

FIEC Churches in 2017

Trends and Statistics from churches within the FIEC family

The following statistics give an idea of the growth and challenges facing churches that belong to FIEC (The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches).

Why a data survey?

In 2014/15 we asked our family of churches to provide us with statistics about their congregations and ministry. As the first detailed survey for over a decade, it helped FIEC refine its gospel priorities and where best to allocate resources.

One example was the overwhelming response from churches for a revitalisation initiative which we formally launched in January 2016, with the appointment of our Church Revitalisation Coordinator. We are now engaging with more than 100 churches – those in need of help and those which are offering support. We were able to tap into external funding sources for an initial three year programme. You can read more about this in section five.

In 2016/17 we repeated the data survey ¹, to build up a better picture of churches in the Fellowship and to identify emerging trends so we can serve FIEC's mission more effectively. More than 8 in 10 (82%) of churches responded. Only one in 17 (6%) did not respond to either of the surveys, so we are now more confident of extrapolating the figures for the Fellowship as a whole.

Data Survey	Participation
2014 - 2015	85%
2016 - 2017	82%

So, do read on and be encouraged by what we have found and challenged as to the scale of the unfinished gospel task we face. And then please pray for our great gospel task of reaching Britain for Christ.

Andrew Nicholson
FIEC Head of Development

1. Reaching Britain for Christ

If we are to reach our nation with the good news of the Lord Jesus, we need the churches that are part of the Fellowship to work together. It's been one of our greatest encouragements that more and more local churches are doing just that.

We've seen it in trust and friendships being fostered between leaders, to praying for other FIEC member churches and serving one another through sharing resources. And some of the outcomes?

¹ Inevitably, with the experience of the previous data survey, the latest survey responses have led to a number of clarifications and some minor revisions to figures reported in 2014/15.

More churches planted, more men and women trained for gospel ministry, churches revitalised and pastors reinvigorated for ministry in an increasingly secularised culture. The impact? More people added to the Kingdom, for which we rejoice and give thanks to God.

As we cast this gospel vision for Independent churches working together to reach Britain for Christ, others are being attracted to join the Fellowship. As we start our new FIEC year on 1 September 2017 we have 575 local congregations as part of the family, an increase of 4% over the two years. Some of the joiners were already in existence, but around one third were newly planted churches.

Year End	No. of Congregations
2015	552
2016	565
2017	575

Church planting

Since we launched our additional support for church plants almost three years ago, we have seen a steady stream of one new congregation a month on average being prepared for launch, with an expectation that over the course of eight years there will be a total of 100 new plants. These will be in all kinds of communities – from those which feature high up the UK Government’s Index of Multiple Deprivation, to those that seek to reach the student population.

Church Plants	Recognised in Year ²	New Congregations that have not asked for recognition
2014 - 2015	15	Data not collated
2015 - 2016	7	Data not collated
2016 - 2017	9	3

We’d like to offer more assistance to increase the rate of church planting and are in the early stages of establishing a Church Planting Grants Committee that might operate in a similar way to the Training Fund Grants Committee. In the past five years, more than £210,000 from the Training Fund has helped train people who will be working in 12 church plants. So, the need and appetite is there, we just need to secure an ongoing funding source to turn this into reality.

² FIEC is not asked to formally recognise every congregation planted by an FIEC church. Some are a) multi-site and intend to remain so; b) others remain ‘daughter congregations’ and become fully affiliated churches in due course and do not use the ‘recognition’ route as an interim stage; c) some are fully affiliated churches from launch

Baptisms and conversions ³

We remain encouraged by the number of baptisms reported amongst FIEC churches which can be extrapolated to 950 across all Fellowship churches.

We also asked how many people attending FIEC churches are believed to have been converted during the previous twelve months. Churches found this a more challenging figure to establish, but encouragingly, the reported figures equate to 900 across all Fellowship churches.

We thank God that he continues to be at work while churches faithfully go about their gospel task of proclaiming and sharing the Good News.

	2014/15	2016/17	Increase
Baptisms	820	950	16%

If Christians in FIEC churches are dying at the same rate as the general population then we can expect just less than 1% of believers to die every year. So, we would hope to find that people are coming to faith at a greater rate, which at 1.7% of regular attenders, would look to be the case.

Of course, this represents just tiny fraction of people who are not yet believers and even when we take into account people becoming Christians in other church networks or denominations, the likelihood that only about 3%⁴ of people in Great Britain are born-again believers, is cause for much prayer.

2. Meeting for worship

Before commenting specifically on the number of people attending FIEC churches, it may be helpful to clarify how the latest set of data relates to the previous survey.

As the number of churches in the Fellowship increases, changes in attendance figures will be the net result of churches that are new to, or have left, the Fellowship along with churches that have remained part of the Fellowship throughout.

Our experience has been that churches joining are, on average, larger than churches that are leaving (or closing). In addition, the age profile is, on average, younger in churches that are joining than in churches that are leaving (or closing).

