

## **Sunday School and Other Small Groups: Substitutes?**

### **Executive Summary**

This study is based upon local church year-end reports which, for the first time, include measures of small group attendance. The available data extends over the period 2012 to 2016 and the focus of this study is on local churches with average worship attendance greater than 125.

Since 1984, Sunday school attendance has been in rapid decline—decline faster than that of worship attendance. Between 2012 and 2016, small group attendance has been increasing—increasing to the point that in 2016, total small group attendance exceeded total Sunday school attendance. Over the past two years, total attendance in Sunday schools and small groups reached a plateau. The gains in small group attendance almost exactly offset the losses in Sunday school attendance.

Growth in small group attendance is common among both large and small churches (large churches are with worship attendance greater than 125). In fact, among larger churches, 55% of these churches reported positive growth in small group attendance. Only 38% of the larger churches reported growth in Sunday school attendance and only 36% of the smaller churches reported positive growth. It seems easier to instill positive growth in small group attendance than in Sunday school attendance.

Both Sunday schools and small groups depend upon growth in worship attendance as their source of attendees. However, gains in worship attendance foster a larger flow of new members of small groups than in Sunday schools. An increase of 100 in worship is expended to foster 18 new attendees in Sunday school and 25 new attendees in small groups. Declining worship attendance makes positive growth in both Sunday schools and small groups more difficult.

Growth in Sunday school attendance fosters significant growth in small groups but the reverse is not true. Growth in small groups yields almost no growth in Sunday schools.

Attendance in Sunday schools has a significant effect upon giving to the operating budget—as does attendance in worship. The new member who attends only worship after two years is expected to annually contribute \$743 to the operating budget. The new member who attends worship and Sunday school (excluding small groups) is expected to contribute, after two years, a total of \$1,598 to the operating budget. A new member who attends worship and a small group (excluding Sunday school) is expected to contribute, by the second year, a total of \$843 to the operating budget. The new member who attends worship, Sunday school, and small groups, by the second year, is expected to give \$1,698 to the operating budget.

This evidence indicates that Sunday school attendance, in combination with worship attendance, promotes levels of generosity that far exceed that reflected by worship attendance in combination with small group attendance. While some of this difference in levels of generosity might be explained by differences in the incomes of those attending Sunday schools versus incomes of those attending small groups, the gap between the two levels of generosity must also reflect differences in the percentages of income given to the church.

Perhaps this study questions the wisdom of current trends—small groups serving as replacements for Sunday schools. If levels of giving reflect the depth of faith achieved among attendees, Sunday school attendance yields the greater benefit. Reversing decline in Sunday school attendance is a substantial challenge. However, excellence in teaching and subject matters that attract the interest of members would be a beginning.

## Sunday School and Other Small Groups: Substitutes?

Sunday schools have been around a very long time. Robert Raikes has been credited as the pioneer in the 1780s in England. John Wesley is quoted:

“I verily think these Sunday Schools are the noblest institutions which have been seen in Europe for some centuries, and will increase more and more...It will be one of the great means of reviving religious thought throughout the nation.”<sup>1</sup>

Sunday schools served the purpose of reaching children, teaching the Bible, evangelism, and doctrinal teaching. It served as a means of recruiting new church members.

According to some authors, Sunday schools have lost purpose in recent years—particularly evangelism and a portal for new members. Rich Warren claims that as churches lose purpose, this directly affects Sunday school attendance. Particularly among adult Sunday school classes, the expectations of Sunday schools have changed. For many, the Sunday school class is a place for fellowship and a devotional among long-time friends--until old age forces the class to disband. Some older classes have abandoned any notion that it could attract new members as an entry point—particularly among young families.

There are exceptions. I recall touring a church in the 1980s and discovering a large room with theater seats—a capacity of over 100. It was a Sunday school classroom with a very popular Sunday school teacher. At that time, the lessons were broadcast over a local radio station to accommodate those who could not attend or could not find a seat. An outstanding Sunday school program and teacher attracts large numbers in attendance. I recall a combined Sunday school class for a series of lessons that recently attracted 200 which was the largest assembly of attendees on a Sunday morning other than worship. We sell ourselves short if we contend that Sunday school is an idea whose time has past.

As Sunday school attendance declines, many churches have turned all emphasis to small group formation and attendance. For many years churches fostered organized Bible study groups which met once a week as short term projects. With the advent of *Disciple Bible Study* in the 1990s, these became and continue to be popular, largely because of the quality of the materials. To Bishop Wilke’s credit (the founder of the Disciple Bible Study), this material continues in use, forming an important part of the small-group movement. Today, there are considerable, published materials used to support lessons used in small group gatherings during the week. Many of these fall into the category of Christian formation classes. There are others, such as studies on personal finances, bereavement, marriage, child rearing, and other topics. The scope of options typically expands with the size of the congregation. In addition, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Taylor, *21 Truths, Traditions, and Trends*, Conventional Press, 1996, p. 29.

