

## St. Timothy's Service Study Team Report to the Vestry - 26 October 2015

### Executive Summary

When considering whether to implement a 2-service or continue with a 3-service Sunday morning worship model, key factors were capacity, logistics, and congregational preference. In terms of capacity, data shows that with the two service model year-round, St. Timothy's would be intolerably or uncomfortably full 75% of the time, thus driving away both newcomers and existing congregants and shrinking the congregation. In terms of logistics, a minimum of 20 minutes is needed between the end of one service and the start of the next to clear the receiving line, the parking lot, and to set up for the next service. In terms of congregational preference, the top three factors that determine which service a congregant attends are service start time, music options, and child activity options. Existing three-service model start times closely align with congregational preferences, but tweaks to music offerings and child activity offerings could help rebalance attendance at the services.

### Introduction

In the summer of 2015, St. Timothy's experimented with a Sunday morning summer service schedule that offered two services: 8:00 and 10:00 am. Questions were asked about potentially adopting the 2-service model year-round, instead of the traditional 3-service model with services at 8:00, 9:30 and 11:00. In an effort to avoid "confirmation bias"—the tendency to search for, interpret, prefer and recall information in a way that confirms one's beliefs while giving disproportionately less attention to information that contradicts them—the Vestry commissioned the service study team<sup>1</sup> at the July Vestry meeting to analyze the situation and return with a recommendation. The Interim Rector and Wardens agreed that in addition to assessing whether the 2-service model was feasible and desirable, the team should also investigate alternative service time models—in effect, all options were on the table.

### Study Basis

The team bounded the scope of the study with a few simplifying assumptions. First, no facility modifications were considered requiring capital expenditure, meaning the any solution had to be viable in St Timothy's current building and grounds condition. Second, given that the current music program is led by an interim director, the team avoided any analysis of the music program beyond determining its importance (or lack thereof) to the congregation at various services. Third, the team assumed any service model setup had to be viable with roughly the current model of volunteer support, since growing the levels of volunteer participation was considered beyond the scope of this study—that effort will require unity of effort across many church ministries.

The first phase of the study involved extensive data gathering and analysis. The team initially asked for open-ended feedback from the congregation about the summer service schedule experiment.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Service Study team was composed of Brian Flusche (Team Lead), Duncan Hutcheon, Genevieve Zetlan, Jane Perry and Gayle Rippe.

Additionally, the team calculated the capacity of St Timothy's, in terms of both cars in the parking lot and worshipers in the sanctuary pews. The team also interviewed clergy and leaders of key functional teams (altar guild, ushers, lectors and lay Eucharistic Ministers) to determine existing logistical constraints. In conjunction with the Director of Children and Youth Ministries, the team, assessed the options for the Christian education program. The team surveyed the other churches in our Region for information on their service times, logistical challenges, and approaches to Sunday School and worship functions. Finally, a survey was administered to the congregation to determine their preferences.

Over 40 households provided feedback about the summer experiment via e-mail to the service study team lead. The question posed was "What did you like (or not) about the summer schedule?" in order to avoid a premature comparison to the traditional 3-service schedule. Comments received were positive by about a ratio of 2:1, meaning two positive comments for each negative comment. The dominant favorable themes were (#1) the summer service schedule reduces the burden on volunteers and (#2) enjoying how full the church felt. The dominant negative themes were (#1) the 10:00 service ran too long and (#2) not liking how full the church felt. The division apparent in perceptions about church capacity foreshadows the crux of the decision facing the leadership of St Timothy's.

### **Capacity of the Sanctuary**

Academic researchers have previously considered the problem of church capacity, and have determined ways to calculate the realistic, or "comfortable", capacity of a church<sup>2</sup> for the purposes of encouraging growth. The resulting comfortable capacity is less than a fire marshall's safe maximum capacity because it takes into account cultural norms about "personal space". The comfortable capacity of a church's sanctuary is calculated by determining the total length of available pew seating and dividing by 26", which represents the number of people that can be accommodated without feeling as though their personal space is being infringed upon. The 26" figure represents an apparently reasonable compromise between two larger strangers (who will take up more space) and a smaller intimate couple (who will require less space). However, the ability to retain existing congregants and attract newcomers is derived from a comparison of service attendance to a church's comfortable capacity<sup>3</sup>, and this relationship is described in Table 1. Note that more than occasional services with attendances greater than 80% of capacity are considered detrimental to growth.

