

What Is A Trend?

A “trend” is an indication of the general direction of change.

I use the Microsoft Excel TREND function. I do so because it does in fact give a good indication of the general direction of change, and because as a straight line it is easy to understand. Whatever the future holds, it will not unfold in a straight line, but a straight line is useful for clarifying the general direction we are headed.

And it is important to understand what a trend is NOT.

1. A trend is NOT a single example. A trend looks at a history of events – the more the better – and summarizes the overall change.

There will always be examples that contradict the overall trend. Because that is precisely what a summary is; it is roughly the average with examples that are better than the trend, and examples that are worse than the trend. And so, a trend is not proven false by examples that are “bucking the trend.”

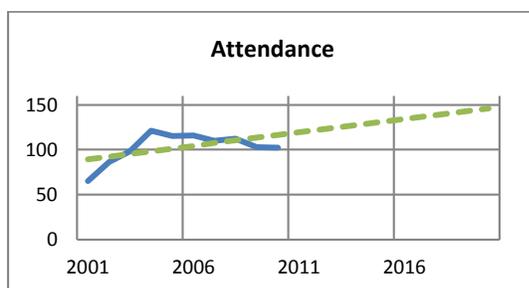
But because a trend is not a single example, it can also help answer one big question:

Is it just us? Are we the only ones experiencing this problem?

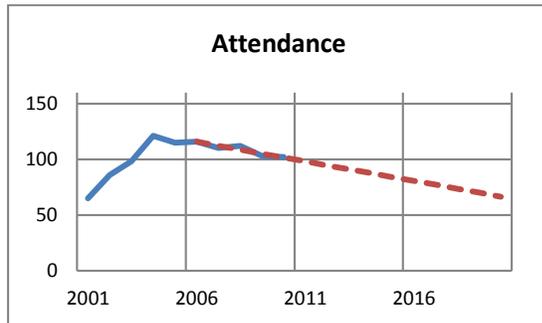
Ever since the 1990’s, every congregation I have been part of has worried about the decline of Sunday School enrollment. And we tried every new program that promised to fix this problem. They were all good programs and helped us make many helpful and necessary changes. But our enrollment continued to steadily shrink. If only we’d had the wits to ask, “Is it just us?” And if only someone had shown us a chart of United Church Sunday School enrollment, then we might have seen that we were part of a larger trend, and began to ask different questions – and seek new ways of responding to the changes happening in Canadian society.

2. A trend is NOT a prediction of the future. It is an analysis of the present and recent past.

For example, suppose that ten years ago, your congregation had set a goal to increase average worship attendance from 65 to 100. Suppose the results for those 10 years was, 65, 86, 98, 121, 115, 116, 110, 112, 103, 102. This is great news as the goal was achieved quickly and is still above 100 at the end of 10 years. And the overall trend, shown as the dotted green line, is quite promising.



But what is the trend of the past 5 years? Are we still tending in the general direction of achieving our goal? This trend, shown as the dotted red line, is more worrisome.



Both trends are correct as showing the overall direction of change for 10 and 5 years. Projecting them into the future helps give a sense of whether we are moving in a desired direction or not. But.

The question to ask about these two trends is not: Which is correct? The question to ask is: What factors created the overall trends? And.

When searching for factors that may have created the overall trend, it is crucial to look at factors OUTSIDE the church as well as inside. For example, it may very well be that a change of leadership in the church was a key turning point. Or perhaps this is a small town and a major employer has shut down.

Which leads to my third point about trends.

3. A trend is NOT just about the United Church. It is also about changes in Canadian society and our neighbourhoods.

It is my strong conviction that when we look at United Church charts and trends and only ask:

What did we do wrong?

We are asking the wrong question. And so end up trying to solve the wrong problems.

If we only ask about what we did wrong, we will spend fruitless time, energy, and money trying to fix ourselves: get a new minister; get an overhead projector; get a new choir director; get a new board structure; etc., etc. But these solutions don't work over the long term because they are trying to solve the wrong question. They are trying to solve only one half of the whole question.

The question we must also ask is:

How has Canadian society and our neighbourhood changed?

There is no single source to present graphs of all the ways Canadian society has changed over the decades. There are many sources. Too many for me to gather here. But here is my quick summary:

- There has been a huge population shift from rural to urban.

- There has been increased diversity of ethnicities and their languages, cultures, religions, and values.
- There has been increased secularization of the public realm, and privatization of religion as a personal opinion. Religion is no longer publically valued and is often characterized as problematic.
- There has been increased web-based social networking and decreased real-time face-to-face community-based networking.
- Initial gains of increased wealth across all sectors has shifted to concentration of wealth amongst the wealthiest and a decrease amongst the middle and lower classes. This results in more adults – and teens – working more and having less time and money for volunteer organizations.
- There has been a shift from volunteer participation to consumer purchasing of services. Membership in volunteer organizations of all types has declined and grown older, and organizations have increasingly relied less on volunteers and more on paid staff. Sunday School is one of the last remaining non-fee based organized children’s programs.
- With the exception of congregations populated by recent immigrants, there has been an across the board decline in religious organizations of all faiths and theological spectrums. People are not being religious like they used to. They are not going to church / synagogue / mosque / temple like they used to – and this trend applies to second and third generation immigrant populations.

So when we look at these graphs and trends, the right questions to ask are:

- What are we doing wrong? What can we learn from congregations that are “bucking the trend?” From non-United Church sources such as Natural Church Development? Maybe we should get an overhead projector or Wi-Fi, or allow coffee in worship? Or maybe we should become more intentional about inviting ourselves, our friends, neighbours, and strangers to openly commit to Jesus and to following his way? Or maybe we should become spiritual but not religious? Or maybe we should sell the building and use the proceeds to ...? Or?
- Who are our neighbours now? What might be our ministry with and to them? What sustenance might we receive from them that will nurture the health of our faith community?
- Given the changes in Canadian society how might we expect those changes to impact the United Church? Does our experience confirm or question those expectations?
- Given that changes in Canadian society are not a problem that we can fix – and are not our fault – how can we best respond to them in ways that are faithful to the Gospel of Christ and also practically sustainable for the next generations? Some of the areas that come to mind where specific responses are needed are:
 - ❖ Given that people are just not going to church like they used to, what do we do with the over-capacity of our existing buildings?
 - ❖ Given that people are not volunteering like they used to, what forms of organization can we adopt to use less volunteer time more effectively and with greater pay off in service and satisfaction?

- ❖ Given that people are not donating like they used to, what sustainable balance of revenue streams (donations, grants, bequests, rentals, investments, advertising, new monastic income sharing, etc.) and expenses will support life-changing, service-oriented, Gospel communities?
- ❖ Given that people are using the internet to connect and communicate in new ways, how does the church change the ways we connect and communicate – including changing the qualities and locations of our face-to-face gatherings?

To re-cap. Remember what a trend is not:

1. **A trend is NOT a single example.** A trend looks at a history of events – the more the better – and summarizes the overall change.
2. **A trend is NOT a prediction of the future.** It is an analysis of the present and recent past.
3. **A trend is NOT just about the United Church.** It is also about changes in Canadian society and our neighbourhood.

Use charts of United Church Year Book data to expand and sharpen the questions you are asking about your situation as a congregation. Without the right questions, you will try and solve the wrong problems.

And widen the conversation as far as possible. Within your own congregation, but also with as many neighbours and neighbouring congregations as will join in. Jesus has promised to be present when we gather in his name. I am sure that God is not done with us yet.

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