

Reporting Online Attendance

Online Attendance

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Taking attendance in online worship certainly isn't as simple as counting heads in pews. But don't despair – there are ways to do this responsibly, some already in use and recommended by annual conference and churches across the connection.

These tips were compiled with assistance from almost a dozen annual conferences that responded to a request from Discipleship Ministries for them to share the guidance they've been offering to pastors, as well as input from the General Council on Finance and Administration.

1. First and most important: Your annual conference may have a policy on tracking online attendance. If so, that's the policy you should follow.
2. Second, 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.
3. Third, 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.
 - b. Most annual conferences we contacted caution 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.
 - c. Several annual conferences advise counting only viewers who stay with a service for a specified length of time. This seems to vary widely from conference to conference, with some saying to count anyone who watches for one minute or more, and at least one saying not to count anyone who wasn't there for 30 minutes or more. We encourage you to check with your annual conference and/or have a conversation with your leadership about what a meaningful participation in online worship would entail.
 - d. 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 worshipping 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 worshipping but not checking in, a multiplier can be used. This means you simply multiply the number of views by a decimal (somewhere between 1.5-1.9 seems to be common) to account for the possibility that some computers are "hosting" more than one worshiper.

This would be another question to check with your annual conference.

- e. 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. Sunday night, Monday morning, or Monday night all are commonly recommended.
 - f. Most important: Be consistent. Whatever method you choose, stick with it (at least for a while). This is the only way to get a meaningful view of your online worship life at year's end.
4. Finally, great advice from the Mississippi Annual 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.