



Protocols for Counting Worship Attendance

Counting attendance measures the health of a congregation. That's true, but often misunderstood. Some churches have come to think of the count as a measure of their worth. Even more troubling, many pastors seem to imagine it as a measure of their own individual worth. Both sorts of thinking stray far from the truth. Worship is one of the practices that we, as United Methodists, believe necessary to fully live out the relationship between God and individuals.

By counting attendance, pastors and laity may gain a glimpse at the collective growth of their congregations' relationship with God. Counting people, like counting the offering, should be joyful, a celebration and a thanksgiving for what God is doing in the lives of those who attend.

Given that, the Texas Annual Conference has decided to establish protocols for counting. We also encourage consistent application to Vital Signs weekly reporting, as well as additional measures developed by individual congregations. We hope that all congregations and pastors will take this and find it useful, even easy to accept and apply.

Who to count?

IN PERSON WORSHIP



(Line 7 in the Year End Report)
Count every single human being physically attending a primary worship service.

- Every human being includes children in attendance.
- Count all youth or children who are in children's worship service and include the persons who are in attendance. Also count all persons in attendance at youth and children's worship services.
- Primary worship services are those worship opportunities that happen regularly throughout the year, and are comprised of the normal components of worship: gathering (i.e. songs, prayers, and greeting), hearing God's Word (i.e. Scripture readings and sermon), responding to God's Word (i.e. offering, Holy Communion, creeds, altar calls) and sending forth (i.e. announcements of service opportunities, benedictions and blessings).

ONLINE VIEWERS



(Line 7^a in the Year End Report)

- Count those listening or viewing online (within one week of the broadcast) for whom the church has evidence of participation through an online check in process or through analytics. One connection equals one. Do not use a multiplier.
- **Software demonstrating that the person viewed the worship for more than 50 % of the service or longer.**
- *But, that means someone can go online and then make lunch.* Yes, but people in attendance can sit in the pew and balance their check book or make grocery lists too.
- *What if our analytic tool doesn't show the time viewed?* Even free tools do that, but really, let's just admit that this is an honor system.
- *Why just one week of the worship service?* Primary worship services occur weekly and it is a relevant measure to observe the presence in that week.

NURSERY WORKERS



(Line 7 in the Year End Report)

- Count nursery workers and children in the nursery if they are also listening to the audio feed or watching the video of worship.
- *But, the workers will just be distracted with the children.* Yes, and so are parents sitting with children in worship.
- *But, babies don't even understand.* You're right. Neither do they understand what God is doing through them in baptism, but we believe God's grace is big enough to overcome cognitive disconnects for those immersed in worship.

Who not to count?



People who aren't there.

- *What? That's obvious.* Yes, but we know some churches just add 5% to account for people who stepped out for the bathroom. Seriously? Five percent don't go to the restroom all at once, even if you serve free Starbucks.
- See the section on "When to Count," for more.
- Worship attendance data is less than helpful when it's been fabricated. This can be especially traumatic when pastors move, and new pastors develop expectations based on reported data.



People, of any age, who attend special worship services or non-worship events.

- Remember the definition of "primary worship service." The service must be regularly occurring throughout the year and consist of the four main parts of worship.
What about Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Christmas Eve? Those are certainly worship opportunities, but they aren't throughout the year. They are "special services."
- *What about Christmas Eve?* Look. We get it. High Holy days are really important worship opportunities. And, we can even understand counting Christmas Eve, but if you do that, you need to increase the number of weeks by which you divide to get the average. That said, ask yourself, does a big service on Christmas Eve or rolling Maundy Thursday into Easter Sunday attendance give anyone an accurate picture of the worship attendance in that local congregation? In fact, we have all complained at one time or another about C&E Christians. The most honest approach to counting probably has you exclude any Holy day that doesn't occur on a Sunday (or during a regularly scheduled service).
- *We have a fellowship dinner on Wednesday night and a program for the kids. Shouldn't we count that?* Probably not. Meals might be holy, but they aren't necessarily worship services.
- *We lead worship in a nursing home every week, does that count?* If you do it every week and you have all four parts of worship, then that sounds like a primary service to us.
- *We have Wednesday night worship for those who work on Sundays, how about that?* Again, if it's regularly conducted throughout the year, that sounds like it should be counted.

When to count?

- During primary worship services, we think it's best to count right as the sermon begins. That will give you the best sense of who's really in attendance. Counting too early will almost certainly mean missing some folks who exit early. Counting at the end will miss those who pursue the Baptists and the Buffet. The majority of people get settled and are present for the sermon. That seems like a good time.
- For online worship, we recommend using a time analytic or having people somehow "check in." The standard is for the participant to be connected for more than 50% of the service and that we only count those who view or listen to the service in that week. For consistency sake, it is best to count online connections and not use a multiplier. If a multiplier is employed, we will apply it conference wide, but request that local churches use one connection for more than 50% of the worship service equals one.
- *What about in person church being but on pause because of the pandemic?* If your church cannot host in person worship for any reason (pandemic, weather, etc.) then reduce the number of weeks that you will divide by in order to obtain your average.

If you have any questions about these guidelines, please contact your District Superintendent.