

Board of Spiritual Life Listening Session

One Sunday Worship Service

Updated May 17, 2023

Question:

Considering current attendance numbers and trends, would Grace be better served moving to one Sunday worship service while expanding Sunday programming to encourage more engagement and fellowship?

SOCIETAL TRENDS NOT FAVORABLE (EVEN BEFORE COVID)

- In 2014, 3,700 Protestant churches closed; 4,500 in 2019 (Source: Lifeway Research)
- In 1972, 90% of Americans identified as Christian, dropping to 64% in 2022 (Source: Pew Research/religion)
- In 2020, Lutheran church membership was 25% lower than in 2010 (Source: ASARB)

DEMOGRAPHICS

- GenX cohort is 30% smaller than Baby Boom Generation, contributing to current church attendance declines
- Mainline Protestant church members are older. 1/3 are over age 65; 1 in 10 are under age 30
- The number of Millennials forming families is increasing but,
 - 1/3 of 30-39-year-olds raised in Christian households no longer identify as Christian
 - Only 20% of those brought up unchurched join a church
 - More than 1/3 of church members have switched from childhood denomination

YET,

- 4 out of 5 Americans believe in God
- 9 out of 10 Americans believe in a higher power

CHALLENGE: How to connect church and faith with spiritual needs?

Grace Sunday Attendance Summary

- From 2011 to 2019, attendance steadily declined by 14%
- From 2019 (pre-COVID) to 2023, attendance is 40% lower
- Volunteer pool has been compressed commensurate with decreased attendance
- From 4th quarter 2022 to 1st quarter 2023, attendance has not increased
- Easter Sunday 2023 was only 10% lower than Easter Sunday 2019, showing underlying strength

Even in the post-COVID era, we are not seeing a strong rebound in attendance. Is this an opportunity to reset ministry and outreach given societal trends, particularly given the relatively good Easter attendance?

Ten reasons people aren't returning to church after COVID:

- 1) Loss of habit/change in Sunday routine
- 2) Value engagement over attendance
- 3) Failure to see a direct benefit
- 4) Cultural disappearance of guilt
- 5) Online options
- 6) Self-directed spirituality
- 7) Blended and single-parent families
- 8) Higher focus on kids' activities
- 9) Greater affluence
- 10) More travel

Where can we make a difference?

ONE SERVICE—COMMENTS COLLECTED FROM GRACE COMMITTEES, STAFF AND MEMBERS

Positives

- Positive response to one service last summer
- Recognition of declining attendance both before and particularly after Covid pandemic.
- Opportunity to reimagine Sunday worship, fellowship and education.
- We sing as a congregation, with more voices for a more powerful worship experience.
- Visitors are more likely to see Grace as flourishing. An empty church sends a “sinking ship” message.
- Chance to develop intentional fellowship time, belonging and especially involvement needed in world plagued by loneliness.
- Ease load on existing and diminishing number of worship service volunteers. Avoid volunteer burnout.
- More likely to determine who is missing to follow up with concern.
- Chance for Grace members to get to know more fellow members.
- All members have an opportunity to hear/see Senior Choir more often.
- “Unify” the congregation into one group versus 8:30 and 11:00 congregations. Expand feeling of ONE united Body in Christ.

Negatives

- Less flexibility/choice.
- Move to one service may cause some to leave as worship time doesn’t meet their need.
- An emotional and dramatic signal from a congregation that has been a leader in the Lutheran Church for decades.
- What would the move say to the community at large?
- Where does the education hour fit into this switch, that includes Adult Ed, Sunday School, confirmation, etc.?
- If education hour is set before worship, will it challenge teens to attend and participate?
- Such a big building with only one service—seems incongruous. Also, possible questions concerning staff size.
- Reimagining takes work. Do we have the time, resources? Who will do this work?
- Less opportunities for musical groups to perform. School and youth choirs bring non-member families into Grace worship.
- Congregation has resisted change in the past (rejected moving up 8:30 a.m. service to 8:15 a.m. some years ago).
- Elderly may have difficulty making it to 10 a.m. vs. 11 a.m. service.
- Certain holy days, such as Christmas and Easter, would still require two services (or more). (Holiday and festival services could continue as is).
- Unlikely to ever return to two services.

Possible Schedule for Sundays at Grace With a Single service

8:30-9:30am		9:30-10am	10:00 - 11:00am (ish)	11:00am - Noon
<p>A.C.T.S. (All Church Together on Sunday) 10 minutes of song, fellowship, etc.</p>	<p>Sunday school</p> <p>Confirmation</p> <p>Teen Talk</p> <p>Bible Study</p> <p>Parent Groups</p> <p>New Members</p> <p>Fellowship/ Coffee Hour</p>	<p>Preparation for Worship, Choir Preparation, Fellowship</p>	<p>WORSHIP</p>	<p>Fellowship</p> <p>Committees</p> <p>Bible Study</p> <p>Small Groups</p> <p>HS Brunch</p> <p>Service Projects</p> <p>Other...</p>
<p>Adult Education</p>				

YOUR FEEDBACK MATTERS

Our collective wisdom will help us make the best decision

Some thoughts to consider:

Do you feel moving to a single service will affect you in a positive or negative way?

Do you envision this as an opportunity to expand engagement?

As you read through the potential positive and negative outcomes, do any strike you as being more likely than others?

Please respond via email to elders@graceriverforest.org and join us on June 4, 8:30 AM at Grace for an additional listening session