

Statistics for Mission Report 2015

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Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Information, for use as a discussion starter
Draft Resolutions	15/1. The Council receives the report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	Methodist Statistics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights from latest (2014 – 15) annual returns round; • Ensuring their fitness for purpose as the church considers its commitment to “growth”
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methodist membership likely to fall to under 200,000 for the first time since 1819; • 80% of Local Churches not making new members; • Baptisms down almost 12% on previous year; • Need to review reporting measures and processes in the light of challenging circumstances; • Activities, Groups, Associations, Projects and Events (“AGAPE”) and “Fresh Expressions” now being brought to account; • Further initiatives in train in respect of Community Roll reporting, Ecumenical Church Census and district development planning
Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)	SO 305(2); SO 054(7),(8); SO 525(ii) <i>Statistics for Mission</i> (2014 Conference Report, Agenda 2, pp. 351 – 383)
Consultations	Detailed statistical survey of all Local Churches via annual returns process; District Membership Secretaries; Strategic Research Team

Summary of Impact

Wider Connexional	Relates to ongoing high-level engagement with discipleship growth/intentional evangelism
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, with Ecumenical Church Censuses being planned for both Scotland and England and Wales in 2016

Statistics for Mission Report 2015

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper presents the Methodist Council with headline figures from the 2014/2015 *Statistics for Mission* annual returns round. The headline figures and supporting material for each District, Circuit and Local Church were published on the Methodist Church website on 30 June 2015, eight months after the end of the statistical year to which they relate. This slightly delayed timescale reflects the effort required to check and clean incoming data so as to establish 2014/2015 as a solid basis for future years' analysis. Considerable care was taken where Local Churches had been closed or amalgamated, including establishing effective dates of closure.
- 1.2 SO 305(2) requires a statistical report on church membership to be made to the Methodist Conference every three years. The next such report is scheduled for 2017. However, in the period from 2014, when the last Conference report was delivered, there is an opportunity to follow up trends and analyses identified in the triennial report and, in the light of these, ensure that future reports give a true and fair view of British Methodism. This includes reviewing the range of statistical measures which, in recent triennial reports, have been used to set the membership figures in context.
- 1.3 This paper proceeds, therefore, to:
- Update Statistics for Mission with the key trends from 2014/2015, especially in relation to numbers of new members;
 - Draw out implications for the church's mission and ministry;
 - Report on developments in the reporting process; and
 - Link to other work within the Connexion and beyond.

2. Statistics for Mission – Key Trends 2014/2015

- 2.1 As at 31 October 2014, Methodist membership in Local Churches stood at 201,714. However, there were an additional 24,760 members of Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnerships holding membership other than from the Methodist church forming the partnership. There were also 3,539 Methodist ministers, whose membership is held by the Conference.
- 2.2 Membership was down 3.6% on the year before. There is every likelihood that, using the headline figure above, it will dip below 200,000 in the current statistical year 2015/2016. These sorts of numbers were last reported around 1819, when membership was growing at roughly the same rate as it is declining today.¹
- 2.3 There were 2,527 people received into membership during the course of the year compared with 5,962 member deaths, giving a deaths to new members ratio of 2.4 – slightly lower than the previous year's figure. Almost 80% of Local Churches (3,348 out of 4,254) did not receive any new members, and fewer than 5% (201 churches) received four or more new members in the course of the year – this latter group accounting for just over half of new members in total. As might be expected, churches receiving four or more new members tended to be larger, with

¹ Figures extrapolated from David Hempton *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Yale 2005), Appendix p. 214 ("Methodist Membership in Great Britain 1770 – 1920").

a median start-of-year membership of 92 compared with 29 for the generality of Methodist churches. There were 90 churches with a start-of-year membership of 100 or more which received between four and twenty-two new members during the course of the year.²

- 2.4 The number of under thirteens receiving baptism was 8,265 – down by 12% on the previous year’s figure, although the number of adults and older children receiving baptism rose from 686 to 708. As with new members, baptisms were unevenly distributed between Local Churches, with just 120 churches reporting twelve or more baptisms during the course of the year while accounting for well over a quarter of all baptisms. Just over half of all Local Churches (2,374 out of 4,650) reported no baptisms during the course of the year.
- 2.5 The average number of weekly attendances at church services were 219,700 as measured by the “October count”: this compares with 224,500 in October 2013. 75% of attendances were adults at Sunday services; 10% children and young people (under 20) at Sunday services; 10% adults at midweek services; and 5% children and young people at midweek services.
- 2.6 Reported attendances at events and activities other than public worship continued to grow, although this may be as much due to Local Churches bringing more of such activities to account than to real growth in numbers and frequency. There are now known to be over 538,000 weekly attendances at activities ranging from foodbanks to fellowship groups. Work is ongoing to analyse the information reported by churches to understand more fully the variety and reach of these various activities, and how they relate to mission and ministry.

