

Counting Online Attendance

Adapted from: UMC Discipleship Ministries

Taking attendance in online worship or online small groups or Sunday School certainly is not as simple as counting heads in pews or chairs. But do not despair – there are ways to do this responsibly, some already in use and recommended by GCFA and churches across the connection.

1. First, we all recognize the unprecedented challenges of life and ministry in 2020. When it comes to counting online attendance, the Kentucky Conference simply hopes each church will not only do their best to capture the numbers, but more importantly, connect with all of the persons worshipping in these new ways. In addition, local churches should know that online worship attendance has no bearing on General Church, Conference, or District apportionments.
2. Second, if you or your church have developed a system that is working consistently for you, please continue to use that and report accordingly on your 2020 Year End Reports. Also, in this season of learning for local churches and Conferences, we would love to hear about your methods, successes and failures, learnings, and more. As we continue to develop methods and strive to offer best practices to churches, please connect your District Superintendent or share your methods and stories with David Garvin at dgarvin@kyumc.org.
3. Third, let's remember why we count: Numbers represent people and people matter. Every person who watches on YouTube, participates on Zoom, messages on Facebook Live is a child of God. They matter, and it matters that your church has given them a way to worship in a challenging time.
4. Fourth, the details:
 - a. Most churches offer online worship via Facebook Live, YouTube, or Zoom, with some streaming directly from their websites. Each of these platforms offers some statistics, usually including (at least) number of view and length of views.

GCFA cautions churches against simply counting the number of views as attendance. A casual “scroller” on Facebook or someone searching for something else on YouTube may come across your church’s worship service and be counted.

GCFA advises counting only viewers who stay with a service for a specified length of time. Given the length of your weekly worship service, the time “required” to be counted as an active worshipper may vary. To that end, GCFA encourages you to have a conversation with your church leadership about what a meaningful participation in online worship would entail.

- b. Check-in, multiply, or something else? The most accurate count will come if people “check in” in some fashion and indicate how many people are worshiping with them. This can be done on Facebook Live and Zoom, and churches can set up other online tools for this, as well. But if that is not doable, or if you suspect that a significant number of people are worshiping but not checking in, a multiplier can be used. This means you simply multiply the number of views by a decimal (GCFA suggests 1.75) to account for the possibility that some computers are “hosting” more than one worshiper.
 - c. Because many online services are recorded and then watched at times other than Sunday morning, attendance trackers also need to decide when to cut off counting. GCFA commonly recommends Sunday night or Monday morning.
 - d. Most important: Be consistent. However you choose to measure and count online attendance, apply it to all online worship services for the year and report accordingly on your year-end stats. This is the only way to get a meaningful view of your online worship life at year’s end.
5. Finally, great non-statistical reporting advice from the Mississippi Conference: Focus on engagement, not just attendance. Pay attention to greetings and prayer requests in the chat, look for likes, comments, shares, subscribes, requests for connection, and giving patterns. Think about ways of connecting worshipers with one another. Respond to expressions of interest. And, of course – keep track of all of this. Even though it won’t show up on your annual reports, these are some of the most meaningful ministry metrics you can have at hand at this present, confounding time, because they inform you about how you are doing in terms of connection with your community. Remember – we are called to See All the People, and in this unprecedented time and beyond, online engagement is a key part of that.