



## Motivation...

...to participate – Adults are self-directed learners who choose to participate in those learning opportunities that have immediate application to their life situations.

Cyril Houle identified adult learners as being motivated to participate from one or more of three

orientations: 1) goal-oriented learners are those who seek to achieve a specific outcome from their learning experiences; 2) learning-oriented learners are motivated by the simple desire to gain knowledge for the sake of learning; 3) activity-oriented learners are motivated by a desire to interact with others, for the social interaction that comes with the learning experience.

Participation can be enhanced by involving the adult learners in the development of the learning objectives and learning methods.

...to learn – Motivation to learn is closely related to the motivation to participate but varies slightly based upon a more in-depth understanding of the nature of the learner.

Raymond Wlodkowski identified six motivators that were necessary for adult learners to have at some level: 1) Attitude (a satisfying experience in prior learning situations); 2) Needs (experience must focus on the perceived needs); 3) Stimulation (must feel challenged); 4) Affect (a sense that one is progressing); 5) Competence (needs must be satisfied); and 6) Reinforcement (positive feedback regarding personal accomplishments.)

Adult learners have a rich reservoir of prior experiences that should be used as a basis for future learning and to help enhance the learning experience for others. (Knowles)

## Barriers...

...to participation – Participation barriers are those things that keep the adult from attending the learning event. These barriers may be external to the learner, such as inadequate transportation or time conflicts; or they may be internal such as personal fears associated with the learning experience, dislike of the facilitator, or negative experiences in prior learning events.

...to learning – Learners can participate in a learning experience but still fail to gain any new insights. As with the barriers to participation, some of these learning barriers are intrinsic and some are extrinsic. Adults can only learn at their level of development therefore a learning experience that doesn't effectively target the learner's developmental level can be a barrier to learning. Ineffective teaching strategies can also be a barrier to learning. Room conditions, such as uncomfortable chairs, poor lighting, inadequate sound system, room temperature and other environmental concerns can provide barriers to learning. Existing biases of the learner can stall the learning of new concepts.



## Motivation – Continued

Reviewing the Barna 2024 – Small Groups and Bible Study Data

The survey results from Barna (below) belie a common problem when seeking to understand issues related to adult attendance at church-sponsored activities. The survey was designed to identify barriers to participation and those barriers were focused on the learners. While the data generated might prove interesting, it says nothing about motivation – the real factor that influences participation – and the data provide the sponsoring organization with very little that they are able to do to enhance participation. If people feel they are too busy and don't have time, how is the church supposed to mitigate that barrier without diluting their educational offerings? If people feel they wouldn't fit in, what would the church do to change that (if, in fact, the groups are already welcoming of all attendees...which is usually the case?) Can we really have enough Bible study opportunities to accommodate everyone's schedule?

The truth is, people make time to do those things that they prioritize – that has to do with motivation. Look at Barna's survey below and then read suggestions on the back of this page for how we might find out about the factors that will allow us to enhance motivation to participate.

