



HOW TO DO AN AVERAGE AGE SURVEY

By Tom Swartzwelder

I highly recommend taking an age survey of your church once a year. My experience shows the typical church leadership knows very few facts about its church. The leaders tend to talk in generalities then generalize the generalities when reaching conclusions – conclusions which are sometimes right but sometimes wrong. This survey is a great way to help your leadership understand the church in much greater detail, because *it will give you facts rather than guesses!*

Also, this survey will reinforce one tremendously important lesson regarding the relevancy of the church to the community as a whole. Is your church like the community around it or is it representative of just a portion of the community? This is important, because I want to reach everyone I can for Jesus...but some churches do not have a bridge that extends to the entire community. For example, the average age in most churches is older, sometimes considerably older, than the community. This discrepancy creates a barrier to effective church ministry due to generational differences.

Thom Rainer wrote about one such situation in his “Autopsy of a Deceased Church” (available for download on this website), “The members idolized another era. *All of the active members were over the age of 67* the last six years of the church. And they all remembered fondly, to the point of idolatry, was the era of the 1970s. They saw their future to be returning to the past.” Ouch! That church closed in 2013.

The leadership is able to use the average age (and other data gained in the survey) to educate the church in the area of specific ministries it wishes to emphasize, fund, etc. Since churches tend to be older than younger, some churches have funded children’s days with inflatable games, ventriloquists, day camps, etc. in order to draw that constituency and to help relate better to them. Hurrah for those who recognize their need and take steps to remedy their need!

There are several questions to answer.

1. Who is to be surveyed? The goal is to understand the ages of those currently attending our church. Therefore, we do not conduct this survey on any of our high attendance days like Easter or Family Day. We want this survey to be an accurate reflection as to whom regularly attends our church. As a result, we are comparing apples with apples in a year after year survey.

2. How is it best to take the survey? Distribute a small slip of paper to the attendees either prior to the beginning or at the very end of the Sunday morning service. Such times will not interfere with the normal flow of worship. Ask everyone, including visitors, to record his/her age on the paper but *not* his/her name. Explain this survey will give us genuine facts about what ages are attending our church and help the leadership to better understand what God is doing in our fellowship. I have typically received 100% cooperation from everyone in attendance; this includes even those who are sensitive about their age. Collect the papers! It is as simple as 1-2-3!

3. When is it best to take the survey? Surveys work best when they are done on a consistent basis year after year. I like doing this annual survey on the first Sunday after Labor Day. The children have now returned to school. Regular attendees are more likely to be in attendance since a three-day weekend immediately precedes this weekend. We **DO NOT** schedule a special event to draw outsiders on this Sunday.

4. What to do with the survey? First, I suggest putting each age in a spreadsheet and sorting it by the age in ascending order (see the sample). This will allow you to combine certain age groups. For example, how many children do we have and what percentage of the total sample are they? How many “65 and over Medicare folks” do we have? (A large percentage of your budget comes from older folks so this has budget implications, too.)

5. How to evaluate the findings? I suggest having the entire leadership discuss the survey’s findings. I would brainstorm (use a modern problem solving tool that removes the stronger personalities from monopolizing the discussion) two questions in the following order:

- What do you personally see in these numbers?
- What needs to be done to change or reinforce these numbers?

During the discussion I record each answer on a flip chart. (Do not discard any answer including an answer which contradicts a previous answer. Discarding would discourage participation and identify you as the judge and jury. Participation is the key to making this work. Some leaders may struggle in question 2 but all can provide input in question 1.)

Upon completing a flip chart sheet, tape the sheet to the wall so everyone can see the earlier results and avoid unnecessary repetition. Continue brainstorming (rotate around the table; each participant provides only one answer per rotation) until no more answers are available.

Last, ask the leaders to record (this is done without any discussion in order to discourage converting others to a particular point of view) on a sheet of paper the 3-5 highest impact answers from the second question. Collect the sheets, transfer the answers to the flip chart sheets by placing a checkmark next to each answer on the flip chart sheets, then calculate which 3-5 answers received the highest votes. Last, target the rest of your discussion on how to implement those 3-5 answers. This will give you specific action plans for future activity.

For instance, the leaders may see an obvious weakness in the children's ministry. Perhaps this can be addressed by providing more children activities such as an Annual Children's Day (one has to start somewhere), inflatable games, Easter egg hunts, children's movie day, magicians, ventriloquists, day camps, field trips, etc. We even devoted a Sunday night to creating a Polar Express night for the children.

