

Rationale for Use of Electoral Roll Figures in Centenary Share Calculation

Abstract

There is an element of cost in the diocesan budget which is not *directly* related to any quantifiable aspect of a benefice. Of all quantifiable elements available, membership was considered the most representative and proportional for these costs. All of the available methods of measuring membership were considered, but Electoral Roll was chosen because:

1. There is a *statutory requirement* to record and report this (others do not).
 2. It has a well established and clearly defined method of measurement (others do not).
 3. By definition it eliminates double counting and “errors of geographic and seasonal attendance”.
 4. It does not unfairly penalise or reward parishes for having too many or too few services.
 5. Measures a certain degree of “commitment” to join.
 6. There is a direct line of influence and control between those paying for the mission and ministry provided and those making decisions regarding the setting and allocation of budgets.
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Discussion

Whilst the “direct ministry costs” could be clearly attributed to each benefice in a logical and rational manner, some way needed to be found to allocate the “indirect ministry” costs both fairly and proportionately between the benefices.

Whilst this could have been shared equally amongst all benefices, or loaded onto the stipendiary clergy cost element, this would have disproportionately benefited large benefices, at the expense of the small. If it were shared equally amongst parishes or churches it would have unduly burdened multi parish benefices.

Since the “benefit” of this expense is felt equally by all of the “members” of the communion it seems both fair and logical to apportion the cost in relationship to the *membership*. After all any other method would mean that (anonymising REAL cases) a single parish benefice, in a large wealthy market town with a membership of over 300, would be paying the same as one of our poorest single parish urban benefices with a membership of 46.

Any debate about collection of data to which there may be a cost attributed, is open to accusations of rigging and/or fixing. This is an issue which- whether real or apocryphal- hampers any method of calculation and has been a cornerstone of criticisms of the “AURI” system. It is sad that in a Christian organisation we reduce ourselves to accusations of “dishonesty in others” (it is always “the other parishes/benefices”, never ours!) but is the hope of the Bishop and PSARG that we could make our default position that we assume that, whatever method of measure is used, people will be honest.

So what measure of “membership” should be used? All of the available measures were considered and all have their various merits and demerits. Each will be discussed in turn.

Attendance Statistics

A key issue with all attendance measures is that there is no statutory requirement to report them or clearly defined method and process for counting and collection. In 2011 less than 85% of churches completed the “Statistics for Mission” (SFM) report and with an extra special effort in 2012 we still only got 90% of returns

The next problem is curious interpretations of how these things should be measured and recorded; this is clear from some of the – frankly bizarre – statistics that are actually reported in the SFM process. Whilst in their favour they should, if counted and recorded correctly, give a representation of the pool of *active members* who are benefiting from the church’s mission and, notionally, prepared to contribute to the cost of that mission, there are a number of hidden problems.

Looking at the main points we would like any measure to address; for attendance measures:

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| 1. Statutory requirement to report | No |
| 2. Clearly defined method of collection | No |
| 3. Eliminating seasonal/geographic errors | No |
| 4. Unfairly penalising/rewarding some | Yes |
| 5. Measuring a degree of “commitment” | Vaguely |
| 6. Links to democratic process | No |

In terms of measuring commitment, whilst attending is a *de-facto* demonstration that someone is committed enough to “get out of bed on a Sunday morning”, it goes no further than that. It does not require any formal “signing up” to a long term decision to be a member; indeed what is being measured by attendance may be tenuous or even spurious (see below). In association with this, mere attendance does not link people in to the chain of democratic processes that ultimately contribute to the bodies and mechanisms that make decisions regarding the way their contributions are directed and how much money is spent.

Having addressed these points, items 3 and 4 will be considered for each method.

Average (October) attendance.

“Average” attendance is, in reality, harvested from actual attendance at 4 services that are reported in October, and collected through the annual SFM report requested by the National Church each year.

This raises multiple problems, most notably that this rarely genuinely represents a *True Average*. October is chosen because it avoids issues related to school holidays and bad winter weather etc. However, October also in many churches represents a strictly un-average attendance pattern. Many rural churches have their Harvest Festivals in October, and for reasons listed above this is also a very popular time for Baptisms and other special services, which artificially inflates attendances. Consider also the rural benefice with many parishes where the incumbent desires to reduce his service load and so has benefice services to which many from across the benefice travel thus loading one church and depleting another whilst –because of reluctance of *some* to travel –reducing the aggregate benefice attendance.

Consider also the church that has many services in the one day, which will each be accounted separately even though many attended both morning *and* evening services, thus double counting, and with the whole choir for example being triple counted.

