



Statistics for Mission

An introduction for parishes

Written by:

Rev. Jason Kennedy

Diocesan Missioner

Diocese of Derby

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Introduction

Each year the diocese asks all churches to provide a range of statistics about the church community and its attendance patterns. This is called *Statistics for Mission*.

The data collection is a national exercise, carried out each year by the Research and Statistics Division of the Church of England, based in London. However, the work of collecting the data falls to the individual churches and to the dioceses.

It's right, therefore, that you should know what is being collected and why, how the data is used and how we can make them as accurate and complete as possible. That way, they will provide the maximum benefit to the mission and ministry of your church, and that of the wider Church.

The value of statistics

It's tempting to see the Statistics for Mission collection as a bureaucratic exercise, and therefore conclude that the information doesn't really make a difference. However, good statistics are a powerful weapon in the mission and ministry armoury of the Church.

Statistics in the local church

Statistics provide valuable insights into the church and its community. They can help us to be strategic, focusing on the mission and ministry to which God is calling us, instead of trying to work in areas that are not fruitful. Statistics can also be great for confirming or disproving things we *think* we know. They can show that the common myths that might hold us back actually have no basis in fact, or that we can have confidence in the reasons we have for pursuing a particular path.

In the diocese

The diocese uses the statistics to help direct resources. We can't do everything everywhere and it would be wasteful to try. The resources we have are precious and need to be used wisely.

National trends

*Anecdote to Evidence*¹, the national survey on church growth published by the Church Commissioners, has highlighted the power of good statistics based research. The report has confirmed and supported some important information about the critical nature of work with young people and fresh expressions, as well as exploding some deeply held but erroneous assumptions about the causes of church growth and decline.

¹ *Anecdote to Evidence*, Copyright © 2014 The Church Commissioners for England. See <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report>.

Pastoral care

Of course, gathering this information isn't just about raw data.

We may complain about having to record 'joiners' and 'leavers' each year. But if we don't know who has joined, how can we offer them Christ's welcome and full integration into His body, the Church? If we don't know who has left, how can we stop people from drifting away, apparently unnoticed and unloved, with no attempt to follow up?

Above all, we ever hold before us that the numbers we deal with are not mere numbers. They represent real people, with all their stories of joy, hurt, beauty and brokenness, who are loved by God and whom we are called to love and serve in His name.

Handling statistics with care

We know that statistics aren't the be all and end all. We belong to the Church of Jesus Christ, not the Church of Statistics!

If we use them inappropriately, or rely solely on what they say without comparing their findings with what we have seen in the Church, statistics can be misleading and dangerous. Inaccurate, incomplete and poorly interpreted data lead to poor and incorrect conclusions. Caution is required!

Growth as a sign of health

The collection of church attendance can give the impression that all we care about is the number we put in the registers at the end of a service.

Of course, the Kingdom of God is about so much more than church attendance. God is interested in the growth in faith of His people and our sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ, in our worship and common life together and in our love for His world as we share in His work of the transformation of lives and communities.

But for the Church of God to be active in all these things, it needs to be a healthy Church – and one of the signs of a healthy church is growth.

God's mission is to see His Kingdom grow on earth. He gives that growth, but He has chosen to do that through a healthy, faithful, local Church (Acts 2:44-47). So as the Church grows, so does the Kingdom of God. The New Testament everywhere sees growth as the natural state of the Church.

It's sometimes hard to measure the health of a church. However, one way is to see whether *health* is producing *growth*. We measure children in the same way – we are concerned if they stop growing before they should. We certainly would become concerned if they started to shrink.

So, we measure the growth of the local church because it tells us about the health of the church, and because it is through a healthy, growing church that God has chosen to grow His Kingdom on earth.

No growth doesn't always mean poor health

Statistics could be used to apportion blame for churches that are not growing, to put pressure on churches and their leaders or to compare one church with another. Doing so, however, is destructive and unproductive. There may be many reasons why churches aren't growing.

1. *There may be special circumstances or difficulties.* There may have been a particular pastoral concern in the church, or an event in the community that will impact on the church.
2. *There are seasons in the life of the church.* Sometimes, in order to grow numerically, the church may need to focus on growth in another aspect – for example, building relationships or deepening her spiritual life.
3. *There is almost always a delay between enabling growth and seeing that growth happen.* Several years of faithful work may be needed by the church before the fruit of that work is seen, suddenly producing an abundance of growth (perhaps after one leader has left and another has arrived!) Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 3:6.
4. *Churches often grow in 'spurts'.* There may well be an optimum size for a church (as there is for an individual animal reaching maturity) – after which growth comes by planting another church. There are also 'ceilings' at which churches need to change structurally before they can grow further.

