

MONTHLY MISSIONAL VITAL SIGNS



It's about keeping
Christ's main things
our main things

Did I hear right that every congregation will be asked to fill out a monthly report?

Yes, that's right. The Cabinet has been thinking and praying about this for over a year. Other Annual Conferences are already asking every congregation monthly to give an accounting of their fruitfulness in ministry. Our Cabinet knows that there will be some resistance to doing this, but still we believe that missionally, it is the right thing for our connection of congregations to begin doing.

But we tried this before and it didn't work!

We have tried doing this before – several different times – and many of us agree that it didn't work very well. It wasn't, however, the monthly accountability that didn't "work." What didn't "work" was the nature and volume of information being asked of congregations. Most people felt that the information being asked for was too complicated. They also wondered if anyone even looked at it and had a hard time seeing how it benefited anybody.

So, what makes this monthly report different?

First, congregations will report monthly five figures for each week and three of these figures are ones that most pastors can rattle off anyway: worship attendance, total offering and the total number of persons received into membership by profession of faith or reaffirmation of faith.

Secondly, the five figures tie directly to the disciple-making practices of effective congregations, rather than to institutional strength. These are missional metrics designed to give an indication of how a congregation is doing living into The Methodist Way. They will indicate the trends in the fruitfulness of our congregation's ministry – whether it is increasing or decreasing in the essential ways Jesus calls His Church to shape His followers and to serve the world.

What are the measurements that we will be reporting?

The five figures which you will be asked to report monthly for each week relate directly to the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. While more and other measurements could have been chosen, the Cabinet wanted only one metric to give an indication of the effectiveness for each practice of The Methodist Way. So there will be five figures: three every congregation already tracks, one that congregation have tracked generally in the past and one that will be new for most congregations.

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Passionate Worship: The worship attendance at your congregation's principle worship services each week – a metric every congregation has historically tracked.



Radical Hospitality: The total number of persons received into membership by profession of faith or by reaffirmation of faith each week – again, something every congregation has been recording for decades.



Intentional Discipling: The total number of persons involved in small, face-to-face discipling groups each week. The assumption is made – consistent with our Wesleyan heritage – that discipling happens most often in small, face-to-face groups designed to train persons to follow Jesus. The annual statistical report has asked for this information in several different ways. As we move forward, many congregations will need to tighten up their definition and accounting of this.



Salty Service: The total number of persons involved for one hour or more in ministries of mercy or justice to persons beyond the congregation each week. We will talk more about this shortly as it requires the biggest shift in focus and behavior for most congregations.



Extravagant Generosity: The total number of dollars given to the congregation for both budget and capital concerns each week – again something every congregation has always tracked.

Boy, now I have a whole bunch of questions! Beside questions about the specific measurements, I guess the thing that bothers me most is that I'm not sure that numbers can ever tell the whole story about ministry.

Of course they can't! How can you really measure growth in a congregation's Kingdom impact in their community or in a disciple's ability to forgive or to be compassionate or to be obedient? The numbers give only an indication of trends in key areas without fully capturing what the Spirit is doing to change people's lives and the world.

On the other hand, those that say that faithfulness, not fruitfulness is all that is important simply are not taking what Jesus said in John 15 seriously:

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"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (John 15: 1-2, 8, 16)

Clearly, Jesus is concerned with both quality and quantity, authenticity and effectiveness, faithfulness and fruitfulness in our ministry.

Okay, I know the numbers matter, but to be honest, I guess I resent being asked to give this monthly reporting. It feels like Big Brother is watching. And I worry that the reports are going to be used punitively against me. We work very hard in our congregation and the numbers don't necessarily show it.

I think a lot of people feel just like you.

One member of the Cabinet said that the monthly reporting is like the weigh-in at a Weight Watchers' meeting – which everyone hates. However, everyone comes to Weight Watchers to lose weight and the weigh-in is how they determine whether that's happening or not. The point is not to make people feel bad or to punish anyone, but to see if what they are doing is effective in accomplishing what they said they wanted to do: lose weight. If it is, they celebrate. And if it isn't, they know they need to change what they are doing in order to lose weight.

It's a pretty good analogy, really. Pastors seek ordination to serve the church's disciple-making mission through "word, sacrament and order." Congregations ask to be chartered by the Annual Conference to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" in their particular community. The monthly reporting is a way in which we help one another be honest about whether we are really doing what we willingly committed to do. The reporting helps us have integrity in fulfilling the covenant we made with Christ and one another.

Even good analogies, however, eventually limp. The Weight Watchers' weigh-in measures how successful each individual has been at losing weight. While a pastor may at times feel that it is all about her or him, clearly the fruitfulness of a congregation is also about lay leadership, congregational traditions and community factors that are beyond the control of a pastor.

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Thank you. It feels like the report could be used to hold me accountable for something which I do not have power to control.

Please be assured that every member of the Cabinet – all of whom have been pastors themselves – knows that the numbers going up or down are not just an indication of the pastor’s effectiveness. Increasing or decreasing trends reflect the ministry effectiveness of the whole congregation, including its members and leaders, its traditions and style of engaging the community missionally. So it is never just about the pastor alone.

Changing the trends of ministry fruitfulness in a congregation is all about effective spiritual leadership, both lay and clergy. And over time, the pastor is in the position of greatest influence to reshape a congregation’s understanding and practices of ministry. Pastors are not responsible for the past ministry trends of a congregation to which they have just been appointed. But pastors are responsible for helping a congregation be honest about whether they are doing what Jesus asks and to lead them in discovering more effective ways of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” in their particular community.

So, tell me how monthly reporting will assist us in doing this.

Probably the most significant thing monthly reporting does is help the leaders of congregations remain clear about what is really most important and determine whether they are actually making headway.

