

Statistician Report -- Annual Conference, 2017

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A review of where we finished 2016 is in order. This is a table drawn from our last two annual reports.

Description	2015	2016	Numerical Change	Difference
Professing members at the close of last year	59,619	58,523	(1,096)	1% Decrease
<i>New or Restored Christians</i>	1,362	1,247	(115)	1% Decrease
Total Gains (and this includes New or Restored above)	2,377	2,289	(88)	3% Decrease
Total Losses	3,391	3,770	379	11% Increase
Professing members at the close of this year	58,605	57,042	(1,563)	2% Decrease
<i>Average attendance weekly worship services</i>	27,187	26,117	(1,070)	3% Decrease
<i>Baptized</i>	844	697	(147)	17% Decrease
<i>Enrolled in Confirmation</i>	404	461	57	14% Increase
Total Expenses Paid by all RMC Local Churches	\$66,704,020	\$65,487,022	\$(1,216,998)	1% Decrease
Total Income Reported by all RMC Local Churches	\$66,545,720	\$66,302,112	\$(243,608)	Less than 1% Decrease

The lines in yellow represent vitality metrics. We are down compared between 2015 and 2016 against ourselves. We are down in new Christians (slightly), average worship attendance, and baptisms (significantly). We are up in those enrolled in confirmation (significantly).

Before we start reflecting on the Rocky Mountain Conference, let us look at national numbers and where the Rocky Mountain Conference fits in relation to sister conferences. National numbers for 2016 are not available, so let's start with 2015.

Membership versus Attendance as a Metric: While we elect delegates to General Conference based on membership, it is not a valid metric for comparisons. A suburban Atlanta church is an illustration: Over 11,000 members and under 1,000 in attendance. Our zealous Western adherence to constantly "prune" our membership rolls is not shared by those with national political power. I prefer attendance as a closer approximation of church size, and depending on the movement of that metric, vitality.

Figure 1 on the next page shows from highest paid per attendee, to the lowest paid per attendee for 2015 in the US Conferences. The highest (New York) is \$64.44 per attendee and the lowest (Mississippi) is \$32.14 per attendee. The median (halfway point) is Iowa at \$46.99 (and is shown in blue on the figure). Rocky Mountain (shown in green) is third from the highest at \$62.86 per attendee. There are fifty-three conferences in this analysis, and all fifty-three names are not shown. The issue is primarily the columns.

While I have studied this for several years, I am quite candidly at a loss as to why the disparity between those paying the most "per capita" (in this case attendee) and those at the lower end is so great. I will continue to pursue this as an issue, but at the present time, I am lost on any rational explanation. Given that our average compensation for pastors is in the lower third, I do not understand how we can be in the top three on a per capita, year in and year out. It simply does not make any rational sense.

