



COUNTING LIVE STREAMING NUMBERS FOR YEAR END REPORT

In 2020 and beyond, with the onset of Covid-19 and the recommendation not to hold inside worship, many churches have opted to provide services via live streaming. Because so many churches are switching to this digital ministry, questions have surfaced regarding virtual attendance and how to count those participants. Churches continue to offer virtual ministries and we believe this approach is a permanent part of church culture.

There are multiple ways to count virtual attendance, just as there are multiple ways of streaming your worship service. The reason why we take attendance – virtual and in the worship space – is that it is one measure of the health of your congregation. The most important thing to remember about taking virtual attendance is to make a good faith effort.

History. In 2017, the end-of-year statistical report started capturing online worship attendance in question 7A as online participation was increasing and was not being captured in question 7.

7	<p>Average attendance at all weekly Worship services</p> <p>Report average in-person attendance at all services held on a consistent weekly basis as the primary opportunity for worship. Count all persons (including children) who participate in part of any of these services. Do not include online worshippers nor attendance from irregularly held special services (i.e. Christmas Eve services).</p>
7a	<p>Number of persons who worship online</p> <p>Report here average weekly number of unique viewers who access worship online. This includes those live streaming your worship service and views/downloads of recorded worship services (audio or video), sermons, and/or podcasts. Do not include generic hits/visits to your website.</p>
7b	<p>Enter total participants in other digital or online events</p> <p>Report here TOTAL (not average) participants in other digital groups or events. You may include same individuals if they participated multiple times. DO NOT include worship attendees reported in 7a. Include the total number of those who participated via live streaming as well as views/downloads of recorded events (audio or video) and/or podcasts. Do not include generic hits/visits to your website.</p>

Line 7A above states to report the average weekly number of unique viewers who access worship online. The software and platform used may vary with features that enable you to do this.

Guidance. For online views, count anyone listening online for whom the church has evidence of participation. This can be accomplished through an online check-in process or through analytic software associated with your streaming platform. Confirm that the analytics demonstrate that the

person viewed a significant portion of the worship service. Create a standard, for example, 20 or more minutes, and stick to it consistently. Be aware that some platforms' analytics – like Facebook – will even count someone scrolling by as a hit. You should filter down to those who “attended” a significant portion of your stream. The critical element is to be consistent. Do not jump from one formula to another in a given year.

Method.

1. Attendance Sign In. You could develop a process whereby viewers sign in electronically in the same way you may use Attendance Pads for in-person worship. However, the challenge to this approach is that the internet allows great anonymity and many individuals, especially visitors, may not share their identity.
2. If your streaming provider reports the peak number of streams, we recommend you start with that. Facebook recently added this to their analytics report for each video. (Click on Showing All, which will flip the report to Showing Live. The top metric is Peak Live Viewers.)
3. If your streaming provider does not report peak live, then a good substitute is 30-minute views. If your service averages 50-60 minutes, most worshippers who watch 30 minutes or more will overlap at some point in the middle of the service and give you something very close to peak live.

The next step is to estimate the number of worshippers per video stream (many households have multiple people worshipping together around a single screen). Churches across the country have estimated this various ways over the years, typically through surveys or online worship attendance registration forms. A decade ago, enough churches found a ratio around 1.7 worshippers per stream that it became a good rule-of-thumb if you did not have another way to estimate it. Over time, that ratio declined as more people worshipped individually using a cell phone or tablet. We recommend a good way to estimate worshippers per stream is 1.6 in non-pandemic times and 1.8 during this pandemic.

The above leads to this simple formula for estimating worship attendance.

**Estimated attendance = Peak Live Streams X Worshippers per Stream
(rounded to the nearest whole person)**

Replays. If your worship video is posted somewhere for on-demand replays, then we recommend using the number of Plays or 30-Minute Views as the count, with no multiplier. We believe replays are much more often a single individual, rather than a group gathered around a large screen. Also, since there is no equivalent to Peak Live for on-demand replays, the count will already be inflated from people who watch only a brief portion of the video.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Dr. R. Mark King, Conference Statistician at mking@wnccumc.org or 704-535-2260.