

# Conference Statistician's Report 2016

## OF THOSE METHODICAL METHODISTS ...

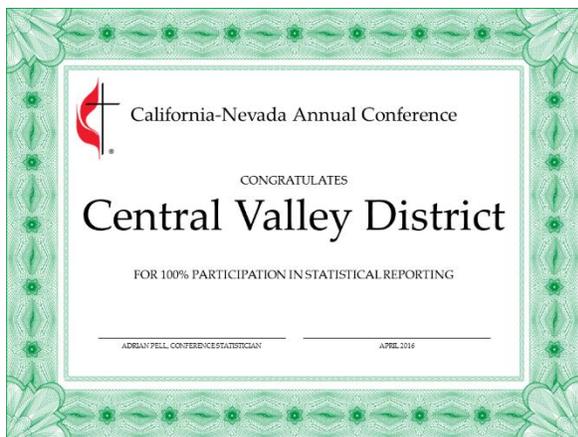
United Methodists are, as we all know, nothing if not methodical! We have processes for most things and we report on almost everything that moves, the requirements for most of which are embodied in our *Book of Discipline* ... which is doubtless a bit longer by the time you read this, as a result of actions of the 2016 General Conference!

Our statistics are the envy of many other denominations as well, and provide us with many insights into the operation of the church. George Santayana wrote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That might be said to be the motivation for the collection of our statistics. Let us try to learn from the past!

I would like to express my thanks to all the pastors, church secretaries, membership secretaries, treasurers and others in local churches who work to gather the information for the statistical reports. Your assistance is invaluable and will live on in statistical history!

In this report, I will present a summary of the 2015 statistics, and then focus on one particular trend over the past few years

## SUMMARY



At the time of writing this report, we are still missing information from 19 of our churches and fellowships – slightly fewer than last year. However, many of the reports came in well after the deadline – only 206 (of 363) were filed on time. This year, we did not send out paper mailings until late in the process as a cost-saving measure, and we will be working to optimize this process next year. I would encourage churches to submit on time if at all possible – it certainly makes my job much easier!

This year, special congratulations go to the Central Valley District and their superintendent Debra Brady for 100% reporting! This is the first time any district has achieved this during my tenure and, as far as I can tell, for quite some time.

Looking first at our membership records, we added 2,119 members during the year – 1,496 on profession or reaffirmation of faith (386 of which were confirmation), 201 on net transfer from other UM churches and 422 on net transfer from non-UM churches. All of these numbers (except confirmation) are greater than in 2014 which gives us hope for the future.

Overall, though, our conference membership continued to fall with 1,058 removed by death, 1,160 by charge conference action, 359 withdrawals, and 483 removed as a result of membership audits. At the end of 2015, conference membership stood at 73,287 – down 941 from last year's figure of 74,228.

Average worship attendance, based solely on reported numbers, was down from 31,134 to 29,829. When adjusted for non-reporting churches (using the most recent reported numbers), the decrease of 1,229 from 31,993 to 30,764 was slightly less. More on that shortly.

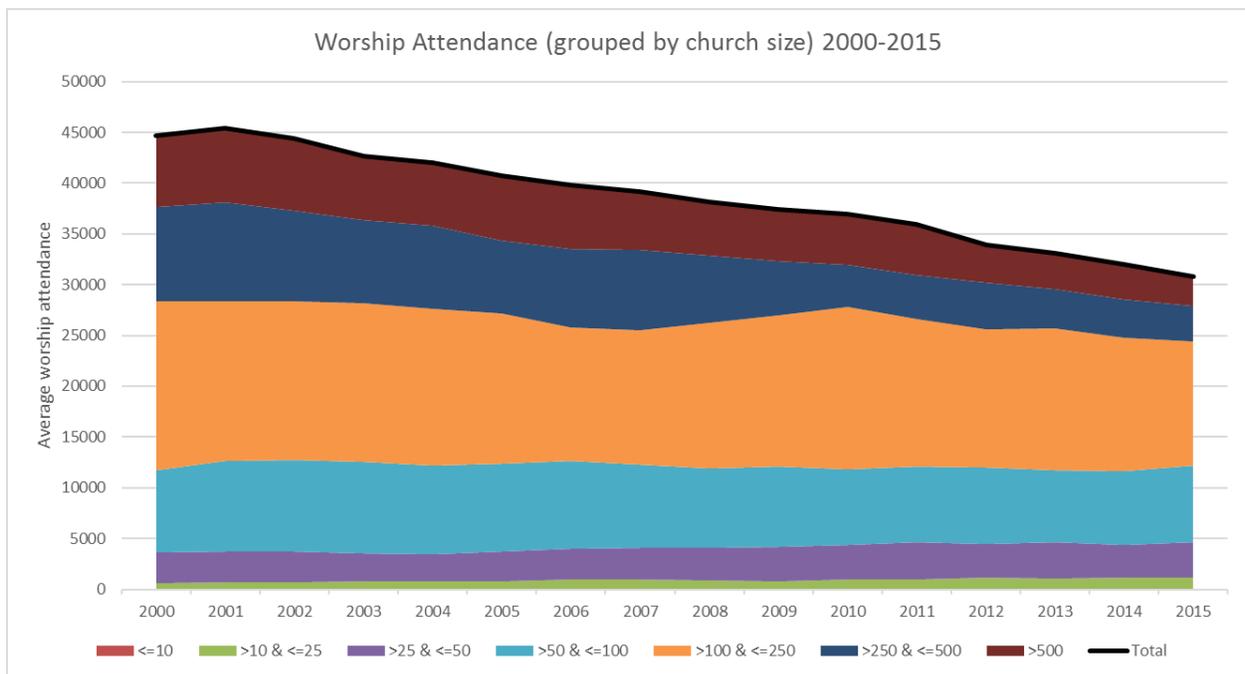
The detailed statistics which are found elsewhere in the Conference Journal include first-time reports for a number of New Church Starts in the conference. In future years, I hope to be able to look more closely at the early lives of these fellowships. It is worth noting that these new fellowships are not required to submit financial reports so are missing from Tables 2 and 3.

