

Results from the congregational survey about congregational meetings

May 2020

Background:

At its January 7, 2020 meeting the Leadership Group (LG) discussed how to increase congregational participation in congregational meetings. The pros and cons of various meeting times we identified, but there was a sense more input was needed to understand the congregation's attitude toward congregational meetings. LG asked the pastors to craft a survey.

We received 93 responses to the survey, many with extensive comments. Some of the key findings of the survey were:

Key findings:

- 1) People appreciated being surveyed.
- 2) Two-thirds of respondents said they are content with Assembly's decision-making process and satisfied with the decisions being made.
- 3) While some wish for broader participation at congregational meetings, several others who don't participate expressed their willingness to abide by decisions made by others.
- 4) Some said they are reluctant to speak in large group settings. A few said they are reluctant to express a minority point of view.
- 5) Many find it valuable to discuss congregational issues in their small group.
- 6) Many say that Sunday evenings are a difficult time for them to meet and suggest 2nd hour as a more accessible time for them. Some also expressed interest in having varied meeting times (Second hour, Sunday evening, Sunday afternoon) or solicit input online.
- 7) For a sizable number, participation in monthly meetings where the congregation grapples with issues and makes decisions by consensus is either not possible or not what they're interested in. For some others, changing this significantly will change an important part of who Assembly is.

Below is the tally of responses and the comments made by the respondents, grouped by how often one attends CM.

Responses	93
Regularly attend congregational meetings	35
Occasionally attend congregational meetings	29
Rarely or don't attend congregational meetings	28
Member	72
Not member	21
<36 yrs old	11
36-50 yrs old	28
51-65 yrs old	16
>65 yrs old	38
a) I'm content with the current process of decision-making at Assembly.	60
b) I don't understand the decision-making process at Assembly.	1
c) The time of congregational meetings is inconvenient for me.	32
d) My current stage of life makes it difficult for me to attend congregational meetings.	25
e) Participating in congregational decision-making isn't important to my church experience.	9
f) I'm rarely interested in the content of congregational meetings	3
g) I feel like my opinion at congregational meetings doesn't matter much.	8
h) I don't like consensus-decision making which takes a fair amount of time and conversation.	1
i) There are too many people at Assembly now to make decisions in the manner we do at congregational meetings.	7
j) I'm content to just offer my opinion on congregational issues in my small group.	16

k) I don't attend congregational meetings because as a non-member I'm not part of the final decision-making.	10
l) I've disagreed with some decisions made in the past, and have decided not to participate anymore.	0

