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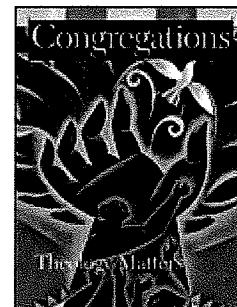
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# CONGREGATIONS

Winter 2004

## The 80 Percent Rule: Fact or Fiction?

MARLIS MCCOLLUM



Church growth consultants are fond of noting that when average church attendance exceeds 80 percent of sanctuary capacity, crowding begins to limit a congregation's growth. This rule of thumb, often called the "80 percent rule" has been so commonly cited by consultants that it is now invoked by many a minister or lay leader as a reason for a congregation's failure to grow or as proof of the need for a second service or a new facility. Lately, though, more and more people are asking how and where the 80 percent rule originated and what research supports its validity.

Despite its familiarity, the 80 percent rule is far more complex than most might imagine. "There are misconceptions about the rule," says Jim Moss, a church growth consultant with 26 years of experience. For instance, Moss points out, "It isn't about a particular Sunday attendance reaching 80 percent of the sanctuary seating capacity. It refers to the annual average attendance compared to the comfortable capacity of the sanctuary." And, though some have attempted to apply it to parking capacity (see box on page 9), consultants say its applicability is to seating capacity—and primarily pew seating, at that.

The exact origin of the 80 percent rule is unclear and it seems likely to have been experience based. However, there is now both research and anecdotal evidence to support it. Initially, the rule may have been based on the simple observation that churches never reached the occupancy capacity cited on the building's architectural plans and submitted to the local building code authority. For many years, sanctuary seating capacity in churches with pew seating typically has been based on 18 inches of space per person (with some variation by state), which would require even individuals of average size and weight to sit shoulder to shoulder in the pews. This measurement is an inch less of space than is allotted to coach class passengers on airplanes, and considerably less space than research shows people reserve for themselves in a pew if left to their own devices.

For instance, architect Roger Patterson, who has designed hundreds of churches in his 52-year career, uses 20 inches to calculate capacity. "A pew seating 12 people at 20 inches per person will average 9 persons in the pew," he says, "but if you place 12 chairs behind this same pew such that each chair affords 20 inches of space, 12 people will be seated comfortably. That's 75 percent of capacity right there." According to building code standards, 13 people could be accommodated by the pew in this example, with room to spare. But, as architect Jerry Cripps of InterDesign points out, state building code capacity standards have nothing to do with comfort or personal space preferences. "Under the building code, the 'occupant load' or capacity relates to getting people safely out of the building in the event of an emergency, such as a fire," he says. "What we've seen is that, in reality, people don't crowd in that close."

### The Rise of "Comfortable Capacity"

It is for this reason that architects, church planners, pew designers, and consultants have begun to consider "comfortable capacity" as the designation of a full church rather than the maximum capacity specified by building codes. When drawing up the plans for a church, InterDesign allows between 22 and 24 inches per person for pew

seating, as do many other architects, but there are those who say even that amount isn't sufficient for most people—at least not in pews.

For instance, Moss suggests 25 inches per person is needed for comfort. This figure is based on findings from a survey of 711 churches from seven Presbyterian denominations that Moss conducted in the mid-1980s, as well as ongoing research since then.

Kenn Sanders, a church planner and designer who has worked with more than 1,000 churches, says the attendance and pew length data he has obtained from many of these churches indicate that "26 H inches is the amount of space everybody wants when they sit in a pew these days."

Others believe the figure is even higher. "When your main worship service reaches 80 percent of comfortable capacity (measured at 30 to 36 inches per person), you may be pretty certain that you are discouraging frequent attendance by current members and presenting a 'no vacancy' sign to newcomers," says Alban Institute senior consultant Alice Mann in her book *Raising the Roof*.<sup>1</sup>

According to Mann, this notion of providing a welcoming environment for newcomers is one of the core issues from which the 80 percent rule emerged. Another is the question of how a church can take responsibility for factors that may decrease the frequency with which its current members attend. For Mann, the "hassle factor" is a caption for both these issues. "If I am brand new to a church and the only available seat is way up front, I may leave," she says. "If I am a member who is on the fence about coming to church on a particular day, my expectation of crowding may tip the balance in favor of staying home. Until people begin to consider these questions of human motivation more carefully, they often don't 'get' the 80 percent rule. Instead, they hold onto the premise that nothing has to be done because the church isn't full yet."

### **Identifying Unwelcoming Space**

When church members perceive there to be vacant seating, resistance to believing capacity is an issue is common, consultants say. But they also report that much of the seating that members identify as available is not what most newcomers would consider comfortable or inviting seating, so identifying such unwelcoming seating has become part and parcel of consultants' work with the 80 percent rule.

For instance, many consultants now consider uncomfortable seating to be unavailable seating and do not count it when calculating comfortable capacity. Obvious examples are portions of pews located behind large pillars or other view-obstructing objects. And, though church members often point to empty balconies and front rows, consultants tend to agree that these are not welcoming spaces. "Few visitors would feel welcome if the only seating available was in a hard-to-access balcony littered with gum wrappers," says Mann. "Most people don't want to sit in the balcony," Moss agrees, citing less distance between pews and the difficulty of negotiating stairs as two barriers to balcony seating.

