



How to ...

Complete a Statistics for Mission annual return

What is Statistics for Mission

Every year, parishes in the Church of England are asked to return information about attendance at services and the number of baptisms, marriages and funerals conducted over the year. This is called a Statistics for Mission return (SfM) and is made via a national online reporting system. SfM data from parishes across the country is important for identifying trends, appropriately investing resources, and helping to paint a picture of participation across the Church of England.

'We count people because people count' – people are not just numbers. Statistical information gives us a great repository of data of which we can ask good questions and use to facilitate supportive conversations. The information also helps us identify trends in different expressions of church and worship and where there is a correlation in growth or decline across different churches and contexts.

Statistics for Mission helps to improve our collective understanding of the people God calls us to serve and to fulfil God's call to know and love those around us. Better statistical data leads to better decision making by all when combined with local knowledge of the story in a parish.

Benefits to the Parish

As each local church discerns its own plans for mission, understanding the local context is essential. The Church of England's Research and Statistics Unit processes the data it receives into accessible information which Parishes can use. Parishes can view and download their own Parish Dashboard which provides information about attendance, the community, baptisms, marriages and funerals, the Electoral Roll etc. over a number of years.

Accurate data collection and analysis ensures better strategic decisions are made and helps us to effectively prioritise focus, energy and resources. Sometimes the information provided paints a disappointing picture. It may show attendance decline in a church or highlight a challenge or difficulty. But it is this accurate, honest information that makes the data useful. It can initiate a conversation that leads to prayer, informed decision making and missional action.

Benefits to the National Church

The statistics help the National Church to learn about the nationwide picture of the scale of activities of Church of England churches. They enable the National Church provide informed advice to dioceses about their approaches to supporting mission and ministry.

How to submit a Statistics for Mission return

Parishes are asked to submit their return online by the 31 January each year looking back at the previous calendar year.

The submission can be made here: <https://parishreturns.churchofengland.org>

The user guide for the online system can be viewed here:

<https://parishreturns.churchofengland.org/UserGuides/User%20Guide.pdf>

To make a submission you will need an account for the returns system which is personal to an individual, but then linked to the parish or church which you are responsible for making the return for. This account will have a username and a password. The account can be created by anyone in the parish who has an existing 'Administrator' account for the parish, or by contacting the diocesan office.

These accounts are held with the National Online Parish Returns system, notifying the Diocese that you are no longer an office holder will not automatically delete or close down your account with the Online Parish Returns System as the two are not linked. Accounts can be closed by anyone in your parish with an 'Administrator' account or by contacting the diocesan office.

Common errors

As we have said, accurate data collection and analysis ensures better decisions are made, it is therefore important to make sure that the data you are submitting is of good quality.

Fresh expressions of church. Please refer to our 'How to...Understand Fresh Expressions' for information about what qualifies as a fxC.

School services. Please make sure that the attendance at these services is recorded in the correct boxes in the October count.

Help boxes. Please click on the little blue question marks next to each question for further help and advice for completing that question.

Worshipping community. This is a relatively new measure recognizing the changing nature of church attendance. However counting the number of people who have joined or left each year, and noting where they came from or left to, can be a challenge and may require dialogue with the church ministry team.

Click 'submit'. You do not need to enter all your information in one go, but when you have completed your return for this year, please click 'submit'. The submission will show as incomplete if you do not enter a zero into empty boxes.

Failure to make a submission

The Diocese will send out reminder emails to anyone who has a registered account with the Online Parish Returns System where the parish or church they are linked to has not made a submission.

When Parishes do not submit their Statistics for Mission data, the National Church makes an educated estimate to fill in the gaps. This will mean that the data for the parishes is inaccurate and presents a picture that does not represent reality. For example, it may look as if a congregation is shrinking when in fact it is growing.

Please help the Diocesan Support Services to serve you better by ensuring the quality of your data is good and that it is submitted in a timely fashion.

Support

If you require any assistance to support you to make a timely, accurate Statistics for Mission return, then please do not hesitate to contact the Diocesan Office.

If the task of completing the Statistics for Mission return at the end of the year is a daunting one, the Diocese have produced an Excel Spreadsheet that could assist you with recording and monitoring attendance at weekly services and support you to complete your Stats for Mission returns at the end of the year. [You can download it here](#).