## AN HOUR ON SUNDAY

One of the more obvious metrics of the strength of a fellowship, and certainly one of the easiest to measure, is worship attendance. It is, arguably, a better vitality metric than membership. Different churches have different ways of assessing readiness for membership, as well as different methods for maintaining membership rolls – even within the processes laid down by the Book of Discipline.

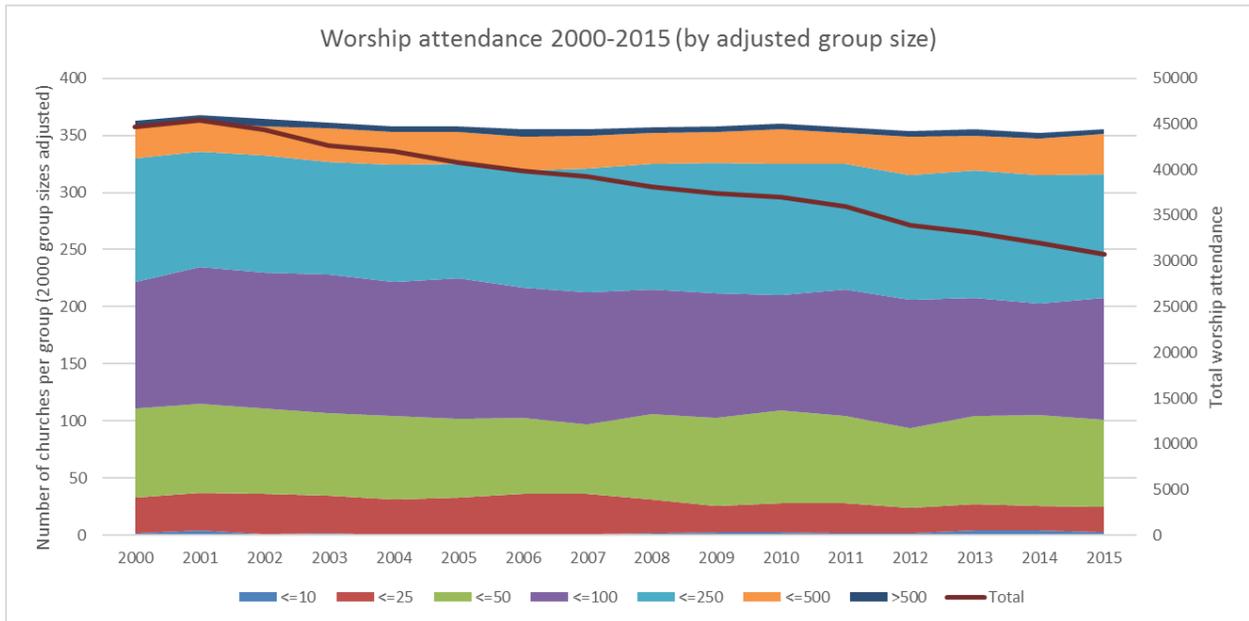
Of course, mere numbers can never record the whole story of the vitality of congregations but they are a contributory factor. It is, therefore, somewhat disturbing when reporting a fall in reported worship attendance, as I did earlier. It is more disturbing when looked at in the context of history. Since 2000, we have seen a fall in reported membership from 44,759 to 29,829 – almost exactly one third.

How has this been reflected across the churches in the conference? The first chart helps to visualize the size of our worshipping communities. In 2000, 16,317 people worshiped in 33 communities larger than 250 on Sunday – 36.5% of the total (44,679). By 2015, only 6,360 worshiped in 13 communities of that size – 20.6% of the total (30,764).



This probably shouldn't surprise us – a fall of one third in overall worship attendance is quite likely to affect all churches to some degree. So is this significant?