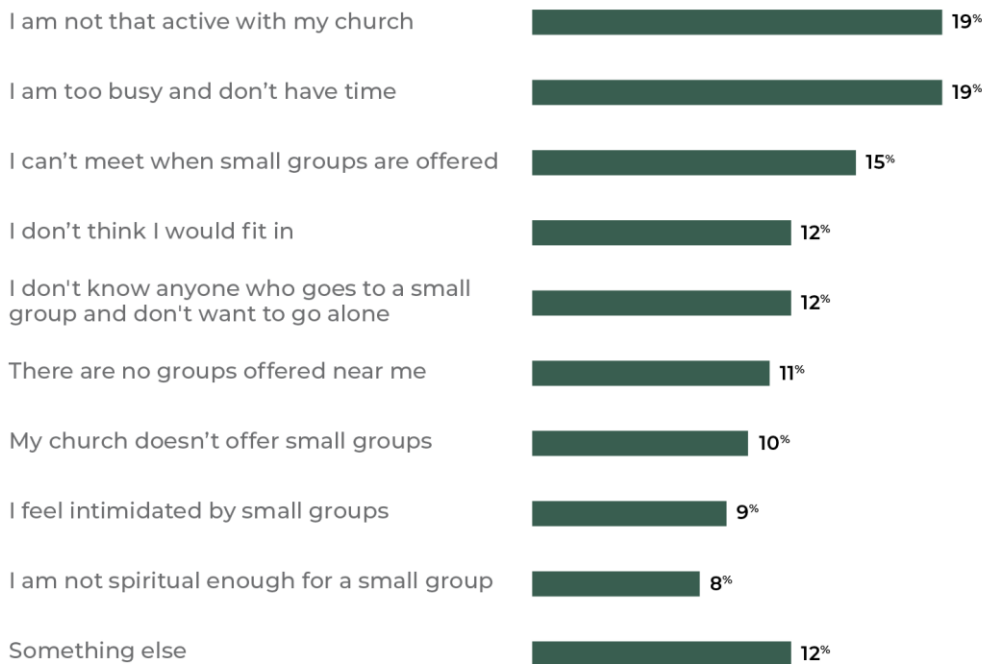
### STATE OF THE CHURCH



#### Top 10 Reasons Nonattendees Are Not in Small Groups

Using the list below, are any of the following reasons why you are not currently involved in a small group?

Base: churchgoers who do not attend a small group



n=791 U.S. churchgoing adults who do not attend a small group or Bible study, March 18–27, 2024. Only top 10 of 22 possible responses are shown.

What questions should we ask to make a determination about how to best attract adults to attend educational opportunities? How do we assess motivation? How do we assess those things that church leaders can do to enhance participation?

Because a church's educational ministries exist in an open system, we can rightly assume that the research and theories regarding adult attendance that we find in secular settings will apply also within the church. Houle's insights would tell us that the plurality of adults are goal-oriented learners, who seek out learning that results in achievement of those goals that are practical and immediately applicable (Knowles). Leaders need to assess their educational offerings to determine if they are designed to appeal to the goal-oriented learner...and the goal isn't just to attend.

Adult attendees also want to feel as if their participation results in actually learning something. This seems like an obvious priority, but church leaders often see participation as the outcome. For example, one of Wlodkowski's motivators to learn is "affect – a sense that one is progressing." Leaders should look at learning experiences to determine if there are opportunities for the learners to receive feedback that shows that they are building knowledge or specific skills. Making sure that all six of Wlodkowski's motivators are present at some level will motivate learners by helping them to feel real learning is taking place.

What questions should we ask? Imagine that you have the same opportunity as Barna – to survey people who do not attend any study opportunity. Here are some questions that could be asked that are based on what we know about adult motivation, and which provide information that leadership can use to modify what they are doing:

(using a scale – strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree, strongly disagree)

1. The church has made clear why I should attend adult study opportunities.
2. The classes being offered by the church are ones that fit my needs.
3. I have a clear understanding of how a disciple should do behave.
4. I have a clear understanding of what a disciple should know about the faith.
5. I feel as if I adequately prioritize my study of God's Word.

The degree to which respondents agree with these question will help educational leaders to determine what they should do to enhance participation. If respondents are lacking in clarity about the goals of the adult education opportunities, and how those goals align with their needs, the leadership must clarify the reason for the educational offerings and how they will help individuals to better live lives of discipleship. Much work should be done by the leadership to make certain that possible participants know the goals of the learning opportunities.

Ideally, those who are attendees can also receive a survey. That survey would ask about their learning experience. Did the course content help them to encourage them in their role as a disciple? Did they receive feedback that helped them to know if they were progressing? Did they have a say in the selection of course content? Were they encouraged to contribute during classes? Did they have adequate time to interact with other class members? Was the content appropriately challenging for them? Did the facilities used for the study accommodate adult learners (comfort, sound quality, set up to enhance discussion...)? All of these questions can assist planners in determining if they are doing what they need to do to increase motivation and reduce barriers.

Congregational leadership must make every effort to understand the "needs" and "wants" of the learners. They must articulate a rationale for attendance. They must clearly communicate the hoped-for outcomes of participation in a class and provide some opportunities for the learners to reflect on how they have changed as a result of the learning experience.