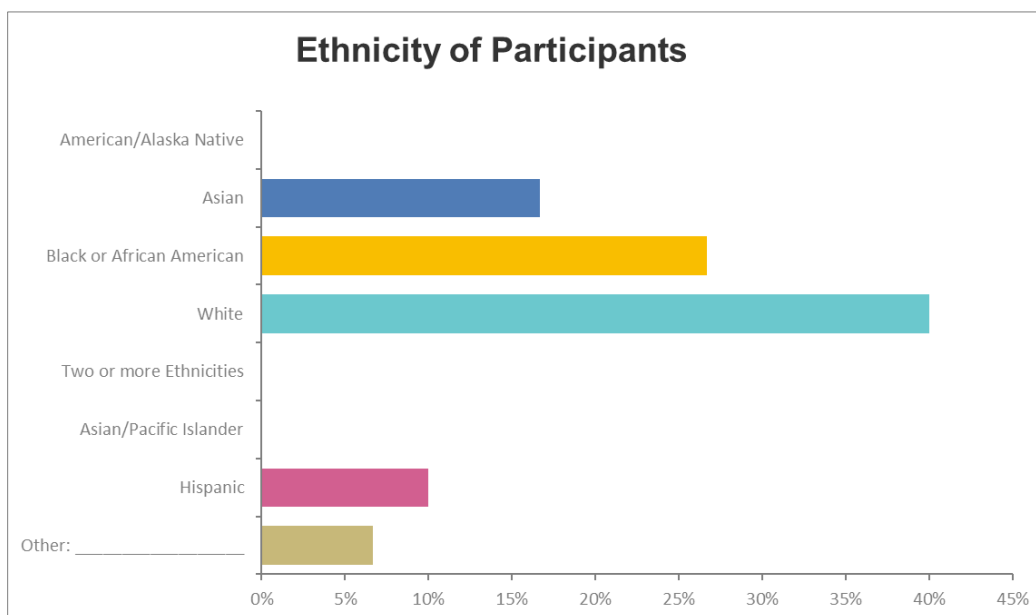
The surveys were created prior to the Evangel Conference held in Wichita, Kansas in August 2022, and served two central purposes. First, the research team desired to collect baseline data for those just entering the cohort system (Timothy’s). Subsequently, the survey can be re-administered after these new cohorts have met for a year, and then compared to the baseline data. This will help the team assess the progression of cohort members over time. The team also administered the survey to existing cohort members, although a baseline does not exist for them.

Second, the surveys provide significant data related to cohort members' self-assessment based on questions derived from Vanderweele's six domains of human flourishing (synonymous to thriving), and how this might correlate to membership in a cohort.

