

## Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, July 20, 2016

Go deeper with me regarding something I brought up at our weekly staff meeting on Monday: our average worship attendance is down from last year.

Elder Jim Catlett put together an Excel Spreadsheet for me a couple weeks ago that provides a helpful comparison of worship attendance statistics over the past few years.

Our average worship attendance this year through the third Sunday of July is 319. That is 4% lower than the average worship attendance over the same period last year of 332. This year's attendance is 1% higher than the 316 which was the average worship attendance over the same period in 2014.

I asked the staff why worship attendance is down this year compared to last year, especially given all the special services we've hosted throughout this 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. And since attendance two years into my ministry is nearly identical to what it was before I arrived (an increase of only 1% over two years), I observed that my ministry has made no difference in terms of worship attendance.

The rest of the staff quickly hushed me, saying, "Oh David, come on!" but I was asking an important question. We measure what matters. Worship attendance is a key indicator of congregational vitality. Numbers don't lie. In two years' time (August 1 will be my second anniversary), worship attendance is flat.

Why?

I don't have any answers, which satisfy me. I'm pondering and asking around. What do you think? Let me know. I welcome your thoughts. I really do. Whatever you share with me, I will share with the rest of the staff.

Several years ago (2010), United Methodist Lovett Weems published an article in the Christian Century titled, "No Shows" in which he addressed the issue of waning worship attendance. Read it by clicking here:

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-09/no-shows>

Among the reasons he and others cite are:

- **Worshippers attend less frequently.** People are still worshipping, but less frequently than they used to. Thom Ranier explains, "If the frequency of attendance changes, then attendance will respond accordingly. For example, if 200 members attend every week the average attendance is, obviously, 200. But if one-half of those members miss only one out of four weeks, the attendance drops to 175... No members left the church. Everyone is still relatively active in the church. But attendance declined over 12 percent because half the members changed their attendance behavior slightly. This phenomenon can take place rather quickly in an individual church. And leaders in the church are often left scratching their heads because the behavioral change is so slight, almost imperceptible. We



really don't notice when someone who attends four times a month begins to attend only three times a month. Nor do we typically catch it when the twice-a-month attendee becomes a once-a-month attendee."

- **We're busy.** As former Alban Institute Consultant Susan Beaumont observed, "The cultural shift in Sunday morning activity places increasing time demands on congregants, demands that often interfere with a regular Sunday morning worship experience. Jobs, sports and scheduled recreation often keep people away on the weekend."
- **Aging constituencies.** Weems notes, "Mainline churches have a disproportionate number of members age 65 and older. This proportion will only grow more pronounced as the first of the baby boomers reach 65 in 2011. While it does not appear that death rates are changing dramatically in the mainline churches from year to year, many older members may not be attending as often—for health or other reasons."
- **Failure to reach younger generations or new persons, period.** For far too many years, the e-word—*evangelism*—has been muted in mainline congregations. At its root, evangelism means "good news." One of the most fundamental acts of evangelism is one person telling another the "good news" of how their faith and church makes a positive difference in their life. To the degree that such sharing leads to invitations to worship, congregations are blessed by an influx of new faces, hearts, and hands.
- **Walking away from drab, conflicted, or overly-politicized congregations.** When worship is poorly planned and led or not enjoined with sincere passion, folks walk away. It's more comfortable to sleep in a bed than a pew. Likewise when there is unresolved conflict. Likewise when overweening partisanship from the left or right overshadows the radical claims of Christ.

We all want Central to flourish in all the ways that matter. Dynamic corporate worship is one of the things that matters most. I am willing to say worship is *the* most important thing we do as church. Everything else we do as people of faith is nourished by the ripples outward of what happens on Sunday. If the core is diminishing, everything else will be ailing. If, however, the heart is beating strongly, the rest of the Body will be vitalized as well. Hence my raising the question about flat worship attendance. It doesn't take a cardiologist to know that a flat line on an electrocardiogram is cause for alarm.

I welcome your thoughts.