

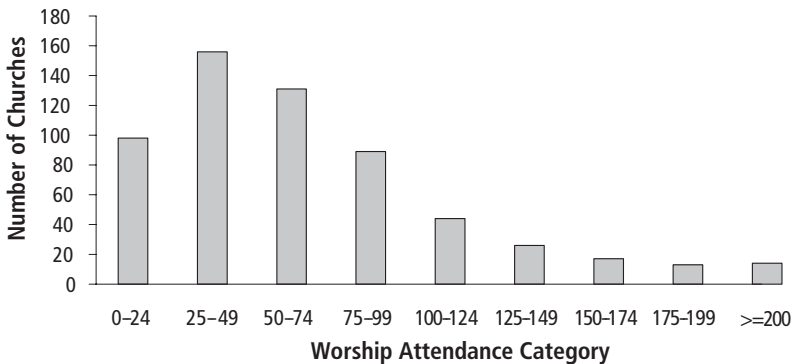
STATISTICIAN'S REPORT

JUNE 2006

In every county in New England, United Methodists gather together each week to worship God. In a typical week, over 33,000 people attend a worship service at one of 538 churches. Any change in this average attendance is one important indicator of the health of our conference. The 2005 average attendance decreased 3% from 2004. This drop was smaller than the previous year's, but was still the second largest drop in our conference's history. Over the last ten years, we have collectively 6,400 fewer people attending worship in our churches each week. I'd like to share a picture of what has been happening with you today.

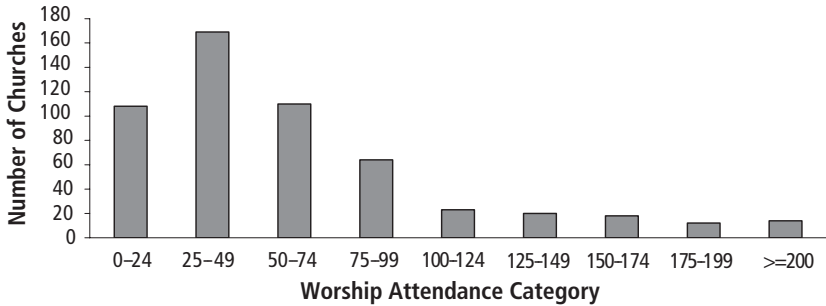
The graph below shows the distribution of the 588 churches in 1995 by worship attendance size. The height of each bar represents the number of churches falling into that particular size category for average attendance. The tallest bar represents the largest group with an average attendance between 25 and 49; in 1995, there were 156 churches in this category. The shortest bar shows 13 churches with an average between 175 and 199.

Distribution of Worship Attendance Categories: 1995



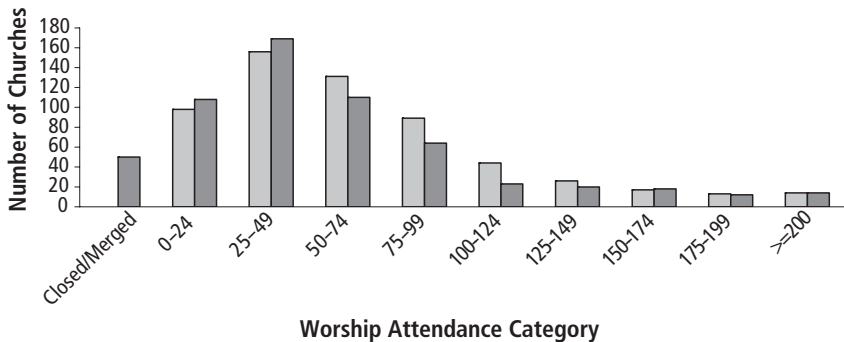
The next chart shows the same distribution for the 538 churches in 2005. The pattern looks similar with the largest number of churches again between 25 & 49. This time the bar is higher because there are now 169 churches in this category.

Distribution of Worship Attendance Categories: 2005



Putting the two charts together as shown below allows us to look at the shifting in church sizes over the last decade. On this slide, the light bars represent 1995 attendance and the dark bars represent 2005. The first dark bar represents the number of churches that have closed or merged with another church since 1995. The three sets of bars at the high end show little change; we have nearly the same number of churches with worship attendance over 150 although they are not the same churches. The pattern in the middle, from average attendance of 50 through 149 shows a shift with fewer churches presently in every one of these categories. In the two smallest attendance categories, there is an opposite shift with more churches in these two groups. In 1995, 43% of all the churches in our conference had an average worship attendance less than 50; in 2005, the percentage increased to 51%.

