

## ATTENDANCE FLUCTUATIONS,

Rev. Helen Zidowecki, President UU SGM Network, *CGN*, January/February 2013

A question about fluctuating attendance was raised on Small Group Ministry Network Facebook, with some responses. There is no single answer and answers will differ from location to location and from time to time. For each suggested reason for change in attendance, expect a counter experience of success. So much for easy resolution! Maybe the "givens" are what we use to define the situation and the "options" that we have to address it. This article is to invite comments here and on Facebook, so that we can enhance our understanding of the problem. *The concern crosses geography and demographics of our congregations.* Here are some beginning considerations, incorporating some in the Facebook responses.

### **Defining the current situation within your congregation**

Keep note of who is in which groups, why people join and leave groups. When people leave, have an exit interview that will give an idea of the reason for the change. Some of the responses might include inability to continue a commitment, unmet expectations from the experience or the group, or group dynamics and leadership. The importance is to ask. There are various evaluation tools available to assess the status of the program and groups.

*Assess what is going on in your congregation and larger community.* This includes the place of Small Group Ministry within congregation, the opportunities and expectations that people will participate, and the competing activities. Change in leadership within the congregation and within the Small Group Ministry program itself may also influence attendance. While it is possible that the whether the groups meet once or twice a month, or whether the groups are ongoing or time limited, may be factors, the concerns about attendance cross those factors. However, change in the demographics may be a factor. Is there a change in the interest for specific times, such as evening versus daytime, possibly related to work status (part time versus full time, retired) or younger families with children.

*Considerations to address the situation* may include altering ways the program is structured. For example, if the groups are time limited, give the option of having continuing groups, and visa versa. If groups meet twice monthly, give the option of meeting once a month, and visa versa. If groups all follow the same session plans or are tied with the sermon or a shared topic, allow for selecting from the broad variety of topics available.

There are several ways to describe groups. One is usual or traditional groups, usually selected based on time available to meet. Another is affinity or groups comprised of people with common interest, such as parents, gender or age, etc. I see a third type emerging -- a focused group around a specific topic, such as the Thirty Days of Love and Women's Issues mentioned in another article, or Newcomers groups. *We need to consider attendance in all the various uses within a congregation to truly assess the concern about attendance.*

The ABC of Attendance:

A. Awareness of who is participating. Attend to those who are active, and be attentive to those who could be.

B. Basic elements of Small Group Ministry are being followed.

C. Choices for enhancing groups and programs are varied from time to time, and place to place.

This article is only the beginning, the opportunity to consider the importance of attendance to the success and vitality of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups. Your thoughts and experiences are welcome, by writing to the Network or continuing to share on Small Group Ministry Network Facebook. We will capture sharings. And this will be included in the Summer Institute as well as the new section being planned for the website on Implementing Small Group Ministry. There is no one answer, but we all can benefit from the experiences of each other.