

Romans 16:1-20

¹I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ²so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. ³Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ⁴and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. ⁵Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹²Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

¹⁷I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.

¹⁸For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. ¹⁹For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil. ²⁰The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Mark 2:18-22

18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' ¹⁹Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'

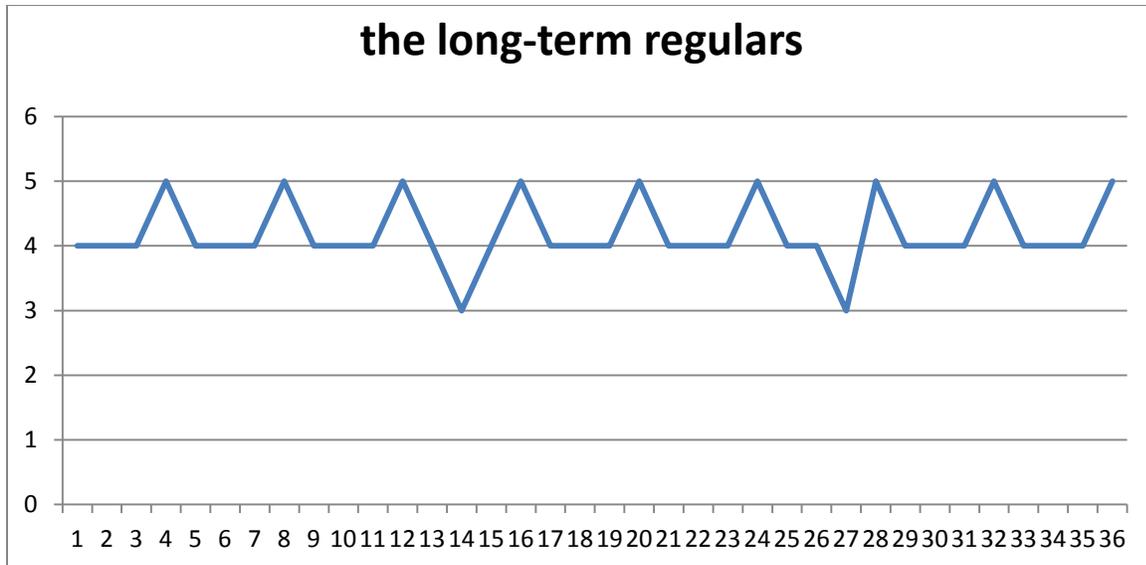
21 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins

“Who Are We Now?”

Today is the second Sunday in our worship series called “Living into God’s Future.” Last week we focused on the past, and I made the point that our past is never perfect, but those we honor from our past, like the soldiers we honor on Memorial Day, gave their lives for something greater, something they hoped would be realized in the future, and the best way we can honor them is by striving to realize the future they died for. Well today I want to focus on the present, particularly our present. Who is Bethel United Methodist Church, or if you are members of another church, who is THAT church at this moment in time? We need to know that in order to have a clear vision of our future. Today I want to focus on two words from this question “Who are we now?” WE, and NOW. From this message I want you to glean that the WE are those most engaged in ministry, and this message is directed mostly to those who are engaged. As far as the NOW is concerned, I want to emphasize that NOW means NOW. Last week we spoke of honoring those from our past, but we have to avoid glorifying our past because it ends up being a stumbling block toward visioning our future.

