

Friends

At this time of year, the Methodist Church conducts counts: of the number of members and of Sunday Service attendance. It began in 1766, when Methodist membership numbers were reported for the first time, and the present system for "Statistics for Mission" dates back to 2002. For some reason, this year's October count has caused me to pause, reflect and ask questions....

Counting in the Bible is nothing new..... In the Old Testament, the book of Numbers takes its name from two great wilderness censuses. Firstly, where God told Moses to count the fighting men by tribe (Numbers 1), and a second count was taken about forty years later as the new generation prepared to enter the land (Numbers 26).
In the New Testament, there is the census under Caesar Augustus that brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. And in the Gospel accounts Jesus feeding the multitudes, the crowds were counted.

But what if counting isn't just about numbers?
Can we take comfort in the counting that God does? In Psalm 147:4 and Isaiah 40:26 we read that God counts the stars and calls each by name. God's counting reveals the intimacy that God has for us.... In Luke 12:7 we are told that even the hairs on our head are numbered, and in Psalm 56:8 we are reminded that God keeps count of our tears.
And then there is the counting that leads to naming, noticing and action. In Luke 15, there is a series of "lost" sheep, coins and a son. In all cases, the one who is missing is noticed, and action unfolds to "find" them. Should this be something we should be noticing and calling ourselves into action?

Are there other things we should be measuring? Should we be measuring the number of people whom we fellowship with and how much we are growing in our faith? Or the number of people whom we serve at our Community Meals and the Hot Drinks table? Or the network of Eco-focused churches that are growing around us? Or the number of people whom we share Jesus with during our week? Or the things that are impacted by the presence of a group of believers in a church? Is the crime rate in the locality of our church lower than elsewhere, are

businesses being blessed? I am reminded of a hard-hitting question: "if the church wasn't here, would anyone notice?"
In 2008, I journeyed around several English cities as part of a course of "how to be church without a church building". We travelled to Leeds and visited a Salvation Army's ALOVE project on one of the most deprived housing estates in the city. A group of Christians had chosen to move and live on the estate and had formed a small community. Their intention was to share and show Jesus. The testimony of a young professional couple continues to challenge me. They were in the process of rebuilding the council house they had bought, which had previously been a burned-out house of a local drug dealer. Their measure of the impact they were making, was that after eight months, their neighbour had started looking at them with a smile, instead of one of fear.

Are there anything else we should be measuring, in addition to the normal counts? It would be good to think about and share.

Every blessing, Jimmy