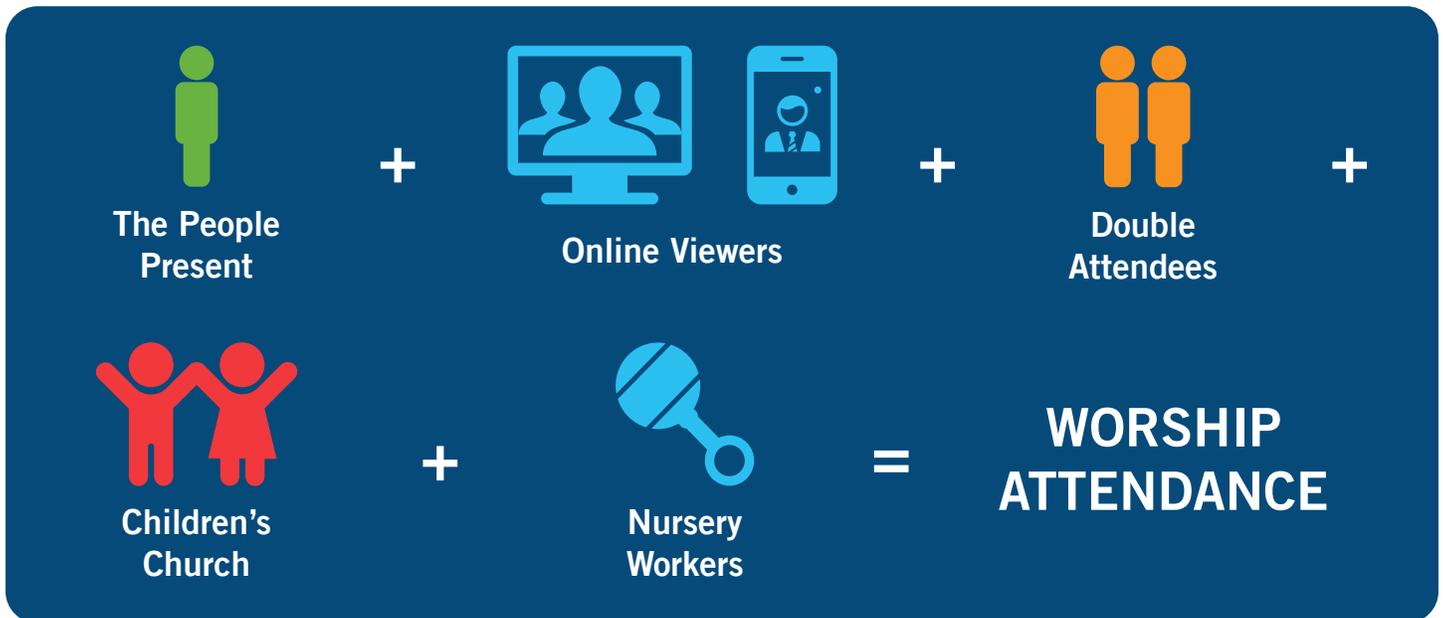




## ***PROTOCOLS FOR COUNTING WORSHIP ATTENDANCE***

Revised February 2023



Counting attendance in worship and other ministries 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. If relationship with God means "becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ," then worship serves as the primary ground on which a curious person, entering the congregation from any one of a number of entry points, may become a committed disciple. The other means of establishing and strengthening that relationship (prayer, small accountability groups, study of Scripture, works of mercy) are never enough without regular attendance at worship, hearing God's Word proclaimed and sharing in the Sacraments. 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 Missouri Annual Conference has decided to establish strongly suggested protocols for counting. Meant to be taken as helpful and in good humor, these protocols primarily apply to the end-of-year statistical reports required of every congregation. We also encourage additional measures developed by individual congregations. It's generally best if churches count every week, at least to the extent that it's possible. We hope that all congregations and pastors will take this and find it useful, even easy to accept and apply. We offer it while also affirming that consistency within each congregation is more important than consistency Conference-wide. We always prioritize the local congregation and place greater weight on developing useful measures in each local church than on the data we receive, though we do put those reports to use in appointment-making. At the same time, there are certain practices and methods of counting that, as a general rule, simply aren't helpful to anyone involved, including the pastor, congregation, Bishop and Cabinet. These are practices that significantly inflate or under-count and others that simply aren't based in the realities of a worshipping community.

***As the Bishop and Cabinet seek to match clergy with local congregations, we ask that, at the very least, local congregations who vary from this protocol remain consistent in what they do every week and provide the most honest assessment of the congregation's health as possible.***

And, in case you're wondering, yes, the Conference staff, Bishop and Cabinet all realize that the COVID-19 pandemic changed almost everything. Even in what seems to be emerging as a post-COVID world, little seems to be returning to exactly the state it was in before March 2020. That said a many things have returned. The pandemic made things so difficult that we ended reporting via Vital Signs. That service has returned, though it is one managed by district offices. We strongly encourage utilizing the same counting methods and practices for both Vital Signs and end-of-year statistics, but Vital Signs remains a process managed entirely by the district offices. Please refer any questions about Vital Signs to your district office staff.

We also sought to extend some grace to end-of-year statistics. Some of that grace will continue. But, as new rhythms emerge, we strongly encourage a return to the cadence of tracking worship attendance and participation in other ministries. If for no other reason, it will be helpful to evaluate where local churches stand in the new and emerging world.

We will always want our churches and our clergy to be mindful of the health of their congregations. Such mindfulness is simply part of ministry. But, the pandemic changed the way we worship, most notably in the rise of "online participation." We suspect most pastors have also recognized that the pandemic also changed the basic patterns people follow during their weeks. Given those seismic changes, we understand a need to change the way we measure effectiveness and even the way we think about ourselves as the Church. The most recent revisions to these protocols seek to begin envisioning the most effective practices related to counting attendance and using that attendance to evaluate congregational health.