It's dangerous to demand constant growth in the local church, or to seek only those strategies that provide immediate growth in numbers, labelling the Church or her mission as ineffective if that short term growth isn't seen.

Overall, we would expect the Church of God to grow. So, it follows that at whatever level, if we are not seeing growth, it is always worth asking, 'Why?' and ensuring that we are doing all we can to enable God's growth in His church.

About the statistics

We have seen that collecting statistics is a good idea, even if we need to be careful about how they're used and interpreted. But why collect so many? Is it all absolutely necessary?

Each different statistic can give us specific information about the local church. Here's a summary of the types of information that are collected why each one is needed.

Electoral Roll

The electoral roll measures the number of people who consider themselves members of the church. It's not as useful as it once was, as 'membership' is becoming less meaningful in a culture that values organisations less and relationships more, and in which people no longer wish to 'join'.

Some people are fully committed to a church community but don't want to be on a 'register'. Others join the register simply to have their child baptised or a wedding in a particular church.

However, the electoral roll still has value. It's a statistic that's been collected in the same way for a long time. This means we can look at long term trends in church membership – even over decades. Until we build up enough data in other more recent statistics, it's important to keep collecting it.

Usual Sunday Attendance

USA is different to the electoral roll because it measures an average of the number of people who come to all the services in any one Sunday (or the day the church normally gathers for worship, if it isn't Sunday). It's about those who are active in worship together, not just those on a register.

USA smooths out the peaks and troughs of attendance to give an average figure. Unlike the electoral roll, it also looks at the attendance by under 16s, which is a critical area for church growth. Experience tells us that the older a person is, the less open they are to becoming a Christian.

Although it has not been collected for as long as the electoral roll, USA has been collected for a while, so we can look at more recent trends. It's one major drawback is that it doesn't consider midweek attendance, which accounts for more and more of church attendance.

Festivals (Advent, Christmas and Easter)

Knowing how many people attend a church at festivals can help us plan for those festivals in the future. When are we making most contact with the community? Can we learn from those festivals that are better attended? Where are the best opportunities in festivals?

October Count

The October count is a detailed snapshot at the same time every year, rather than an average. It looks at a range of figures at a level that would be impractical all the time, so it's very helpful to see a breakdown of ages and types of attendance year on year. It's been described as, 'Springwatch for Churches' (except we do ours in the Autumn)!

Worshipping Community

These figures are a relatively new addition to the statistics collection. They are designed to give an accurate picture of the *total number* of people who are active worshippers in a particular church, across all types and times of congregation.

As worship is increasingly happening midweek and not just Sunday, and in a variety of contexts, this is an increasingly important figure to collect accurately. It will be several years before we can look at trends here, but accuracy now is vital if we're going to do that in the future.

Joiners and Leavers

In support of the worshipping community statistics, these statistics show how many people join or leave that community through the year. They are important because just the total number can hide a great deal of 'turnover' – it may be that many people are joining but lots of people are leaving too.

For example, seeing a steady ‘worshipping community’ figure may be hiding an encouraging number of new people coming into church that is being offset by a large number leaving because integration into the worshipping community isn’t happening as well as it might.

Fresh Expressions

Fresh Expressions are a crucial part of our Church and a central part of our common life together. They are one of the largest growth areas in the Church of England today – they account for a worshipping community together that’s about the size of two small dioceses! They are also at the heart of our vision as a Diocese. We’re still discovering more about this important form of church, so collecting information on it is vital.

Occasional Offices

Occasional offices, as well as showing love and service in our community, present tremendous opportunities for us to build relationships with people who otherwise may not come to church. These figures can give local churches information about what opportunities exist with which occasional offices and how existing work is influencing them.

For example, if we see an increasing number of funerals, it might prompt us to put more resources into the pastoral care and provision for bereaved people.

Other Questions

Usually, the return will contain questions concerning a particular topic that might be relevant to a particular issue or current concern (for example, levels of community engagement). These data can be used to inform policy decisions and debates as well as help the local church.

Where does the data go?

Each year the Statistics for Mission data are collected through the online Parish Returns system, starting with the electoral roll and Easter figures in the spring and completing in the January of the following year. Your own figures are available for you to look at as soon as you enter them, along with historical data from your parish – but where else does the data go?

Checking for errors and anomalies

Although the online returns system does some basic error checking, we also check the data for any obvious anomalies (perhaps an unlikely jump or fall in a particular figure from last year, or data that’s missing), querying them with the parishes concerned. We then verify the data for each parish as being as complete and accurate as possible.

Return to the Research and Statistics Division

The data on the online Parish Returns system are then used by the Research and Statistics Division of the Church of England in London, along with the figures from other dioceses. The Research and Statistics Division spend time collating and analysing the data, publishing trends and findings nationally approximately nine months later.

