

A Few Facts & Figures

June 6, 2018

If you've ever been the Clerk of Session, you'll appreciate seeing how your annual statistics are used. For the rest of you, sit back and enjoy the fruits of someone else's labor.

The denomination compiled our 2017 congregational statistics into one large report, letting us see our membership trends. For example, the [summary](#) of this year's report reveals that 2/3 of the denomination's congregations have 100 or fewer members, but 2/3 of Presbyterians are members of churches of 300 members or more. In other words, most churches have fewer than 100 members, but most of the 1.4 million Presbyterians nationwide are attending churches with more than 300 people.

I'm not a statistician. I'm just a regular person looking at the numbers, so I might get this all wrong. However, I suspect there must be some tipping point at which a congregation becomes small enough that its own members begin to transfer membership to a larger church. Similarly, if non-member Presbyterians are looking for a new church home, they will choose a larger congregation over a smaller one. The shift isn't big enough to force the congregation's closure, but it's enough statistically to make the congregation small and – more significantly – keep it small.

I suspect a skilled person could plot our denomination's membership over time to find that precise tipping point. It probably involves a bell curve.

While I haven't tried to calculate this tipping point, I did compare these national statistics to the Presbytery of Milwaukee. I assumed you'd mirror the national average, but you didn't. You're an anomaly. You don't fit the mold.

	Churches Under 100 Members	Membership in Churches Over 300 Members
PC(USA) nationally	66%	66%
Presbytery of Milwaukee	52%	45%

About 37% of our members belong to congregations that range from 100-300 members in size, and only half our congregations are under 100 members. We have more balance than the rest of the denomination.

Numbers can make us panic. Statistics can make us wonder whether we're doing enough or doing the right things. Bold comparisons, with nothing more, can instill jealousy, resentment, and excuses.

As a longtime member of a congregation that worships with about 35 people, I can tell you that size matters. In a small congregation, visitors stand out, and they feel uncomfortable. So, even when you can get them in the door, few come back no matter how much hospitality you show. In a small church, everyone plays several roles. Worse, when we insist on functioning like the

church we were in the 1950's, we're 35 exhausted members. When we pursue members in order to fill our committees and preserve the church, rather than to share the gospel for the spiritual wellbeing of our community, then we're labeled as desperate or disingenuous. And, we stay small.

Size *doesn't* matter if our goal is praise God and be faithful disciples. Whether we are twelve gathered together in an upper room or a thousand in an auditorium, we embody the Church when our focus is on serving God. We might need to "right-size" our ministries and listen for the Spirit's leading in innovative ways, but small congregations can be as fruitful as medium or large churches. We might grow, but any increase is in God's hands, not our own and certainly not the result of some bell curve or tipping point.

Our PC(USA) Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson offers these words in response to our denominational trends:

"The church is not dying; it is reforming, and that reformation must be built on a vision of God's kin-dom that is compelling to people who find us lacking. We have that vision – it is part and parcel of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We simply must find new ways to proclaim it and, more importantly, live it out in our congregations. I don't despair, I never despair. The challenges before us are clear, but so is our vision, so is our call and so is our determination to follow that call, which comes from Jesus Christ."

What will this reformation mean for your congregation? How will you proclaim authentically the hope we have in Jesus Christ? How will you live as faithful disciples? Surely, the answers to those questions will be much more revealing for our future than a trend line in a report.