“permanent” small groups formed in which a group of perhaps twelve individuals or couples meet regularly for years, in some cases, mirroring the Wesley societies where strengthening one’s faith takes place.

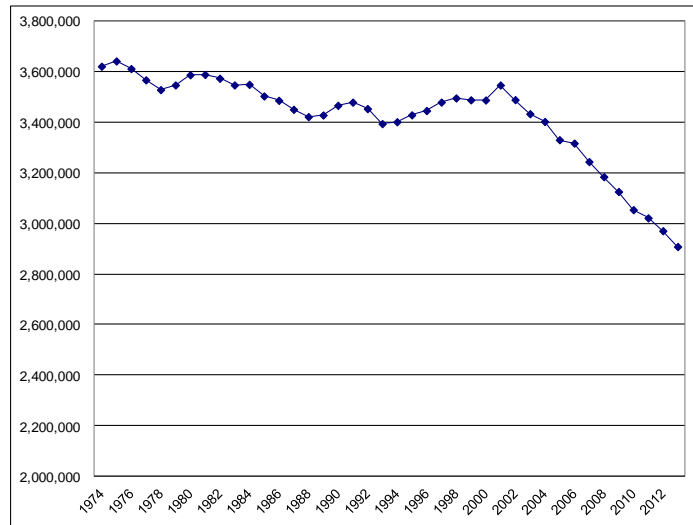
The small group movement among the United Methodist churches is significant—so significant that the Committee on Forms and Records of the General Council on Finance and Administration included questions about small group participating on the local church end-of-year reports. The inclusions in these forms are fortunate in that we can now examine the growth of these groups and consider important differences between them and the modern Sunday school classes.

The challenge that we face as a denomination is the apparent substitution of small groups in place of Sunday school. In 1985, 18.4% of our churches reported zero Sunday school attendance during the year. By 2016, 20.7% of our churches reported zero Sunday school attendance during the year. Among churches with worship attendance over 100, 0.5% reported zero Sunday school attendance in 1985 but 2.7% reported zero Sunday school attendance in 2016. As will be shown below, small group attendance has increased substantially.

### **The Setting**

The setting for Sunday schools and small groups is worship. The worship services still gather more people together than any other regularly scheduled church activity. As worship attendance increases or decreases, the potential for Sunday schools and small groups are affected. Our focus is national so the national trend in worship attendance sets the stage. Figure 1 presents annual average worship attendance among our local churches in the U.S.

**Figure 1**  
**Average Worship Attendance**



This worship attendance history has been studied, described, and analyzed. The most puzzling feature about this history is the “turning point” in 2002 when the persistent, downward trend began. I have collected explanations of the cause of this turning point, and the best explanations are these:

1. A national departure from organized religion in the U.S.—caused in part by the controversies in the Catholic Church over conduct of priests—the pedophile crisis
2. A national departure from religion in total due to the tragedies of 911—conduct of a devoted religious group.
3. The split among several protestant denominations over homosexuality.

The problem with number 1 and 3 is that the turning point was abrupt and substantial. The uptick in 2001 is a part of the story which underscores number 2. Beginning in September 2001, church attendance swelled among our churches. Total attendance in 2001 was 1.7% greater than attendance in 2000—the largest single year gain in attendance since records were made available—1974. A total of 43.9% of our churches reported an annual gain in worship attendance between 2001 and 2000. For most of these, the gain was assured due to the gains in attendance between September and December 2001. The troubling question is what were the experiences of those who attended in 2001 that led to the decline thereafter? Where these experiences so negative that the impact was widespread? Were our worship services totally

unprepared for those seeking answers and comfort? Might that have been true for our Sunday school and small groups? If so, how do we best recover?

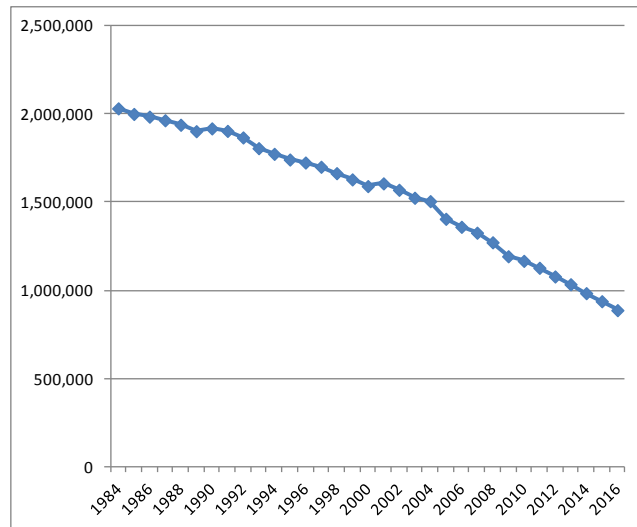
## **Sunday school**

Today, most local churches sponsor Sunday school classes. Among all United Methodist churches, 79.3% reported positive Sunday school attendance in 2016. Among the larger churches (worship attendance over 100), 97.3% reported positive Sunday school attendance in 2016. Among children and youth, Sunday school classes mirror the grades in public school—a children’s division and a youth division. Children are assigned a “grade” based upon age, and they are annually promoted through high school. Some churches sponsor a college Sunday school class. The adult Sunday school classes largely follow over-lapping age groups—young adults (singles and couples), middle-ages, and older adults. The adult classes commonly have their own life cycles, beginning with young couples and finally disbanding as the remaining few, aging members are physically unable to participate.