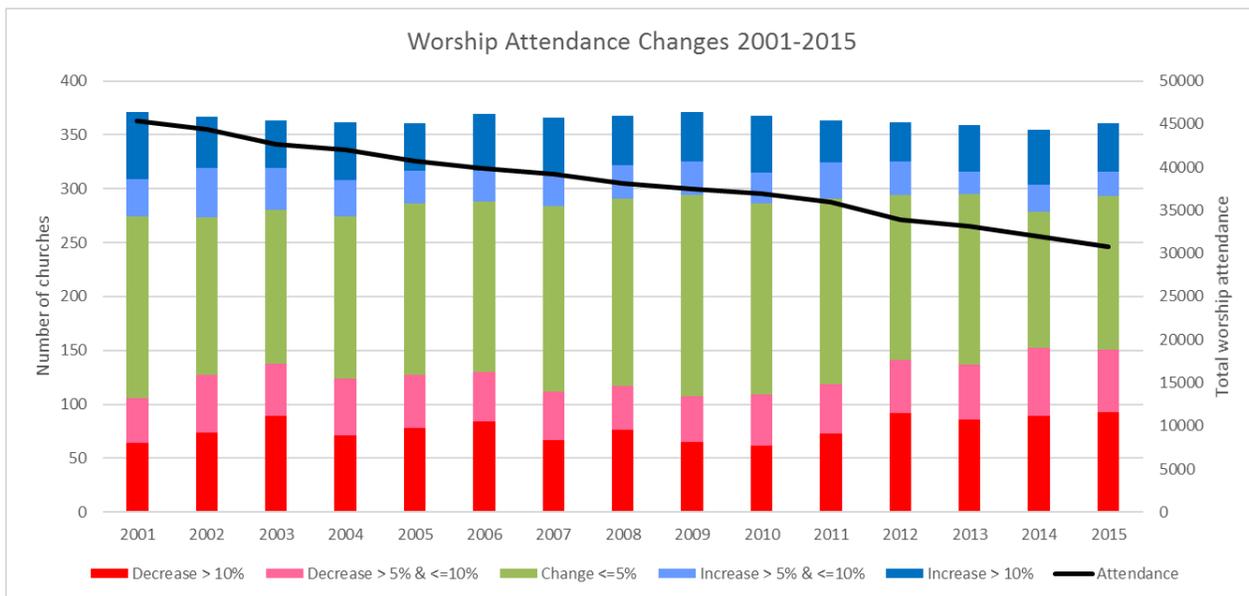
For comparison, let's look at that same data a different way. The following chart uses the same data, but evaluates the church size bands differently. For example, rather than the top band being churches with average attendance over 500, it is average attendance over 344 (reflecting the overall reduction in worship attendance). The chart shows the *number* of churches in the various bands.



Perhaps surprisingly, the pattern looks reasonably uniform across the whole period. In fact, using the adjusted bands, there are actually more churches with adjusted worship attendance greater than 250 (2000 value).

What does this tell us? Perhaps the most reasonable explanation here is that the fall in worship attendance has affected most churches in a similar manner. Of course, these are not strict comparisons – some churches that existed in 2000 have subsequently closed, and we have new churches now that didn't exist 15 years ago. There are also examples of churches with very significant growth over this period ... and the reverse. Nonetheless, it shows that one possible way to evaluate worship attendance in *your* church, as compared with the conference as a whole, might be to adjust numbers using the conference totals. I would be happy to work with any churches who would like to evaluate this further.

One might be tempted to view this as a somewhat depressing picture, but there are a number of bright spots. The following chart shows churches grouped by their percentage increase or decrease in worship attendance.



Although, in any given year, worship attendance in most churches varies by less than 5% up or down, there are exceptions. 68 of our 361 churches reported *increases* in worship attendance exceeding 5% in 2015 – less than the 97 in 2001, but still showing that growth is happening. Hallelujah!

## **UMDATA**

So, how does your church fit into this picture? There's now an easy way for you to explore past statistics. Check out the UMC's new online directory and statistics site, and let me know what aspects of *your* statistics you'd like to examine further.

<http://www.umdata.org>

## **MISSIONINSITE**

Don't forget that the Annual Conference has a subscription to the "MissionInsite" demographics tool. That means that it is available to all churches without charge! It's free and makes it very straightforward to generate a report of your local area by radius, zip code or some other area that you draw yourself! Check it out on the conference web site – you might be surprised what you find.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

I look forward to continuing to work with our local churches in the next few years. We have a long stream of statistical data stretching back many years. My hope is that, as your statistician, I can help churches to make use of this data. You may have questions about changes in your local church statistics, or about comparisons with similar-sized churches across the conference, or you might just be curious about some other trend which you have observed. I would welcome your calls or emails to discuss these topics further.

Finally, my thanks to Clare Powell and Diane Knudsen in the conference office for their assistance in gathering the statistics, to Cindy Buna and Jasmine Johnson for their persistence in encouraging churches to submit their statistics and to Bishop Brown and the Cabinet for their invaluable insights and advice throughout the year.

The detailed statistical tables can be found elsewhere in the Conference Journal and on the conference web site.

Don't forget, you can always find resources to help with your statistical analysis on the conference web site:

<http://www.cnumc.org/statistics>

I look forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming Annual Conference Session.

Respectfully submitted,

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