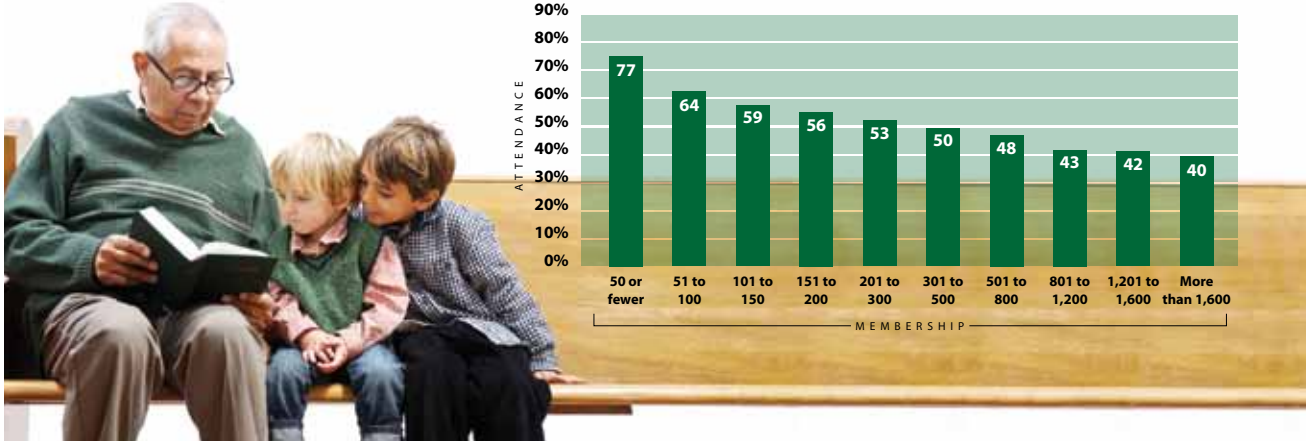


Down for the count

The smaller the congregation, the larger the percentage who attend regularly.



Let's look at worship attendance totals and trends in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

- **In 2009, worship attendance averaged 1,083,000 per week, a drop of 19 percent since 1999, when it was 1,329,000.** Over the same period, membership also dropped 19 percent.
- **Weekly attendance dropped from 122 to 109 between 1999 and 2009 for the average congregation,** a decline of 11 percent.
- **Attendance averaged 51 percent of membership in both 1999 and 2009.** This ratio has varied little since attendance was first measured in 1990, staying in a narrow range (48 percent to 52 percent).
- **The ratio of attendance to membership varies by church size,** ranging from 77 percent in congregations with 50 or fewer members to 40 percent in those with more than 1,600 members (2009 figures).
- **A small percentage of congregations (549, or 6 percent, in 2009) report that their average attendance exceeds their membership.**

*Denominational totals are estimated, based on the 83 percent to 89 percent of congregations reporting in a given year.

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What the research shows

That attendance is lower than membership in most congregations comes as little surprise. People lead busy lives, get sick, take vacations, have emergencies. Given that, having around half of members present on average sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Except . . . some attendees aren't members. A number of worshipers are visitors, regularly participating nonmembers or children too young for confirmation. I estimate that, on average, about 70 percent of Sunday worshipers are members, which means that only around one in three members is present on a given Sunday.

But that overall one-in-three average differs by congregational size. Because the ratio of attendance to membership falls as size increases, congregations with 50 or fewer members have perhaps half of them present on a typical Sunday, while in the largest congregations, it is around one in four, on average.

In a recent survey of congregations, we found a greater share of members serving in leadership roles in smaller congregations (63 percent) than in larger ones (48 percent), a difference that may explain some of the variation in attendance by size. Also, accountability is likely greater in smaller than larger congregations. In the latter, who will notice if I miss a particular Sunday? But in the former, everyone will know.

Large congregations have many advantages, from multiple programs and services to large staffs who lead a variety of specific ministries. But could it also be that, beyond these attractions, large congregations are preferable to some because they make it easier to be less involved?