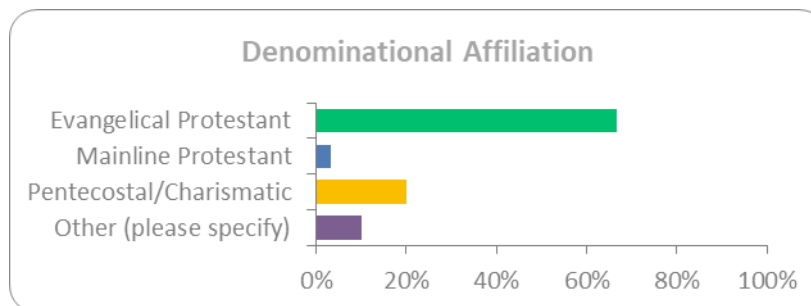
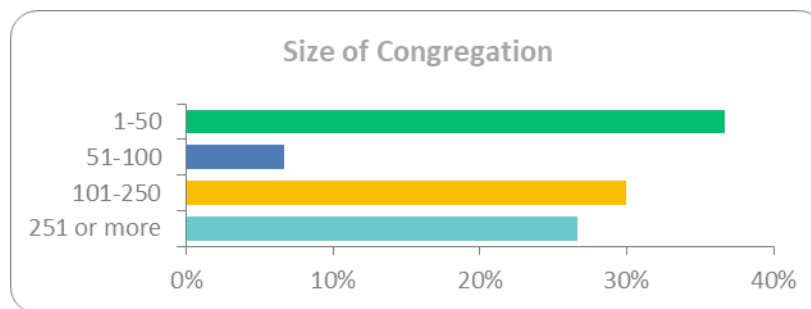
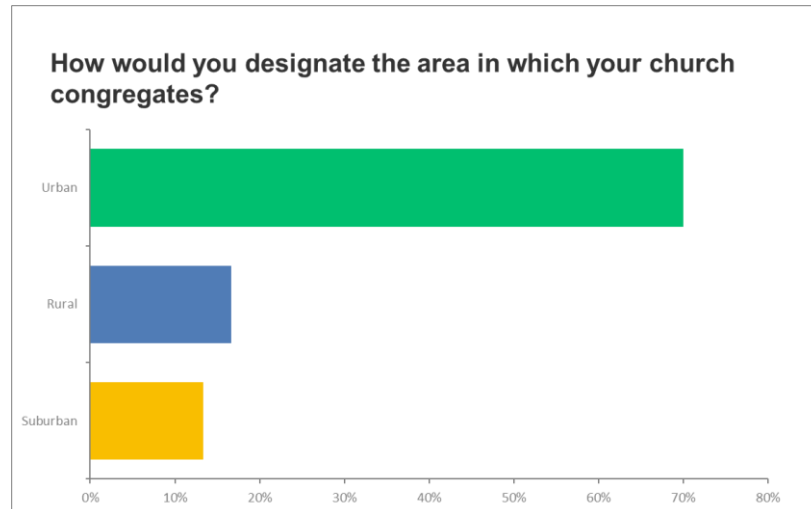
A snapshot of the research team's findings based on thirty-two respondents is as follows.

The vast majority of respondents were men (86.6%) between the ages of 45 and 64 (60%), with a minimum educational level of a bachelor's degree (70% bachelor's or higher). An interesting observation is the potential preparedness of those without a BA to engage in the reading of the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics.

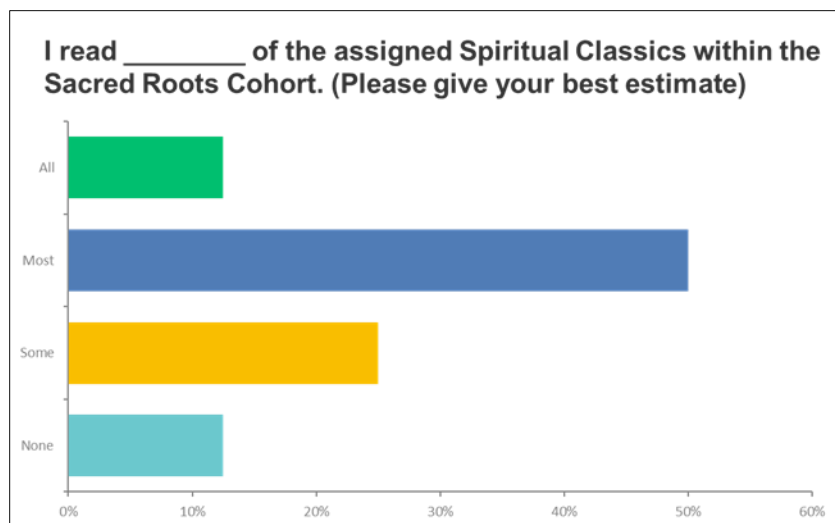
Another interesting element was related to the diversity of participants, as is demonstrated by the following graph. While the largest representation from a single group is white, the majority of participants are Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, or other.



Most participants are connected in one way or another with World Impact, Inc. or The Urban Ministries Institute (TUMI) and are engaged in active ministry within the local church. Not all participants are pastors, but everyone serves as a congregational or ministry leader of one kind or another. For those who pastor, the majority lead congregations within the urban setting, although the size of the congregations did vary.