Survey comments from those who “rarely or don't attend congregational meetings”	
1	I'm just not a very opinionated person and am usually fine to go along with what other people decide.
2	We are a family with young children. Our family schedule, individual moods, and overall need of the family as a whole are all unpredictable from day to day. I've decided that some things I can't be a part of right now. I trust the congregation to make wise decisions without me at this point in time. I do one day hope to participate, though with a bit of trepidation as the one congregational meeting I attended during 2nd hour was uncomfortable (some people like to talk a lot without saying much of anything).
3	While I'm not uninterested in the decisions being made at Assembly, it often seems like too much time out of my evening as I'm preparing to go back into the work week on a Sunday evening. It's often harder to voice opinions aloud to a large group but I am happy to be a part of discussion in smaller, more comfortable spaces like small group, or if input were asked for in other ways, such as this online survey or if written responses were collected in church.
4	I am really not a fan of Sunday evening meetings. After spending the whole morning at church, I don't feel compelled to return in the evening. I also feel like discussion on some items gets drawn out too long. I also don't enjoy singing hymns at meetings - they seem forced. I'd rather have efficient meetings that just get the job done. I imagine we would have much better attendance at meetings if they took place during 2nd hour. Children's SS classes wouldn't have to meet in traditional groups. There could be childcare provided by the MYF, and older kids could have supervised game time so that SS teachers could participate in the meeting as much as possible. Maybe we could alternate meetings between the current evening time and 2nd hour if we don't want to commit to a permanent 2nd hour arrangement.
5	I've made it no secret through the years that I'm a strong advocate for moving (at least some) of the congregational meetings to second hour. Coming back and giving up a Sunday evening is a big time and energy challenge when there is so much else on the calendar and the last thing we typically want to do before the busy work week kicks off. We often do not have very robust electives for adults during 2nd hour anyway and this would make for more compelling reason to stay. / To provide a case study, we made this move at LMC years ago when I was the congregational chair and more than doubled our average attendance because it was suddenly more convenient for people to attend and not Swiss cheese their entire day. / In order to support this move, substitute teachers or alternate arrangements for SS classes to enable those who want to attend but are teaching would be important. At LMC, we often did some kind of special activity that MYFer's would facilitate to free up adults. It also means cutting out "fluff" from meetings by keeping crisp agendas and managing time (which people appreciate anyway) and eliminating additional congregational singing - which should be fine since we just had a whole morning of worship that preceded it.
6	7 p.m. on a Sunday evening is a terrible time for families with small children to attend a congregational meeting. I suggest moving the congregational meetings to directly after second hour on a Sunday. Provide food (pizza or whatever) and childcare so parents can participate in the meeting without distraction. I would be glad to chip in to help cover the extra cost of food and childcare. Also, I like the consensus model of decision-making in principle, but it is much harder to do in practice with such a large congregation, especially if one of the goals is to provide space for everybody to speak into the decision-making process.
7	I am content with all of Assembly's decisions, so I don't feel I need to be there. Tacit blanket approval.
8	The times when congregational meetings have been on Sunday mornings have been much more convenient for me. It just doesn't work for us to come back later in the day and I'm not concerned enough about any of the decisions to make myself come back when that is a high stress (pre-Monday) time for me. (That is to say, I don't ever feel like any decision that the congregation will make without me is going to be so catastrophically awful that I absolutely have to come.) / As far as the consensus-decision making item, I think it's great in theory but it does wear on my patience and the extra time involved does make it harder for me to want to come more often.

9	As my wife is not an attender and Sunday afternoons and evenings are the time that I have committed to spending with her. Virtually any weekday evening would work better for me - but I understand those times may not work as well for many others.
10	As a previous member of Assembly and, hopefully, an eventual member of Assembly, I wish I prioritized congregational meetings more. While my current excuse of being a full time working parent of a small child is the primary reason I don't currently attend meetings, I know I didn't attend many meetings prior to having a child. I do find small group conversations to be a helpful place to process congregational issues and have relied on that a lot over the past 2 years. However I do see the value in meeting as a congregation as a whole. I don't have any perfect solutions to offer, but I would just say I would be sad to see these meetings disappear entirely, but I think approaching them with fresh eyes is a great idea. Thank you to all who work hard to make this process work, attend meetings, lead meetings and generally keep the congregation going. I am very grateful.
11	i have young children, with evening commitments nearly every night of the week. I would attend congregational meetings during second hour on Sundays, but likely will not attend an evening meeting in the foreseeable future.
12	Sunday evenings are difficult - it would be more convenient for me and my family to attend a meeting during second hour or a fellowship meal on Sunday at noon. / My opinions generally line up with many others at Assembly, so I feel comfortable and confident that other voices are expressing similar thoughts.
13	A second hour on Sunday (with an alternative plan for Sunday School and childcare folks provided by external people).
14	If you change, Assembly is no longer Assembly.
15	I would be more inclined to attend if the meeting was held during second hour or shortly thereafter.
16	We have found our adjustment to Greencroft/Goshen to require our attention so we have not attended many Congregational meetings. If/when we are members we would take decision making seriously and try to attend regularly.
17	We have mainly tried to learn to know people and how Assembly functions. We have had many changes in moving here so being part of decisions at Assembly has not gotten much attention from us. If we become members we would want to participate in congregational decisions and see that as an important part of membership.
18	I attend when the meeting is Sunday 2nd hour. I am alert and have energy to think through issues. As an introvert, I don't feel comfortable speaking up in large groups. When there are smaller discussion groups, I feel more heard.
19	I would prefer congregational meetings in the afternoon following worship service rather than in the evening.