Assessing the capacity of St Timothy's required evaluating both the sanctuary and the parking lot. The sanctuary's comfortable capacity (in its current configuration, with choir flexible seating installed) is 199 people seated in the pews. Therefore, the percentages in Table 1 can be directly applied to St. Timothy's as shown in Table 2. Note that these values don't count the altar party, choir, or standing ushers—all of whom are counted in the attendance values recorded by ushers. Therefore, service-specific models were derived to adjust the attendance reported by ushers for comparison with the values in Table 2.

---

<sup>2</sup> "The 80 Percent Rule; Fact or Fiction", Marliss McCollum, published by the Alban School of Divinity, Duke University, 11 August 2006

<sup>3</sup> "Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church", Gary L. McIntosh, Baker Books, 2006

**Table 1. There is a relationship between comfortable capacity and service attendance that impacts the congregation.**

Weekly attendance as a percentage of a church's comfortable capacity	Impact on congregation
Greater than 100%	"Intolerably full" - Can't be sustained and will drive away existing members. The church will shrink.
80% - 100%	"Uncomfortably full" – Newcomers feel too crowded and will not return. The church will not grow.
65% - 80%	"Comfortably full" – Best state for worship satisfaction.
35% - 65%	"Comfortably empty" – Newcomers feel accepted without others knowing they're a visitor. The church can grow.
20% - 35%	"Uncomfortably empty" – New people feel conspicuous and less welcome. The church will not grow.
Less than 20%	"Intolerably empty" – Newcomers will not return, and the church may shrink.

**Table 2. The number of people attending St. Timothy's (seated in pews) impacts the whole congregation.**

Individuals attending service (in pews)	Impact on congregation
Greater than 199	"Intolerably full" - Can't be sustained and will drive away existing members. The church will shrink.
160 – 199	"Uncomfortably full" – Newcomers feel too crowded and will not return. The church will not grow.
130 - 159	"Comfortably full" – Best state for worship satisfaction.
70 - 129	"Comfortably empty" – Newcomers feel accepted without others knowing they're a visitor. The church can grow.
40 - 69	"Uncomfortably empty" – New people feel conspicuous and less welcome. The church will not grow.
Less than 40	"Intolerably empty" – Newcomers will not return, and the church may shrink.

### **Parking**

St. Timothy's parking lot has 121 spaces—five handicapped, four for seniors, and one currently hosting a trailer and therefore not available for use. In summer months (with good weather), additional spots can be generated by parking on the grass. However, in winter months, with snow or mud possible, grass parking is much less attractive and possibly unsafe for older parishioners. Feedback from parishioners indicated that some parking spots can become unusable because they're too small—in effect, one vehicle can take up two spots. There are commercial areas with ample parking that are in within walking distance of St. Timothy's.

Once the capacities of both the sanctuary and parking lot were determined, the team worked to determine whether the parking lot capacity provides an artificial constraint on service attendance. Note that the parking lot must accommodate both worshippers in the sanctuary and individuals in the

building for other purposes like counters, nursery attendants, youth director, and anyone setting up for events. For example, at the 10:00 service on 26 July 2015, the parking lot was full (with a few cars on the grass) but the pew seating capacity wasn't exceeded—no chairs were brought into the Narthex. The official attendance number recorded was 207, producing 191 individuals seated in pews in the sanctuary. Therefore, the parking lot is sized about right for St Timothy's—when the lot becomes full, the sanctuary is on the edge of becoming intolerably full. Newcomers are not being turned away simply because they can't find a parking space, so instead the predicted service attendance becomes the key variable in determining the impact of adopting the 2-service model year-round.