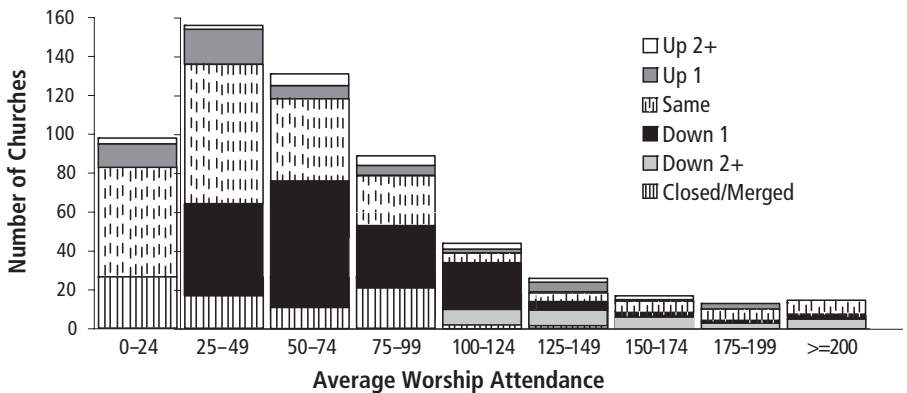
Distribution of Worship Attendance Categories 1995 & 2005



Overall, worship attendance decreased by 16% in the last ten years, but that doesn't mean that every church experienced a 16% decrease. In fact, over the last 10 years, there are churches that have experienced larger decreases and smaller decreases. There are churches that have held steady in attendance. And, there are churches that have grown a little bit and a lot! To get a feel for the way individual

churches changed, look at the 1995 chart in multiple patterns. These patterns show how the churches in each 1995 category changed their worship attendance. For example, the dashed block represents the number of churches that remained in the same category from 1995 to 2005 – their attendance may have increased or decreased some, but not enough to shift the church to another bar. The black blocks represent the number of churches who lost enough attendance to shift down one bar – this shift is shown dramatically with the churches in the 50–74 category. 65 of the 131 churches that had a worship attendance in 1995 between 50 and 74, are now in the category of 25 to 49. The churches in the light gray blocks, are ones that moved down 2 or more categories, and the churches in the striped pattern are those that closed or merged with another church. In the categories from 50 to 175, more than half the churches in each group shifted downward. On the other hand, the solid dark gray blocks near the top of each bar represent the opposite shift – churches that increased their worship attendance enough to move up one category. And, the white blocks at the top of each bar are churches that moved up two or more bars. You can clearly see that the blocks representing downward shifts outweigh the blocks representing shifts upward, yet there are upward shifts in every category. Now this is a very specific way of looking at the changing worship attendances of churches. The categories here are arbitrary and by selecting them in this way, it may leave out a few churches that have shown some significant growth. But changing the categories would not change the overall picture. I present this chart not as a way of displaying the growth pattern of individual churches, but as a picture of our changing conference.

Changes in Worship Attendance Distribution



To explore what we might learn from the group of churches that went against the tide and shifted up, I focused on the 21 churches represented by the white blocks

at the top of each bar. These churches, when taken together, tell an important story about our New England Conference. The story is a simple one, but one that we need to hear. Churches in New England can grow! This group of churches also helps dispel a number of myths that we sometimes incorporate into our thinking about changing worship attendance.

Churches in New England do not have to be in a certain geographic location to increase their worship attendance. The churches represented by the white blocks are in cities and towns all over New England – from Mansfield Center, CT to Old Town, ME, from Providence, RI to Sandown, NH, from Wilmington, MA to Bangor, ME and other places in between.

Increased worship attendance is not limited to churches of a particular size. Ellingwoods Corner in Winterport, ME grew from 14 to 52, North Woolwich, ME doubled their 1995 attendance of 50, Belfast, ME soared from 67 to 166, and First UMC in Hudson, MA increased from 126 to 205!

Churches can increase attendance despite declining populations in their communities. It is not unusual to hear that the lack of increase in church attendance is due to the fact that the population in New England is not growing as fast as other parts of the country, and in some places, the population is decreasing. However, 8 of these 21 churches are in counties where the overall population is declining. 7 were in counties that had population growth less than 4.3% in the last five years, the average population growth for the United States. Only 6 of the 21 were in counties with population growth greater than the national average.

At other times, it can seem that churches need to be in affluent communities to have the necessary resources to grow, but these 21 churches are located in neighborhoods of widely varying income levels. The group includes affluent communities like Winchester, MA with an average household income over \$155,000 and 6 others like Sandown, NH and Franklin, MA with average incomes over \$80,000. But, 7 churches were located in communities with average incomes under \$50,000. Some of these churches are in economically stressed communities like the neighborhood in Providence, RI where the Vida Abundante church is located; the average income in this part of the city is \$35,500. Another church is in rural Limestone, ME where the income is \$41,600. 6 churches were in middle income areas like Stafford Springs, CT and North Woolwich, ME with average incomes around \$60,000. **Churches can grow in high, middle, and low income communities.**

Growing churches in the New England conference are also a celebration of our diversity. Greenland UMC in New Hampshire began as a predominantly Korean church and now has a totally bilingual service to meet the needs of their international families. Mt. Bellingham in Chelsea and Vida Abundante in Providence are Hispanic congregations. Union in Boston is an historic African American congregation that

reports it now reflects the diverse demographics of its changing neighborhood with people from every ethnicity, and a large GLBT population.