Pew design can also inhibit full use of the space, Moss says, noting that pews longer than 13 feet tend to remain empty toward the middle and that pews ending at a wall tend to remain empty in the spaces nearest the wall. Pews with a central armrest are also problematic. "You generally lose a full seat with those pews," he says.

There may be congregation-specific seating patterns to factor in, as well. For example, notes Alban Institute senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss, physically disabled parishioners often occupy the seats at either end of long pews. When that's the case members and newcomers are reluctant to disturb these individuals to gain access to the inner seats.

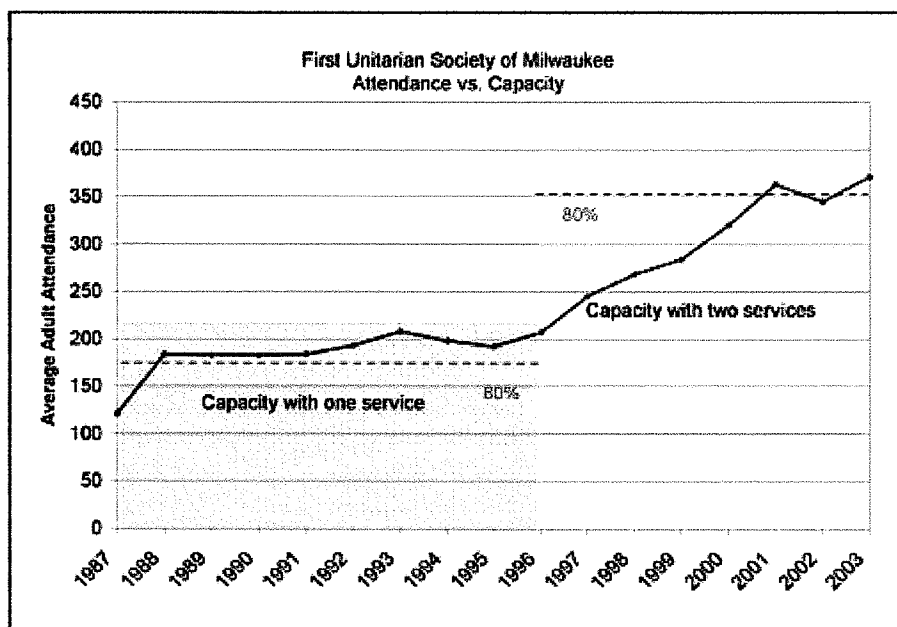
In some cases, notes Moss, "the perceived space may be more important than the actual space. I've been in several churches where the sight lines gave the impression that the space was smaller than it was, and the attendance in those churches seldom reached 80 percent of capacity."

Only after all of these and other seating considerations have been taken into account is an estimate of comfortable capacity determined. And after that, consultants believe, there still needs to be some welcoming space left over if the church is to continue to grow. They cite both experience and research to support this conclusion.

### What the Research Shows

Using 25 inches per person to calculate comfortable capacity in the churches he surveyed, Moss found that average annual attendance increased until it reached 57 percent of comfortable capacity. At that point it began to decline. Consequently, Moss says, "I think resistance to growth occurs at about 57 percent of the comfortable seating capacity. After that, people have to sit closer to each other, and Americans are accustomed to space. We want to have our own turf." It is because of evidence like this that consultants often recommend a church consider adding a second (or other additional) service once it has reached 65 to 70 percent of its comfortable capacity.

"I would prefer that a church add a second service before reaching 80 percent capacity," says Moss, "It is a major change and in many churches there is a lot of resistance to it, so it can take a long time to accomplish."



What many churches have found, though, is that adding a second service has been key to their continued growth. An example of such an experience can be found in First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee. Hotchkiss, who worked with the church on an 18-month strategic planning process, recently graphed the church's yearly attendance as it related to comfortable capacity, producing the startling illustration shown above.

Between 1987 and 1996, the church offered only one service. While attendance rose sharply between 1987 and 1988, it quickly leveled off after exceeding the 80 percent capacity mark (calculated based on 30 inches per person, applied to each pew separately). Although small increases were seen after that, First Unitarian did not see significant gains again until it added a second service.

"The results are quite dramatic," Hotchkiss notes. "It was like letting a lid off."

Since the introduction of the second service, the church's attendance has nearly doubled, but participation began to level off again after peaking just above the 80 percent capacity mark. According to many consultants, this is an indication that a third service should be added to encourage additional growth, and the church is considering doing just that.

### Exceptions to the "Rule"?

Despite case studies like this one, doubt remains about the validity of the 80 percent rule. Alban consultant Patricia Hayes says many congregations believe the 80 percent rule doesn't apply to them. "They say things like 'We don't mind sitting close together' or 'The children leave after the first ten minutes.' In cases like that, I have them look at their visitor return rate—the number of new members versus the number of annual visitors."