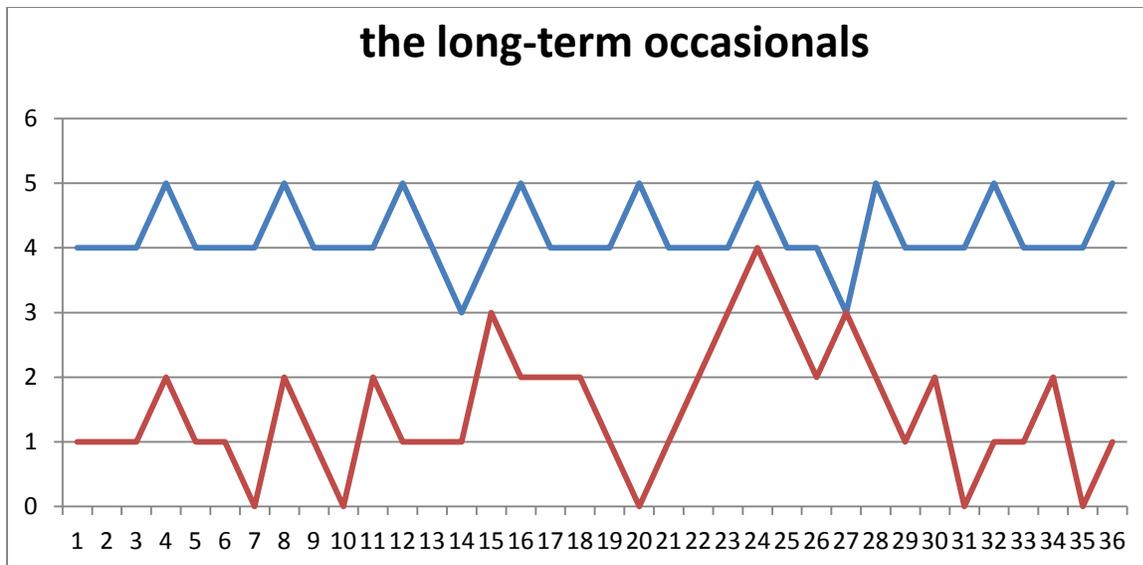
So to start out let’s look at the WE

And as I look out into the pews at who’s here, I realize that “who we are” is quite complex. I decided to make a series of graphs to show you how complicated that question is. Have a look:



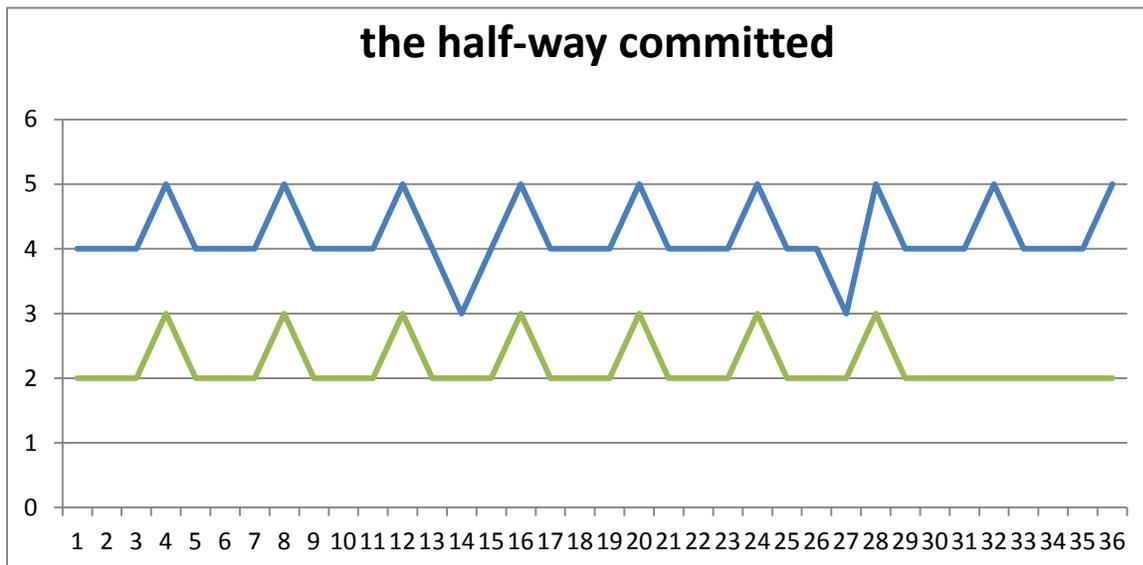
This first graph represents the folks who show up nearly every Sunday, and have done so year after year (the horizontal “x” axis represents months spanning three years, going up to 36; the vertical “y” axis is the number of weeks per month that a particular person comes to worship at Bethel – you see that every fourth month there is a spike, because every fourth month has five Sundays). So these folks almost always attend worship service, and because things are just simpler that way; you don’t have to make elaborate schedules to make sure the work gets done. People like the greeter, the welcomer, the Sunday School teachers, the altar stewards, the set up crew and the cleanup crew, and worship leaders. I’m going to leave their line up as I compare it to other groups for the sake of comparison, because it looks like a heartbeat, a little irregular, but what you would see from someone who is alive with a relatively healthy heart.