Reporting and analysis

The diocese uses the data we collect from the online Parish Returns to assist the senior staff of the diocese. Senior staff, area deans, archdeacons and diocesan officers also have access to the data at the level appropriate to them to help support and resource churches effectively.

Confidentiality

Although the overall findings and conclusions coming out of the data may be published more widely, we don't release individual parish data to anyone outside the people mentioned above without the permission of that church. This discourages unhelpful 'league table' comparisons!

Completing the return

Data entry opens on the online Parish Returns system for the Electoral Roll and Easter figures in the spring of that year, so that data can be entered as soon as it's collected. The remainder of the statistics can then be entered from around October. Although data collection now happens online, an electronic copy of the latest Statistics for Mission form is available for download from the online Parish Returns system website homepage. It's sometimes helpful to have a printed copy of the form available as you collect your figures.

Churches have access to a wide range of reports and information for their church.

We ask that all the data entry is completed **by the end of January at the latest**, although the sooner parishes are able to complete their data entry the easier the verification process is.

Although the Parish Returns system contains very good guidance notes, you may feel that you need extra help. If that's the case, please don't hesitate to contact your deanery administrator.

The online forms can be daunting when you first see them, and there are lots of different figures to complete. However, there are some ways of making the task much more manageable and less scary.

Know who is responsible for completing the form

Like most matters in the parish, the overall responsibility for completing the information, along with the accuracy of the data, *lies with the incumbent*. However, he or she may (and often does) delegate the task of collating the information and completing the form to one or both churchwardens, or to another person or group of people in the church.

Whoever does it, it's important that the task is agreed and that they have the time and support they need to complete the task well and on time.

Start at the beginning of the year

Although online data entry doesn't begin until the spring, it's reasonable to assume you'll be collecting the same data as last year. Any changes to this are communicated to churches in good time. This means you don't need to wait before collecting the information. It's a good idea to start collecting the data you need at the start of the year. This has several advantages:

- It saves hunting through registers later and avoids the resulting guesswork and missing data
- It means that you don't have to do everything in just a few weeks
- It means that the diocese is likely to receive the data sooner

Have a clear process

Understanding what needs to be collected, and working out exactly how you are going to collect the information in a way that works well for your church, right at the beginning of the year will help you to obtain the information as quickly and easily as possible.

Spread the load

In large churches, or churches that have a large number of services, why not use existing teams to collect a proportion of the data each? Perhaps each warden or assistant warden can be given the task of counting in a particular section of the church, or the youth and children's team can be given the task of counting the children and young people. If you have small group leaders or a pastoral team, they could meet regularly through the year to consider who is new in the church (joiners) and who hasn't been seen for a while (leavers).

Use the support and tools available

On the Statistics for Mission web page on the diocesan website (you'll find it in the Mission section) you'll find this guide, along with a range of tools to make collecting the data easier. The tools come with the instructions you need to use them. If you can think of ways the existing tools could be improved or would like to comment on them, or you'd like to suggest an additional tool, there are links on the page to get in touch with us.

Use what you collect

Above all, try not to think of the Statistics for Mission data as *for the diocese*. These statistics are most useful in the place they are collected – in the local church! Think of the Statistics for Mission data as *for the church to aid with its mission and ministry*, but sent to the diocese.

Our joint commitment to statistics

Poor statistics means poor conclusions

If we collect inaccurate and incomplete stats, the result will mean at best wasting time, at worst focusing on the wrong areas. That's no good for anyone. So as a Parish Support Office in the diocese, we would like to offer our commitment, and ask for your commitment in return.

Our commitment to you

We will ensure that we don't...

- collect statistics we don't need
- release church-level data to anyone who doesn't need to see it to do their job
- use statistics to apportion blame or make inappropriate comparisons

We will ensure that we do...

- give you the support and help you need to collect and use the statistics well
- use the statistics you provide effectively
- report the statistics you provide appropriately

Your commitment to us

We would like to ask you to ensure that you...

- use your best effort to collect the most accurate and complete data that you're able to
- complete the statistics return each year by the 31st of January

Where to find more help

Deanery Administrator

Your deanery administrator is your first point of contact for any query regarding the Statistics for Mission returns. However, you can also contact the Parish Support Office (see below).

The website

For further help, you can visit the Statistics for Mission website at:

<http://www.derby.anglican.org/en/our-mission/statistics-for-mission.html>

Parish Support Officer

You can also contact the Parish Support Office with any query about Statistics for Mission. The contact person you need is below. Please don't struggle alone – we're here to help.

Jason Kennedy *Diocesan Missioner for the Diocese of Derby*

t 07539 483733

e jason.kennedy@derby.anglican.org

Postal address:

Derby Church House

Full Street

Derby

DE1 3DR