Usual/Typical Sunday Attendance

The main issue with this is the “how long’s a piece of string” factor; what is typical? This requires someone to make either a “judgement” or a calculation (which can be seen from some of the curious 6 decimal place numbers reported sometimes in SFM returns). The questions of judgement include one of “who is an adult” (because we surely would NOT want to be including children in any of these measures.) And –all deliberate efforts to misreport aside- whatever the measure, some people’s judgements of the “typical” are very optimistic and some very pessimistic.

Furthermore, it is clear when considering some of the actual figures reported under this heading, that they *cannot possibly be correct*, as they make no logical sense at all when juxtaposed to other statistics.

There are also geographical issues, for example, where a parish may only have a service every other month, but when they *do* it is a benefice service; therefore their ACTUAL “usual/typical” attendance may *look* tremendous, but is not truly representative. Equally, consider some of our popular tourist destinations, whether for holidays or the church building itself, whose typical attendance is greatly inflated by non-subscribing seasonal and irregular visitors.

Christmas/Easter Attendance

Whilst possibly being a great measure of “potential”, is dogged disproportionately in many places by the tourist/visitor factor.

But using Attendance in General...

Means jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire; because the key complaints about using Electoral Roll are that it: a) dissuades people from becoming members and; b) taxes membership (the term “poll tax” frequently being used in a derogatory manner in an attempt to bring it into disrepute through the *toxic connotations* of that term).

The corollary of using some measure of attendance figures to measure “membership” would instead be to: a) dissuade people from attending church, or; b) *effectively* charge them an entry fee. The consequence of using any measure of attendance instead of electoral roll would surely be that instead of hearing the cry of “Poll Tax” there would be taunts from the naysayers of “shall we install turnstiles and charge an entry fee then?”

Another Parish Scaling Alternative Sometimes Cited- Census Population Figures

Let’s assume for the moment that it was possible to get an accurate and up-to date figure of total population for each of our parishes. The argument in favour of this figure is that it is a measure of the “potential” membership of any particular parish, and of the total “giving pool”.

The first problem associated with using this is that such a figure would always include children, whom would not be eligible to be contributing “members”, and this would disproportionately disadvantage those in more urban settings (and not just those in big towns). Furthermore it would include those of every religion (including none), and for those who *are* Christians, every denomination. This would further doubly disadvantage those in more urban areas where multiculturalism is more common, along with the concentrations of those of other denominations. However – not naming specifics- we do have several churches that are, very well attended (among our largest congregations), with large electoral rolls and good income, who by accident of location boundary lines, have –if those lines are strictly applied- populations that are truly miniscule (less than 100). There are others who have very large populations within their boundaries the majority of whom, because of the layout of roads etc., see their natural local church to be in the neighbouring parish, and consequently all attend there (there are numerous examples of this on the fringes of our larger towns. In the most extreme circumstance we have one small village whose indigenous worshipping population is less than 150, that has a census population of over 6,000.... thanks to the US Airforce base within the parish boundary.

CHURCH Electoral Roll

Contrast the above with church electoral roll figures

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| 1. Statutory requirement to report | Yes |
| 2. Clearly defined method of collection | Yes |
| 3. Eliminates seasonal/geographic errors | Yes |
| 4. Unfairly penalises/rewards some | Possibly |
| 5. Measure a degree of “commitment” | Yes |
| 6. Links to democratic process | Yes |

There is a clearly defined method and process for the collection of Electoral Roll data, clearly defined “qualifying criteria”, and there is a statutory requirement to report these. They are also not allowed to “stagnate” since they MUST be refreshed every 3 years.

The qualifying criteria eliminate any geographical errors and since this is fixed across a year (we intend to fix for 3 years initially) there are no “seasonal” issues.

There *is* a slight tendency for subscription “rates” to the Electoral roll in rural and smaller churches to be slightly higher than in urban areas, but it must be noted that the difference is only a few percentage points on average; but this is also a reflection of the greater “competition from other denominations” in towns compared to rural locations. It must be said however that the greater subscription rate is often matched by a greater participation rate which is also apparent in the “rates” of attendance.

The very fact that someone must take the effort to fill out a declaration to be on the Electoral Roll, is an indication of commitment and preparedness to “subscribe”. It also draws people and at least makes members aware of the democratic chain of hierarchy to which they are subscribing by “having a vote”. Numbers of ER members dictate how many seats a parish has on Deanery synod, and consequently how many seats in Diocesan synod a Deanery has. The more ER members you have, the louder your voice is in these synods, and the greater sway you have in deciding how budgets are allocated and ultimately as a consequence, how Parish share will be allocated and how much your Parish Share will be.