The next group...



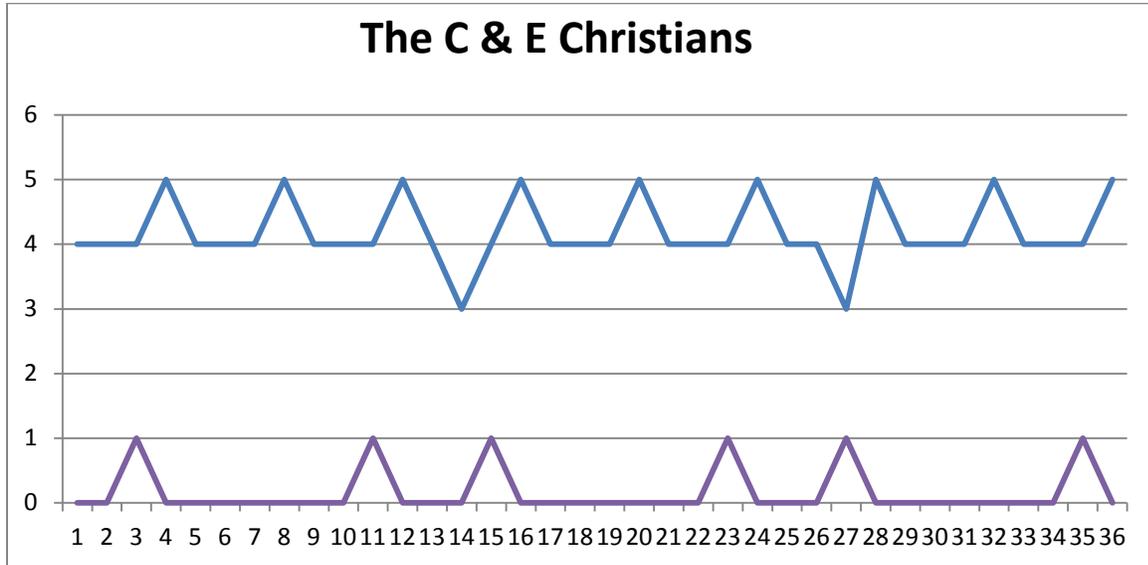
...are those who have been coming for a long time, but they come occasionally. They have a lot of stuff going on, but they try to come when they don't have other stuff going on. They can fully engage in *worship*, but for obvious reasons it's hard for them to really know everything that's going on in the church. They can keep up with sermons and announcements, but they don't share the communal worship and fellowship as consistently as the long-term committed folks do.

And then...

