

43. There is Room: Triennial Membership Returns 2019 - 2022

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Resolution	43/1. The Conference receives the Report.

- 1 Every three years the Connexional Team (hereafter “The Team”) is required to present a report on the membership returns of the Church to both the Presbyteral and Representative Sessions of the Conference (Standing Order 305). The Standing Order further indicates that Chairs and Superintendents shall provide any statistical information that is necessary for the business of the Team.
- 2 Over the last few years there has been a constant drive for the Team only to ask for information which it absolutely requires, recognising the pressures on the whole Connexion and not wishing for any returns to be seen as a burden. Work continues to ensure that what is being asked for in the various returns is pared back as much as it can, without us ceasing to have any real sense of ourselves through the data that we request and hold.
- 3 Whilst it has been the practice to present a Statistics for Mission report to the Conference every three years, the approach to reporting has changed so that it more closely meets the Standing Order requirement to report on ‘membership returns’. It also allows space to reflect on what changes in membership might mean for the church. It is anticipated that on-going reporting on membership returns will form part of the reporting of the Mission Committee.

Returns 2019-2022

- 4 The table below shows the returns received across the period from 2019-2022.

Membership & Attendance	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of Churches Submitted	4,159	4,058	3,406	3,332
Total Number of Churches	4,285	4,182	3,923	3,745
Reported Membership	169,321	164,084	131,689	131,839
of which are LEP members	29,310	27,844	22,967	22,263
Attendance	132,980	N/A	N/A	87,588
% Complete	97.1%	97.0%	86.8%	89.0%
Membership adjusted for missing data	174,451	169,098	151,678	148,180

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- 5 For the years 2020 and 2021 attendances were not recorded due to the lockdown with many societies meeting online for that time. The attendance figures for 2022 (as for 2019) do not include those who shared online in services.
- 6 At first reading the reported membership looks very different from the bottom line which has been adjusted to take account of the missing data in each year.
- 7 Despite the requirement for membership to be reported annually, the percentage of those not reporting has increased. This makes it difficult really to ascertain what the numbers are saying.
- 8 In order to add further meaning to them the line at the bottom of the table offers a picture of what might be the case if we were to assume that the churches for which no report has been made have membership in direct proportion to the churches for whom we do have data.
- 9 These numbers would indicate a 3,000 reduction between 2021 and 2022, which would be more typical of pre-pandemic trends. Such an extrapolation also implies a loss of 10,000 members during the pandemic (representing approx. 15% of our membership) which would match the narrative around the Connexion.

A smaller Church but God still evident

- 10 The decline in membership and attendance is not unexpected nor is it unique to Methodism within these islands, or to Christianity in the West generally.
- 11 However, despite the falling numbers, there is evidence that God is indeed still at work in and through the Methodist Church and its people. The faithfulness of God and God's people in the current reality is seen in pockets of growth in churches and Circuits, and in experimentation, with Methodist people and churches taking missional risks. That faithfulness is also evident where Trustees make hard decisions about the best use of property and resources and draw some presence to an end for this time.
- 12 Furthermore, every District has now taken up a commitment to New Places for New People, with 13 district-led new Christian communities already launched or in planning for launch, of which five are Church at the Margins projects. As more Districts and Circuits launch New Places for New People (NPNP), we anticipate seeing growth in the numbers of new people exploring Christian spirituality and community and making faith commitments.

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- 13 The Methodist Church in Britain is a Church that desires to grow and is taking strategic steps for long-term growth. Those strategic steps are based on the belief that growth is inseparable from inclusion, justice, and evangelism. In particular, the newly established Mission Committee, formed by the 2022 Methodist Conference, has worked to join up the different areas of mission (see Section M of the Methodist Council report 22 to the 2023 Conference), in particular the intersection of evangelism and justice via the Walking with Micah project (see report 12 to the 2023 Conference). This last year has also seen fresh attempts to bring innovation to a number of areas as evidenced by the new candidating processes and the new *Foundations for Mission and Ministry* course offered by Cliff College.
- 14 A church with a smaller membership is not necessarily a church with a lesser impact. Membership is one indicator of the impact of a church, but by no means the only nor always the most informative indicator. Another indicator of impact is the measure of engagement with mission projects. This last winter, more than one in ten Methodist Churches hosted Warm Welcome Spaces in service to their local communities in a cost of living crisis, proportionally more than any other denomination. These were spread across the Connexion, with more than 60% of Circuits hosting at least one space.
- 15 Considering the stewardship of resources is another way to measure impact. The increasing numbers of churches choosing to 'merge for mission' tell brave and encouraging stories about resurrection and new life. The funding for district-led and circuit-led NPNP projects to inspire Circuits and churches is another example of missional commitment and stewardship.