### **Logistical Constraints**

In parallel with examining the capacity of St Timothy's, the team sought to understand any logistical constraints that might drive service schedules. Vergers and leadership of the altar guild indicated a need of 15 minutes between the end of one service and the beginning of the next to reset the altar. The Interim Rector indicated he needed about 20 minutes to clear the receiving line and take a short break. Observation by team members indicated that the parking lot cleared sufficiently to allow cars in for the next service with a break of about 20 minutes between services. Therefore, the logistics constraints at St Timothy's produce a requirement for 20 minutes between the end of one service and the start of the next. This is different than the often cited "interval between service start times", because the driving variable is actually the *length of the preceding service*. The other churches in Region 5 also report needing at least 20 minutes between services—if not longer—but five of the seven churches offer adult Christian education in between services which drives the required time interval.

### **Survey Results**

After examining physical and logistical constraints, the team surveyed the congregation to determine preferences on a variety of topics. Responses were received both hardcopy and electronically from a total of 141 households across all three services, thereby ensuring a representative sample. Figure 1 shows the desired service start times of the congregation, and implies that both the summer 2-service and traditional 3-service model reasonably align with the preferences of the congregation.

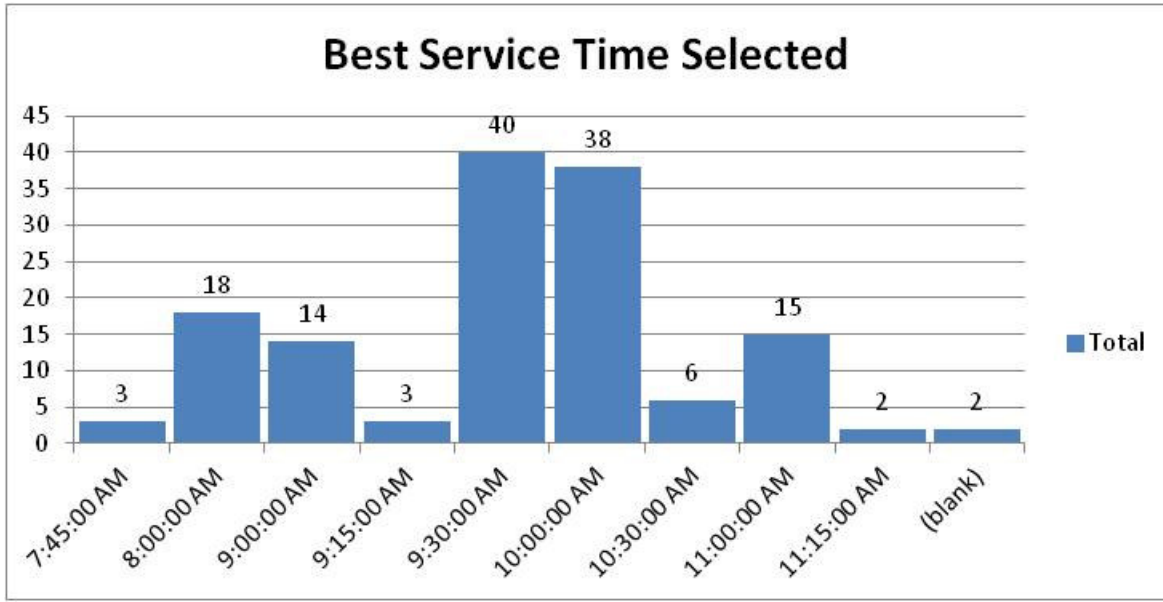


Figure 1. The number of households indicating a preference from a variety of possible service start times demonstrates that both the 2-service and 3-service model align reasonably well with the congregation's desires.

Survey responses also indicated that service start time primarily drives the choice of service attended, not Rite I vs. Rite II (service structure) as previously thought for those at 8:00. Significant other drivers are music (or lack thereof) and children's activities. As shown in Figure 2, these three variables drive the attendance choices of 86% of the congregation at St Timothy's.