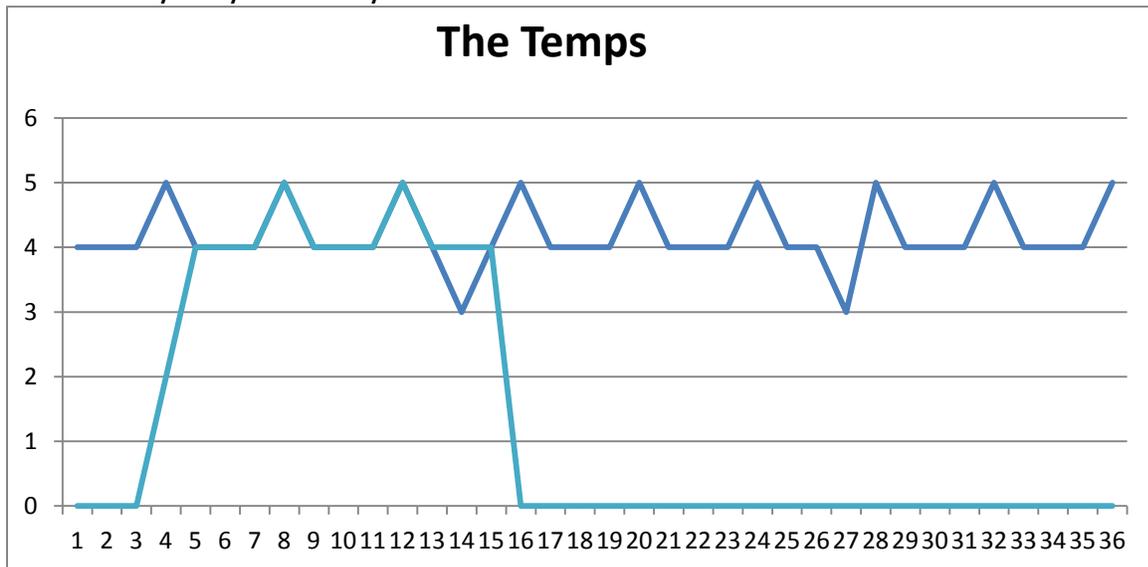


...you have the folks who come consistently, but only a set number of weeks per month. In a way they are like the long-term occasional, fully able to enjoy and

engage in worship, they may help count the offerings if they are consistent in the weeks that they attend, but they're not engaged in other facets of ministry.

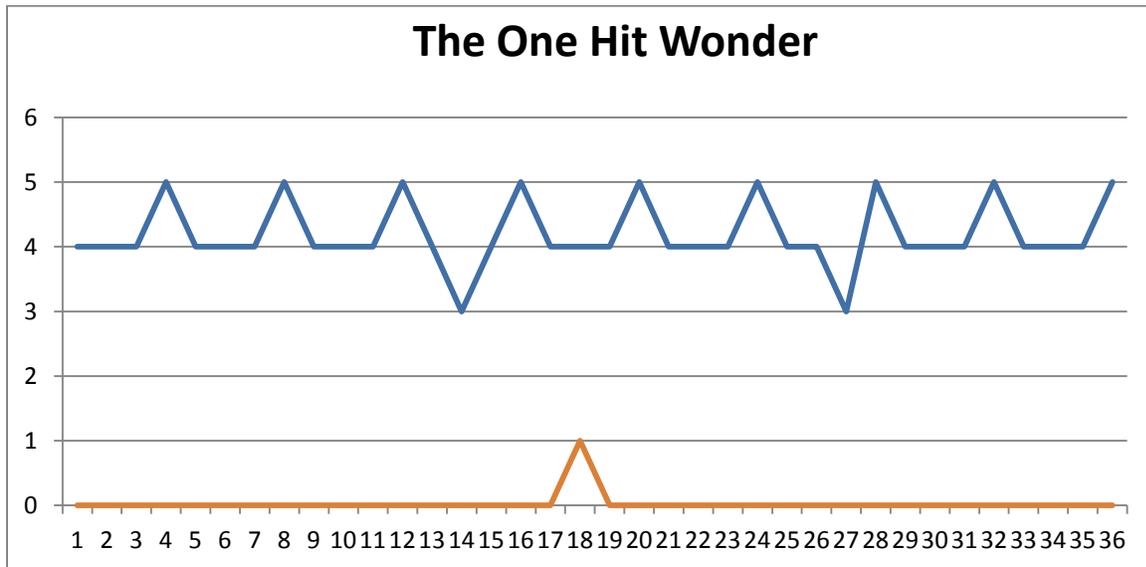


The Christmas & Easter Christians. It's nice to see them twice a year, but church for them is just a seasonal ritual. They are tangentially connected to the church and usually stay that way.