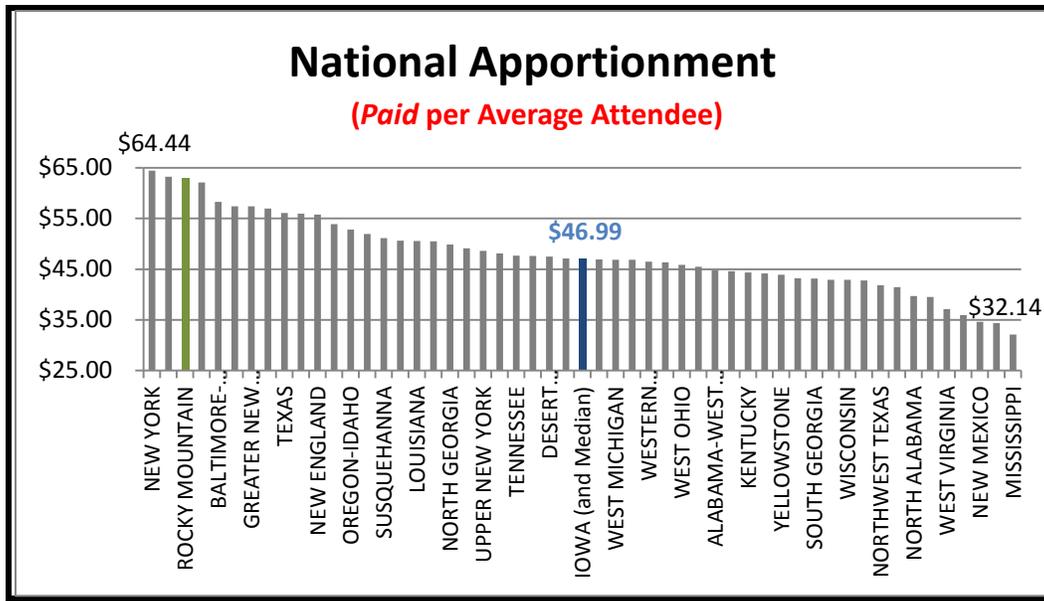


Figure 1 -- National Apportionment Paid per Attendee – 2015

Rather than provide six different figures like Figure 1, I offer a Table for your review. Again, there are fifty-three conferences examined here (removing the three missionary conferences from the analysis.) Upper third would be in the range of 1 to about 18. Middle third would be from 19 to 36, and lower third would be more than 36.

Metric	Rocky Mountain	Rank	Median	High	Low
Average Membership	229.4	17	199.5	498.9	85.9
Attendance	106.1	9	83.4	204.6	38.6
Natl Apportionment Paid per Attendee	\$62.86	3	\$46.99	\$64.44	\$32.14
Professions of Faith per 1,000 Attendees	42.1	15	37.1	60.6	24.7
Deaths per 1,000 Attendees	36.4	25	36.0	58.6	23.3
Baptisms per 1,000 Attendees	31.2	21	30.2	39.2	18.1

Table 1-- Key Metrics Comparing Rocky Mountain with other US Conferences

To review: The third metric down on the above table is the same metric as Figure 1. It restates in table form the same information. Rocky Mountain is third of all (fifty-three, non-missionary) US Conferences paid per Attendee at \$62.86. The median, high and low are shown on the Table.

Comments:

Average Membership: Rocky Mountain is seen as a large membership church conference and the table affirms that. Our average membership is three times that of the smallest US Conference. We are about thirty members per church higher than the median. We would probably be a greater distance over the median if all conferences shared our local church enthusiasm for pruning our vines of absent souls.

Attendance: Our average attendance in 2015 was 106.1 and we are in the top 10 here. Note: the 17th in average membership and 9th in average attendance reinforces the need for us to recognize that membership is a flawed metric.

Vital Congregation Indicators: The national church suggested several years ago that professions of faith, baptisms, and confirmations were good indicators, along with movement against attendance, of local church vitality. *I agree conceptually with this as long as they do not become numerical Golden Calves.* In the two displayed on this, at least in relation to other conferences, we are above or near average. We do continue, against ourselves over time, to trend down here and I will cover that later in this report.

Conclusion: Comparing ourselves against other conferences, places Rocky Mountain in a favorable light as least as it relates to congregational vitality as measured by the national church and for our financial support to the national and international church.

Review from Last Year. Last year in my Statistician's Report for the Journal I wrote addressing the attendance decline in the Rocky Mountain Conference:

"I would propose we treat the remainder of this paper as a first draft of history and the associated analysis as a plausible basis for this decline. As with any sociological phenomena, there are multiple explanations, and to suggest there is a single cause with one single effect, attendance decline, is problematic. However, there is some visual evidence that can be offered to at least partially explain what we are seeing. Let us start with looking at the life of organizations, specifically churches.

I wish to reprise elements of that theme.

