

COLLEAGUES:

"And all the congregations are above average."

Math is still a bad taste in my mouth from my school days, so when someone offers up a heaping serving of statistics, I usually nibble around the edges and pass on the rest. Means, medians, absolutes: What do numbers have to do with ministry?

Nothing, if you never have to answer to a finance committee, denominational office, curious news reporter, or inquisitive congregation. But suppose your "average" congregation discovers that, compared to other area congregations, your membership, attendance, or giving is far above or below average. Cause to celebrate? Or lament?

Every institution, including congregations, tends to compare itself with others on the basis of numerical data. I may plead: "It's not the quantity but the quality of what we do that matters," but there are those—congregants, funders, observers—who will demand: "Show us the numbers." I find that I'm better equipped to engage them if I understand what the numbers actually show.

Understanding the difference between a mean and a median may seem rather simplistic, but the implications are important. Not all aspects of religious life can be quantified, to be sure, but those that can be should be handled carefully.

What's your appetite for numbers? Have statistics been helpful in your ministry? Do your calculations compute?

Let's keep in touch.



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WHEN "AVERAGE" DOESN'T MEAN "TYPICAL"

People may describe themselves as "about average" in height or weight. Similarly, many congregations probably think of themselves as "about average." But what does average actually mean?

The answer is not so obvious as it might seem.

For example, Ellenberger United Church of Christ and St. Bernadette Catholic Church are similar in many ways. They're both in or near the east-side neighborhood of Irvington, they were founded in the early 1950s, and both can be described accurately as "average" in size. But Ellenberger is a church of about 150 members; St. Bernadette has more than 400 members.

How can both of them be statistically average? The answer is that "average" can mean two entirely different things, depending on whether you calculate the mean average or the median average.

According to The Polis Center's database of information on congregations in Indianapolis, the mean size of congregations in the city is about 400 members. That number is calculated by dividing the total number of religious congregants by the total number of congregations. The median size of Indianapolis congregations is about 150 members: half the congregations have fewer than 150 members, while half have more than 150 members.

The median average gives a truer picture of "the middle" because it is not skewed by atypical numbers. In the example above, the mean is nearly triple the median because a few very large congregations inflate the mean. (One congregation reported 9,000 members, and at least four reported 4,000 or more members.) Thus, while the mean average size of a congregation in Indianapolis is 400, three-fourths of the city's congregations are actually smaller than that.

The distinction between the mean and median is of more than merely academic interest. Public policies are being formed using unqualified notions of "the average." In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed welfare-reform legislation premised on the idea that faith-based organizations could fill gaps in the relief efforts of local and state governments. During the debates over this legislation, supporters implied that congregations had the resources and the will to play a more prominent role in their communities. But they offered little statistical evidence to support that notion. No one knew what the "average" congregation looked like.

In 1997, some Indianapolis congregations were included in a study conducted by Ram Cnaan, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work. Cnaan concluded that the average Indianapolis congregation in his study had 517 members and contributed about \$200,000 annually in cash and services to its local community.

Citing Cnaan's numbers, an editorial writer for the Indianapolis Star reported that "the average congregation spends \$140,000 a year to subsidize its community programs and provides over 5,300 hours of volunteer support."

Cnaan's study, however, examined only those congregations housed in "historic properties." As a result, the study was skewed to large, relatively prosperous, mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. Yet Cnaan's numbers were cited as descriptive of the "average" congregation.

By contrast, data collected by The Polis Center's Project on Religion and Urban Culture, which has examined 300 local congregations of every size and type, suggests that the typical congregation in Indianapolis is relatively small and possesses modest resources.

Even among the congregations studied by Cnaan, many are leery of claims about their untapped potential to offer community services. St. Bernadette Catholic Church hands out food during the holidays and maintains an emergency food pantry. But it has no established social service programs.

"There are certain things you have to offer as a church, and all of that takes a significant amount of time," said Tom Bogenschutz, pastoral associate at St. Bernadette. "To offer social services on top of that—it's really difficult. We're not going to do social work. That's just not realistic."

Ellenberger United Church of Christ offers no social service programs, either, though the congregation supports various relief programs through Irvington's ministerial alliance.

"We have found that if you can get a nucleus of people to work at an issue and stay interested, they can make

a difference," said Pastor John Eichacker, who is Ellenberger UCC's only full-time staff member. If his church were called on to sponsor programs independently, he said, it likely would not have the resources.

Ted Slutz

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH KEITH WULFF

As coordinator of research services for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Keith Wulff spends most of his time trying to make sense of numbers. The denomination's research office, which includes eleven other staff members, compiles and distributes statistics for the use of 11,000 member churches. The information, both published and made available on the denomination's Web site, covers such topics as the mean and median sizes of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations, breakdowns of membership by region and race, and membership gains and losses by synods and presbyteries. "Numbers by themselves are neither good nor bad," Wulff wrote in the introduction to his office's 1998 report. "Different congregations will interpret these numbers differently." Wulff has a degree in sociology, and has taught statistics. In the following interview, he discusses the use and abuse of numbers and the pitfalls of interpretation.

Polis: Has your work made you suspicious of the word "average" when it's used in the media?

Wulff: Whenever I see something quoted as the average, I always want to know which average. Are they talking about the mean or the median? The mean can be very misleading, especially with income figures. A few extremely high or low incomes can pull the average way up or way down. The average income of a geographic area doesn't tell you anything, unless you account for high unemployment, or the presence of very rich people, or the kind of population. Statistics for the average contribution don't tell you anything unless you know what percentage of their income people are giving. The poor may not give much in actual dollars, but viewed in terms of a percentage of income they may look very generous.

Polis: In what other areas would you suggest caution in interpreting statistics?

Wulff: It's important to know whether the numbers are from a representative sample. In some ways the sample is more important than whether you cite the mean or the median. If you group things into categories, how you divide the categories makes a big difference. When you talk about unwed teenagers, do you mean 13-year-olds, or 19-year-olds? The most misleading statistics are those regarding age.

Polis: What are some problem areas specific to congregations?

Wulff: There's the issue of who counts as a member. Presbyterians count as members those who are confirmed. Most denominations count baptized members. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) looks smaller than the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America because the Lutherans count the baptized as members, and the Presbyterians don't. The difference in total membership between the two is not as great as it appears. Confirmed members include only people over 12. But if you count those who are baptized, you include everyone from birth.

Polis: What is your opinion of congregations' ability to assume a greater role in providing social services in their communities?

Wulff: I don't think we have a clear idea of what churches are capable of doing. The Presbyterian Church has always been active in helping in the community—look at the Presbyterian hospitals. How much more the churches can do is hard to say. Some could do more; it's also clear that some are stretched to the limit.

RESOURCES

Arthur Farnsley's essay, "What Do You Mean By Average?" appears in the February 2000 issue of Research Notes, available from The Polis Center.

The full content of Ram Cnaan's report, "Social and Community Involvement of Religious Congregations Housed in Historic Religious Properties: Findings from a Six-City Study" is available at www.ssw.upenn.edu/orsw.html.

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To see the denomination's statistical information, click on the "resources" link and from there go to "research services."