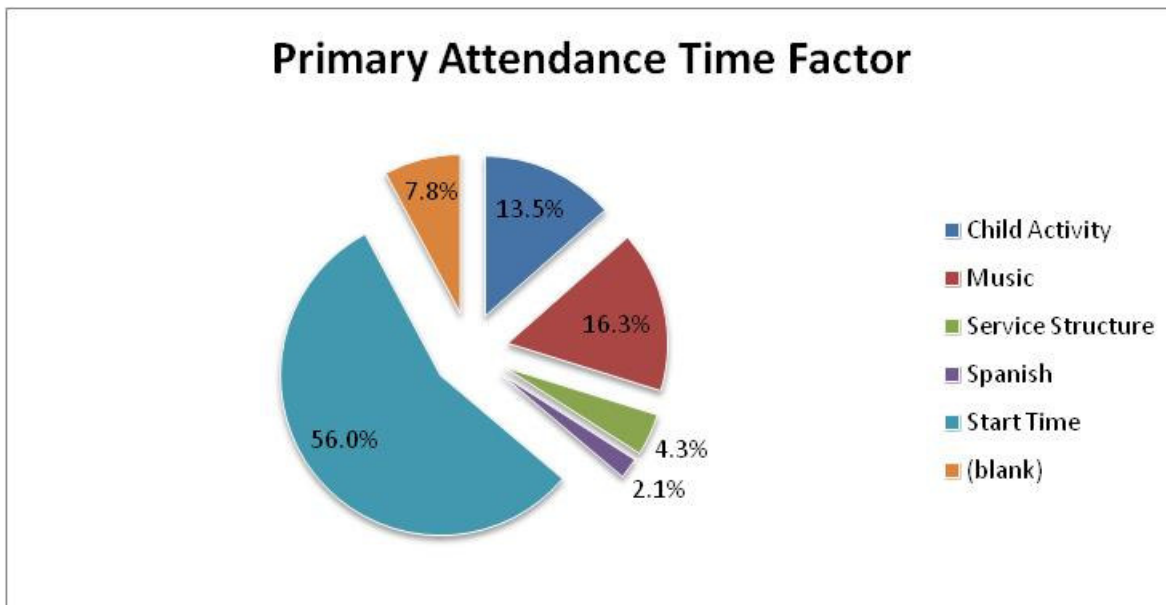


Figure 2. Service start time overwhelmingly drives the choice of which service households attend, with children's activities and music also representing significant influence. Service structure (Rite I vs. Rite II) and Spanish language appear to have relatively secondary effects.

While Spanish language wasn't flagged as a prime attendance driver, several written comments on the topic were submitted for the question with an open answer. The comments were negative by a ratio of about 2:1, but none of the comments indicated satisfaction with the current situation. For those who

disliked Spanish, the absence of Spanish actually influenced their attendance choice, with people moving away from the 11:00 service to the 9:30 in order to avoid Spanish. For those who liked Spanish, the current amount in the service was seen as inadequate. Addressing how to provide worship options for Spanish-speaking parishioners remains a significant challenge.

In terms of children’s activities, Figure 3 shows parents indicating an overwhelming desire to offer Godly Play in parallel with the service, as opposed to having children sit with parents during the service. This finding is consistent with the significance of children’s activities identified as driving the choice of service attended. Finally, specific written comments that proposed potential changes for an individual’s currently attended service were forwarded to the Interim Rector for his consideration.