Additionally, most of the respondents identify as Protestant Evangelical (66%), or Pentecostal/Charismatic (25%). The remainder were mainline (3%), other, or they did not specify. One of the participants who specified “other” stated that he or she identifies with, “our historic Christian faith as summarized by the Nicene Creed and practiced through the church year.” These data help to clarify the context cohort participants.

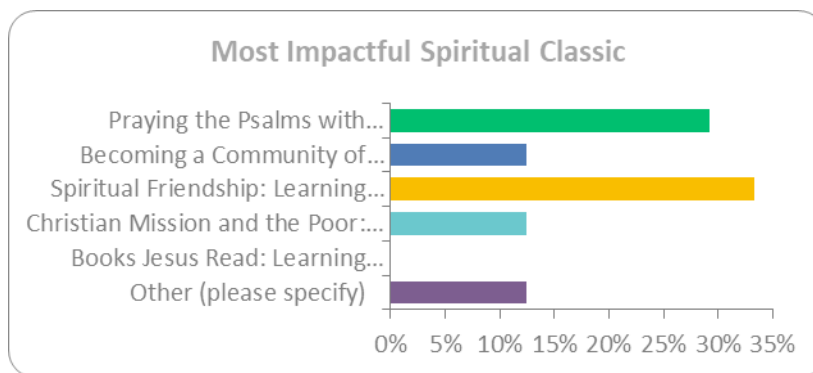


In terms of the engagement of participants in the cohorts themselves, survey responses indicate that the majority (63%) read most, if not all, of the readings from the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics.⁸ This response is particularly impressive as these cohorts met during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, 38% of participants did indicate that they did “Some” of the reading or “None.” This may be due to the demands of the positions that they hold, their lack of interest in the text, or other outside pressures. One cohort group leader, Prodip, noted that his cohort members were very busy and had limited availability to read the books. He shared, “When I host a [cohort] meeting, managing time is difficult. [The Cohort Members] don’t give me the time to discuss these books.” He went on to explain that it was hard to find a time that worked for everyone to meet and for them to come to the meetings prepared to discuss the texts.

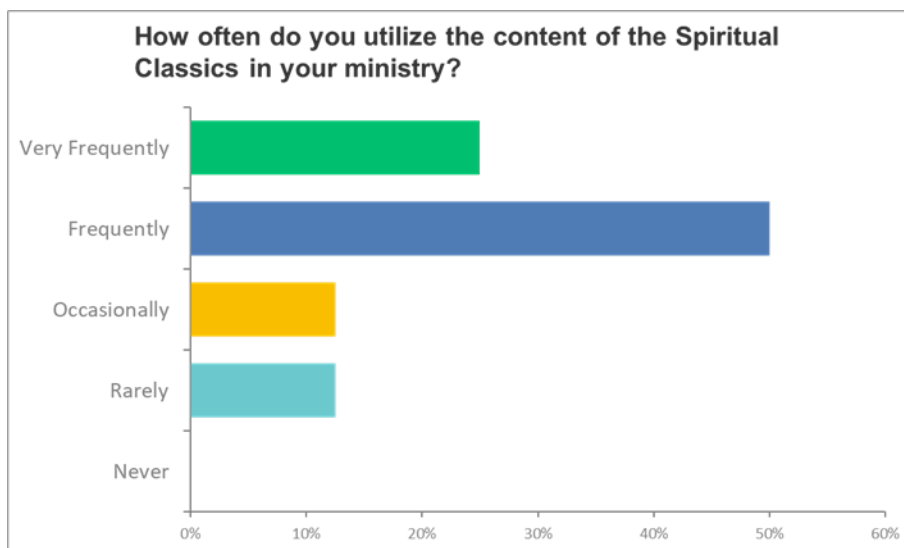
It may also indicate that while reading is part of what the group does, the value of membership in the group might be more closely connected to relationship building, comradery, or something else other than the reading.