Another myth is that some churches are too old or established to change. Don't tell that to the West Scarborough UMC in Scarborough, ME. This church is celebrating its 205th birthday. Ten years ago the average attendance was 63 – it is now 114. They've added a new worship service that has a jazz feel and is not held in the sanctuary; most of their new members come through this service. They fixed up their nursery even though they didn't have any kids that age coming to church at the time except for the new pastor's kids. Now they have 14 in nursery each Sunday.

When a church is going through a difficult time, it can be hard to believe that they will someday be able to grow, but this group of churches shows us that churches can grow even if they face significant adversity. The Grant Memorial UMC building in Presque Isle, ME burned ten years ago. Their present pastor describes the fire as “a shattering experience that opened the congregation up and left them less isolated.” Despite the fact that Presque Isle is in a county with declining population and economic struggles, and despite the fact that 60 of their members have died within the last decade, their attendance has grown from 117 to 165. Calvary, Arlington is also in a community with a declining population. There were once two United Methodist Churches in Arlington whose memberships had shrunk. Each church experienced painful instances of clergy abuse. A merger initiated by a few members of each church helped them get on stable financial footing. Ten years, and three pastors later, the church has a strong presence in the community and is growing. In Chelsea, at the Mount Bellingham church, the historically white congregation dwindled, but the community gave birth to a new Hispanic congregation that last year averaged 150 people in worship.

We can come up with all kinds of reasons to justify the fact that we aren't growing. Can a church grow under women's leadership? Ask Valerie Roberts-Toler in Mansfield, CT or Ellen Cleaves in Limestone, ME or talk to Clauri Gonsalves in Chelsea, MA or Ruth Merriam in Cape Porpoise, ME. **Churches with men and women pastors can grow.** Can a church grow with a young pastor or a middle aged pastor or a pastor near retirement? The churches in this group have pastors in their 30's, 40's, 50's, and 60's. **Churches with pastors of all ages can grow.** Can a church grow if a pastor or congregation has a liberal theology or a conservative theology? When I talked with pastors from these churches I had one tell me that that the newer people in the congregation are more liberal than the older members and that has presented interesting challenges, but they've made it work. In another church, the same is true except in this case the new people are more conservative. **Liberal and conservative churches can grow.**

Although many of the reasons we often hear to explain the lack of growth in conference have been dismissed by this group, it was a blessing for me to be able to talk with the pastors of a number of these churches. It was a blessing because they didn't tell me about magic solutions or specific programs they followed, but many of them shared a number of things in common. They told me about loving their congregants. They told me about having a clarity of vision and articulating priorities and evaluating progress. They told me about being intentional about worship and music. They told me about focusing on children. They told me about congregations who were open to change. They told me about knowing their neighborhoods. They told me about being "out and about" as one pastor put it, in the community. They told me about the pastor and the laity working together as a team –and working hard! And the good news is that they can tell you, too. Most pastors were eager to tell me about their church. This is a gift that our connectional system provides us if we want to take advantage of it. We can read books and attend seminars about church growth, but we can also talk with our colleagues, hear stories first hand, help each other, and work together for better tomorrow.

Submitted by:

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Churches Growing in Worship Attendance from 1995 to 2005

State	Church	Pastor
CT	Mansfield Center: First	Roberts-Toler, Valerie
CT	Stafford Springs	Pagano, Richard
MA	Arlington: Calvary	Mueller, John
MA	Boston: Union	McLee, Martin
MA	Chelsea: Mt Bellingham	Goncalves, Clauri
MA	Franklin	Bonnette-Kim, Travis
MA	Hudson: First	Merrill, Allen
MA	Wilmington	Black, Richard
MA	Winchester: Crawford Memorial	Taylor, John
ME	Bangor: First	Chretien, Randall
ME	Belfast	Abbott, David
ME	Cape Porpoise	Merriam, Ruth
ME	Winterport: Ellingwoods Corner	Langbein, Chuck
ME	Limestone	Cleaves, Eleanor
ME	North Woolwich	Thorpe, John
ME	Old Town	Chaffee, Philip Rodney
ME	Presque Isle: Grant Memorial	Blackstone, Thomas
ME	West Scarborough	Calhoun, David
NH	Greenland	Han, Sang-Shin
NH	Sandown: St. Matthew's	Murray, S/Kuder, E
RI	Providence: Vida Abundante	Escobar, Santos