

Advice from GCFA concerning worship attendance counting for 2020

As COVID-19 spreads and the world is practicing social distancing, many churches have opted to provide services via live streaming. Because so many churches are switching to this digital ministry, many have questions regarding virtual attendance and how to count those numbers. 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-person – 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 viewership of services was increasing and was not being captured in question 7.

7 Average attendance at all weekly worship services 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).

7a Number of persons who worship online 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.

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.

Guidance. For online views, count anyone listening online for whom the church has evidence of participation. This can be done through an online check-in process or through analytic software associated with your streaming platform. Confirm that the analytics demonstrate that the person viewed the worship for a significant portion. Create a standard 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. This method isn't perfect, and it likely may account for not counting groups or families watching together. Just remember that your online attendance (during shelter in place orders) will most likely be similar to your prior combined in-person and online worship totals are when you hold a service in the sanctuary. And as with everything else, remember that you are trying to report accurate and fair information to the best of your ability.