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Keeping Us Honest

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Some say the numbers don't lie. It's hard data. The facts and figures keep us honest. From stepping on the bathroom scale to the speedometer in our cars (admittedly both of which can be fudged by about five points), we rely on the numbers to show how we're doing. So, I offer you some numbers today.

The Office of the General Assembly has released its annual [statistics report](#) showing a continued steady decline in membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Current active membership stands at just over 1.1 million, a 51,000-member drop from 2020. Total number of churches last year stood at 8,813, approximately 112 fewer than the year before.

Here's another set of statistics that I find helpful as we look at Milwaukee Presbytery: the median presbytery has a membership of 5,526 people and the average presbytery consists of 111 ministers, 53 churches and four candidates. We are doing a little better membership-wise, but have fewer churches, coming in at 41.

We're not alone in seeing these declines. Other mainline denominations have experienced the same trend of losses, some of which has been caused by the pandemic and shifts away from "going to church."

So, the numbers tell a story. They keep us honest about how we're doing as the Church. The gospel remains compelling, but our witness of it might need some adjustment in this day and time.

These numbers only tell a part of the story, however. New expressions of the church continue to grow. The denomination's new worshipping communities are increasing in number and variety. Even traditional church plants are stable. Consider these six-year trends:

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
New Worshipping Communities	114	144	158	176	206	241
New Church Development/Fellowships	128	122	116	110	112	107

Milwaukee Presbytery is helping add to those numbers. This year we called Rev. Mark Fraley to the position of Presbytery Evangelist, as he develops a new worshipping community centered around worship, discipleship and just action. If our immigration visa application is approved, we will also call Rev. Dan Gonzalez to service as a Presbytery Evangelist for Latinx Ministries. These are new expressions of the gospel for us, and we are excited at where these passionate leaders will take us.

We can be confident that the gospel withstands 6-year trends, statistical reports, and averages. It will never succumb to human limitations. If we are truly honest with ourselves, however, we must admit that the numbers tell a story that calls us into action. The Spirit is moving in our midst, closing ineffective forms of ministry and opening new forms in which the gospel can flourish. May we be ready to both celebrate our legacy and welcome what lies ahead.