Lovett Weems, Junior, in his 2003 leadership text *Take the Next Step*, addresses the idea that organizations have a normal life cycle. Figure 2 below frames this for us. Weems correctly observes six clear phases for organizations in general, and churches in specific. They are vision, growth, maintenance, decline, recognized decline, and crisis or death.

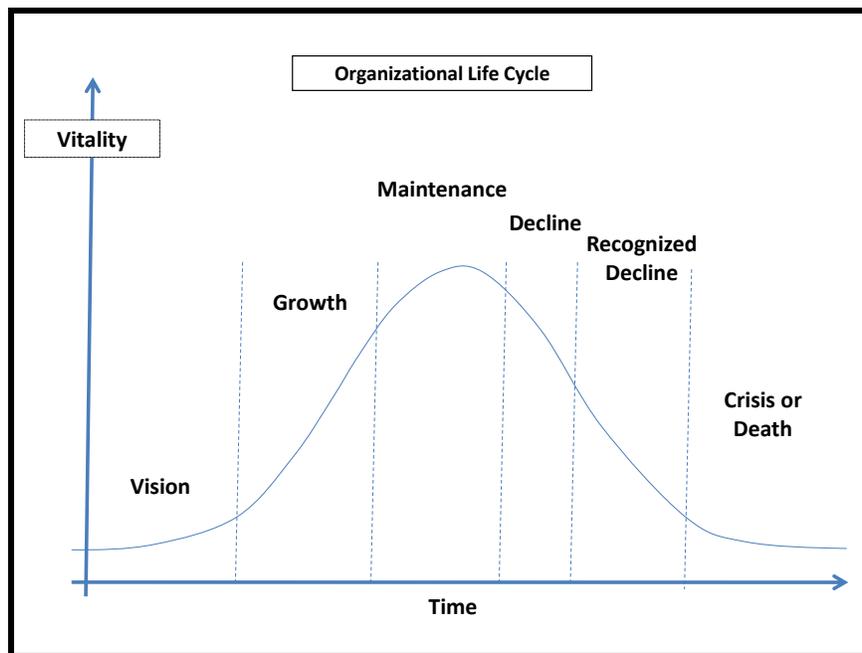


Figure 2: Weems Organizational Life Cycle

From last year I wrote: "Age [of the church] is not an automatic indicator of decline."

Figures 3 and 4 are meant to be examined together.

Figure 3 shows the decade of charter for existing RMC Churches. One can see after World War II a steady chartering of churches, which tapered off in the 90s and 00s, drawing to a near complete halt in the 10s.

