

Defining Your Active Congregation in an Emerging Post-Pandemic Year

By

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Until a few decades ago congregations could numerically define their active congregation by the average weekly worship attendance. This was during an era when people attended weekend worship up to three or four times per month. If it was a Sunday – unless they were sick or away from home – they were in church. Even if away from home, they often attended church where they were on Sunday.

Over the past several decades the regularity of weekly worship attendance has declined. It became two to three times per month, and in some cases one to two times per month. With this decrease in regular attendance, active membership became the number of different people who attend worship in any four-week period. At first that number was greater than the average weekly attendance number of earlier decades. Eventually that number decreased to mirror the earlier metric of weekly attendance.

Along the way some prognosticators – myself included – suggested that counting individual people was not the best way to understand the active congregation. A better pattern is to count the number of households in attendance on a weekly basis. This is a better barometer when the type of households in congregations are much more than the traditional family units of husband, wife, and children, but include single adult households – with or without children, empty nesters, blended families, and a host of other configurations.

Counting households is also a better metric for deciding the real growth or decline of active participation. It provides better insights into the ministry needs of a diverse congregation. For example, single person households do not increase attendance numbers very fast. However, if over the course of a year a dozen or more single person households connect with an average size congregation, that is a significant occurrence with program and ministry implications.

When portions of the entire congregation grow older, many more households are one or two person households. It is numerically possible for a congregation to decrease 20 to 30 percent in attendance over many years and have more households present than in earlier decades.

When the average household has 3.3 people in it, then 100 households produce an attendance of 330. When the average household has 2.2 people in it, and attendance now averages 220, that is still 100 households even though attendance has decreased by one-third. The pastoral care load may be greater with the lower attendance than it was with the higher attendance. The health and life issues for an aging congregation may demand a greater amount of care ministry than in previous years.

Counting Engagement in an Emerging Post-Pandemic Era

The pandemic produced a new category of attendance composed of those watching or listening to the livestream of worship, and on a videoconference or telephone conference call with small groups. How are these people counted? Have congregations lost a significant number of active attendees, or are people simply connecting in new ways not just for a season, but permanently?

What do we call our active congregation now? It is no longer the average weekly attendance, the number of different people who attend at least once monthly, or even the number of different households present? It is something else.

Counting the number of people providing their tithes and offerings to the congregation will not work. Already at least one-third of attendees in many congregations do not express their financial generosity through their congregation – at least in a form that is trackable.

Numerous congregations have discovered the people not coming back to worship or otherwise connecting with the congregation are also not now contributing financially and were not before the pandemic. In many congregations, offerings are meeting or exceeding their budget without these missing households.

These households now reveal themselves as casual church members and nominal Christians. Congregational leaders often suspected this, but now these people are supplying clear evidence.

Back to the key question, how do you count people?

I offer the word *engagement* to describe your active congregation. People who attend live on-site worship are engaged with your congregation. Those who watch or listen to the livestreaming of your worship service are engaged. Those who connect regularly with their small group (Sunday School class, Life Group, or another trackable group) are engaged. People who are homebound or in a group residential setting may be more engaged because of your livestreaming and videoconferencing.

The key is figuring out a way to count them. Perhaps congregations should revive systems of registering people by name – even in worship – to know who is present. Second, congregations can ask people viewing livestreaming to register using a simple pop up in Facebook, on the Internet, or on You Tube or Vimeo. Small groups can keep up with people connecting with them live, by videoconference, or conference call.

And, yes, if people are contributing financially they are engaged.

It is not that the count needs to be weekly. It could be monthly. The first Sunday, or a certain Sunday each month, ask people to indicate their engagement. The monthly

method will keep a higher percentage of people taking part so that people do not grow weary of a registration system.

Whatever method you use, begin thinking of ways you can measure engagement in the life and ministry of your congregation in what we all hope is an emerging post-pandemic era.