The typical Sunday school class forms life-long friendships that serve as support groups during days of trouble. The classes include fellowship, but there are lessons prepared by designated, volunteer teachers who are usually members of the class. There are published materials available for the teachers and class members to use as part of the quest for expanding Christian education. The Sunday school is typically designed to complement the worship service—often covering subjects in more depth than is possible during worship. The same can be said of other small groups.

At the national scale within the United Methodist denomination, Sunday school attendance has been on a steady, declining path—losing, on average, 35,000 attendees per year. The rate of decline steepened after 2002 when the rate of decline in worship attendance increased significantly. Before 2002, the annual average loss of Sunday school attendees is 25,000 per year. Since 2002, the average annual loss is 48,000 per year. Without question, the popularity or acceptance of Sunday school programs since 1984, when the attendance records were first collected at the national level, has deteriorated. Figure 2 presents the annual total Sunday school attendance at the national level since 1984.

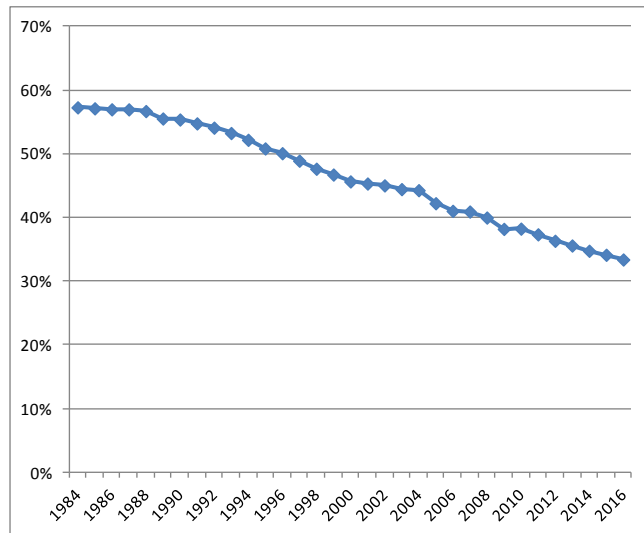
**Figure 2**  
**Total Sunday School Attendance**



Another view of Sunday school attendance is worth attention. Economic studies have considered the efficiencies of bundled visits. One travels to a strip center to shop for groceries and for some clothing in stores resident in the same strip center. The bundling of the two chores eliminates an extra trip. Residents in rural areas who travel to town for a host of reasons are among the best at bundling since trips to town are time consuming.

These studies have some usefulness in considering Sunday school attendance and worship. Typically, one can make one trip to church and attend Sunday school and worship—a bundled trip. If the primary purpose of the trip is worship, it requires only extra time to also attend Sunday school and little time is wasted. However, there have always been members attending only worship and members attending only Sunday school. On average, the percentage of those in worship who also attend Sunday school has been in decline (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
**Sunday School Attendance as Percent of Worship Attendance**



It was in 1997 that the percentage fell below 50%. In 2016, the percentage fell to **33.4%**. This marks a substantial deterioration of the role of Sunday school in the life of the average local congregation.

The reasons for this decline are many. In my own casual review, too many classes report that they have no leaders who are willing to spend sufficient time in preparation. The reason for poor preparation is a key to the puzzle. Assignments of topics by others often results in a teacher with little or no interest in the topic. Many classrooms do not have adequate equipment—video and audio. There is a tremendous amount of excellent materials available on DVD format. Small classrooms destroy the ability to grow, and small classes do not encourage sufficient preparation time among teachers. A small class is often too forgiving of a lesson for which the teacher made little or no preparation. Finally, some classes are not viewed as tolerant of controversial material. A class that avoids such material would never tackle the tough issues surrounding 9/11. Instead, the church perhaps is one of the few places that such conversations can respectfully take place.

Perhaps a personal story is useful. I attended an adult Sunday school class which deteriorated to eight attendees. The lessons were painfully boring for two important reasons. Lessons were assigned from a list of topics collected from class members. All topics were honored in that no topic was discarded. The list was passed around the class each year until every topic had a listed teacher. Most members agreed to teach. This was viewed as fair at the time.



Due to continual decline a new method was designed. Ask the more gifted teachers to select their own topics and no topic was “out of bounds.” The class discovered teachers who were interested and excited about the topic chosen. The topics were often challenging and controversial. The class began to favor the more controversial topics due to the discussions that were ignited. More people came. A larger classroom was secured. And another. And another. Today the class has up to 60 in attendance—the maximum for the room. Teachers have to wait three to six months to get their next turn—usually three to six week series. With 50 to 60 in attendance, teachers spend many hours in preparation for a single lesson. It shows. Teachers are eager for their turn since 50 or 60 will be attending rather than 7 or 8. Growth feeds more growth. Even when worship attendance is down, the classroom is full. For some, it is the primary reason to come to church. It can and does happen.