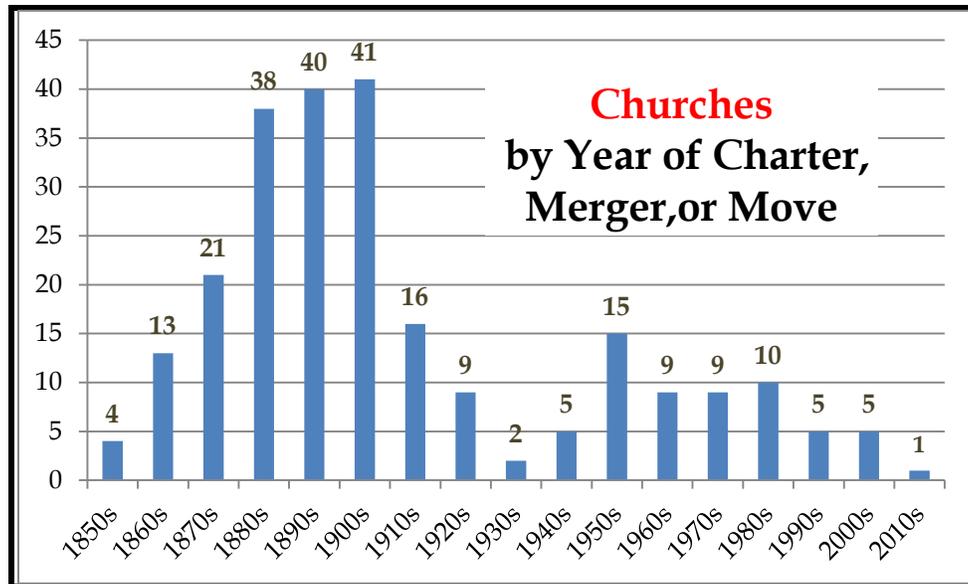


Figure 3 Decade of Charter for Existing RMC Churches

Figure 4 on the next page, is “A Complex Look at Attendance.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior once wrote: “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” There is complexity to Figure 4, which I think leads to a relatively simple comment. These thoughts help us understand the complexity of Figure 4 (next page).

- From 1976 to 2001, attendance was relatively “flat” (36,000 in 1976 and 36,700 in 2001).
- The Yellow Area is the sum of worship attendance for those churches chartered before 1974.
- The Green Area is the sum of worship attendance for those that were chartered, moved, or merged since 1974.
- The relatively steady attendance in the conference was the offset in decline from those churches chartered, merged, or moved since 1974.
- That point is supported by the attendance difference between those two categories in 1976 was 2,000 and in 2001 it was 8,000. The overall attendance was flat, but the difference between “newer” and “older” churches increased by 6,000.

I posit that Figure 4 demonstrates that much of our decline in attendance is due to “normal life cycle” aging of older congregations *but coupled* with our pause in new church starts over the last 25 years. It is absolutely true that the effectiveness of the new church starts in the 1970s and 80s were a significantly strong element in keeping our attendance “flat” in a time of denominational, and conference older church, decline. That period has ended, and it started ending in 2001.

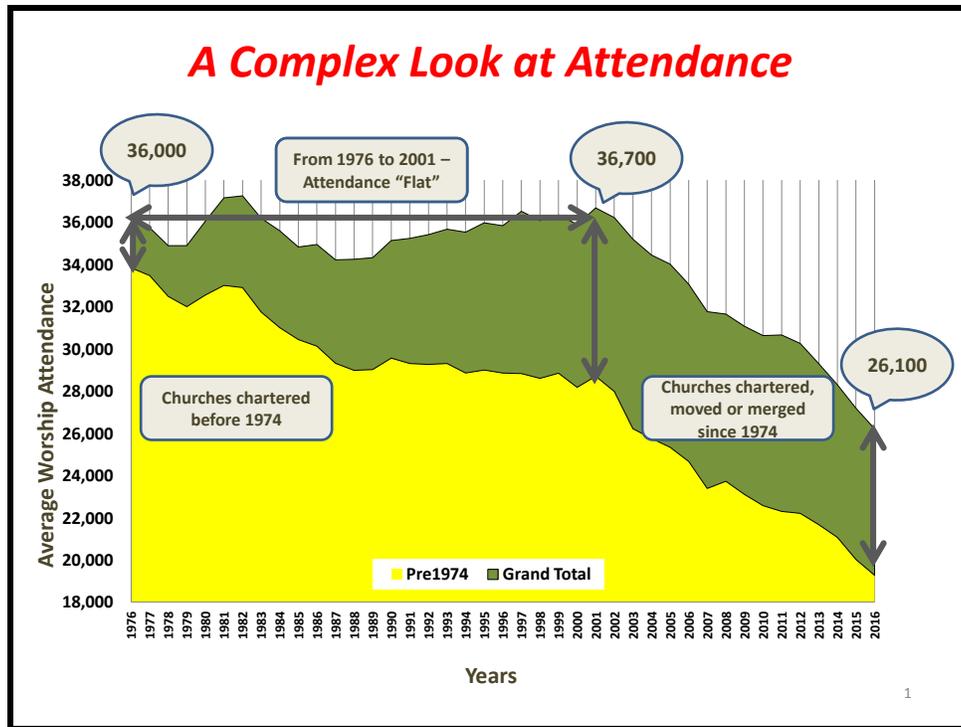


Figure 4 – Rocky Mountain Attendance Since 1974

Simple Conclusion: Our worship attendance decline is due to both natural life cycle aging and insufficient new church starts.