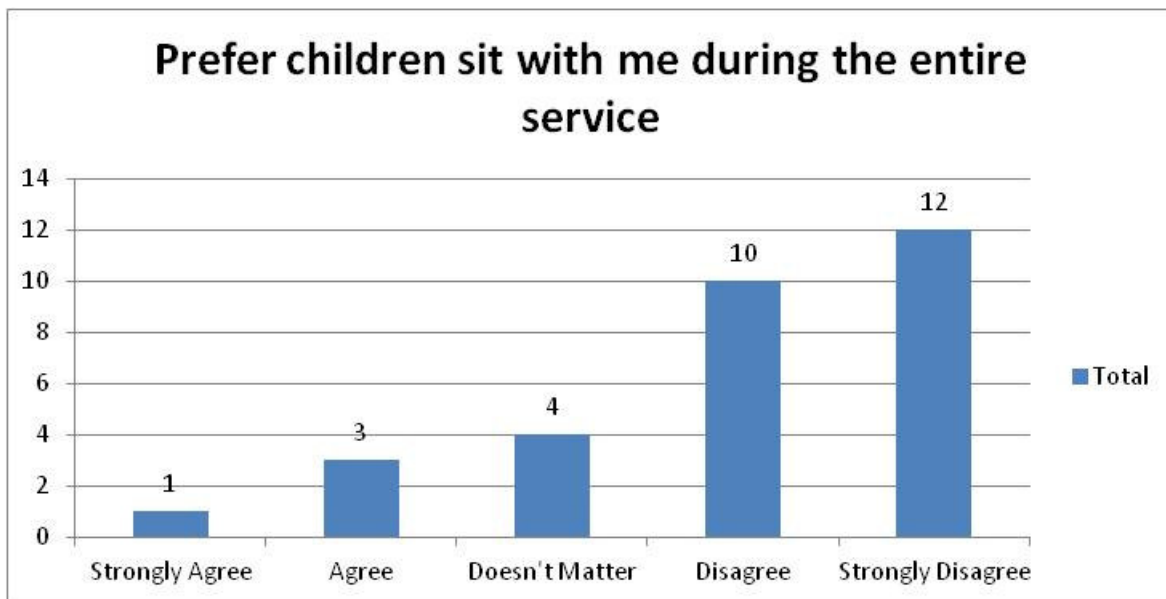


Figure 3. Parents disagree with the statement “I prefer that my children sit with me during the entire church service.”

## 2-Service Model

Once physical constraints had been identified and the congregation’s preferences were known, the team assessed the feasibility of adopting the 2-service model year-round. Figure 4 shows that for the period of June 1 – August 2, 2015, when the summer schedule was in effect, attendance at the 10:00 service was in the comfortable range 78% of the time, and became uncomfortably full 22% of the time. This information in part explains the feedback themes originally received about the summer schedule being both pleasantly full and too full. If attendees at the 8:00 service are assumed to consistently attend year round, then any summer increase in attendance represented individuals who previously attended 9:30 choosing to attend 8:00 instead of 10:00. Using this logic, only 2% of the 9:30 crowd decided to attend 8:00 during the summer—the 9:30 and 11:00 effectively combined into the 10:00. However, one of the reasons for adopting the summer schedule was because of the significant overall drop in attendance (-20%) during the summer months. Therefore, the comfort level during the spring and fall could be estimated by beginning with actual spring 2015 attendance and applying the same logic. Figure 5 shows that neglecting the Easter holiday weekend, for the period from January 4 – May 31, 2015, the predicted attendance at the 10:00 service would only be in the comfortable range 20% of

the time. Further, the attendance levels would turn away newcomers (by being too full) 75% of the time and would actually drive away existing parishioners 10% of the time. These results demonstrate that while the 2-service model produces a comfortable environment in the summer (when overall attendance is down), the 2-service model would likely constrain growth (or even diminish the active congregation) if applied year-round (when overall attendance increases) unless significant actions were taken to re-balance the attendance and shift worshippers to the 8:00 service.

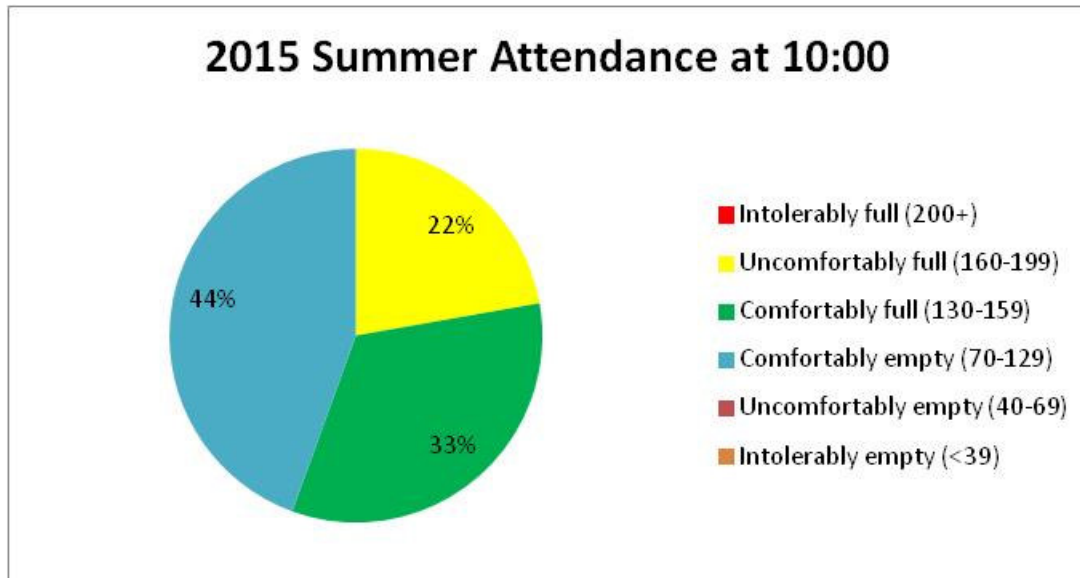


Figure 4. Attendance at the 10:00 service during the summer of 2015 (1 Jun – 2 Aug) was in the comfortable range 78% of the time.