"Identifying the barriers that 80 percent capacity creates is just the beginning of a conversation," says Mann. "A great deal of the work goes into convincing the congregation that it is a barrier. A lot of my work involves helping people to acknowledge the way they do things and to see that these ways might be hampering the welcome they want to provide. Sometimes I use the image of a fishbowl full of marbles; there comes a point when you can't add a new marble without taking another one out. If people begin to consider that welcoming five newcomers means displacing five existing attendees, the impact of the 80 percent factor becomes clear."

Nevertheless, some argue that the 80 percent rule may have limited applicability. "Most new churches have adopted theater seating," says church planner and designer Sanders. "The 80 percent factor doesn't play out there." Others disagree, saying certain issues are eliminated with theater seating, such as the need to figure out how many seats remain empty, but that a sufficient number of empty seats in desirable locations must still be available if growth is to be facilitated.

Others believe the 80 percent rule may not be applicable in Evangelical, African American, and Catholic churches, many of which have a "push in" policy—the practice of asking members to "push in" toward the center of the pew to allow additional members or visitors to be seated.

Hotchkiss acknowledges that "the 80 percent rule may have some basis in the customary zone of privacy of white Protestants" and therefore may be a less accurate predictor in churches with other personal space customs. However, he maintains that at some point crowding will impede any church's growth. "American consumers are used to having abundant goods and services, and most potential and actual churchgoers are no different," he says. "Crowding and uncomfortable seating will drive members away. And while a church that is in an initial growth phase gathers momentum and its members may tolerate many discomforts and inconveniences in those early days, people will create a more comfortable space for themselves as soon as they can. All of my experiences with congregations that resist these realities indicate that their growth will eventually plateau."

"It's very difficult to keep a church full for more than five years without a plan to address the issue of crowding," Moss agrees. Even when there is such a plan, he says, there must be confidence among parishioners that the plan will be implemented. He cites the example of a church that had been pushing capacity for five years, yet remained unwilling to add a second service. Although it had a plan to address the issue of crowding—and had acquired property and obtained the necessary funding to build a larger facility upon it—the church ultimately lost half its members in an 18-month period. "The younger members did not believe anything was going to happen," Moss explains. "They just lost the vision."

#### **Not the Only Factor**

Despite their conviction that a church that is crowded—or perceived as crowded—can inhibit a congregation's growth, consultants and others are quick to acknowledge that this is just one factor among many that may impinge upon growth.

"Too many churches come to me regarding their building, and their facility is not the problem; ministry is their problem," says Patterson. "The problem is that the congregation hasn't grown into the ministry it is called to."

"Even if a church is at 80 percent capacity, the data does not tell you your call," adds Mann. "You have to interpret the information to determine where God calls this congregation next."

## Parking: Does the 80 Percent Rule Apply?

Many consultants are convinced that church growth will be impeded when average annual participation reaches 80 percent of the sanctuary's comfortable seating capacity, but does this same rule of thumb apply to parking? Are newcomers discouraged from joining a church that has reached 80 percent of its parking capacity? Do active members perceive the lot as full and return home when 80 percent of the spaces are taken?

Alban Institute senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss says it is not that simple. This is not to say that the availability of parking does not have an impact on attendance and growth. "I usually tell church leaders that seating is one important factor affecting growth and parking is another." But with parking, Hotchkiss says, application of the 80 percent rule of thumb is not possible because there are so many other factors that come into play. "You not only have the number of spaces available, but other factors to consider, as well, such as distance and safety." As an example, he cites the experience of a Wisconsin church with whom he has worked recently. "The interesting thing about First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee is that they have zero parking spaces. The church is located in a neighborhood that is urban enough that people can park in front of someone's house without the residents feeling intruded upon, and it's an area where people feel safe, so they feel comfortable walking a good distance from their cars to the church."

For other churches, though, such neighborhood parking may not be available or appealing, and in these cases a full parking lot can severely affect attendance. "I serve three little country churches, and when parking is gone, attendance peaks," notes Alban consultant Patricia Hayes.

"In many situations there is no parking other than the church parking lot," notes church architect Roger Patterson. "For instance, new church buildings set well back from a rural road must depend on the parking they provide. My usual statement is 'Provide a parking space for every two persons you want in the building' similar to the sign in the dentist's office that reads 'Only floss the teeth you want to save.'"

Even when off-site parking is available, Patterson sees a correlation between the notion of comfortable seating capacity and comfortable parking capacity. "A person coming to the church for the first time doesn't know there is parking behind the bank, school, or nearby store." In some churches Patterson has worked with, members volunteer to park off-site to free up space for new worshipers and those needing to park near the building. In recognition of their contribution, these members are provided with "I am a remote parker" lapel badges. "I have suggested this to many congregations with similar situations."

The effect of a lack of parking, says Patterson, is a serious consideration for churches planning new or expanded facilities. "I have consulted with churches that needed to expand their building facilities but could not expand their parking. I tried to convince them that it would be a waste of money to expand the building if the parking could not be expanded, because if you cannot park your car, you cannot attend."

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### NOTES

1. Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001), 20.

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[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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