³ The figures for baptisms and conversions relate to the previous 12 month period (rather than to the two years since the previous survey)

⁴ Estimations from church research groups suggest that church-going evangelicals form just 2.9% of the overall population of Britain. Even that figure is influence upwards by London where Brierley Consultancy (www.brierleyconsultancy.com/capitalgrowth) suggests the figure is 5.4%. In reality this figure is likely to be closer to 1% in some areas of our nation.

For example, among the 70% of churches that completed both data surveys, the increase in typical Sunday attendance was 2% (against a UK population increase of around 1.5%). But the net increase across the whole Fellowship was 8% for the reasons outlined above.

Typical Sunday

Some 41,600 people meet for worship in FIEC churches on any typical Sunday morning – with adults accounting for 32,600 and young people (under 18), 9,000.

Data Survey	Typical Sunday Total	Increase	Adults	Increase	Children	Increase
2014 - 2015	38,600	n/a	30,600	n/a	8,000	n/a
2016 - 2017	41,600	8%	32,600	7%	9,000	13%

Regular attenders

But as church leaders are only too aware, many people who consider themselves committed do not necessarily attend as frequently as they once did. Several detailed surveys done by larger FIEC churches of their own congregations highlight this quite starkly – and they are also attracting more unbelievers who are interested enough to want to attend from time to time.

So, counting 'regular attenders' as people who come at least once a month, the number of individuals attending Sunday morning worship ⁵ increases to 52,600 – that's 41,300 adults and 11,300 children. In total that's almost 7,000 more people attending FIEC churches compared to two years previously.

This was one of our most significant findings and is one of the reasons we are glad to have Ray Evans as part of the FIEC team in the role of Church Leadership Consultant. He's been busy helping leaders of larger churches with the leadership skills they need serving growing congregations.

Data Survey	Regular Attender Total	Increase	Adults	Increase	Children	Increase
2014 - 2015	45,700	n/a	36,400	n/a	9,300	n/a
2016 - 2017	52,600	15%	41,300	13%	11,300	21%

The changes in regular attendance resulting from churches joining or leaving and the growth of churches that have remained part of FIEC throughout are as follows:

Category	Effect on regular attendance

⁵ With a number of church plants (in particular) opting for Sunday afternoon, rather than Sunday morning, services, the report on our 2018/19 data survey will refer to those attending the *main* Sunday worship service

New churches joining FIEC	+ 3,800
Churches leaving FIEC or closing	- 800
Existing churches growing	+3,900
Net effect	+6,900

Service patterns

The trend, noted in the previous survey, of churches no longer gathering on a Sunday evening continues. Just seven in ten (71%) churches meet in the afternoon / evening, compared to almost eight in ten (77%) last time. But the traffic is not all one way.

A number of newer church plants meet in the afternoons and some churches have re-started their Sunday evening gatherings. Others have re-purposed their second Sunday meeting and we ran an article on the FIEC website to highlight a number of such initiatives (go to fiec.org.uk and search for "Sunday services").

Data Survey	Churches with afternoon / evening services
2014 - 2015	77%
2016 - 2017	71%

3. Membership

Churches which are affiliated to FIEC are asked to help financially towards the costs of our gospel mission. The suggested donation levels are based on the number of church members and equates to around 50p per member per week.

The number of church members stands at 28,200. Whilst there has been an increase of 1,200 (4%) since the previous survey, among the seven in ten (70%) of churches that completed surveys in both years the increase was a negligible 0.6%.

This could indicate a number of things, including a potential decline in people's willingness to 'commit', through to more unbelievers attending church.

Data Survey	Membership	Increase
2014 - 2015	27,000	n/a
2016 - 2017	28,200	4%

4. Congregation

Students

For the first time we asked about the number of undergraduate students attending churches during term-time, which is more than 1,200. If non-reporting churches are included the true figure is likely to be nearer 1,500. FIEC is not currently represented in a number of major student centres and there is scope for reaching more young men and women at this pivotal moment in their lives.

Ethnic minorities

It's clear that with an increasingly diverse population and the task of distinguishing ethnicity from nationality not always easily understood, we can't be sure our statistics are as reliable as we would like.

But taken as reported, we are encouraged that non-White ethnicities appear to represent around one in six of the adult congregation (16%) compared to one in seven (13%) in the previous survey.

For the first time we asked for data on non-White young people under 18 and this was much higher at one in four (23%). In the population as a whole, the figure for all ages is around one in seven (14%). Of course, that figure is significantly affected by London where some 40% of the population is non-White.

We have a small number of congregations who exclusively use languages other than English in their worship services (such as Arabic, French, and Romanian) and some which use other languages in part of their service (such as Farsi and Gujartati)

There are also a number of churches that truly reflect the ethnic diversity of the communities in which they serve. We know we have more work to do to engage with biblically-faithful Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) Churches and their leaders.

Older members

Just over one in nine (11%) of people attending FIEC churches are thought to be age 75 or over, compared to one in 12 (8.5%) of the population as a whole. This is slightly higher than in the previous survey but is perhaps not surprising with an aging population.

5. Church revitalisation

Whilst the report so far paints a picture of growth and modest gospel fruit, there is another side to the statistics that is masked by the overall totals.