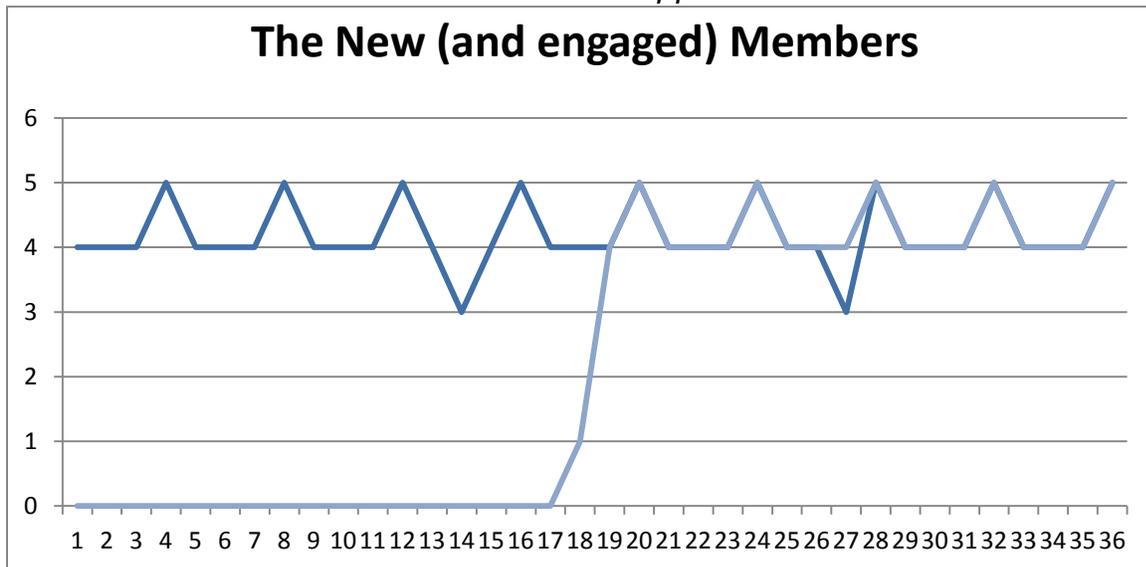


You also have the Temps, those who come and keep coming, and fully commit themselves to worship and even to ministry *for awhile*, maybe a year or more. But then something happens. Maybe they don't like something the pastor said to

them. Maybe they don't like something somebody else said to them. Maybe there's a conflict with someone in their church family, and they just stop coming.



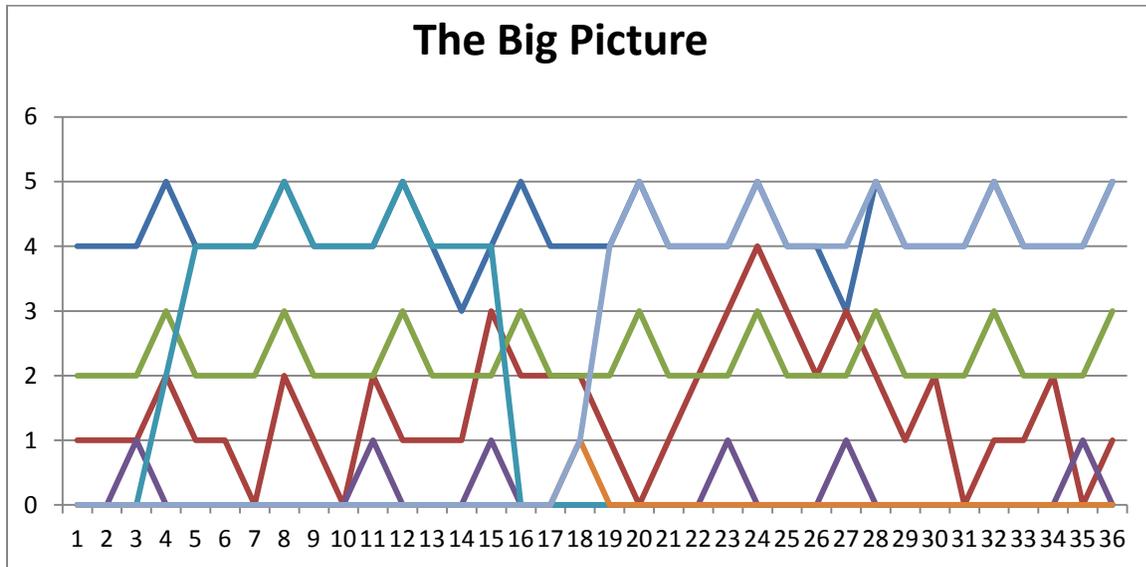
There are the folks who show up once, and don't show up ever again. It's like they took a wrong turn or something. Maybe they've just moved to the area and they're looking at different churches, and they did not decide to make Bethel their home...*how in the world could that happen?*