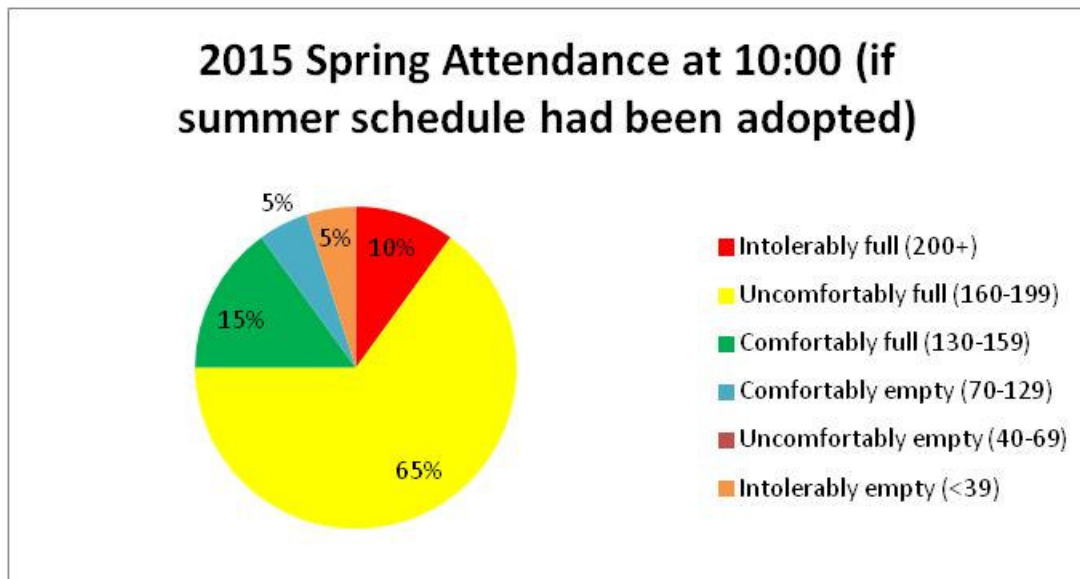


Figure 5. If the summer schedule had been in place during spring (4 Jan – 31 May, excluding Easter), attendance would only be in the comfortable range 20% of the time. 10% of the time, existing parishioners would be driven away.

## **Adult Christian Education Option**

While the sanctuary capacity limit represents a significant challenge, the service study team realized that the 2-service model might present an opportunity to incorporate adult Christian education between the two services. St. Timothy's currently lacks an adult Christian education offering on Sunday mornings, but does offer Godly Play for children ages 3-2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Spark+ for 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders, and Christian education for 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders. Currently, Godly Play is offered at both 9:30 and 11:00 services, while the other opportunities are offered in parallel with the 9:30 service. In contrast, five of the seven churches in Region V offer their youth Sunday school activities between services, in parallel with their adult Christian education. The St. Timothy's Director of Children and Youth ministries held informal conversations with ~50% of parents who have children in Sunday School—Spark+ and higher—and some youth participants, and heard some potential problems with adopting this approach. The largest concern voiced from parents and youth is altering the youth Christian education schedule would require too much total time spent at church (2+ hours each Sunday), with three teachers and five families worried they might have to leave St. Timothy's and find another church because of the potential time commitment. Additionally, the earlier start time could negatively impact youth attendance, producing an estimated loss of 50% of youth in sixth grade and higher. Finally, if adult Christian education is added between the services, but youth Sunday school stays in its current time slot, the Director of Children and Youth ministries raised concerns about safety of unsupervised children while parents are in class. One partial mitigation to this concern is to offer a two part Godly Play class, with part 1 in parallel with adult CE, and part 2 in parallel with the 10:00 service. However, attendance at adult Christian education may wind up being limited to those either without any children at all, or those with children younger than 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for whom a child care option is being provided. Therefore, while adopting the 2-service model year-round would constrain the size of St Timothy's, it may present opportunities to better address the spiritual needs of the existing congregation.

