



BACKGROUND DATA FOR MISSION

Providing Data for Planning and Ministry

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EXPLORING PROFESSIONS OF FAITH

There is much discussion around the United Methodist Church these days about how to measure church vitality. While there are many dimensions to this process, part of the analysis invariably deals with looking at numbers. The two most often referenced statistics are membership and worship attendance. An additional statistic, which can be very revealing, is New Members Received by Profession of Faith, or PF for short. Churches which are able to bring in new members from nominal or unchurched backgrounds are really addressing the core mission of making disciples. Unfortunately, in 2005, over 45% of United Methodist churches in the USA did not report bringing in a single new member by profession of faith. This merits a closer look.

As with all reported statistics, multiple factors influence the validity of the numbers themselves. Churches vary in how well they actually keep track of all that they need to, as well as how accurately this makes it to the year end report forms. Interpretation of what to put on the line on the form is critical and PF is understood in many different ways. Some view it nearly synonymously with someone making a profession of faith in Christ, whether or not that is connected to membership. It is not known that anyone actually records this while ignoring the membership component, but some do interpret the statistic this way. On the other hand, this statistic does not measure all professions of faith which may happen in a local church. It only measures those who become members. Some new non-members may come to faith in Christ but not become a member. On the other hand some folks may be long time

members but of nominal faith until their hearts are strangely warmed. They may then consider having a faith to profess for the first time. Neither is captured by the statistic, though many people who look at that statistic interpret it as including these categories.

Whereas “new member by profession of faith” may be interpreted incorrectly on the profession of faith part of the term, others error on the new member portion. Some churches use this category to welcome any new member who does not fit into any of the other categories, even if there is no indication that the new member has come to a place of actually professing faith in Christ. These varying understandings of the statistic happen from region to region, as well as church to church. Having said all that, the statistic is still a useful indicator in the aggregate, though individual church numbers are less reliable.

A few tweaks can be made to make the data more useful before going into greater detail. One is to eliminate the one thousand churches which did not submit the report. This reduces the percentage of those not reporting a PF to 44.2%. Next we can add a derived statistical measure to level the playing field between larger and smaller churches. A very small church not reporting a PF in a given year is not earthshaking, but a very large church should have many. To accommodate this factor, we can divide PFs by attendance to get PF/A. To further accommodate the small church, we will use a three year average for PFs with those reporting zero. It is disappointing to note that even using this 3 year figure, there were 7000 churches which reported no PFs. The denominational

average was 4.5 PFs per year. As a percentage of attendance, the PF/A is about 4.6%. Stated another way, for every 20 people attending worship in a typical church, less than one new member is added by profession of faith per year.

A common question regarding who is achieving in the PF department pertains to size of church. Larger churches do better on average, though not by a huge margin. Churches under 51 in attendance (approximately half of all UMCs in the US) averaged 3.5% over three years in the PF to attendance ratio. Churches with 51-100 had a PF/A of 4.3%. Churches with 101-300 had 4.8%. Churches with 301-1000 had 5.1% and the very largest churches had 5.7%. Only 181 out of nearly 35,000 UMCs are in this largest category. Small churches have been criticized as being ineffective at adding PFs, relative to larger churches. These statistics reveal that they are not as effective on average, but that the difference is less than most making the criticism realize, especially when compared to medium sized churches.

Another interesting result of analyzing the PF stats is finding out what we can about the highest performers. The top 100 churches had a PF/A ratio of 21.7%, or were bringing in more than one PF for every 5 people in worship. These churches averaged 80 in membership and 36 in attendance, making them well below the average size. Half had 25 or less in attendance. The conference with the highest number of these is West Virginia. This pulled the NEJ into the lead with 32 churches. The SEJ followed with 27. It appears that 11 of the top 100 are new church starts.

When one broadens the category to 1000 churches, the PF/A ratio is a still respectable 13.3%. This means that these churches have more than PF for every 8 people in attendance. These churches averaged 121 in membership and 55 in worship, still below the national average by quite a bit. Half the churches had less than 37 in attendance. West Virginia had 53 of them, with Virginia (37) and Baltimore Washington (34) following. The NEJ had 299 of the churches, followed by the SEJ (239) and NCJ (215). Twenty two of these high performers appear to be new starts. Interestingly, 439 are declining, though the overall attendance was up over 2600 for the group.

On the other side of the spectrum, some surprising results appear for those churches with the worst ratios. Of course the worst ratio is zero for three years. The next group were those with zero in the most recent year but some PFs in the prior two. These were about 8000 mostly small churches, averaging 40 in attendance, with a PF/A of 2.2%. The real hall of shame, however are the churches which had at least one PF in 2005 but with a lousy PF/A. The worst 100 of these averaged 280 in worship with a PF/A of 1.1%. This means that these mostly larger churches only averaged about 1 new member by profession of faith. The worst 1000 averaged 175 in attendance, with a PF/A of 1.4%. The worst 5000 of these averaged 149 in attendance, with a PF/A of 2.7%. The common factor of the worst churches with at least one reported PF is that they average well above the norm in size.

In summary, the UMC has not had a stellar record in bringing in new members by profession of faith. The worst, and best, of the performers are small churches, though on average larger churches do better. Some of the best performers are new starts. Among those churches reporting at least one PF, but a very low number relative to their size, are a surprisingly large percentage of the medium to large churches. While many factors impact membership changes, failure to bring in more members by profession of faith is surely a key player in the ongoing membership decline. It is clear that this valuable indicator of making disciples reveals a need for improvement in a basic component of disciple making.

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