Survey comments from those who "occasionally attend congregational meetings"	
20	Meeting during 2nd hour once a month would be helpful! / The process feels very slow and heavy at times, maybe even restrictive (GCM decision comes to mind...). I'm not sure the best way to improve this while still honoring the system and elements that do work well for this community.
21	I am relatively new at Assembly (within the past year), so I imagine I will feel more involved/included/inclined to offer my opinion/like my opinion matters more, as I become more rooted in the community. / I am only able to participate in congregational meetings if they happen at a time other than Sunday evenings, due to children's bedtimes. I have only attended one congregational meeting, and I was able to do so because it happened during 2nd hour, when childcare was available. / Otherwise, I don't know enough yet to know whether the content of meetings interests me. I think I understand how the consensus process works, but I'm sure there are things I don't realize I don't know. In general, I value community discernment, and would be interested in being involved in the future as I am able.
22	I prefer that these meetings happen in tandem with church (second hour preferably) vs. an additional gathering on a Sunday.
23	It seems that some of the options above are a bit heavy on an outcome that could cut into the consensus model. I clicked "I am content" but could make a stronger statement: the model of decision making is a draw

	to Assembly, and I highly value it. I don't think it is overly complicated or too involved, nor do I think the church is too large and the model is somehow outdated. Timing, however, doesn't always work, and I guess I am not the only one among families with younger children. More meetings during 2nd hour (once a quarter?) would remedy that.
24	Timewise, I prefer a meeting either during 2nd hour with child care so that SS teachers can attend, or an afternoon time. Sunday night is tough, with kids bedtimes and getting ready to go back to school the next day. Usually even if I hear about the meeting at church the same day I end up forgetting to attend just bc im in the swing of bedtime at home. / I hate to say it but I feel like often times the older, most educated or longest attenders at congregational meetings get their "way." Often times these people are men. This makes some meetings feel uncomfortable. I'll cite a specific meeting: when Tricia Blosser came to talk about renting space at AMC. People were just brutal about how she'd never meet our guidelines, etc. It was painful to watch. ... It was really disheartening the way people were "discussing" the option.
25	Timing - Sundays 2nd hour or Sundays between 4-7pm would be better / Statements #5-8 above are somewhat true for me, although in a more mild way than stated above - / 5. Participating in congregational decision-making at the time commitment of the length and frequency of in-person congregational meetings isn't so importation to my church experience that it outweighs the stress it places on my family rhythm and psyche to get myself to a Sunday evening meeting most of the time. / 6. I am occasionally interested in the content of congregational meetings enough to really want to hear the discussion points from others. Usually I am content to read the summary documents that come out and discuss at my small group. / 7. It is usually a challenge for me to feel comfortable asking for a mic and speaking extemporaneously in a large group format of congregational meeting discussions, meaning I am unlikely to voice my opinion at congregational meetings. I do like surveys like this one and smaller group discussions in meetings with notes taken or summaries given to a larger group. -/ 8. I like the idea of consensus-decision making but I lack the patience and stamina for the length of conversations and the pace of the process in this size of congregation, given the other stressors that I feel in my current stage of life.
26	The time is not actually inconvenient, but I have a lot of inertia on Sunday evenings and find it hard to force myself back out of the house. This is compounded by the fact that I feel like there are such thoughtful people in the congregation whom I trust and the decision making process itself is fairly exhaustive. So, in other words, I have complete trust that a good decision will be made with or without my presence. :) Do it isnt that I don't feel heard or think that my opinion is not valued, only that My presence is not required to assure a good decision is made. I am aware that this is lazy, lame and not a good reason not to go. :) I'm only trying to explain my response above.
27	At the last few congregational meetings, I ended up feeling frustrated because various people brought up the same questions multiple times despite those questions having been addressed previously. Also, while I appreciate the consensus decision-making process, I think having a visible show of fingers for deciding potentially as inhibitive as certain people may feel hesitant about blocking a vote if the majority of others are in favor.
28	I think efficiencies could be found but generally do not find the system broken. The problem for me right now is life stage and work demands. I also have a hard time with a Sunday evening meetings but I think that is my problem.
29	Second hour is a good time for these meetings.
30	I have appreciated when we have congregational meetings during second hour on Sunday mornings. That way, my kids are already in Sunday school/child care and I don't have to make another trip to church at bedtime.
31	Due to our family makeup (small children who have bedtime around the time of mtgs) it is quite difficult if not impossible to go to reg scheduled mtgs. Having them after church would help this and I would attend them.
32	I'm wondering if we tried an early afternoon on a Sunday when we gather for a fellowship meal. Maybe not all the time...
33	Works better to have the meeting during second hour. That would increase attendance