In addition, several cohort members indicated the challenge of the accessibility of the spiritual classics due to “translation issues.” One cohort leader shared, “Some of my country people are not proficient in English so it’s hard to understand [the spiritual classics].” Another individual shared, ““From what I see the main challenge is the translation issue for who we work with in the Congo...Also, starting a site in Tanzania.”

⁸ The responses for this question come from the Paul’s or those participants that have already participated in a cohort. The Timothy’s were not excluded from this response.



Respondents indicated a range of preferences around the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classic that impacted them the most. This might be related to what was available at the time of the drafting of their Thrive Plan, which texts were read by specific cohorts (not every cohort read every text), or which texts were read by those who completed any portion of the reading. Preferences may also be related to the connections made between the respondent's own ministry context alongside of the reading.



A majority of those that had already attended an Evangel conference and participated in a cohort group (the “Paul’s”) indicated that they utilized the content of the Spiritual Classics “Frequently” (50%) or “Very frequently” (25%) in their ministry. This is a promising indicator that what is being read and discussed in groups is working its way into the ministry engagements of respondents; one of the goals of the SRTM project.

Other survey questions were designed to help the research team understand how the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics aided respondents in the development of theological understanding, to what degree the Classic equipped respondents for interactions outside of their cohorts, and to what degree the Classics were personally rewarding. In each case the majority of respondents indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with these texts benefited them in these areas.

Additionally, most respondents indicated that they had cultivated a greater sense of friendship by participating in a Sacred Roots Cohort. This has led to their engagement in warm, and supportive relationships with cohort members outside of cohort meetings, with the intention to connect with cohort members after their participation in the program.

What might be most important is the way in which participation in a cohort helped to inform and motivate respondents. When asked, whether their understanding of thriving in ministry changed after reading the Spiritual Classics, 100% of respondents indicated in the affirmative.

Participants have become more aware of what it means to thrive and feel that other people in their lives would indicate that they also recognize the signs of stress and burnout in themselves (69%). Both of these indicators suggest a growing self-awareness on the part of respondents.

Furthermore, a majority of the participants (76%) indicated that the Sacred Roots program “strengthened [their] system of beliefs, values, and virtues, which provides structure and guidance to [their] life and ministry.”

Conference Participatory Observation:

In August 2022, the research team attended the annual Evangel Conference in Wichita, Kansas. The purposes of attending the conference were to: 1) to conduct one on one interviews and participant observation, 2) to highlight the research already conducted for conference participants, and 3) to conduct the survey with participants.

During a plenary session, Dr. Isaac Voss highlighted the team’s work to this point and promoted the survey as a helpful tool in the furthering of our research. This was done on the first night of the conference so as to encourage participation in the survey. Dr. Voss, Zara Escamilla and Makaela Brass conducted interviews with cohort leaders/members. The interviews were later transcribed and coded. Preliminary observations related to the interviews suggest that SRTM participants are providing narratives that supports the survey findings.

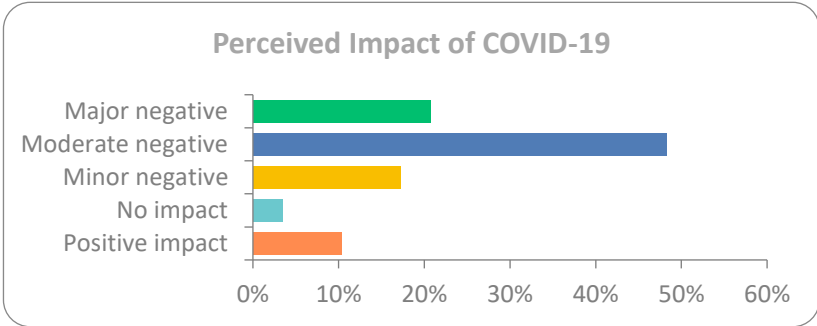
In addition, Dr. John Mark Robeck helped to facilitate small group sessions. These sessions were framed around specific learning points and promoted guided group dialogue.

