

Sunday night services a fading tradition

by [Matt Vande Bunte](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

Doug DeVries describes Sunday evening worship as "a lot less formal" than the morning service at Plymouth Heights Christian Reformed Church. It's also a lot less crowded.

The Grand Rapids, Michigan, congregation is in step with a larger trend showing declining attendance at evening services in evangelical denominations that have long cherished a heritage of worshipping twice on Sunday. Some evening services have become more intimate; others have been canceled or replaced by an alternative.

"People are spending time with their family [on Sunday nights] or using that time to get together in small groups," said DeVries, the church's minister of music. "We were concerned that we were squandering resources to put the evening service together."

Plymouth Heights's 5 p.m. worship service continues, drawing about 25 percent of the people who attend the weekly Sunday morning service.

That mirrors data from other Christian Reformed churches on the basis of survey results presented to the church's 2010 synod. Research found that evening worship attendance is "plummeting," down from 56 percent of members in 1992 to 24 percent in 2007. The data "seem to suggest evening service attendance has become optional."

It's not just the CRC. Officials at the Assemblies of God reported a 6 percent drop in Sunday evening attendance—to 416,751—in 2009 even as the overall size of the denomination grew by 1.2 percent, to 2.86 million.

Some CRC members see the trend as harmless; others see a troublesome departure from Reformed Dutch tradition.

"Many churches are substituting evening worship and putting their energies into other things," said Jeff Meyer, pastor of Crosswinds Community Church, a four-year-old CRC congregation in Holland, Michigan, that, like many new churches, does not conduct evening worship. People looking into Christianity would find "a community-based expectation that you do this twice a Sunday . . . extraordinary."

At Roosevelt Park Community Church in Grand Rapids, attendance at Sunday evening services fell from as many as 175 people in the mid-1990s to about 40 when the service was discontinued five years ago, said pastor Reginald Smith.

Ending the service has enabled the church to put more energy into the morning service, children's programs and ministry during the week. The result has been a bigger focus on evangelism and relational ministries, Smith said. "The evening service was a wonderful thing back in its heyday, but it cannot continue to function in the same form that it has historically. For a lot of churches, that's really a harsh reality."

Others, including Ron Rienstra, who teaches at the Reformed Church in America-affiliated Western Theological Seminary, are concerned that Christians may be chipping away on the one day a week that God commanded to be set aside and kept holy.

"The two services are a way to frame the whole day as belonging to the Lord," Rienstra said. "The decline of Sunday evening worship is a marker alongside many that our culture is becoming more popularly secular. We've lost a sense of sacred time that is being offered back to God."

Some churches have dropped evening worship but offered an alternative. Grand Rapids's Eastern Avenue CRC now meets every other Sunday night for a half hour of worship, a half hour of eating and an hour of small-sized "covenant groups."

More than 200 people took part in the groups last year, a significant increase from evening attendance that "literally became a bit embarrassing," said church administrator Fred Sterenberg, who said the switch was "a pretty good tradeoff."

—RNS