### ***Small Group Attendance***

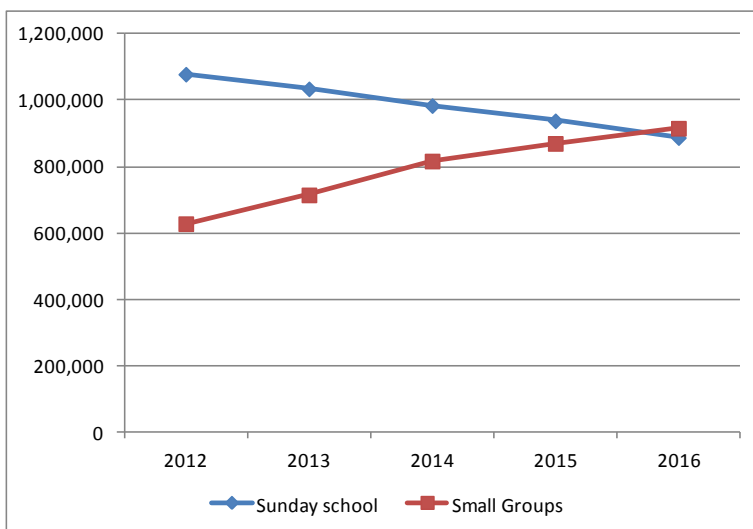
The form of the local church end-of-year report was revised by the Forms and Records Committee of GCFA for the 2012-2016 reports. The questions included in these revised forms are as follows:

1. Number of children, youth, young adults, and other adults in all Christian formation groups and other small group ministries
2. Number of participants in Vacation Bible School
3. Average weekly attendance (all ages) in Sunday school
4. Total enrolled in confirmation preparation classes

For the purposes of this examination, small groups are defined as groups other than Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and confirmation classes. Thus, the calculation of small group attendance is simply total Christian formation groups and other small group ministries (item 1), minus Sunday school attendance (item 3), minus Vacation Bible School (item 2) and confirmation classes (item 4).

The comparisons between Sunday school attendance and small group attendance tells an interesting story. Figure 4 presents the total annual attendance for Sunday school and for small groups.

**Figure 4**  
**Total Sunday School Versus Small Group Attendance**



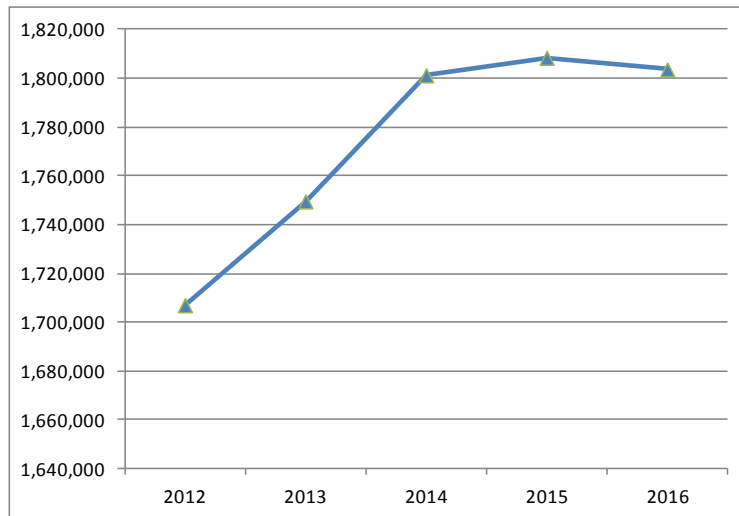
According to our records, small group attendance surpassed Sunday school attendance in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Given the recent trends, small group attendance will be the largest attended activity outside of Sunday worship in our churches.

Figure 5 presents the total annual attendance in Sunday school and in small groups-the sum of the two.

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<sup>2</sup> Recall that our measure of small group attendance excludes attendance in Vacation Bible Schools, Sunday schools, and confirmation classes.

**Figure 5**  
**Total Attendance in Sunday School and in Small Groups<sup>3</sup>**



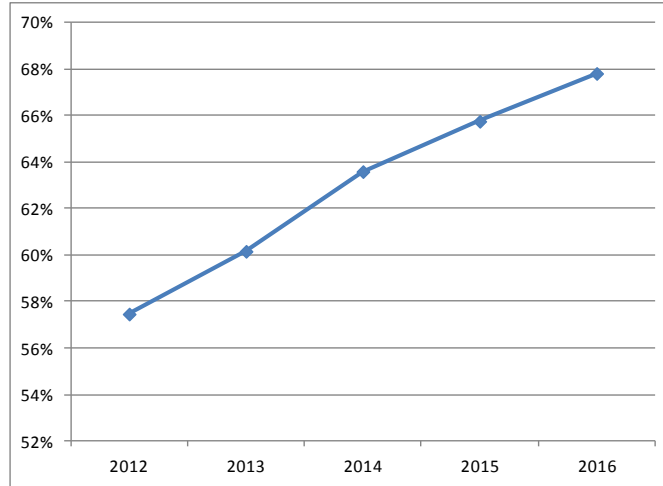
The growth in total Sunday school and small group attendance reached a plateau in 2014 when the gains in small group attendance almost exactly offset the losses in Sunday school attendance. The plateau marks a change from a more positive trend. But the plateau is a positive feature in the midst of declining worship attendance.