## **3-Service Model**

However, the traditional 3-service model also has issues. If an adult Christian education program were desired, it would either have to be run in parallel with an existing service (which would require an associate rector) or the service start times would have to be adjusted to make room for a program between services. However, Figure 1 shows that congregation has very little tolerance for extremely early or extremely late service start times. Therefore, a Sunday morning adult Christian education program is not feasible with the current 3-service model.

Additionally, feedback from the congregation indicates that the 3-service model is putting a serious strain on volunteers (vergers, lay Eucharistic ministers, ushers, altar guild and choir). One reason for this is that the same individuals serve on teams like the altar guild, or in multiple roles like verger/LEM, that can align to require participation at multiple services on the same Sunday. In a situation like this, those individuals feel a significant time commitment. The burden feeling is enhanced by a feeling of not being appreciated due to low attendance at the 11:00 service.

One theme that was evident in feedback from the congregation was the perception that the 11:00 service is uncomfortably empty, and perhaps requires more trouble than it's worth. Figure 6 demonstrates that the 11:00 consistently is better attended than the 8:00. Figure 7 shows that both the 8:00 and 11:00 are typically uncomfortably empty, which may be acceptable for the 8:00 given its niche as a "no frills" service. Additionally, recall that 30% of people attend a service based upon its music and activities for children, both of which have been scaled back at 11:00 in recent years. Specifically, four households indicated in the survey that they currently attend 9:30 but would prefer to attend 11:00. These results highlight that St Timothy's should initiate an intentional effort to revitalize the 11:00 service if the 3-service model is retained.

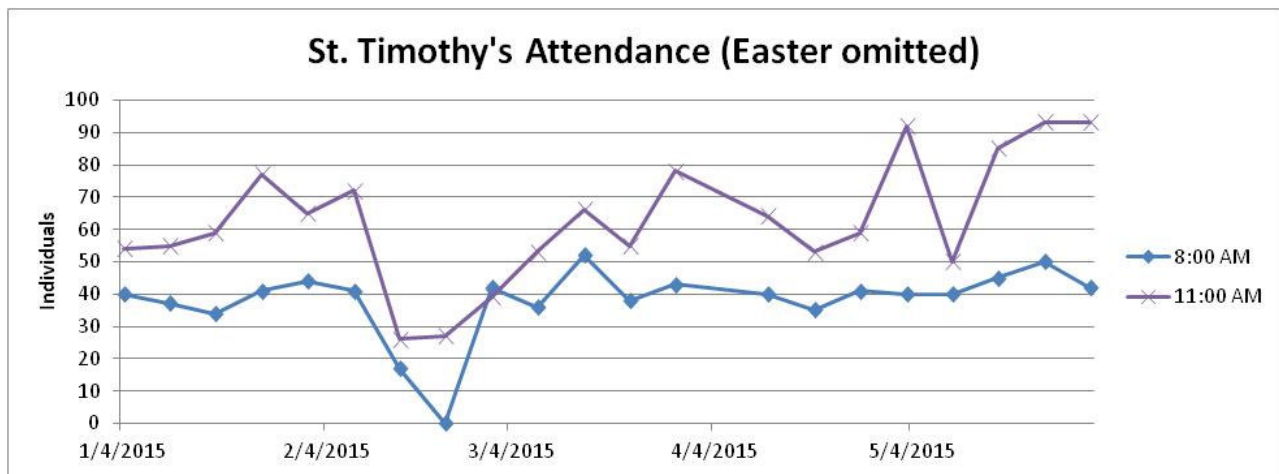


Figure 6. In spring 2015, attendance at 11:00 service consistently exceeded 8:00 service attendance.