Observations:

Several questions have come out of the research, one significant question is as follows. How is the program enhancing the vitality of congregations? It might be said that congregations are benefiting because the leaders of these congregations are benefiting. One method of attempting to answer this question came through in the survey. When participants in the SRTM project were asked if “*The Sacred Roots program strengthened my system of beliefs, values, and virtues, which provides structure and guidance to my life and ministry*”, a significant majority (76%) indicated that it had. When asked a question about the benefits of the program, especially framed around the reading of the Spiritual Classics, one person who was interviewed indicated that he felt closer to God and filled to a capacity through which he could engage more effectively in

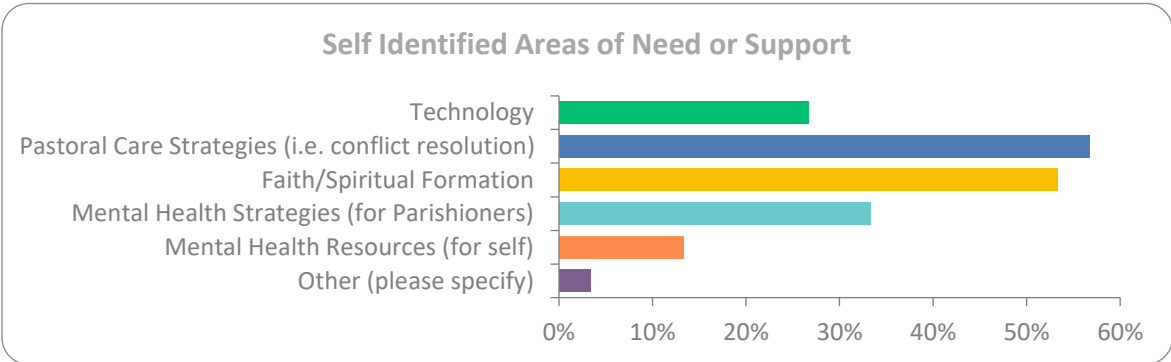
ministry. Additional work needs to be done in order to more clearly understand the linkages between participation and outcomes at the congregational level.

It became abundantly clear that COVID-19 had a negative impact on these congregations, which may contribute to slowed progress in this regard. When asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their home church, the majority of respondents indicated a moderately negative to major impact.



Even as SRTM project was positively impacting congregations, COVID-19 was wreaking havoc around the world, potentially hampering progression. Unrelated research has already shown a decline in membership and attendance at the local church level, along with declines in financial contribution. While these are not the focus of the SRTM research, questions were asked around the impact of COVID-19 at the congregational level. While these questions might initially seem out of place, they are quite important in gaining the bigger picture related to the context and efficacy of the SRTM project during the time of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced congregations to begin to identify gaps between their needs and their ability to meet those needs. One question that stands out is in relation to the primary areas where church leaders need support or assistance. The chart below is telling.



While issues related to technology persist, the majority of respondents indicated the need for assistance in the areas of pastoral care strategies, faith/spiritual formation, and mental health strategies. These are issues that correlate directly with the spiritual classics. It would be easy to

assume that this might suggest that the SRTM project and the Spiritual Classics are not addressing these areas sufficiently, however, it might alternatively suggest that the awareness of these needs have increased based on engagement with others around the reading of these texts.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that research continues around the linkages between the benefits to participants and their congregations and ministries. Thus far, emphasis has been placed on personal growth and development. One way to get to this information is through the continued engagement of the research team with SRTM project participants by means of one-on-one interview. Another possible mechanism would be by means of congregational surveys, capturing the perspective of the members of these communities. Though this may not be viable, it might suffice to conduct congregational board surveys.