We've already indicated that a significant number of churches are engaging with us in our revitalisation initiative. And all of the smaller churches asking for help would feature in one, if not several, of the following statistics:

- No conversions in 204 or nearly half (46%) of reporting churches.
- No baptisms in 199, or nearly half (45%) of reporting churches

- No young people in one in eight (12%) of our churches on a typical Sunday, with almost one third (30%) having five or fewer.
- Just over half of our churches (53%) have fewer than 35 members, a figure that has remained relatively flat, going as far as a decade back.

However, this last statistic itself masks some deeper issues. On average slightly more than four churches a year are closing. As they close, others are falling below 35 members and so maintaining this ratio.

Taking the churches which completed both surveys, four in ten (39%) are declining and more than half (56%) report growth in the number of regular attenders.

But smaller churches are about twice as likely to be declining than larger ones, with more than half (54%) of churches with 35 or fewer regular attenders declining, compared to just one quarter (26%) of churches with 100 or more regular attenders.

So, how can FIEC help? Well, we must first be careful not to make mistakes. A large church is not necessarily as healthy church, much as a small church is not necessarily an unhealthy one. God loves small churches too!

However, the Church Revitalisation Initiative provides a great opportunity for healthy churches to get alongside struggling churches so that, together, they might find a way for a work to flourish once again. In September 2017 we hosted a Forum for larger churches to discuss this kind of opportunity.

And we also see the need to make available some resources that elders / leaders (not necessarily paid pastors) of smaller churches can access that will help them as they seek to lead churches in a godly and faithful way.

6. Further research

In the course of collecting the data and talking to church leaders, we began to pick up some of the key trends identified above and some anecdotal evidence of other factors affecting the life and witness of local churches. We brought together a Focus Group of leaders selected from a broad variety of situations – churches in student centres, rural hubs, London, deprived communities, commuter belt and so on.

Here are some of their observations around the three areas we asked them to discuss:

The changing patterns of attendance

“We used to assume that if we had announced/communicated something once in a Sunday morning service, then the vast majority of the church was aware – this assumption is no longer valid.”

“The congregation has changed over the past few years, more children in the morning, smaller congregation in the evening due to babysitting, an increasing number of people who come more occasionally but consider themselves [as] regulars.”

“Working people are now much less likely to attend Sunday evening services, and mid-week meetings than a decade ago.”

“We have a core group of around 50 who would never miss a service, and then a much larger group who attend from 50% of meetings, to as low as once a month.”

The changing nature of understandings of 'community'

"In the working class and deprived housing community, it is all about neighbourhood and many people rarely leave it. In growing middle class areas, community is network not geographical."

"It's our observation that within the 'council estate culture' people tend to live, work, and stay local. There is lots of family overlap, expectations of looking out for each other, everyone knowing everyone and generally up for social stuff."

"As our neighbourhood has increased in wealth, the community has become even more polarised along class lines. Whilst locals identify strongly as belonging to [name of area], in reality they mean that they identify only with others of their social class in the local area."

The changing nature of migration

"The biggest impact for us is that our students all head off to university and few return."

"Dramatic rise in the cost of living in inner London and other large cities has created a generational divide: those under the age of 50 are broadly transient (maximum three years); those over the age of 50 are likely to live within two miles of the church and been regular attenders for 20+ years. It makes change hard as the younger generation are unlikely or unable to stay for the medium to long term."

It was fascinating to hear the participants' experiences and perceptions. A better understanding of what it was like to 'do church' in other settings was one outcome and another was their growing sense of inter-dependence as part of the FIEC family of churches. This came through particularly strongly in the area of migration within Great Britain. Whatever we feel about it, migration within Great Britain has significant effects for many local churches from the:

- young people migrating to a university city / town (1 million on the move each year - a population the size of Birmingham ⁶), to the more than a quarter of graduates who end up in London (half from some universities) ⁷ and the relative lack of migration in / out of more deprived areas, and the
- fluid population within London (pastors might only have people to disciple for just a few years) to the significant net out-migration from the capital (mainly when children start to approach school age) now at the level of 100,000 each year. ⁸

FIEC will be producing a round-table discussion video resource so that a wider group of our leaders can 'listen in' on this type of discussion and hopefully understand more about our inter-dependence as churches.

7. Conclusions

Statistics only show one facet of FIEC. They are not its heartbeat, but they do give an indication of trends that should be heeded, challenges to be faced and opportunities that could be taken.

⁶ Internal Migration: Geographical Perspectives and Processes (Smith, Darren)

⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/11/21/londons-job-market-calls-for-young-graduates-as-scale-of-the-uks/>

⁸ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/08/Get-a-move-on.pdf>

While we were pleasantly surprised at the increasing number of people attending FIEC churches and the rate at which new churches are being planned and planted, we must work hard to be gospel-generous, seeking the good of others and serving the wider cause of the gospel. As well as encouraging gospel initiatives that touch all kinds of communities, especially those in more deprived areas where resources are likely to be less readily available to enable self-supporting congregations.