

Religious Giving and New Metrics

Assessing Congregational Vitality

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Local religious communities are a vital part of any study of Americans' philanthropic giving. While religious giving has continued to shrink as a percentage of philanthropy, it is still by far the largest segment of overall giving (31% according to *Giving USA 2014*). Local congregations' ability to receive weekly and monthly tithes and offerings from committed members remains the envy of the fundraising community. Yet, membership does not mean what it once did.

For a number of years, researchers have substituted attendance rather than membership as a more accurate statistic in measuring congregational vitality. We also know that frequent attendance continues to be one of the clearest predictors of religious giving. Yet defining what counts as frequent attendance has continued to change. If frequent attenders were defined just a few years ago as those who attended services two to three times a month, now individual responders consider themselves a committed and active participant if they attend once a month. Many researchers have followed suit in adopting monthly worship attendance as the standard for measuring frequent attender.

Dave Odom, executive director of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School and a Lake Institute partner, recently pronounced the death of average attendance as a meaningful congregation measurement tool.¹ What does active attendance mean when people may engage religious communities online, through small groups, or outreach ministries as often as weekly worship? For many non-Christian religious communities, weekly worship attendance has rarely served as the defining measurement for congregational vitality in the same way. As someone interested in assessing the health and growth of congregations, Odom raises the question whether there are other measures of congregational vitality.

This same question is important for those of us interested in religious giving. Financial health remains another metric often used to assess congregational vitality. Researchers still find a positive correlation between frequent attendance and increased giving, but what does it mean when the times and the metrics we used to assess them are changing? Maybe weekly offering receipts are not the best measure to report.

While Lake Institute is continually engaged in the latest research on faith and giving, we also spend a great deal of time with practitioners in the field, and we are learning how these evolving trends are impacting local congregations. For example, even if a community's membership is not declining, weekly attendance often is. Those saying they are committed to their local church may remain the same, but rarely are the majority of attenders in the same place at the same time.



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Leaders of local religious communities need to consider how they educate and inspire those associated with their congregations when they cannot count on a majority of members present week to week. For instance:

- A single sermon series or study curriculum will not suffice.
- Congregations should consider how to engage their community in other ways to give besides the weekly in-person offering (the ability to receive giving electronically is a necessity at this point).
- Religious leaders need to connect giving to the life and mission of the congregation, but they should also consider how their mission engages those outside their own institutional walls.

Local religious communities will continue through these uncertain times even as congregational experts search for new ways to measure vitality and success. The key for congregations, however, remains an awareness that times are changing and a willingness to address critically and creatively these new contexts together.

¹ Odom, D. (2014). "RIP, Average Attendance." Online: <http://www.faithandleadership.com/blog/08-15-2014/rip-average-attendance>.



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