Encouraging membership and discipleship exploration

- 16 It remains the case that some people will want to explore spirituality, to serve their community, to find friendship and fellowship, and to be active in and committed to the Christian community, but not to become members of the Church. The Methodist Church will respect their journeys, welcome them wherever they are on those journeys, value them as they are, and invite them to play an active part in the life of the church. *A Methodist Way of Life* provides an accessible, experiential framework for both members and non-members to deepen their exploration and discipleship.
- 17 In existing churches and *New Places for New People*, the Methodist Church should still seek to convey the value and relevance of membership for a person's

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spiritual life and for the robustness of service and mission as a local church in a local community. The report, *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century*, reminds us that "Membership of the Methodist Church is primarily about growth in grace and holiness... It involves a choice and commitment to work at growing in grace and holiness in relation to a particular community of Methodist disciples."¹

- 18** All Christians are called to develop and deepen their faith through a rhythm of life which leads to meaningful faith commitments and an extension of the invitation to others to share in that rhythm. Enabling this to happen needs and helps to create a culture in the local church in which commitments to discipleship and membership are regularly communicated in an honest, normalised, consistent, and joyous way. This also provides clear and accessible pathways for exploring deeper discipleship commitments including membership, which are offered as a standard part of the church's life, and in turn provides opportunities for faith commitments including membership to be celebrated publicly and seriously. As these faith commitments form part of the church's liturgical and missional life, the testimony from those making commitments is centred, the rhythm of the life of faith is reinforced and faith is developed and deepened.

Opportunities to share good news stories

- 19** There is a number of ways in which we share the stories that highlight how communities are being supported by our engagement, thereby conveying our desire to be an inclusive, justice-seeking church.
- 20** Currently 75,000 people visit the Methodist website at least once a month, with 4000 visiting at least once a day. Our social media channels have more than 50,550 followers. In the last year there have been around 5.5m impressions (those who have been shown our content) on our social media channels and we have reached more than 4.63m people who have viewed our tweets and posts on these channels. This is a significant set of figures for a denomination our size.
- 21** In the past year we have seen a net increase of more than 2,500 followers on our social media channels. Our original videos have been viewed over 200,000 times with almost 150,000 engagements (people liking or commenting on material). On YouTube we have seen a net increase of almost 700 new subscribers and we have had over 162,000 video views on this channel (in addition to social media film views).

¹ Conference 2022, *Methodist Membership in the 21st Century* paragraph 2.4

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- 22** All of these numbers represent either the faithful discipleship of the people called Methodist today or the potential of a future group of people living a Methodist way of life.
- 23** One particular way we have had a huge impact recently is through the *There is Room* campaign which ran from Advent to Christmas. Central to this campaign was the provision to local churches of high-quality and easy to use resources which would point new and existing audiences to either faith exploration or a local church. Many liked the 'real-ness' of the theme and were able to connect the difficulties faced by those featured to events in their local context. Others talked of how the diverse range of resources enabled them to engage with different audiences.
- 24** Our social content including a 'hero' film reached more than 575,500 people with all social content reaching around 1.4m people. The video content was viewed more than 250,000 times and more than 181,000 free printed resources were distributed. The main video drove 5,660 clicks through to our website. There were over 19,000 visits to the *There is Room* resources page on the website. Again, all these engagements are a snapshot of the reach and the possibilities of how our message is being shared.
- 25** A further way in which we share good news stories is through *the connexion* magazine. The goal for *the connexion* is for a high quality discipleship and evangelism tool to be read by members and for copies to be shared with those who do not regularly attend a church but may be interested in hearing good news stories and reading about how the Methodist Church is working in their communities.

Conclusion

- 26** As stated earlier, our membership figures are not a surprise, nor need they be the whole story. Behind these numbers lies a wealth of stories of growth, of celebration, of community engagement, and of faithfulness to God.
- 27** However, these numbers signal we no longer have the people to populate our structures. We know that we cannot continue to do everything we did when these triennially reported numbers were significantly larger and that therefore we need to make pragmatic choices about the things that our ours to do. We know that we must work harder with partners in order for us all to have economies of scale where we can and to focus our energies and resources clearly and effectively on our priorities under Our Calling.

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- 28** There is room in our Church for real growth in our discipleship, in our commitment to justice, and in our desire to be inclusive. There is room in our work for people to hear the call to discipleship through us. There is room for us to continue to have a presence where God calls us to be and there is room for us to be excited by the possibilities that we are seeing behind the statistics we collect.

*****RESOLUTION**

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