Figure 6 presents the ratio of total Sunday school and small group attendance (sum of both) to worship attendance.

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<sup>3</sup> The total includes members who are counted more than once. Many Sunday school attendees are also members of small groups.

**Figure 6**  
**Ratio of Sunday School and Small Group Attendance**  
**To Worship Attendance**



While the increase in this percentage could be interpreted as a positive reflection on the vitality of our congregations, the driver of this growing percentage is the decline in worship attendance. As noted in Figure 5, the total attendance in Sunday school and small groups has stabilized while the decline in worship attendance has continued. This upward trend in Figure 6, combined with the growth and stabilization in the total Sunday school and small group attendance, does suggest that small group opportunities are offering experiences that attract growing percentages of our members.

Although the trends among all churches are clear, the composition of change is worth examination. Table 1 presents the number of churches that, between 2012 and 2016, reported positive growth, decline, or no change among worship, Sunday school, and small group attendance.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Churches Reporting Positive Growth, Decline, or No Change**  
**2012-2016**

	<b>Growing</b>	<b>Declining</b>	<b>No Change</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Attend&gt;125</b>				5,347
Attend	2,040	3,050	257	
Sunday school	1,918	2,904	525	
Small Groups	2,938	2,316	93	
<b>Attend&lt;126</b>				26,828
Attend	7,570	13,434	5,824	
Sunday school	6,386	9,882	10,560	
Small Groups	11,398	10,005	5,425	

Overall, there are 5,347 churches with average worship attendance greater than 125, and 26,828 churches with average worship attendance less than 126. Among these two groups, it is useful to review the growth and decline patterns between the groups.

For worship attendance, 38.2% (2,040/5,347) of the larger churches reported positive growth. Only 28.2% of the smaller churches reported positive growth. For Sunday school attendance, 35.9% of the larger churches reported positive growth, and only 23.8% of the smaller churches reported positive growth. For small group attendance, 54.9% of the larger churches reported positive growth, and only 42.5% of the smaller churches reported positive growth. There is a story here. The larger churches seem to have a stronger capacity to sustain positive growth in worship than the smaller churches—38.2% versus 28.2%. Likewise, the larger churches seem to have a stronger capacity to sustain positive growth in Sunday school attendance—35.9% versus 23.8%. Finally, the larger churches seem to have a greater capacity to sustain positive growth in small group attendance—54.9% versus 42.5%. The larger churches clearly have the advantage in promoting growth over the smaller churches. However, promoting positive growth in both groups is less successful for Sunday school attendance than in worship attendance, although for the larger churches the difference is small—38.2% versus 35.9%. The majority of larger churches report positive growth in small group attendance (54.9%) compared to a minority of smaller churches (42.5%).

These figures suggest that a useful strategy might be to reallocate efforts toward improvement of attendance among small groups from efforts seeking improvements in Sunday schools. It appears that improving Sunday school attendance could be as difficult as improving worship attendance. However, one must take into account the fact that these are not

independent attendance figures. Instead, they are related. The following explains these relationships and why they are important.

### ***Attendance Flows: Entry Points and Expanded Activities***

There are three primary entry points for a new church member: worship, Sunday school, and small groups.<sup>4</sup> Most new members begin with worship, and church members typically encourage new members to join a Sunday school class, a small group, or both. Members of small groups and Sunday school classes often invite friends to join them there. Once attending a Sunday school class or small group, they are then encouraged to join the church as members and regularly attend worship. It is reasonable to contend that the entry point that demonstrates the highest level of excellence is the entry point that sees the most traffic. The worship service by design often exhibits the highest level of excellence, compared to a Sunday school class or a small group. Thus, we would contend that the worship service is the entry point with the most traffic. But it is not the only entry point with traffic.

It is useful to think of a new church member as one who chooses his or her entry point. As noted, this would include worship, Sunday school and small group. It can also include mission projects, music concert, or other one-time events sponsored by the church, but due to the lack of records, we must ignore these other entry points.

Hopefully, the new member will expand his or her involvement in the congregation by attending multiple activities. One might begin with worship, and, after a few weeks, the new member might join a Sunday school class. In another few weeks, the new member might join a small group which meets on a weekday in a member's home. This is a simple sequence of events, but it is useful to keep in mind in interpreting the results below—all derived from an examination of local church year-end reports.

We first turn to the Sunday school attendance. Among 100 new members who began with worship, on average, how many find their way to a Sunday school class? Among 100 new members who began with small groups, how many find their way to a Sunday school class? The following regression results provide useful estimates.