34	<p>The evening time of the meeting leaves out important demographics. / I appreciate when a significant amount of time in Cong meetings can be in small group discussion with reporting back. While this is utilized, it often feels rushed. / Although the offer to hear minority opinions is stated, the felt experience is that the current is flowing strongly in one direction and it takes too much effort to articulate a divergent possibility - and this effort will just be swallowed up in the stronger current. / I wish that divergence would be valued as a way to help us all find something better. I understand this belief is held, but again, I don't experience it this way. / So I tend to not engage in the meetings very often, to just accept what is decided, and not try to engage only to feel not heard. / I haven't invested enough to have other suggestions for change. I do always appreciate a chance to process in a small group as that is a caring, safe space. But I've also been previously in a small group that struggled to create space for these conversations.</p>
35	<p>It has been difficult for me to attend these meetings the past 2 years, because of a very heavy work load and other commitments. I have trusted the current process, the people involved and have been aware of the content of the meetings by reading minutes or talking with someone who has attended.</p>
36	<p>I don't mind the current process, but am often disappointed at the low attendance. It is often difficult to get motivated to go out in the late evening for a meeting. I am often slow to process things and so don't participate much in the conversation, and don't always feel like my opinion is valued, but I usually take part in consensus. I do like hearing others comments. Would there be a way to do this through small groups? Though we do miss out then on the greater conversation.</p>
37	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I like when important meetings such as the budget are occasionally held during second hour. The only downfall is that SS teachers cannot attend. - The 2 part process of decision making (reading/discussion and then the decision at the next meeting) draws out the process, I think it is helpful as I can't always attend the meetings. So if I miss it the first time around, I can still get caught up at the next meeting. I like when the process also includes taking it to small groups as I am not as comfortable talking in a larger crowd. - I am familiar with the current process but I would be happy for a change if that meant others could participate. (Ultimately, I hope we can find ways to encourage more regular attenders to become members and feel like they can participate fully in the decision making process)
38	<p>When I am able to attend I think that there is good participation and lively atmosphere. / I expect to attend more meetings in the future and I look forward to it. I don't think we should let non-attendance threaten us too much. / As a rep I try to present to the small group the issues up for discussion. It is often hard to get much response and mostly I think people are satisfied with the way things are going. I appreciate the effort the elders put into making meetings accessible to all.</p>
39	<p>Having meetings during second hour, makes the most sense to me. I know of the history of consensus at Assembly; however, wonder of the continuation is meaningful</p>
40	<p>It's known as the "faithful 40". It seems whatever the size of the congregation, there are the faithful 40 at congregational meetings. I would be interesting to know what other (Mennonite) churches experience. I found that saying held true in the churches I served. But I don't blame you for trying to increase the attendance. I checked the one about time. For my wife, Sunday evenings feels like relax time because Monday is coming. And often I just stay home with her. I like Second hour, but I know the draw backs because of teachers not being able to come. Did attendance increase in second hour meetings?</p>
41	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are occasions in the decision-making process when I think it would be appropriate for the LG to be more direct in making a recommendation or at least listing options. 2. I feel that most decisions should be made primarily by younger people who have a real stake in the future direction of the congregation.
42	<p>I like it when we have congregational meetings during the Second Hour. The attendance is higher and more of the elderly and the young parents are able to attend. If we go that route, we would have to figure out how to have the Sunday School teachers available. While that would mean the compromise of giving up some Second Hour time, I think we would gain more of a community feeling when our "business" is also shared with a larger part of the whole. I think we have enough evidence that Sunday night is not a good option for many people.</p>

