

Statistics for Mission Report 2017

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Status of Paper	Final
Resolutions	51/1. The Council receives the report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key trends 2014/2017 • Reporting developments
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headline membership 188,000 as at 31 October 2016 • 3.5% year on year decline over the decade to 2016 • 100,000 membership and worship attendance loss in 12 years • Changing nature of Methodist community as membership numbers decline • New reporting tools and measures being developed to map these changes
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO 305 • <i>Statistics for Mission</i> (2014 Conference Report, agenda 2, pp. 351 – 383) • <i>Statistics for Mission Report 2014</i> (MC/14/57) • <i>Statistics for Mission Report 2015</i> (MC/16/15)
Consultations	Detailed statistical survey of all circuits and Local Churches via annual returns process; District Membership Secretaries; Strategic Research Team; Church of England Statistics Team; British and Irish National Church Statisticians (BINCS)

Summary of Impact

Wider Connexional	The information provided in the 2017 Statistics for Mission Report and the more detailed reporting available to all members of the Church online and through the Methodist webmap should impact on decision making and planning throughout the Church.
External (eg ecumenical)	Development of Methodist statistical collection and reporting takes place within the context of an emerging Church statistics research community involving principal ecumenical partners.

Statistics for Mission Report 2017

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper updates the Methodist Council on progress towards compilation of the triennial Statistics for Mission report due to be presented at this year's Methodist Conference. Although all data from the recently completed statistical returns has been gathered and analysis of the figures is well underway, it would be premature to report detailed results in advance of verification and reasonableness checks.
- 1.2 Two facts lend heightened interest to the publication of this year's triennial report. The first is that, as previously indicated in a report to the January 2016 meeting of the Council, headline membership numbers are now likely to have fallen below 200,000. The second is that, as these statistics are probed more deeply, questions are increasingly raised about their usefulness in relation to the process involved in collecting them.
- 1.3 This paper proceeds by:
 - Updating Statistics for Mission with key trends from the 2014 triennial Statistics for Mission report, especially in relation to membership numbers;
 - Putting these numbers in context;
 - Noting recent developments in statistical reporting;
 - Drawing out the implications for future reporting requirements.

2. Statistics for Mission – Key Trends 2014/2017

- 2.1 As at 31 October 2016, Methodist membership in Local Churches stood at 188,398. To this headline figure should be added 3,459 Methodist ministers, whose membership is held by the Conference, and 21 members on the Methodist Forces Board roll, making a total of 191,878. There were also 22,886 members of Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnerships holding membership other than from the Methodist church forming the partnership.
- 2.2 Membership was down 3.3% on the year before. It was down 9.7% across the triennium, representing an average annual decline of 3.6% over three years, or 6,780 in numerical terms.
- 2.3 The average number of weekly attendances at church services was 202,100 as measured by the "October count": this compares with 210,000 in 2015 and 224,500 in 2013. This represents an average annual decline of 3.4% over three years, or 7,500 in numerical terms.
- 2.4 The number of reported events and activities other than public worship continues to grow, although this may be as much due to Local Churches bringing more such activities to account than to real growth in numbers. Activity types range from faith exploration and discipleship to campaigning and support groups, fellowship meetings, foodbanks, community facilities, shops and cafes. There were 2.3% more reported activities than in 2015 and 9.7% more than in 2013. Aggregate participation in such activities would appear to be stabilising at around the equivalent of 490,000 to 500,000 attendances per week, taking into account the fact that many meetings and activities are held less than weekly (some are one-off or annual events, or courses than run for a set number of times).

3. Contextual Analysis

- 3.1 It was found useful in the 2014 triennial Statistics for Mission report to examine trends over a longer period than the three years since the last such report. Examined over a ten-year period, membership numbers were reported to have declined by an average of 3.7% annually from

2003 to 2013, but with a slight improvement in the rate of decline towards the end of the decade. This picture is broadly consistent with the 3.6% average annual decline in membership numbers for the triennium to 2016, noted above, and with the 3.5% average annual decline in membership numbers for the decade 2006 to 2016. Membership numbers have fallen by 100,000 in twelve years.