To begin, it is useful to explain how the following tables are used. Regression analysis is a powerful, statistical tool through which some underlying relationships within data can be identified and measured. In the following Table 2, one is identifying the relationship between worship attendance and Sunday school attendance, among others. By design, we look for a possible relationship between worship attendance in (say) 2012 and observe Sunday school

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<sup>4</sup> An additional entry point for many churches is mission projects. While this is important, it is assumed that the new member beginning with a mission project will ultimately attend worship, Sunday school, and or a small group.

attendance in 2013 and in 2014 to see if they move together. If they do, the relationship will be identified by a coefficient (second column). A positive coefficient means that there is a direct relationship—when worship attendance declines between 2012 and 2013, Sunday school attendance declines between 2013 and 2014—a year later. Now to Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Regression Results**  
**Sunday School Attendance in Response to Worship Attendance**  
**And Small Groups<sup>5</sup>**

attsch	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
attend_1	.0751167	.008873	8.47	0.000	.057726	.0925074
attend_2	.1059861	.0088015	12.04	0.000	.0887355	.1232368
small_grps_1	.0037374	.0018334	2.04	0.042	.0001439	.0073309
small_grps_2	.0118644	.0020529	5.78	0.000	.0078409	.015888
rpgmexp_1	-.0000245	.0000161	-1.52	0.128	-.0000561	7.05e-06
rstaftcomp_1	.0001416	6.34e-06	22.32	0.000	.0001291	.000154
affinity_3mi	-.0001189	.0000237	-5.01	0.000	-.0001654	-.0000724
year	-4.869061	.6198882	-7.85	0.000	-6.08402	-3.654103
_cons	9833.187	1248.811	7.87	0.000	7385.563	12280.81

where:

attend\_1 measures average worship attendance during the previous year

attend\_2 measures average worship attendance two years before

small\_grps\_1 measures average small group attendance during the previous year

small\_grps\_2 measures average small group attendance two years before

rpgmexp\_1 measures program expenditures during the previous year (inflation adjusted)

rstaftcomp\_1 measures non-clergy staff compensation during the previous year (inflation adjusted)

affinity\_3mi measures the affinity resident population within 3 miles of the church  
year equals the calendar year

\_cons represents the constant term in the regression equation

The results in Table 2 offer several important findings. Worship attendance is a main driver of Sunday school attendance. The coefficient of attend\_1 and of attend\_2 are both positive.<sup>6</sup> With a gain in worship attendance of 100 over a two year period of time, Sunday

<sup>5</sup> This estimate is limited to churches with worship attendance of more than 125 and with increasing worship attendance. The time period is limited to 2013 to 2016. The independent variables are lagged one year.

<sup>6</sup> Both are also statistically significant which gives us confidence in the result. All values of z (fourth column) must be greater than 1.645 (or smaller than -1.645) to be statistically significant.

school attendance the following year is expected to increase by 18.<sup>7</sup> From our end-of-year reports, we know that the average ratio of Sunday school attendance to worship attendance equals 35%. Our measure of 18 attendees (not 35) suggests that the newer worship attendees are less likely to attend Sunday school than established members. Perhaps as they mature, they are more willing to join a Sunday school class.<sup>8</sup>

A growth in small group attendance has little impact upon Sunday school attendance. the coefficients of `small_grps_1` and `small_grps_2` are considerably smaller than those of `attend_1` and `attend_2`. With an increase in small group attendance of 100 over the past two years, one would reasonably expect an increase in Sunday school attendance of only one. The path from small group attendance, expanding into Sunday school attendance is not well traveled.

On average, an expansion of non-clergy staff compensation tends to promote Sunday school attendance, but increases in programming budgets appear to have little effect on Sunday schools.<sup>9</sup> This might best be explained by the likely possibility that the local church spends few programming dollars on Sunday school activities in spite of significant total programming spending. The coefficient of `affinity_3mi` is negative and suggests that Sunday school attendance tends to fall among congregations located in neighborhoods in which the population of residents of similar race and ethnicity as the congregation is increasing. This is a puzzling result.<sup>10</sup> The coefficient of `year` is negative, affirming that Sunday school attendance is experienced a downward trend, as illustrated in Figure 2.

We now turn to small groups where worship attendance and Sunday school classes are the entry points. The following regression results provide the estimates.

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<sup>7</sup> The 18 comes from the sum of 0.75 and .105 (equals .18) times 100.

<sup>8</sup> This result might also reflect the condition that a favored, contemporary service takes place during Sunday school.

<sup>9</sup> The coefficient of `rstafcomp_1` is positive and statistically significant. The coefficient of `rpgmexp_1` is not statistically significant—the z value is not statistically significant.

<sup>10</sup> The coefficient of `affinity_3mi` is negative and statistically significant.