In addition, it is recommended that the SRTM leadership continue to address the “translation issue” as a number of participants indicated that they are not proficient in English. This challenge is a natural outcome of the SRTM’s ongoing growth. One proposed intermediate step, which was recommended by Rev. Bob Engel, is to have cohort leaders act as “translators” of the written works for cohort members, summarizing the key points of the reading in the participant’s language.

Finally, it is recommended that the SRTM leadership team continue to intentionally cultivate the robust diversity that was clearly evident at the Evangel Conference and in the broader SRTM program. As one minister from St. Louis stated,

“Coming here (to the conference) simply is refreshing. Seeing the genuineness of how diversity interacts with one another...for me [as an African American man] is the most powerful thing... you can feel it, you can discern it, that it’s very healthy – it helps everything to move along in a very loving way. I’m all for that. I’m in!”

Appendix I

Selected Quotes from Participants

Spiritual Classics

“I read the book on Spiritual Friendship. Through it I’m closer to God...I’m also closer to my neighbor through this book.” (Prodip, 4.12.)

“Some of my country people [Bengali] are not proficient in English so it’s hard to understand [the spiritual classics]” (Prodip, 6.37)

“From what I see the main challenge is the translation issue for who we work with in the Congo...I will also share it with my people in St. Louis...Also, starting a site in Tanzania.” (Minister from St. Louis, a Timothy)

“Flourishing would be to see discipleship really taking place...in terms of scripture memorization.” Minister from St. Louis, a Timothy

Experience in Cohorts

“I knew all of the people in the cohort before...But definitely grew closer to them.” (Z1 transcript)

“I really loved being part of this program. I loved leading a cohort. I think it not only brings us closer to people that are living now, like our friends and people that we are ministering to, but it brings us closer to God, for one, Jesus, and also to the people who have gone before us in the past who have written these wonderful texts. So overall I just really gained a lot. And it’s been really fruitful and edifying in my life.” (Z1 transcript)

“[COVID-19] affected my personal ministry, because I work with refugees, and I did during COVID too. I would say it limited how many people you could go serve during that time.” (Z1 transcript)

In response to the question “Did you cultivate more connections and more friendships between cohort leaders so far?”

“It’s good because when you’re all reading the same thing and then coming prepared to talk about it. As you know, you can get 10 people together and you and I can read Scripture really, even though we’re reading the same scripture—have totally different commentary. And then you can honestly say I’ve never even thought about that and so seeing people coming together...With Praying in Psalms, that part brought us together...We all had different ideas and then on some days that we came we were all sometimes tied into one thing. That held us together a lot of times.” (Respondent 3 (M3 Transcript))

“ [My Sacred Roots Cohort group] gives an opportunity for us to crossover, to have friends from different denominations.” (M2 Transcript)

“When I host a [cohort] meeting, managing time is difficult. They don’t give me the time to discuss these books.” (Prodip)

“Through Sacred Roots, yes, I [made friendships] with two pastors and another pastor in Bangladesh...I brought five ‘Timothy’s’ to this conference.” (Prodip)

“Through this way we can make a movement among the Bengali Community, then we can make the church grow...This comes to my mind and my heart.” (Prodip)

Interviewer *“What are some of the challenges in your context?”*

“Consistency, a lot of people in our community are transient.” (Minister in St. Louis)

Experience with the Conference and Broader Program

“Sacred Roots is a good program. It’s called Sacred Roots but I think about it in terms of the Apostles doctrine, that is, the sacred roots of the church.” Minister in St. Louis

“Coming here (to the conference), simply is refreshing. Seeing the genuineness of how diversity interacts with one another, now that in the church, for me [as an African American man], is the most powerful thing. Because in the world at large or the church there is still this thing that needs to be dealt with in regard to racism.” Minister in St. Louis.

“Being here for this particular conference and seeing that on display, seeing the genuineness of it – you can feel it, you can discern it, that it’s very healthy – it helps everything to move along in a very loving way. I’m all for that. I’m in!” Minister in St. Louis