Survey comments from those who “regularly attend congregational meetings”	
43	None of the statements above apply to me. I'm interested in meetings, but I am also not content with the current process. I feel like my opinion matters. There aren't too many people to make decisions in this way. / I appreciate that we work to be efficient AND do consensus. I'm glad that we're asking the question of how to best do this congregational work. / It seems to me, though I can't speak for them, that the evening meetings are problematic for many to attend. Sunday mornings take out a layer of Sunday school teachers, who tend to be engaged, thoughtful folks. I'm not sure what the answer is, but I'm glad we're looking at how to do this. / I know pastors probably feel like they work hard to let people know what will happen at a church meeting, but I'm often in the dark about that until the day of the event. That's probably on me, but how could we lay out proposed agenda well in advance?
44	Consensus isn't perfect, but it's sure better than other systems I've encountered. / My definition of "regular" attendance is that my spouse and I alternate attending meetings and try to get to all of them between the two of us. I realize that households of one don't have that option.
45	There have been very few times I felt that my opinion did not matter much, and those times were only when I did not share the opinion of the majority. The times I've stated my minority opinion I've felt listened to, but then dismissed as if "well, we met with her and listened and it's too bad she feels that way." It's really difficult to express a minority or unpopular opinion, whether or not one is voting or using consensus.
46	I think it is good to sometimes have it in 2nd hour & sometimes at 7 pm on Sunday. I'm glad when you cancel if there isn't much agenda. I attend whenever I'm not working. And with 12 hour shifts neither of the 2 times is better or worse for me.
47	I'm curious what prompted this at the current time. We haven't had a congregational meeting for two months. Has cong mtg attendance dropped further? Have cong mtg attendance raw numbers stayed the same but the ratio of cong mtg attendance to Sun am attendance has changed?
48	Monthly evening meetings began in a small congregation when most people lived a short distance from the meetinghouse. I've always appreciated the way this leads to thoughtful, deliberate decisions, but it also makes it likely that people who live farther away will have less of a voice in decisions.
49	Please continue to hold congregational meetings on Sunday evenings. I usually don't attend when they are held 2nd hour or later because that cuts into my afternoon activities. I like attending meetings because it helps me be informed what is going on in the congregation. Currently, I don't have time to be in a small group.
50	Hm. I'd offer more that are a bit positive: --I'm open to new times for congregational meetings so more people can participate easily. --Another idea for congregational meeting time: After second hour, for no more than 45 minutes, while children are fed and entertained by other than Assembly folk. (NOT our MYF, since they should be present for the meetings. Consensus decision making is a skill we can offer them to take into their future lives.) Adults can choose to then eat or take the kids home for naps. Meal should be something very simple so it is not an impediment to participation. --Perhaps "first reading" should be done in small groups/online, with responses, rather than during congregational meetings. I wonder if this would help people feel meetings are more worthy of their time. --While low attendance at congregational meetings is a problem for many congregations, Assembly's way of being makes attendance more important. --While I love that Assembly no longer pushes membership, it might be worth better understanding why people choose to not be members or in small groups. --Thanks for doing this survey!
51	Sometimes, I miss the meetings because of other priorities/obligations. I'm always sorry and generally ask others in my small group who attended to fill me/us in.
52	This survey makes me wonder if some form of online input on matters usually discussed in person at meetings might be one way to widen participation at least in the early parts of discernment. I don't mean this might take the place of meetings but would allow folks who feel they can't attend the meeting to offer input. Are minutes of congregational meetings mentioned in the A-line, with a link to the document? Would it work to ask each small group to commit to having at least one person from the group attend meetings?