**Table 3**  
**Regression Results**  
**Small Groups in Response to Worship Attendance and Sunday Schools**

small_grps	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
attsch_1	.2025568	.0451878	4.48	0.000	.1139903	.2911232
attsch_2	.0520697	.0457757	1.14	0.255	-.0376489	.1417883
attend_1	.2492705	.0401253	6.21	0.000	.1706265	.3279146
attend_2	.0381199	.0397596	0.96	0.338	-.0398076	.1160474
rpgmexp_1	.000229	.0000709	3.23	0.001	.0000901	.0003678
rstafcomp_1	.0004165	.0000284	14.68	0.000	.0003609	.0004721
affinity_3mi	.0002162	.0001024	2.11	0.035	.0000154	.0004169
year	4.085469	2.811775	1.45	0.146	-1.425509	9.596446
_cons	-8299.06	5664.578	-1.47	0.143	-19401.43	2803.308

where:

attsch\_1 measures average Sunday school attendance during the previous year

attsch\_2 measures average Sunday school attendance two years before

attend\_1 measures average worship attendance during the previous year

attend\_2 measures average worship attendance two years before

rpgmexp\_1 measures program expenditures during the previous year (inflation adjusted)

rstafcomp\_1 measures non-clergy staff compensation during the previous year (inflation adjusted)

affinity\_3mi measures the affinity resident population within 3 miles of the church  
year equals the calendar year

\_cons represents the constant term in the regression equation

Table 3 presents the evidence of flows into small groups whereas Table 2 presents the flows into Sunday school attendance. According to the results, Sunday school attendance is a valuable source of attendees in small groups. The coefficient of attsch\_1 is statistically significant with a value of 0.20. This implies that an increase in Sunday school attendance last year promotes an increase in small group attendance this year. An increase of 100 in Sunday school is expected to promote a 20 attendee increase in small group attendance—with a one year lag. The coefficient of attsch\_2 is not statistically significant, indicating that the impact of a gain in Sunday school attendance upon small group attendance lasts only one year—not two years.

Worship is the largest source of small group attendees between Sunday school attendance and worship attendance. Over only one year, 100 additional attendees in worship

yield 25 additional attendees in small groups.<sup>11</sup> From Table 2, this 100 attendee growth in worship yields only 18 additional attendees in Sunday school. Thus, with growth in worship attendance, more find their way into small groups than in Sunday school. This is consistent with the finding in Figure 4.

Increases in programming expenditures and non-clergy staff compensation both lead to new attendees in small groups.<sup>12</sup> For many churches included in this examination, a staff member is likely assigned the responsibility of increasing small group attendance. In some churches, Sunday school attendance is not strongly encouraged.

The results further indicate that small groups are more likely to expand in churches for which the population of like race and ethnicity as the congregation is growing. This result is in sharp contrast to that of the Sunday school attendance examination in Table 2.<sup>13</sup> The regression coefficient of year is not statistically significant. Factors other than the passing of time explain the positive growth over time presented in Figure 4.

These sets of results (Tables 2 and 3) tell an important story. Falling Sunday school attendance poses a difficult challenge for local churches—more so than small group attendance. First, there is a temporal, negative decline in Sunday school attendance (loss of 4.0% per year between 2002 and 2016) which is only partially driven by declining worship attendance. Gains in attendance among small groups among existing members have offset the effects of declining worship attendance until 2015. Growth has now reached a plateau which is being challenged by more rapid decline in worship attendance. The patterns suggest that small group attendance has become a replacement for Sunday school attendance among many church members.

Second, increasing worship attendance feeds both Sunday school attendance and small group attendance. With an increase in worship attendance of 100 over the past 2 years, Sunday school attendance is expected to increase by 18 and small group attendance is expected to increase by 25.

Third, the typical budget allocations seem to favor growth in small group attendance. With existing allocations of budget spending, an increase in spending of \$50,000 on programs and another \$50,000 in non-clergy staff compensation yields a 6.9% increase in Sunday school attendance and a 20.2% increase in small group attendance. It is not at all clear exactly how

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<sup>11</sup> Based upon the coefficient of attend\_1. The coefficient of attend\_2 is not statistically significant.

<sup>12</sup> The coefficients of rpgmexp\_1 and rstafcomp\_1 are both positive and statistically significant.

<sup>13</sup> The coefficient of affinity\_3mi is positive and statistically significant.

these funds are typically spent in the local church, but it is highly likely that local churches are allocating relatively few responses toward financial and staff support of Sunday schools. These results do not address the investment return when funds target Sunday school attendance versus small group attendance.

**Financial Consequence: declining Sunday school attendance**

The financial consequences of significant changes in worship attendance are well known, and churches for the most part respond appropriately. However, little is known about the financial impact of changes in Sunday school attendance and changes in small group attendance when worship attendance remains stable. The results below in Table 4 indicate that these changes in attendance, Sunday school and small groups, significantly affect contributions to the operating budget. In fact, these results could change the perspective of Sunday school attendance among congregational leaders.

Table 4 presents the results from an analysis of changes in contributions to the operating budget in the context of changing worship attendance, changing Sunday school attendance, and changing small group attendance. The financial consequences of declining Sunday school attendance, even in the presence of increasing worship attendance, can be challenging.

