

Statistics for Mission triennial report 2017 – District discussions at the Conference

Initial reflections on the collated responses

Overall themes

- Most Districts were not surprised by the statistics (many were already engaging with them). Some found the figures a source of **hope and encouragement** – as well as ‘a **wake-up call.**’
- Many noted the limitations of the figures and the **breadth** of the mission of Methodist churches.
- Questions were asked on many occasions about the relationship between **membership and attendance** and the relevance of membership of the Methodist Church today. If it is relevant, how might this be communicated more effectively?
- In terms of what God might be saying to the Districts, and discerning a way forward, there was a clear focus on **mission, evangelism and making new disciples**. One District asked for a ‘connexional lead’ on evangelism. Many spoke about the possibility of employing an Evangelism Enabler – but some considered employing *evangelists*, perhaps suggesting a lack of confidence in the willingness/ability of most Methodists to talk of God.
- There was a focus on sharing good practice. In particular, Districts want to know **what is happening in the churches that are growing**.
- Many Districts struggled to comment on the way forward for the District that was not their own, due to a lack of information/experience/conversation. This helpfully raises the question of what information will need to be provided to peers from other Districts as part of the envisaged **peer review** process to enable them to make a valuable contribution.

Themes in the responses to individual questions

With regard to your own District...

Are the statistics for your District a surprise? Do they reflect your experience?

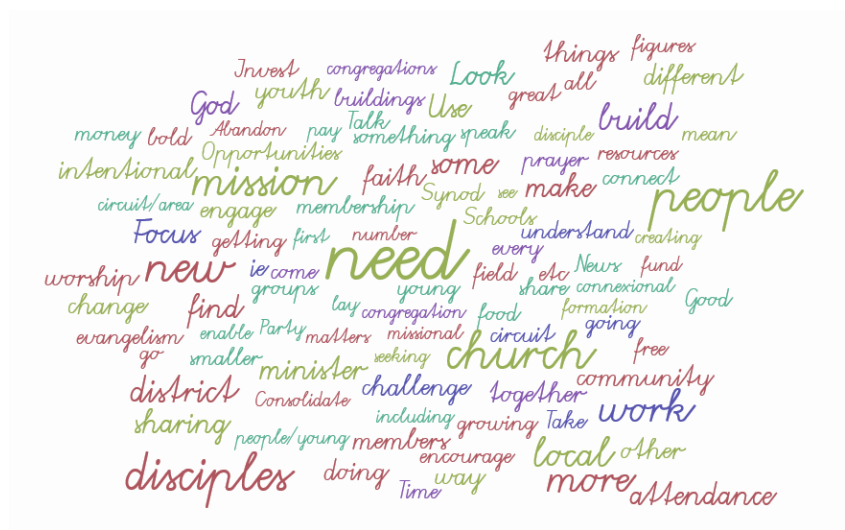
- The vast majority of Districts were not surprised (and several expressed sadness that the figures did reflect their experience). Some were *pleasantly* surprised – having absorbed the narrative of decline, they did not expect to see growth (or even maintenance), eg in the number of baptisms.
- Several Districts noted the limitations of the figures – some elements of the broad mission of the Methodist Church are not accounted for, eg contact with transient populations, the quality of discipleship.

In light of these figures, what do you consider to be the strengths and challenges of your District?

- Obviously, the majority of responses were District-specific. This question seems to have been a helpful introduction to the sorts of conversations that will take place during peer review meetings.
- Many noted that commitment is now, in many ways, counter-cultural, which is a challenge both in terms of finding people to take on key roles and encouraging people to become members. A number cited the age profile of churches as a challenge.
- Many noted the opportunity presented by rites of passage, and particularly baptisms, for building relationships and making disciples.

What might God be saying to the District, through this information?

- Again, many responses were specifically related to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual District. However, there were a number of key themes, including: a) the need to share stories of good practice, especially from churches experiencing growth; b) the urgent need for evangelism and making new disciples; c) the need for deepening discipleship, to equip people for the task of talking of God; and d) the need to reassess and release funds for mission.



What might God be saying to the District, through this information?

In light of these statistics, what do you think might be the way forward for your District?

- The range of responses was very wide, but again, there were some recurring themes. Once again, mission and evangelism were key priorities – a number of Districts suggested that Circuits and Local Churches should be encouraged to lay down a current area of work in order to focus on outreach and making new disciples. On a related note, several Districts noted the need to release both ministers and lay people from unnecessary administration.

How might you use these statistics in your District? Is there other information it would be helpful to collect in the future?

- Some Districts suggested specific statistical information it would be helpful to have – many expressed a wish for information that could be used to contextualise the figures, such as the age profile of the surrounding area and/or analysis of recent changes in the local demographics. Several Districts saw the figures as a positive challenge to Synods, Circuits and Local Churches to make bold decisions – and to make new disciples.

With regard to the other District you have been asked to consider...

Are the statistics for this District a surprise? Do they reflect your experience?

- Most Districts compared the figures for this second District to their own. Some were challenged by this – for instance, if the second District seemed to be ‘better’ at encouraging attendees into membership. Some suggested areas of challenge for the second District – such as how they would respond to new housing developments. Many noted that they had minimal experience of the second District.

In light of these figures, what do you consider to be the strengths and challenges of the District?

- Several cited the number of smaller churches (sometimes scattered over a large geographical area) as a challenge. In others, the spread of churches/Methodist presence was seen as a strength. Some noted strengths and challenges of the wider context (eg good transport links). Other noted the strengths and challenges of the figures themselves (eg the rate of decline) but did not have the background information to suggest contributory factors.

What might God be saying to the District, through this information?

- Unsurprisingly, similar themes emerged here as above – deepening discipleship, mission and evangelism. Some suggested that AGAPE and rites of passage provided key ‘mission fields.’

In light of these statistics, what do you think might be the way forward for the District?

- A large number of Districts did not respond, or suggested that they needed further information/a conversation with the District in order to engage meaningfully. This is worth noting for the proposed peer review process – how might peers from other Districts be equipped to contribute as helpfully as possible?