- 3.2 Attendances at public worship have fallen at a comparable rate: 3.4% annually over the decade 2006 to 2016, with a reduction of over 100,000 in twelve years. These figures confirm that long-term decline in Methodist numbers appears consistent when looked at in aggregate, but there are important qualifications that must be made, which will be rehearsed in the 2017 triennial report:
- a. Aggregate attendance and membership numbers look similar, and seem to move in the same direction and at the same rate, but at local level there are churches with high and growing attendance numbers relative to lower and declining membership (and sometimes vice versa);
 - b. This is compounded by differing ratios of reported attendances at non-public worship activities relative to attendances at public worship. Using basic weekly standardised estimates, there are around 2.5 attendances at activities and events other than church services to every attendance at public worship. Churches and circuits may have differing approaches as to how public worship and non-worship activities are balanced in the overall make-up both of the Methodist community and of individual discipleship.
 - c. Basic age profiling appears to suggest that membership and public worship attendance is heavily skewed towards an older demographic. For other events and activities, taken in aggregate, attendance distribution is bimodal, ie relatively large numbers of participants in their seventies *and* of younger participants of primary school age.
 - d. Methodist “decline” will not have proceeded at the same rate in respect of the numbers of residual Methodists as a proportion of the local population.

4. Developments in Methodist Reporting

- 4.1 More sophisticated tools are needed to capture both the broad demography of Methodist decline *and* the mixed and varied local picture. The most significant development is an upgrade to the advanced version of the Methodist webmap, which is planned for release in parallel with the 2017 triennial Statistics for Mission report. The webmap will combine geospatial data on British Methodism with local demographic and deprivation data, linking this to visual displays of statistical data at local church, circuit, district and connexional levels. Membership and attendance data will cover the period 2002 to date. The webmap will be populated with live data from the connexional database, enabling it to serve as a permanent resource for district policy and local mission action planning, as well as for connexionally sponsored or academic research.
- 4.2 The webmap has helped address important questions as to the nature of the Methodist community that is to be mapped. In particular, the number of local communities that are not formally constituted as Methodist churches but contribute to the mission and ministry of a Methodist circuit rather than one or more Local Churches. A new category of “Circuit Initiatives” has been approved for this purpose: these will be mapped alongside Local Churches when reporting contemporary Methodist circuits. Additional developments include generating “virtual” geographical boundaries for circuits (allowing for precision when calculating circuit population, area and demographic characteristics) and mapping multi-site Methodist churches across each of their several addresses, rather than just the “primary site”.

4.3 Alongside these new developments, some older measures of Methodist community have become obsolescent. The Community Roll, introduced in 1969, is now a meaningful reporting tool for only one third of Methodist churches, although for these it still serves a useful pastoral function. This means that it would be misleading to report an aggregate figure for Community Roll based on individual churches' returns.

5. Future Reporting Requirements

5.1 As membership numbers decline, care must be taken not to overload the Methodist reporting community with burdensome requests for data. The majority of those who fill in returns are volunteers or Methodist ministers. A change of emphasis may be needed from merely supplying the data to using it for local mission and ministry planning.

5.2 On the other hand, a church that is changing as well as declining needs additional tools to report the nature of that change as it unfolds, and to map a recognisably diverse Methodist community. This calls for finer and further probing than the traditional use of standard returns. The requirement is thus to "box clever"; streamlining existing systems while making these compatible with new ways of researching and evidence-collection.

5.3 A key need is for a facility that counts not just *numbers* of Methodists and Methodist communities but their *characteristics* (descriptive statistics). If resources were made available, this would allow the Strategic Research Team or other commissioned researchers to assist in areas of interest and concern identified by successive Council and Conference reports and in the ongoing work of the Connexional Team, for example:

- a. Ethnicity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) monitoring across the whole Methodist community, as well as identifying and reporting ethnically and culturally configured communities of Methodists at local level;
- b. Relationship between membership and attendance, based on individuals' frequency and attendance patterns, distance to church, relationship to the church community, reasons for participating;
- c. Refreshing the categories used for Methodist "church types", i.e. "City Centre", "Inner City", "Council Estate", "Suburban", "Small Town", "Village Rural", which were last self-reported by Methodist churches in 1984.

5.4 Some experimental work has been undertaken in collaboration with the Church of England Statistics Team in pioneering a survey app that could be trialled and rolled out on an individual circuit-by-circuit or sample basis to build up a composite picture of rich data over time.

***RESOLUTION

51/1. The Council receives the report.