**Table 4  
Regression Results  
Contributions to the Operating Budget**

rsectltot	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
attend_1	697.9258	51.78204	13.48	0.000	596.4349	799.4167
attend_2	743.0414	53.15832	13.98	0.000	638.853	847.2298
small_grps_1	75.56712	9.166712	8.24	0.000	57.60069	93.53354
small_grps_2	99.92145	9.164285	10.90	0.000	81.95978	117.8831
attsch_1	651.4295	46.22082	14.09	0.000	560.8384	742.0207
attsch_2	854.7568	51.58548	16.57	0.000	753.6511	955.8625
year	21035.96	2827.848	7.44	0.000	15493.48	26578.44
_cons	-4.24e+07	5697086	-7.44	0.000	-5.35e+07	-3.12e+07

The results presented in Table 4 explain the gains and losses in contributions to the local church operating budget, adjusted for inflation. The definitions of the variables listed in this table are the same as those in previous tables.

To understand these results it is helpful to recall the typical flow patterns across worship attendance, Sunday school attendance, and small group attendance. Worship is the most

common entry point for new members, and attendance in Sunday schools and small groups typically follow after a time among some new members. Other new members will only attend worship, not changing as the years pass by.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis only examines local churches with worship attendance greater than 125 and churches with the same senior pastor over the years examined.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this particular analysis is limited in scope. A later version of this study will focus upon the smaller churches.

There are slightly over 2,100 churches included in this analysis. The average giving per worship attendee between 2012 and 2015 equals \$2,030 (in 2016 dollars). This figure is useful in comparisons with results contained in Table 4.

The financial impact of an increase in worship attendance today over the following two years is captured in the coefficients of `attend_1` and `attend_2`. These regression coefficients are both positive and statistically significant. This represents expected contributions of the new member--\$698 during the first pledge year and \$743 during the second pledge year. Without involvement in Sunday school or small groups, the expected contribution of the new attendee is 41.5% of the average contribution of those in the pews by the second year.

Now consider the new member who attends worship and joins a Sunday school class. The expected contribution is recorded by the coefficients of `attend_1` and `attsch_1` for the first year and `attend_2` and `attsch_2` for the second year. The expected contributions are \$1,349 in the first year and \$1,598 in the second year after joining the church. This path results in a contribution in year two that is 78.7% of the average contribution among existing members in the pew.

Next consider the new member who begins worship attendance and joins a small group without attendance in Sunday school. According to the coefficients of `small_grps_1` and `small_grps_2` in Table 4, the small group attendance enhances the expected annual contributions to the operating budget by an additional \$76 in the first year and by \$100 in the second year. In total, the new member who attends worship and small groups by the second year is expected to contribute \$843 in the second year. This represents 36.6% of the average giving among members in the pews.

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<sup>14</sup> Some churches offer a contemporary worship service during the traditional Sunday school hour. For those who prefer the contemporary service, Sunday school attendance is not an option unless classes are offered at other times.

<sup>15</sup> The churches are restricted to the years in which the senior pastor served no less than 2 years and no more than 12 years in the appointment.

Finally, consider the new member who attends worship, attends Sunday school and attends small groups. According to this analysis, the new member is as fully engaged in the life of the church as we can observe. The coefficients of interest include all that relate to worship attendance, Sunday school attendance and small group attendance. By the second year, the expected contribution by the new member equals \$1,698 which is the sum of the year 2 coefficients: \$743, \$100, and \$855. This amount represents 83.6% of the average contribution among existing members in the pews.

These regression results in Table 4 set forth a concerning view of a tendency to substitute small group attendance for Sunday school attendance. It is the Sunday school attendee who is the most generous between the two non-worship ministries. Yet, the trends are disturbing. Sunday school attendance is in rapid decline whereas small group attendance is increasing in the face of declining worship attendance.

With equal levels of family income, the level of giving of a member of a congregation is said to reflect the member's depth of faith. If so, the journey is best traveled through Sunday school attendance than through small group attendance. However, casual evidence suggests that the average age of members of adult Sunday school classes is greater than those members attending small groups. Accordingly, the average member of a Sunday school class may be of an age of near peak family income in contrast to the younger small group attendee who is at the early stages of a career with lower earnings. These portraits of attendees suggest that the results in Table 4 are driven by differences in family incomes rather than differences in the percentages of income contributed to the operating budget. Yet, the magnitude of the differences in the key coefficients (attsch\_2 at \$855 and small\_grps\_2 at \$100) question this conclusion.

It appears that Sunday school attendance enriches the member's faith, as expressed in one's generosity toward the church, more than that of small groups. This conclusion underscores two strategies for the local church. First, dedicate efforts toward improving the levels of excellence in teaching adult Sunday school classes and improve the equipment and facilities within which classes meet as a means of improving adult Sunday school attendance. Second, examine the materials shared among small groups and ensure that there is a sufficient emphasis on teachings of generosity and awareness of the rich blessings offered to communities among our churches, thereby raising the priorities of giving to our ministries among the many choices facing our members.

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