3. Implications for Mission and Ministry

- 3.1 Implications for mission and ministry were debated at the 2014 Methodist Conference, following presentation of the last triennial statistical report. It was recognised that the numbers posed significant challenges that were likely to inform ongoing debate:
 - Continuing year-on-year decline in membership and attendance numbers, estimated at 3.7% annually over the decade to 2013;³
 - A response to this decline that identifies evangelism as “the main thing”⁴, and further encourages each Local Church to increase by one person a year;⁵
 - Growing interest in what other activities Local Churches are engaged in, and how these relate – positively or negatively – to mission and evangelism;
 - Developments in reporting non-member worship and fellowship groups, such as Methodist Fresh Expressions and language and/or ethically configured congregations;
 - A perception in some quarters that the statistical returns process as a whole has become over-burdensome, and a concern for economy in the data that is gathered from churches.
- 3.2 The specific challenge for *Statistics for Mission* is to ensure that the numbers reported reflect reality in a complex and changing environment where there is both a narrative of longstanding decline and a countervailing narrative of engagement and growth. It has long been recognised that as it stands the membership measure cannot by itself do justice to such an environment.

² Because of the complexities involved in reporting “membership” and “Methodist membership” in Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnerships, these are excluded from the analysis by Local Church noted in this paragraph.

³ Triennial Report to the 2014 Conference (Agenda Vol. 2/37, paras. 3.4, 3.10).

⁴ General Secretary’s Report to the 2014 Conference (Agenda Vol. 2/31, para. 48).

⁵ President’s Address to the 2015 Conference, Methodist Recorder 03/07/15, p. 7.

In recent years it has been set alongside other measures, such as attendance at church services, which must be evaluated together to give a composite and nuanced account of the church's mission and ministry. The process of improving and refining such measures is ongoing.

4. Developments in Methodist Reporting

- 4.1 The questions asked in the annual returns process are reviewed each year in the light of governance requirements, prior year results and user comments. The *Statistics for Mission* team are grateful to District Membership Secretaries, and to all involved in filing returns, for their interest and co-operation, as well as for the achievement of a 99% Local Churches return rate for 2014/2015.
- 4.2 Two significant developments have been incorporated into the 2015/2016 annual returns round, which opened on 1 September 2015:
- Following the decision of the Council (paper MC/15/49 "Recording Pioneering Fresh Expressions"), returns may be submitted not only from Local Churches but also from "Circuit Initiatives" where these are recognisable Christian communities which contribute to circuit life. "Circuit Initiatives" are constituted otherwise than as Methodist Societies and may not have a formal Methodist membership;
 - Reporting of Activities (other than public worship), Groups, Associations, Projects and Events (AGAPE) linked to Local Churches and Circuit Initiatives has been rationalised. AGAPE reporting aims at capturing information on all groups and activities associated with the church's mission and ministry that meet purposefully on a scheduled or regular basis.

5. Ongoing Work in the Connexion and Beyond

- 5.1 Together with the ongoing decline in membership numbers, these developments have raised broader questions about how Methodism is reported in a contemporary context, which are being worked through in a number of initiatives both within the Connexion and beyond.
- 5.2 Following a detailed survey of Community Roll numbers as part of the 2014 – 15 statistical returns round, results are being analysed to see what they say about this measure of reporting. Community Roll reporting was introduced in 1969 in an attempt to identify all those who, besides Methodist members, are recognisably "within the pastoral care of the Local Church".⁶ The intention was partly to ensure that lists of such people should be regularly scrutinised with a view to inviting some formally to consider taking up Methodist membership.⁷ The survey found that while the Community Roll identified a broader constituency than Methodist members, in many cases it failed to name such people or even say where they came from, and so only patchily achieved the aim of replenishing membership numbers through the process of invitation and acceptance. This has important implications for the present aim of growing Local Churches by at least one person a year, if this is seen as the normative way of going about such a task. In view of this, the *Statistics for Mission* team intends to take advice from the Faith and Order Committee and may report to the Council in due course on recommendations relating to reporting and membership growth.
- 5.3 There is little information on the age, gender and ethnicity of Methodist church members to qualify the supposition that there are predominantly white, female and over 60 majorities

⁶ SO 054(7).

⁷ SO 054(8); SO 525(ii)

which may not reflect the situation on the ground. This issue has been highlighted in recent work by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Monitoring Team. On the other hand, there are plans for ecumenical church censuses to be held both in Scotland and in England and Wales during the course of 2016 which would significantly fill out the picture, both of church members and of others attending or involved with the church. The *Statistics for Mission* team is working with denominational partners to determine whether and how the Methodist Church is involved.

- 5.4 Ethnic and Cultural Fellowship groups are another area where current measures of church life and activity may be failing fully to report the situation on the ground. Following the endorsement of a recent report by the Working Group on “Fellowship Groups”, there is agreement that such groups be regarded and reported as part of one Connexion-wide Methodist family rather than as separate or affiliate entities.
- 5.5 Some pioneering work with individual Districts is being carried out to assess whether statistical reporting might additionally be geared to help them in the tasks of development planning and circuit review. Enhancements to the format and functionality of the Methodist Webmap are being considered in this regard.

*****RESOLUTION**

- 15/1. The Council receives the report.**