The life and ministry of a congregation is quite complex. It is easy over time to get fuzzy about what really matters. Every congregation has limited resources to invest. There are only so many leaders with so much time and energy and talent to invest. There are limited dollars, Sundays and facility space. How you invest all these different resources is critical to the effectiveness of a congregation’s ministry in its community. Our monthly reporting, designed to reflect how congregations are doing at living into the five practices of the Methodist Way, helps congregations “keep the main thing, the main thing.” It may be nice that the kitchen ministry increased the number of Wednesday night meals by 14% or that the Trustees bought a new van. But the real bottom line in terms of ministry effectiveness is: did it increase worship attendance or professions of faith or the number of persons in small discipling groups or the number of persons in ministry in the community or the ability of members to be more generous? These are the real bottom lines in a Biblical understanding of ministry.

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We hope that whenever Leadership Councils or Church Councils meet, that the monthly reporting will be reviewed and help shape the congregation’s discussions. So, the monthly reporting is intended primarily to be a tool that helps a local congregation have clarity about the most critical aspects of their life together and an indication of how they are doing – not in relationship to other congregations, but in relationship to themselves and the ministry to which Christ calls them.

We have never counted Salty Service before; why start now?

Good question. The short answer is that it rivets people’s attention on the single most critical factor distinguishing effective congregations from declining congregations: an intentional missional focus on their community.

John Wesley said, “The world is my parish.” For too many congregations, the parish has become their world. And it is this creeping internal self-preoccupation that makes ministry increasingly ineffective and inauthentic. Some congregations get so caught up in caring for their members, maintaining their beloved traditions and keeping up their facilities that they all but forget about the community to which they are called to minister. It is as if they have forgotten that Jesus came and died to save the world (John 3:16-17) and that he sent us out into the world (John 17:15-18) as ambassadors of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:19-20) to make disciples among every ethnic group (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:18). Jesus calls his disciples to pick up their crosses in unselfish service to others (Luke 9:23-24) – not to be consumed by the internal politics, activities and maintenance of our congregations.

And the Cabinet believes that filling out this report will help this?

Look, the Cabinet knows that there will be people who just play a numbers game to appear to go along. But we have already heard from many people that Bishop Whitaker’s “Focus on the Fundamentals” got them to thinking about being servants to their local community in ways they hadn’t heard the Conference or our denomination asking of them before.

The Cabinet expects the monthly reporting to assist our whole connection of congregations remember that Christ calls us to be Kingdom salt and light in our communities (Matthew 5:13-16). It won’t happen overnight, of course. But over time, we believe it can help us be both more faithful and fruitful in this critical area. After all, Jesus told the parable of the sheep and the goats:

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“Then the King will say to [the sheep] on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (From Matthew 25:31-46)

We want every congregation to be caring for Christ among the people of their community. Most people outside the church today are so skeptical about Christianity and people who call themselves Christians that we have to earn the right to be heard by them; until they experience love embodied for them and their community through the non-manipulative actions of disciples, they will not join with us in discovering what it means to be followers Jesus in today’s world.

But how can we measure salty service?

Remember, the purpose is not to have a perfect accounting, but to focus the congregation’s attention on ministering to the community and to encourage every Christ-follower to bless the community through active involvement in ministries of mercy, justice and earth-care.

Here are some suggestions: During the offering time in worship each week the pastor or liturgists can draw people’s attention to a brief statement in the bulletin, such as, “This last week, I was a Salty Servant embodying God’s love to persons beyond our congregation for at least one hour.” After sharing a few words of explanation, persons are asked to self-select if this was true for them and then to indicate it in a way that works for their congregation. If the congregation is small, that may mean simply asking persons to put their hand up and be counted. Congregations that regularly register attendance could ask persons to indicate this as they register their attendance. One member of the Cabinet suggested having tickets in the pew with the Salty Service logo on them and then asking persons to place one of the tickets in the offering plate. The tickets can be counted with the offering and put back into the pews to be used again.

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Each congregation can experiment and find the best way for them to obtain a weekly indication of the number of persons who gave at least one hour of salty service as a follower of Jesus alleviating suffering in their community.

I guess this is a way of taking seriously the membership vows of supporting Christ ministry through your “Prayer, Presence, Gifts and Service.”

Yes, exactly. And it is also a way of taking seriously that God calls not only pastors to ministry, but every baptized Christian. Our emphasis on Salty Service recognizes that the laity are called to serve with Jesus in ministry in the world no less than clergy. We hope that our focus upon Salty Service will add purpose to people’s lives by encouraging them to discern how Christ is calling them to invest their unique blend of talents, skills and opportunities in ways that make a Kingdom difference in the lives of others and the world.

Okay, well, just two more questions: is this going to take a lot of time like the monthly report we used to do and when do we begin?

It shouldn’t take long at all! Each month an e-mail will go out to a designated person in your congregation. We hope that this will be an administrative assistant or perhaps a dedicated layperson. In the e-mail, there will be an internet link to click on; it will take them to your congregation’s chart where five figures will be filled in under each Sunday during the previous month. You don’t even have to average them. Once systems are set up in the congregation to gather the information weekly – most of which we have been gathering for years – it should take just a few minutes to fill in the figures each month and press “send.”

Recognizing that this is asking most congregations to make some significant changes in their thinking and behavior, we encourage congregational leaders to begin discussing now how they will gather the missional information weekly. Leaders will also need to select a person do report for their congregation monthly. The Cabinet and the Office of Congregational Transformation will provide additional information for thinking through the Intentional Discipling and Salty Service metrics. The e-mail reporting software will be operative well before the end of the year, so that any congregation that is ready to start will soon be able to do so. Together, we will all work toward the goal of every congregation reporting all five metrics by July 1, 2009.

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