## 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 come late. 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 again suggest using a time analytic or having people somehow "check in." Though we also suggest the use of the multiplier mentioned below. On the other hand, when you aren't using a check-in, you may find it necessary to discount your attendance a bit. We know of one congregation that uses Facebook views but only counts 7% of them. They used polling to determine that only 7% who view actually end up participating in the whole service. It's true that generating Facebook views isn't very hard. You may have been a church of 150 pre-pandemic, but now discover you have views of over 10,000. Much of that depends on the numbers of "friends" your followers have. If a social media savant with 2,000 friends, posts the Facebook Live recording, you may end up with an awful lot of views. But, be honest. Most of those simply saw it on their friend's post and didn't really watch the whole thing. Just be intentional in creating a standard.

**What if it snows?** OR, now that we've endured COVID precautions, what if the county issues a "stay-at-home" order and the Bishop instructs you to move worship online? If you didn't have worship or if it snows and you have a grossly lower attendance or canceled service, let's just set the rule: (a) don't take a count and (b) reduce the number of Sundays by which you are going to divide in order to obtain the average. That won't help your average if it happens on Palm Sunday (as it has before), but it won't devastate your average with a 0. Any kid in school knows that a 0 can really wreck an average.

## WHO TO COUNT?



### People Present

**Count every single human being physically attending a primary worship service.**

- Every human being includes children in attendance.
- 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).



### Children's Church

**Count any youth or children who are in a children's worship service. That's worship.**

- But, don't count them in both the regular worship service AND the children's worship, even if they started in one and left for the other.
- If they attend two full services, that's different, but  $\frac{1}{4}$  of time in one service and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of time in the rest is still only one worship opportunity.



### Online Viewers

**Count anyone listening online for whom the church has evidence of participation through an online check-in process or through analytic software demonstrating that the person viewed the worship for a significant portion of the length.**

- But, that means someone can go online and then make lunch. Yes, but people in attendance can sit in the pew and balance their checkbook 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. The question to ask is, "What demonstrates that someone is seeking to grow in discipleship?" If you can answer that question, then you can establish whatever criteria you'd like.

We recommend conservative and intentional approaches. Don't just count Facebook views, but allow for some grace. If you are having people "check-in" and feel as though you have attendees who just don't do that, feel free to add a multiplier. Again, just be reasonable. The General Board of Discipleship recommends a multiplier of 1.5 to 1.9 to those who have checked in, for such an instance.

- It may also be helpful to explicitly ask those watching online to "check-in" through whatever mechanism you're using in every single service. We can envision waiting until the sermon and the pastor simply stating that, "We'd ask anyone worshipping online to check in now." Churches might also explore which online participants are engaging the church in other ways (i.e. through regular giving or participation in small group studies).
- What isn't a reliable analytic? Facebook. Period. The number of "views" on Facebook includes anyone who scrolled past the post. Facebook views or reach don't equate 1:1 to people in worship. It may feel great to see 500 views, but that doesn't mean 500 people participated in worship. Reporting those only inflates numbers in unhelpful ways.

## WHO TO COUNT?



### Double Attendees

*Count individuals even if they attended an earlier primary worship service and end up counted twice.*

- But, that's just inflating numbers! You can certainly look at it that way, but isn't it possible to attend one service and connect through God in one part, only to attend a second and connect through a different part? Again, let's assume God can work through different times and media, even if we experience it more than once.
- Remember what worship attendance is about: Growing in discipleship.



### Those in the Nursery

*Count nursery workers and children in the nursery if they are also listening to the audio feed 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. There is a big exception to this rule. If you have a group worshipping primarily online and are attempting to have people "check-in," you may want to add a multiplier to account for those who just won't (i.e. they're too suspicious that the government may be watching) or don't know how (let's be honest, many of us are lucky to have gotten to the church's website, let alone completing a worship check-in). But, again, don't simply take the number of simple "views" from Facebook. It will assuredly be inflated. The multiplier is meant to be applied only to a number you are POSITIVE are actually engaged in the worship. For example, if you ask people to check in and get 15 people to do so, but then have three or six others that you know won't click the check-in but ARE regularly giving or participating in other ministries, it's O.K. to add in that extra 5% onto the 15.
- See the section on "When to Count" for more.
- Worship attendance data is less than helpful when it has been fabricated. This can be especially traumatic when pastors move, and new pastors develop expectations based on reported data. At the same time, it's equally unhelpful to impose restrictions that lead to "under-counting." This can happen when churches don't count kids or refuse to add in the group that watches the live stream together in a local nursing home with a church volunteer.

## WHO *NOT* TO COUNT?



### Minglers

*People who are present but in the donut area, Sunday School classrooms or hallways gossiping, including nursery workers when the audio isn't on in the room*

- Again, counting attendance is about measuring the health of a congregation's discipleship.
- If a congregation has a large number of people who don't actually participate in worship, and favor conversations or donuts, that would seem to say something about the discipleship health.
- We'd add those who worship online, but mute the sound, turn up their own music on a different device and work to pay their online bills. But, who can figure that out? A "check-in" would likely assist with that, but let's also be gracious with each other, while working to provide an honest assessment of congregational health.



### Special Events

*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 Maundy Thursday and Good Friday? 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 Christmas and Easter 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 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. The same goes for individuals living in nursing homes who watch a video or livestream with a volunteer from the local church every week.
- 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.
- We have a fellowship dinner on Wednesday night and a program for the kids. Shouldn't we count that? Meals might be holy, but they aren't necessarily worship services.