Another weakness may appear in the retired population of your church. These folks typically enjoy monthly meetings, local and distant trips, etc. Don't worry about budgeting more to minister to this group! They will always more than pay for the added expense.

It is wise to compare the church's average age with the average age of your community. The average age of the community is provided from Census bureau demographic studies. It is highly reliable. Your convention will likely have this data. If not, check on-line for a demographic study of the nearest community of any size.

6. How did our own church stack up? Just a couple of years earlier our church's average age was around 60. Several area pastors cautioned me about taking the pastorate because "it is an old church which is set in its ways and will not change for you." Well, I had nothing else to do at the time so I took the pastorate.

Through a strong focus on renewing Vacation Bible School, increasing the budget for the children's ministries/activities/facilities, adding inflatable games and after-church July activities, we saw that age change materially. Our last three annual surveys showed an average age of 41 (we do not bus children; hence, children do not distort/lower our number). The median community age was 42.3 for a three-mile circle around our property. This result was regarded as very, very positive and meant we could relate well to the community as a whole. The community did not view us as a church for "old" or "young" people, but as a church for the community.

On the other hand, consider a snowbird church in Florida! I recently held a revival in central Florida. The average age of that church was around 65. That was actually ok because the church's ministry revolves around the snowbirds who come south for the winter. The snowbirds will change from year to year, but they will keep coming! After all, it's Florida and the number of retired people keeps increasing. These retirees will seek snowbird churches where their needs are met.

Interestingly, this snowbird church's pastor wanted me to consider pastoring his church when he retired in a year or two. One item I investigated was the average age of the community. I was surprised to find it was a snowbird community, too, in its average age. Another pastor told me, "I have been in this community for ten years. I know there are young people here, but I have never been able to find them." Well, I didn't find them either! It was a snowbird church in a snowbird community with a snowbird outreach! A perfect match! (No, I did not take the church.)

7. Will this survey help implement change? The short answer is "yes" because it creates much-needed discussion about whether your church is succeeding in ministering to the community. An age survey opens the eyes of the membership to the need of having every age represented in its attendance. This opens the door for dialogue when generational differences arise. It helps each generation recognize "we need the other generations, too."

I then share the results with the congregation in two formats. First, I provide a write-up for the next week's bulletin which explains our annual trend in this category as well as how we compare with the community as a whole. Second, I write at greater length in an email to every member on my email list. This is part of my weekly mailing. My list consists of around 60 people with an average Sunday morning attendance of only 120. The spreadsheet is made available to anyone.

Here is one such write-up: “Let me thank everyone who participated in yesterday's Average Age Survey. The average age of our church is 43.3 (interestingly, some of our younger families missed yesterday and were not part of this survey.). Some of you will remember when the average age was well into the 60's and you wondered about the church's future due to its older members dying off. Our average age tells us that our church does indeed have a future (despite a smaller church attendance than other nearby churches, our ministry opportunities have actually expanded through this youthful energy with the creation of the Good News Club for Sunday evening's children, Hatcher Elementary School After School Outreach, a two division Children's Church, and a much improved Vacation Bible School) but it is also a church which needs a lot of discipleship. Younger churches need lots of training and mentoring. More experimenting and mistakes are made but this is the price of growing people! So be full of the Spirit, be full of love, keep encouraging, and when necessary forgive... as Christ for your sake forgave you!”

Note in the above write-up that I mentioned the need of discipleship. “Younger churches need lots of training and mentoring.” Plus, forgiveness. We worked hard on providing that training and even brought in a Child Evangelism Fellowship missionary to train our children's workers. This, also, led us to create a New Members Class *and* a New Converts Class to further improve our discipleship process.

Let me suggest creating a pie chart with three distinct groups: ages 18 and under (total children), ages 19 – 64 (working age), and ages 65 – infinity. Ask yourself, how do we budget and staff for these three groups? Is one shortchanged?

It is obvious that this material has many uses. It is not only informational, but it is also an excellent training tool for what needs to happen to develop a healthy church with a promising future.

Remember: if we aim at nothing, we will also hit nothing! This information can help identify a target(s) which can affect your staffing, budget, training, etc. Be sure to use it annually!