

Reflections on the Shared Journey –

In last week's *Reflections* article, I called attention to something I observed in our annual end-of-the-year report: a 5 year pattern of growth in worship attendance changed dramatically. Between 2002 and 2006, our attendance in worship increased each year. During the first four years, the attendance increased by 30 +. However, in 2007, our attendance in worship remained the same as 2006 – even though we gained 52 new members.

In attempting to understand that shift, I raised a series of 7 questions. The questions were an attempt to identify the factors that contributed to the lack of increase in worship attendance. Seven different possible factors were identified by the questions. By identifying the factors that produced the plateau, we can address those issues, thereby leading again to growth.

What I find interesting are the reactions to the article.

I frequently write the *Reflections* article for the newsletter. I rarely ever have a response to an article. Yet, this article has stirred a number of reactions. Some have been communicated to me personally while others have been reported to me.

Without exception, the reactions all focus on one question: Is this year's lack of growth in worship attendance an indication that I have reached the end of my effectiveness as your pastor or that I no longer address needs in my preaching?

Most responses have affirmed me and my ministry, thereby answering the question with an unqualified "NO!" I am grateful for those words of affirmation and encouragement.

Many of the responses also seek to analyze or interpret the question. Some see the question as an indication that I am discouraged. Others interpret the question as an indication that I want to leave. Some see the question as me being critical of the congregation's commitment to worship. Several responses viewed the question as inappropriate and disruptive.

While I am disappointed in the change in this growth pattern, I am not discouraged by it. SJA is a very resourceful, committed congregation. We have addressed numerous challenges in our 5 ½ years together – always with creativity, commitment, and generosity. As I said in last week's article, I am blessed to be the pastor of such a great congregation. This change of pattern is simply another challenge we will address with God's guidance and help. In doing so, we will grow – numerically, spiritually, relationally.

In the January meeting of the Council of Stewards, Don Collins – chair of SPR – announced that SPR had requested of the bishop that I be reappointed to SJA. He also reported that I too had requested reappointment to SJA. I look forward to continuing to walk together as *a community of grace committed to making disciples*. And I look forward to working together to answer the other six questions I raised in last week's *Reflections* article.

I'll see you Sunday in worship as we walk the Lenten journey together.

Grace and peace, Steve