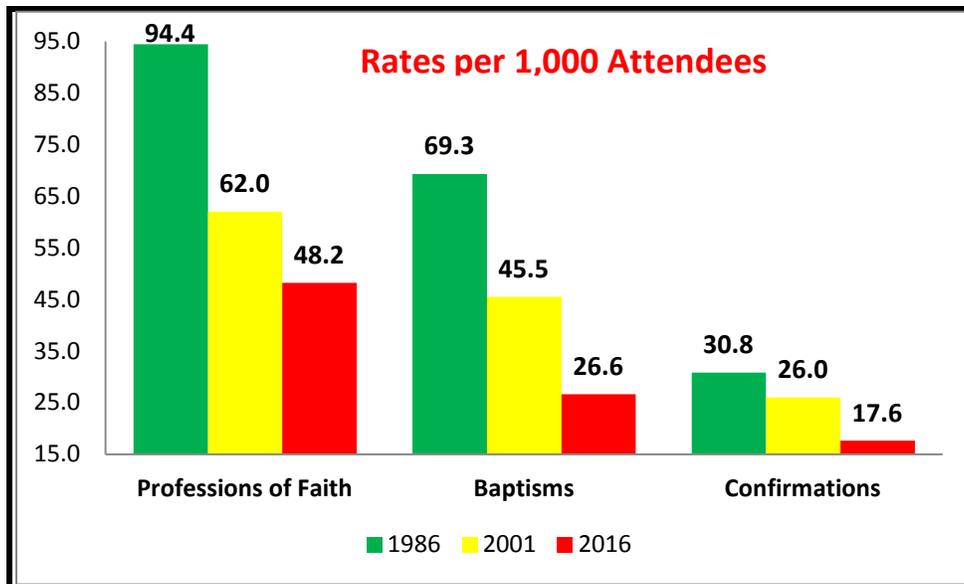


Figure 5 – Vitality Metrics over the Last Thirty Years

Figure 5 shows the rate of professions of faith, baptisms, and confirmations per 1,000 attendees for three dates in time: 1985, 2001 and 2016.

While the Rocky Mountain Conference has performed relatively well when compared with other conferences in these three metrics, comparing ourselves with ourselves over time, our positive “glow” is diminished.

I regularly am told that there is no evidence that baptisms, professions of faith, and confirmations lead to increases in worship attendance. I am gradually coming to a place where I question that statement. I continue to examine these three metrics and their impact on worship attendance. For example, if I look at thirteen churches chosen because of their percentage and numerical growth in attendance since 2001 these thirteen perform markedly better than the conference overall. Correlation is not causation. I am prepared to accept the idea that other factors at these thirteen churches are causing the attendance increases. There is more work to do here, but what I see developing is promising.

Last year on a paper I wrote for Bishop Elaine, Jeff Richards [now at Littleton UMC] wrote:

“The present cannot remain the present, but in the future is the God that calls us toward God’s self. Yes, we must move to a place of faithful anxiety, but, if the Gospel stories of the resurrection teach us anything, it is within that anxiety of something outlandishly new is movement of the Spirit. The recognitions and changes you invite require a leap of faith. We also need a proclamation of hope, a renewed trust that God is on the other end waiting to catch us in that leap of faith. With that kind of proclamation, we can turn to the future most faithfully.”

Those were, are, and I expect, will continue to be, excellent framing thoughts.

I do not write these reports to create anxiety, but rather to stimulate a sense of urgency in our collective and communal now.

It is my belief; we need to place our focus on strengthening and empowering local churches with all of our communal and connectional will and resources.

We must covenant to make strengthening and empowering our operational first principles.

Selah, Dennis Shaw