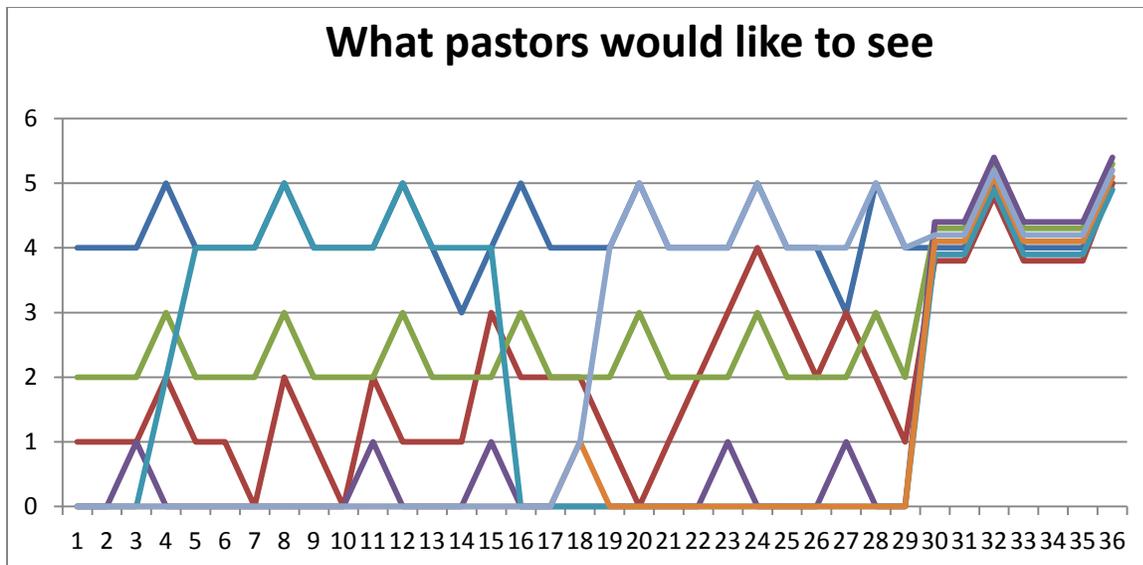
Finally there are the new, committed members, or committed affiliates – they don't join the church for whatever reason, but they come consistently and they get involved in ministry, and they get involved on other non-Sunday activities.

They may even join a committee, God help them. Sometimes these folks assimilate perfectly into the culture (yes, every church has a culture) that runs the church, steering away from points of conflict or tension, and finding a fulfilling way to serve God, serve the church, and get in sync with the mission of the church.

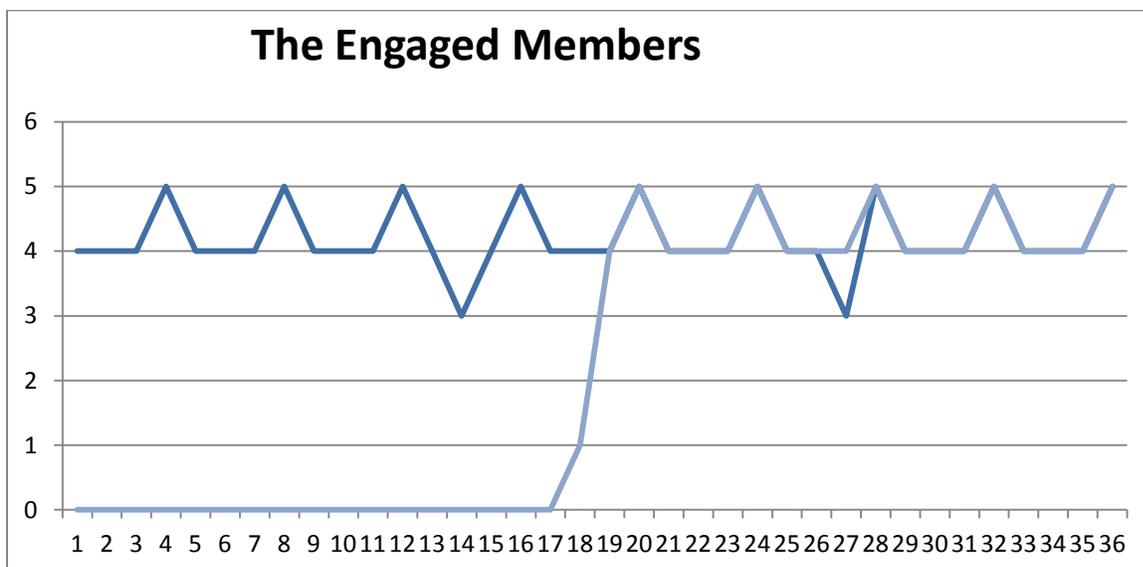
So when you look at these different types, this is what it looks like:



