

Local Church Statistics and Why They Matter

“What happens to the statistical reports we fill out each year? Does anybody actually use them? Does it make a difference if I simply “plug in” some figures that look good?”

These and other questions are directed to annual conference statisticians, district superintendents and the Department of Records and Statistics at GCFA when the **Local Church Reports to The Annual Conference, Tables 1, 2, and 3** are distributed to the local churches. These are good questions and the efforts of clergy and laity who take the time to fill out these forms are greatly appreciated! Data gathered on these forms provides important information we all need to enable ministry on a local church, annual conference and general Church level.

Paragraph 340.2c(2)(b) of the *Book of Discipline* states one of the administrative responsibilities of the pastor is “to give an account of their pastoral ministries to the charge and annual conference according to the prescribed forms.” This helps to assure accountability of the pastor to the local church and the annual conference. It is important for pastors to accurately and diligently monitor membership and financial information in the church. Answering the questions posed on the Tables 1, 2, and 3 allows for that. It is also the responsibility of the pastor to share these statistics with the local church leadership so together they can review the data and interpret the underlying meanings. Sometimes raw data can help a congregation assess the story they tell about themselves.

Once the statistics are reported to the annual conference, they are compiled, edited and checked for accuracy by the annual conference statistician. At the level of the annual conference, the statistics are an important tool. In many conferences the bishop and cabinet use the statistics to assist in the clergy appointment process. Another important use for the annual conference is to help identify local churches which are having extraordinary success in a certain area of ministry. For example, I called a conference statistician one year due to a disproportionately large figure in the UMYF membership of a local church. The statistician informed me the figure was accurate, the church having made a very deliberate commitment to its youth ministry. The reporting of that statistic shared an important story, one which could enable other churches to strengthen youth ministry.

New England conference statistician, Joy Mueller, summed it up well in her report to the conference in 2000 when she stated:

“Of course, the statistics do not tell the whole story – leadership, spiritual growth, economic situation, population increases and many other pieces make up the story of each local church. The statistics do, however, offer a perspective that can help local congregations see themselves as part of a bigger picture..... I hope that when you return home, you will see the statistical report as a tool to be used by leaders in the local church. Have you taken in new members and how are they connecting to the life of the church? Who isn't attending worship this year that was last year and do you know the reasons? Is your average pledge where you as a church feel it should be, given the economic situation in your congregation?..... Perhaps you want to connect with a church in your district or in your size category and find out what is happening differently for them..... I encourage you to use the numbers with the church's story to continue to learn *about* each other, to learn *from* each other, and to learn *with* each other.”

Why do local church statistics matter?

So a church gains or loses a few members from year to year... no big deal, right? But what if that church has doubled (or halved) in membership in the span of 40 years? Church statistics not only help answer the question of "How are we doing right now?" but also, "How are we doing in the long run?" A church's leadership can review this data to interpret underlying meanings and help the congregation assess the story being told.

Apart from a church's internal check-in, statistics provide information about the big picture and help researchers see trends, which in turn aid Church leaders in making decisions. For example, the number of Hispanic/Latino church members has gained more than 20,000 members in the past five years and is increasing at a rate of approximately 3% per year. This sort of information is integral when making a decision about languages used in church materials, for example. On a more local level, many bishops and annual conference cabinets use these statistics to assist in the clergy appointment process. Churches enjoying extraordinary success in a certain aspect of ministry, as well as those struggling in the same, can be identified.

In The United Methodist Church, the statistics are used by the general agencies for a variety of purposes:

- The General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) uses them to help annual conferences, districts, and local churches plan how to more effectively minister within their own communities. Church statistics are combined with demographic data by the office of research to help local churches analyze where there are new opportunities for outreach.
- The United Methodist Publishing House (UMPH) uses them to assist in planning resources and marketing. The statistics help to determine where resources are already being used and where there may be opportunities to provide new resources to local churches.
- The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (COSROW) and the General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) use the information to assist in monitoring and raising consciousness of gender and racial/ethnic inclusiveness in The United Methodist Church. Gender and Racial/Ethnic membership information provides a measure of progress toward the United Methodist Church's commitment toward becoming a fully inclusive denomination.

While it is recognized churches are about more than the number of persons attending worship or how many persons are baptized in a year, those numbers help bring attention to matters warranting concern or celebration. Sharing with each other the objective data numbers provide helps us to keep our connection vital.