

Jim's Tool Box

By the Numbers – A look at some historical attendance data and its implications for our mission.

Here are some facts and figures about 1995:

- The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed that year at 5,117 (that year was the first time that it closed above 5,000.)
- The Federal Reserve Interest Rate at year end was 8.50%.
- The average cost of a new home was \$113,150.
- The average yearly income was \$35,900.
- A gallon of gas cost \$1.09
- A postage stamp was 32¢.

In 1995 these events took place:

- Timothy McVey blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. A blast that took 168 lives.
- The U.S. imposed sanctions against Iran.
- An Ebola outbreak in Zaire killed hundreds of people.
- O.J. Simpson was acquitted of double murder.

These things also happened:

- Windows 95 was released.
- DVD, optical disc storage media format, was announced.
- *Toy Story* was the first ever wholly computer generated film.

At that time the West Ohio Annual Conference had fourteen districts. The Columbus South District, the Newark District, and the Springfield District still existed. Today parts of those districts comprise the Capitol Area South District. Below is a listing in order of the congregations with the largest worshipping attendance in the area making up the new district in 1995 and in 2008:

1995 Worship Attendance	2008 Worship Attendance
1. Reynoldsburg (1,144)	1. Reynoldsburg (2,281)
2. Scioto Ridge (645)	2. Grove City (769)
3. Lancaster First (601)	3. Lancaster First (660)
4. Hilliard (551)	4. Hilliard (635)
5. Newark First (514)	5. Pickerington Peace (542)
6. Grove City (496)	6. Scioto Ridge (540)
7. Pickerington Trinity (424)	7. Village Chapel (481)
8. Pickerington Peace (368)	8. Newark First (452)
9. Brice (367)	9. Granville Centenary (388)
10. Circleville Community (345)	10. Circleville Community (375)

In the thirteen years between 1995 and 2008, the above chart shows changes in the worship attendance of the congregations with the highest average worship attendance in the Capitol Area South District. The

good news is that for these top ten congregations the numbers are up overall. Some individual congregations are higher and some are lower, but the overall trend is toward higher average attendance.

As you can see some congregations on the 1995 list moved up by 2008, and some had moved down or off the list. Two congregations broke into the top ten in 2008 that were not there in 1995. The total attendance of the churches that make up the Capitol Area South District is **18,761 for 2008** while the attendance in **1995 was 16,579**. So the total worship attendance of the 124 congregations listed in this report increased **13%** over the thirteen years. Of course, it should be noted that 1,137 of that increase is due to the increase in one congregation (Reynoldsburg), but it is still good news that the average attendance went up over this period.

The distinction of the largest percentage increase of any congregation in the district belongs to **Summit Station**. Between 1995 and 2008, the average worship attendance rose **328%** at Summit Station. Here is a table that shows the congregations with the largest percentage increase:

Church	% Increase	# Increase
Summit Station	328%	164
South Bloomfield	237%	71
Church for All People	181%	127
Amlin	180%	72
Orient	116%	29
Reynoldsburg	99%	1137
Marne	95%	119

Each of these congregations grew by at least 100 persons in their average attendance during the period:

Church	# Increase
Reynoldsburg	1137
Grove City	273
Pickerington Peace	174
Summit Station	164
Village Chapel	149
Church for All People	127
Marne	119
Granville Centenary	116

The other congregation that is not included in these numbers is the new church start at **New Life Community** in the Hebron area. New Life was one of the last “parachute drop” new start congregations in our conference. The Rev. Brian Harkness says that the congregation started worshipping in the fall of 2004. Currently, the congregation is averaging 140 persons in worship. *New Life Community will be chartered as a new UM congregation in the district on November 15.*

On the other side of the ledger, several congregations (these congregations shall remain unnamed) have seen significant worship attendance declines in the last thirteen years. One of these congregations lost much of the worshipping congregation when the pastor left with many members to start another congregation. The rest of these churches that have lost a significant number of worshippers appear to be doing so without that problem.

The largest numerical decline during the last thirteen years was in a congregation that lost 135 persons from its average worship attendance. Another congregation lost 124 on average over the '95-'08 period. Two other churches in the district declined by 123 persons each in their worship attendance during that

time. *Overall, there are sixteen congregations in the district that have lost more than 50% of their worshiping attendance in the '95-'08 period!*

In the thirteen year period of these results, *seventy-four congregations* have **declined** in their average worship attendance. *Four congregations* have stayed the **same**. There have been *forty-seven churches* that have **increased** their attendance during that time.

So what are we to make of these numbers? Here are some observations that I would make:

1. It seems that the larger congregations are getting larger. Most of the congregations that are in the top ten in attendance are still there with larger attendance figures. Most of the churches experiencing gains are located in areas where there has been moderate to large population increases. *One might say that it is easy for those congregations to experience growth, but that growth does not happen automatically. The church must be proactive in attempting to reach new persons even in these areas.*
2. The congregations with the *largest percentage decline* in attendance are generally in areas where there has been population decline – some are in urban areas of Columbus. Others are in rural parts of the district. *In some cases, it is easy to observe changes in neighborhoods and communities as reasons for decline in attendance.*
3. The congregations with the *largest percentage growth* seem to have increased for a variety of reasons. Some of these are easier to observe than others. In some congregations, there have been intentional efforts by the district and annual conference to encourage these congregations to grow. Except for the Church for All People, the other growing congregations are located in either suburban or small town areas.
4. The number of congregations with declining or stable attendance outnumbers the congregations reporting increasing attendance numbers almost 1.7 to 1. It's not quite 2 to 1, but it is close. **While it is good to see the average attendance up overall, it is alarming to consider that 60% of the congregations in the district are reporting declining numbers in worship over the thirteen year period.** *If that trend continues, within the next ten years, we will have fewer congregations existing in the district and fewer congregations will be served by full time pastors. On the other hand, if these trends continue, then we will have a smaller number of churches with an increasing number of persons in worship in those churches. Those congregations will spearhead the mission and ministry of the district in the days ahead.*

Where will your congregation be ten years from now? How are you seeking to reach the neighborhood and community around your church in these days? Hank and I have been lifting up the vision statement of the Capitol Area South District during our messages in the cluster church conference meetings. You will find that vision printed each month in *The Connection* newsletter: **The vision of the Capitol Area South District is that all local churches are to be disciple-making centers that mirror the demographic composition of the community in which they are located in terms of age, ethnicity, and cultural background; and that the congregations continually grow and reach new people for Christ and strive to be open and inclusive of all God's children.**

Next month, I want to talk about the life cycle that every congregation, every organization goes through and what that means for your congregation and its ministry.