Okay, so you may be a combination of a few of these categories, but to simplify things, I've limited the categories graphed them so you can see why it's complicated to answer the question, "Who are we now?" it really changes from week to week. The ones that usually end up doing the most are the long-term committed and the newly committed, what I'll refer to as the high line, because of their consistency. In fact every pastor would love to have a congregation that looks like this: everyone on the high line week after week.



Because the more people you have consistently engaged, the easier it is to get things done. But the ones that are not on the high line haven't committed themselves to the church for whatever reason, good or bad. The point is not to judge them; it's just to point out the fact that they are not the ones best qualified to lead because they don't have a clear vision of who we are at the **present** time.



The reason I chose for our Epistle lesson this section of Paul's letter to the church in Rome is that we read the names of people who must have been the consistent members of the church in Rome. He knows folks by name. *Greet so-and-so, and so-and-so. Give them a holy kiss.* That's really beautiful. That's what happens

when people love each other, but these are the people he knows probably because he has seen more of them than he has of others – we don't know, but maybe the church in Rome was like our church, a mix of the regular, committed, and then the more sporadic attendees. If our District Superintendent came here every 3 months, unannounced, who would be the people that she would know by name? Who is the Bethel *family* that she would remember? I really like the comparison of a church to a family. The regulars are like the immediate family, mom and dad and sisters and brothers, maybe grandma and grandpa if their living with you. That is who we are.

Which leads to the next question: Who are we NOW? And here I primarily address those who are the regular attendees, though I want the less-than-regular attendees to pay attention because you may someday be a regular attendee either here or at another church, and I hope and pray that that is the case. Who are the regular attendees NOW in terms of their walk with Jesus Christ? Because *the regulars* are the poster children; they're the faces that people will associate with the church, and if they are NOT having a good walk with the Lord, they are not likely to attract the less-than-regulars to become regulars. Going back to Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul knows who these people are, though he might not call them by their first names. Paul warns, "Avoid those who cause dissention and offenses." He uses the same expression in other letters. Do you think there were people who came to church regularly, even served as leaders of the church who caused dissention and offenses? Yes. Do you think there people in churches today who attend regularly and lead groups and cause dissention and offenses? Yes. Leaders, it's imperative that you do not cause dissention and offenses, because if you are, you're really not a good leader. Do you weigh the words you speak to uplift others, or do you constantly insinuate that they're not as good previous leaders. Regarding visioning, are you putting down the church for not being what you think it should be, because if you are, you're putting down the people who ARE the church, and, to use Jesus' words from our Gospel lesson, you're trying to put new wine in old wineskins. Those who walk closely with the Lord accept the current reality, encourage others, and exercise patience and humility. And the true leaders of the church are those who think of others as more important than themselves. Those who selfishly defend their titles or try to revert the church to something it was in the past are the opposite of leaders; they are dictators. If you are a person who comes to this church regularly, if you are the head of a committee or team or council, the spotlight is upon you to be a

representative of Jesus Christ, because you are the ones who people recognize as the regulars, and you are the ones who have the best shot at inspiring others to become regular members. And please don't live in the past. Keep your mind on who we are NOW, and how we can live into God's future. We are different from what we used to be, and it's a waste of time and energy and spirit to keep dredging up the good old days. Besides that, if you keep dwelling in the glorious past, those who are present will be put off, because you seem more interested in other times and other people. Who we are NOW is what God has made us now, and a good leader will be one who sees the potential that WE have as a unique church.

Before we start planning our future, we need to know who we are; we need to assess our own commitment to this church, we need to recognize our own limitations as far as what we know about the church in its present state, and we need to be forward, not backward thinking, excited about the people who are here, encouraging and uplifting them, guiding them into a closer relationship with Christ, so that "they" will become the "we" who plan our future.

Who we are now is who the high line is now, and that high line, those core members have the greatest responsibility to lead by example. The better they do that, the healthier the church is in the here and now.