

Lyle E. Schaller

# What Is Your Definition Of Small?

**W**hat are the most common responses when Protestant congregations in America are asked to report their average worship attendance?

For the calendar year 1999 in the United Methodist Church the five most frequent responses were 30 (896 congregations reported that number in 1999, down from 949 reporting 30 as their average worship attendance in 1989), 35 (842 in 1999, down from 885 in 1989), 25 (837 in 1999, down from 964 in 1989), 20 (802 in 1999, down from 816 ten years earlier), and 40 (782 in 1999, down from 902 in 1989). By contrast, only 644 UM congregations reported an average worship attendance of 15 in 1999 and only 633 reported an average of 45. A total of 2,190, or one out of every seventeen UM congregations, reported an average worship attendance of 12 or fewer for 1999.

## How Does That Compare?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is approximately one-third the size of the



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United Methodist Church if either the number of congregations or the average worship attendance is used to measure size.

In 1999 a total of 327 PCUSA congregations reported an average worship attendance between 3 and 12—slightly more than one-seventh the comparable figure for the UMC.

The five most frequently reported numbers in the PCUSA in reporting average worship attendance for 1999 were 30 (273 congregations), 40 (264 congregations), 25 (235 congregations), 20 (233 congregations), and 35 (215 congregations).

The Assemblies of God also is approximately one-third the size of the United Methodist Church. In that tradition the five most frequently reported numbers for average worship attendance are, in this order, 40, 50, 75, 60, and 30. These numbers reflect the fact that Assemblies have a stronger larger church orientation than either the UMC or PCUSA. For Southern Baptists the five most frequently reported numbers in reporting worship attendance for the last Sunday in September are, in this order of frequency, 50, 40, 35, 45, and 30. For the United Church of Christ those numbers are 50, 40, 35, 30, and 45.

One-third of all PCUSA congregations reported an average worship attendance of 48 or fewer in 1999. For the UMC one-third reported an average worship attendance of 35 or fewer in 1999.

By contrast, only 252 PCUSA and 733 UM congregations reported an average worship attendance of 500 or more for 1999.

Before asking what these numbers

mean, it should be noted that between 1900 and 2000 the average (mean) size of American Protestant congregations tripled if membership is used to measure size.

## What Is Normative?

What is the normal, natural, and predictable size of a congregation in American Protestantism? A parallel question is what is the normative height for an adult American male? While an increasing number of adult American males exceed six feet in height, the vast majority are between five feet six inches and five feet eleven inches tall.

Likewise the evidence suggests the normative size for an American Protestant congregation is somewhere between 25 and 40 at worship. In 1999, for example, 280 UM congregations reported an average worship attendance of 32, five times the 54 that reported an average of 132. More than eight times as many reported an average of 35 as reported an average of 135. (842 to 101).

## Why?

**Why do so many Protestant congregations plateau at around 25 to 40 at worship?** The same reason so many adult choirs include 10 to 35 voices, most public school classes include 20 to 35 students, most youth groups in the church cluster around 15 to 35 in regular attendance, most adult Sunday school classes can count on 10 to 35 regular attenders, major league baseball teams limit their roster to 25 active players (plus a manager and four-to-six coaches during the regular season), the busy physician will treat 30 to 35 patients in a day, and the membership of the city council usually is between ten and forty elected representatives. *Relationships are more important than tasks!*

Many years ago, when asked to describe the hill country of Texas where he had been born, Lyndon B. Johnson recalled it was a place where the people cared for you when you were sick and mourned when you died. Add “they missed you when you were absent and rejoiced when you returned,” and you have an excellent description of three of the distinctive qualities of the small church.

Today many people hunger for community, they are searching for meaning in life, and they enjoy continuity with the past.

Small Christian churches tend to be organized around a network of interper-

sonal relationships. In the very small congregations this network often has one or two or three family trees at the hub. In the larger congregations averaging 35 to 85 at worship, the long tenured, extroverted, and caring pastor often is at the hub of that network.

In the three-point circuit, life often is more complicated. After six or seven years, the pastor, or pastor and spouse, may become the hub of that network in the congregation averaging 85 at worship that meets in a building near the pastor's residence. One family tree is the hub of that network in the congregation that meets in a building six miles away while in the third congregation on that circuit two or three family trees constitute the hub of that network where the worship attendance averages 35. This means the pastor of that circuit needs to master being comfortable in three radically different roles in three different ecclesiastical cultures.

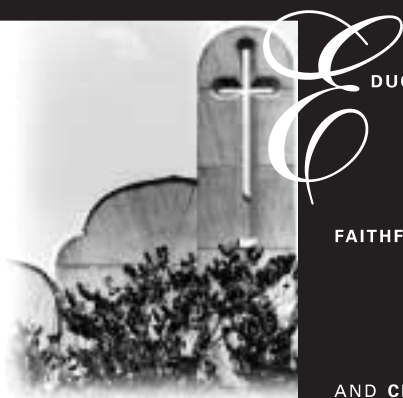
During the past thirty-five years the United Methodist Church closed, by merger or dissolution, approximately 9,000 churches, most of them small congregations. Concurrently, the number of congregations reporting an average worship attendance of 35 or fewer increased by a thousand. One consequence is a decrease in the number of congregations that can both afford and justify a full-time seminary-trained resident pastor. That sharp decrease in the number of congregations averaging 125 or more at worship has reduced the number of pastorates for elders.

One response is to increase the number of trained lay teams and local pastors equipped to serve this growing number of small UM congregations.

## Small Church Leadership

The UMC does NOT have a shortage of seminary grads! We have a shortage of congregations that can both afford and justify a full-time pastor at or above the minimum compensation level. We also have a serious shortage of competent senior ministers for very large congregations and an even more serious shortage of highly competent "career associate ministers."

**The other current shortage is the need for more respect, affirmation, support, and resources for local pastors and lay teams to serve the 24,963 UM congregations that reported an average worship attendance under 100.**



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As I have noted, the members of the small church place a high priority on a pastor who excels in interpersonal relationships. The very large congregation needs a pastor who excels as a visionary leader, is a superb communicator, and is comfortable serving in a highly complex institutional environment.

For the pastor who has spent a decade or two or three serving small churches as a

loving shepherd, this requires mastering a new approach to ministry when appointed to a congregation averaging 180 or 700 or 1200 at worship.

That distinction explains why it is impossible to design one organizational structure that is appropriate for the congregation averaging 35 at worship and also fits the church averaging 450 or 900 at worship. □