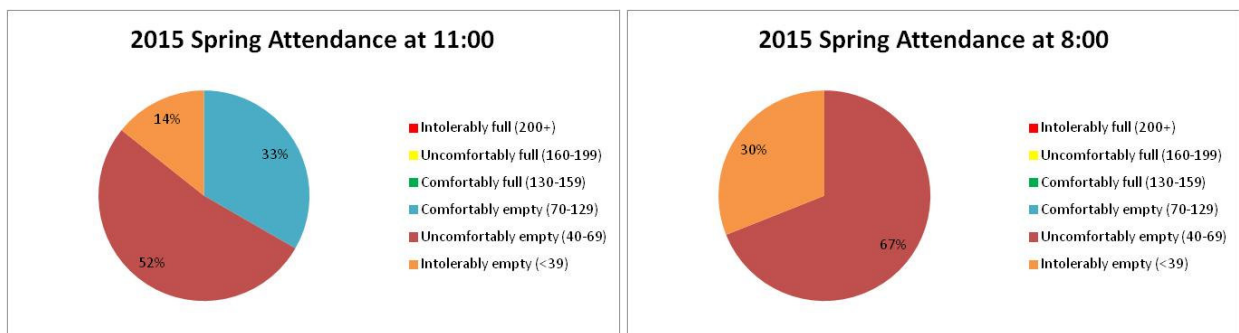


Figure 7. In spring 2015, the 11:00 service was only comfortably full 33% of the time, while the 8:00 was never comfortably full.

## Recommendations

***In conclusion, the key decision facing the Vestry and Interim Rector is whether to impose a cap on the size of the congregation at St Timothy's in order to relieve the burden on volunteers.*** If the 2-service model is adopted year-round, the uncomfortably full status will prevent newcomers from joining the church, create a chronic issue with parking and undermine the Vestry's goal of growing the congregation. While a third service could be re-instated at some point in the future, what would be that trigger point given that the church would already be uncomfortably full? One possible mitigation strategy would be to try to lure current 9:30 attendees to attend 8:00 service—and child activities like

Godly Play and nursery seem the most promising, given the survey results—but this requires a serious communications effort to re-brand the 8:00 as more family friendly as well as a substantial shift in behavior around a key component of why people attend the service they attend (service time). If the 3-service model is retained, efforts should be made to boost attendance at the 11:00 by leveraging factors that drive service attendance decisions—music and child activities. Potential options include moving Sunday school (Spark+ through Grade 12) from 9:30 to 11:00 and re-introducing a choir and special music (or cantor). Next, a strategic outreach campaign is required to reduce the individual volunteer logistical burden. Finally, the survey responses indicate that the three-service model could present an opportunity to St. Timothy's to offer a slightly different worship experience at 9:30 and 11:00 am, rather than repeating the same exact service twice. Write-in free responses indicate that some 9:30 attendees do not like chanting and prefer a less formal service, and 11:00 attendees typically have older children or no children. St. Timothy's could consider making the 9:30 service more “low church” and geared towards families with younger children, and the 11:00 service more “high church” and geared towards adults or families with older children. Moving youth Sunday school and choir to the 11:00 service would seem to be a step worthy of investigation.

Regardless of which model is adopted, there are several additional findings which can be implemented to increase worshipper satisfaction at St Timothy's. First, parking needs to be addressed. The church should reach out to nearby businesses and obtain permission to use their lots during Sunday services—this will be especially important for Easter and Christmas. In conjunction, the church leadership must work to make parking off-site and walking a respected act. When the parking lot is due for its next major maintenance, consider widening the spots (which will reduce the current number) as a safety and comfort measure. Finally, be mindful of potential congestion in the parking lot when scheduling holiday services—ensure at least 20 minutes is left between the end of one service and the beginning of the next.

Incorporating the Spanish-speaking congregation members at St Timothy's remains a challenge. Given that all feedback on the topic indicated the current state isn't satisfactory, the best course of action may be to remove Spanish from the 10:00 / 11:00 service and institute a Spanish-language evening service (which will require a bi-lingual associate rector). The Spanish congregation is about as big as the 8:00 service, and potentially growing, so they shouldn't be ignored.

Finally, recognize the importance of timing in the service. Start the service on time. Consider deleting a reading (as other churches in Region 5 have done) or truncating hymns if the service runs too long. However, be sensitive to truncating the passing of Peace because that seems to be a culturally prized characteristic of St. Timothy's.