

# What Should Be The Norm?

*Lyle Schaller*

One of the most significant operational policy changes in the United Methodist Church since the 1960s has been the decision to increase the number of very small congregations averaging fewer than 20 at worship from a reported 3,839 in 1972 to 4,688 at the end of 2001. This has occurred despite the dissolution or merger of hundreds of small UM congregations.

Concurrently the number reporting an average worship attendance of 100 to 199 plunged from 7,468 in 1972 to 5,703 at the end of 2001.

Some readers will argue these two changes were not among the desired outcomes of an intentional strategy, but rather simply are unintended consequences of a collection of other policies and priorities. It also should be noted that the total number of UM congregations in the United States reporting an average worship attendance of 200 or more remained constant with 4,221 in 1972 and 4,222 at the end of 2001. (A different set of policies and priorities in the South Central and Southeastern Jurisdictions produced a combined increase between 1972 and 2001 from 1,523 to 2,329 in the number of congregations averaging 200 or more at worship.)

## Four Questions

Those three paragraphs raise several questions. One is, **what is perceived to be the “normal” size for a UM congregation in the twenty-first century?** Since 1970 the median size has dropped from an average worship attendance of 67 to 55, and 72 percent not average 100 or fewer at worship. This contrasts with the national trend in American Protestantism which shows a disproportionately large number of the churchgoers born after 1960 are worshipping in large churches.

A second question concerns jobs for the clergy. **How large does a congregation have to be to be able to attract, afford, challenge, and retain a full-time and fully credentialed pastor?** In the 1930s the answer was an average worship attendance of 45 or more. In the 1950s that had grown to an average church attendance of at least 75 or 80. Today, due to the increase in costs of the fringe benefits in the compensation packages for pastors, that number is about 125 to 135. Fewer than one in four UM

congregations exceed 125 in average worship attendance.

Is the best alternative circuits in which one pastor serves two or three or four congregations? While no one can prove a cause-and-effect relationship, it is not an irrelevant fact that more than one-half of the congregations affiliated with one of the six predecessor denominations in 1900, or that were organized during the twentieth century, no longer exist. Have circuits turned out to be a way to increase the number of small congregations and/or to dissolve or merger churches?

A third question challenges what many perceive to be a sacred norm. **Does the sermon have to be delivered in person by a live preacher in that room?** A small but rapidly growing number of congregations in American Protestantism have dropped that norm from

the list and replaced it with five other norms, (1) the quality of the communication and the relevance of the message constitute the top priority, (2) the adult churchgoers of 1950s are dying and must be replaced by younger generations, most of whom are comfortable with projected visual imagery, (3) it is wiser to build the continuity of the congregational culture around the people, that sacred meeting place, and local traditions rather than a passing parade of short tenured ministers, (4) no one really expects one pastor to excel as a loving shepherd, a spiritual mentor, an administrator, a teacher, an evangelist, and a preacher, so we can out-source the preaching to videotapes, and (5) lay persons can carry many of the responsibilities formerly reserved for the clergy such a worship leader, administrator, and visionary leader.

*This combination of modern technology and the affirmation of the ministry of the laity is creating a new set of norms all across American Protestantism. Will the UMC be immune to these changes?*

A fourth question may be the most challenging to United Methodism. The traditional American definition of a denomination called for collection of geographically defined regional judicatories (conferences, synods, dioceses, etc.). (The BIG exception to that generalization is in those denominations organized around affinity judicatories a part of a larger strategy to reach, serve, and assimilate recent immigrants.) The old norm called for each judicatory to include scores of congregations, each with its own meeting place. A new norm for the twenty-first century replaces that regional judicatory with a megachurch. It is organized as one congregation with one name, one message, one culture, one staff, one governing board, one treasury, one budget, and somewhere between 5 and 200 weekend worship services at between 3 and 200 sites. Videotape has made it possible not only to have the same message preached at every worship service, but also to have that message delivered by the same messenger at every service at every site, two or three in person and the others by projected visual images.

Long established small congregations may affiliate with this multisite megachurch. That enables them to enjoy the intimacy and absence of anonymity they cherish, retain responsibility for the maintenance of their sacred meeting place, be challenged by superb preaching, and have access to a huge variety of specialized ministries. The old norm called for tradeoffs. The new norm encourages a both-and response to peoples' needs.

**Will the United Methodist Church affirm this new norm?**

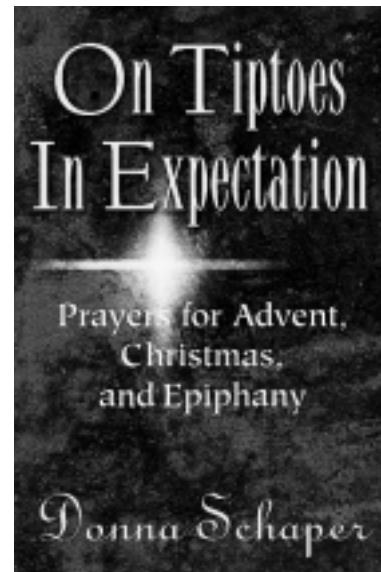
This combination of modern technology and the affirmation of the ministry of the laity is creating a new set of norms all across American Protestantism. Will the UMC be immune to these changes? □

\* The discussion in this article is expanded in the author's book, *Small Congregations, Big Potential*, forthcoming from Abingdon Press in November 2003.



**Lyle Schaller is a church consultant. He has written over 40 books published by Abingdon Press.**

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