

Guest Editorial: The growing challenge of church attendance

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Do you remember perfect-attendance pins for Sunday school? Many of you haven't seen one. There was a day when it was a regular feature in churches all across America.

If a person attended Sunday school every Sunday in a year, he or she was awarded a pin or received an attachment that hung below the original pin to denote *another* year of perfect attendance. People took great pride in amassing multi-year pins that honored their spiritual fortitude and persistence.



Bill Wilson Gradually, the expectation that weekly attendance at church is a given has eroded and been replaced with a hope people will attend church "regularly." The definition of what constitutes "regular attendance" has been redefined downward as competition on weekends has increased. Some churches are realizing very active and loyal people are attending church much less frequently than before. As a result, average weekly attendance is in serious decline.

In the last year, the Center for Healthy Churches has worked with 50 congregations from 16 states and eight denominations. They range in size from 32 weekly attenders to 5,000. In nearly every situation, we engaged

our clients in a conversation about frequency of attendance. Rather than conjecture about why people are attending less frequently, we decided to ask them where they are when they are not attending church.

Here are the 10 reasons most frequently mentioned, listed in alphabetical order:

- **Athletics.** College and professional athletic events evoke intense loyalty. For those who travel to Saturday night games, showing up on Sunday mornings is a stretch. Many professional athletic events take place on Sundays and force a choice between attending church or being at the game or tailgate party.

- **Children.** The array of activities for children offered only on weekends is overwhelming. Athletic teams, academic conferences, chess tournaments, cheering competitions, parties and trips have proliferated in the last 30 years. Many parents tag along and find themselves far from home on Sunday mornings.

- **Commitment.** Many acknowledged the depth of their commitment to weekly attendance is eroding, for multiple reasons. At the heart of the matter is a sense what is offered on Sunday mornings is not meaningful or valuable enough to make the effort to attend.

- **Exhaustion.** On several occasions, we have heard younger families say they find themselves exhausted by a six-day workweek, overactive social life, over-engaged children and a host of other stresses. Several have mentioned Sundays are their only day to be together as a family. Occasionally, they choose to spend the morning together.

- **Holidays.** The number of Sundays that are part of holiday weekends has risen dramatically. One church discovered 26 Sundays in the previous year were impacted by a holiday or vacation week. Long weekends and breaks invite travel and time away from home.

- **Illness.** Several senior adults reported they are living with chronic illness that inhibits their ability to attend weekly worship. In previous years, they would not have survived such a serious illness. Now, they find their ability to get out and participate severely restricted.
- **Parents.** Several median-age adults recounted they miss Sundays because they are caring for aging and ill parents. We frequently heard about rotation systems among siblings to care for an invalid parent. Taking your turn for a weekend each month keeps you out of your church.
- **Travel.** The proliferation of travel as a high-value activity for Americans impacts weekend activities. The ease of travel in our day is a huge shift from 50 years ago.
- **Vacations, timeshares, second homes:** Many admitted they spend multiple weekends a year on vacation or taking advantage of second homes or timeshares.
- **Work.** Nearly every gathering evoked stories of people who work, or travel for work, on Sundays. The official estimate is one in three Americans regularly work on Sundays.

What are we to make of these stories? We must grapple with the illusion Sundays belong to the church and loyal members will be present four/five Sundays a month.

Here are some possible strategies to explore:

- Measure your impact rather than simply count your attendance.
 - Count participants over the course of a month/year rather than attenders by the week.
 - Investigate Bible study and worship on alternate days and locations.

- If nothing else, have an honest conversation about the issue. It isn't going away.

Bill Wilson is the founder of the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).