53	I approve of our decision-making process. I think the consensus model is a good one, even though it may take more time. Everyone has an opportunity to weigh in on decisions (whether they take the opportunity or not). / I am disturbed, however, that so few folks come to Congregational Meetings. "Older" members know that this was expected of folks - it was part of the forming-of-the-congregation milieu - though it seems that not as high a percentage of even these folks come anymore. Newer folks probably don't have much of this awareness. Perhaps some "education" of this expectation/responsibility would be helpful, done tactfully! / I don't know how much of this lack of attendance is related to "not liking" our decision-making process; probably this survey is an attempt to find out. So I applaud your working on this.
54	If anything our decision making process has improved. We have figured out good ways of articulating the process. I believe it is a healthy system and I support it.
55	I am open to new options if ideas come up that result in more involvement by more of us.
56	It does seem like the older generation (that would be us) has a bigger say in what happens because families with children are often not present for the Sunday evening congregational meetings. It gives us oldsters more power than we deserve. I think it should be shared, as much as possible, with all members.
57	As we continue to grow in size, this will need to be assessed from time to time. I would like for more people to be involved in decision making (many do not come to congregational meetings), but I don't know how that would happen.
58	I do have a few thoughts: The process we use to make decisions works well for the amount of people who attend congregational meetings. Although I think most members (in particular) and attendees (or at least one member of the family) should be part of the process, if the attendance at congregational meetings were to double, our current process might need to change. / Is there a way to involve small groups more, or better, in the decision-making process?
59	I appreciate your doing this survey. Great way to get information from a broad range of people. / I would suggest the worship committee do a similar survey to assess the diet needs (sermon topics) of attendees.
60	I almost checked the "There are too many people at Assembly now to make decisions..." box but I'm not sure what a good alternative is. I'm not ready to give up consensus, Perhaps we should just assume that the people coming to congregational meetings are a de facto church council. I liked it when we alternated congregational meetings between 2nd hour and evenings.
61	Even though it works for me, I would like to see more members and attendees participate. If making changes in meeting times would be helpful, I'm game. I feel quite attached to consensus decision making but would listen to reasons for change if that is a hindrance for many.
62	Even though I'm a Sunday School teacher, I think it would be good to have congregational meetings during 2nd hour perhaps half the time. Maybe someone who doesn't want to go could teach those Sunday's or if teaching rotates enough, that means that one could be there sometimes. Sunday evenings are not so hard for me but I think they signal that the meetings are mostly for people who have been at Assembly a long time. It would be a "welcoming" kind of move to have them 2nd hour some of the time.
63	I am deeply committed to AMC's values regarding decision making. At the same time I am eager to understand why others are not participating.
64	I attend congregational meetings when I am present in Goshen. I did not check any of the boxes because, while I am not discontent with the current process, I realize it is cumbersome. So, I am not completely content either. None of the other responses were true for me either. I know, not very helpful.
65	I get pretty sleepy in the evening, so a better time for me would be second hour or after second hour. On the question of whether there are too many people in Assembly now to use the usual system, I admit that if a majority of members attended it might be a challenge to use that system. However, the solution would be not to have so many members!!
66	I want to become a member and appreciate the spirit and friendliness of assembly. Carpe diem
67	I like consensus-decision but I know it takes a lot of time. I think it is harder now to give attention to all the older people. I pray a lot for leadership daily and requests given. This 88 year old often wishes for an Assembly vehicle that can pick us up.