

Numbers that Count

By Tom Rawls

April 2008

Acts 16:5, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."

Some people say numbers are unimportant. I disagree. Numbers are a useful tool to objectively inform us of how our church is growing. Numbers are a reflection of either what God is doing or of what we are not doing.

A criticism leveled at some churches is that they are just interested in numbers. It's that little word "just" that causes me concern – because we're not "just" interested in numbers. Every person who comes to our church is someone of value, they are someone Jesus knows, loves and died for – people are important.

At Proclaimers church we state in our values document that; "as a church we are committed to give priority to people before money, structures, systems and other institutional machinery." Our church values people.

We see in scripture that crowds followed Jesus, but some of the most powerful events recorded were when Jesus took time to interact with individuals – Jesus spoke to crowds but loved the individuals. Jesus gave us permission to leave the crowd – the 99 – and go out to search for the one – the lost sheep. So people are important and the 1 is valued.

Having laid that foundation, why are numbers important? The reason they are is that they are a reflection of things happening or not happening in our church. Some numbers are important and others are very important.

Just before we get into this thought I want to remind you there is a whole book in the bible with the name Numbers. And this book is full of numbers.

Numbers that count

In our opening scripture it is recorded that "the churches were strengthened in faith and grew in numbers." Note there was a measuring of both faith and church growth. Faith was strengthened – or was reinforced or fortified – this represents an outcome that is measurable but measurable using a subjective or experiential set of criterion that some say would be spiritual.

The next comment was the church grew in numbers – this is a measurement we are all familiar with – this measurement is quantifiable, objective and independent. It shows that the church is growing by people being added to the faith community on a regular bases. **Acts 2:41** says, "Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day."

So what do we count and what numbers are a good reflection of what is taking place in your church? Let me make some suggestions;

- The number of first time visitors who come to your Sunday services.
- The number of people who make a decision to follow Jesus.
- The number of new people who are still there a year later – this can be referred to as "retention rate".
- The number of baptisms that take place – this could be calculated annually.
- The number of people attending the services.

- The number of Pounds, Euros or Kroner you receive in your offerings.
- The number of children in a service.

These numbers when collected carefully and used wisely will give you a fairly good reflection of the health and growth of your church.

Why is this information so important? These numbers are indicators of church health. Some church leaders may justify their lack of growth in numbers by saying they are growing spiritually – and this is indeed a good thing but we need both – growth in faith and growth in numbers.

I believe the New Testament's narrative is that church should be expanding in numbers of people as well as growing in faith. The book of Acts makes this point repeatedly **Acts 5:14**, "Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number."

Simply said churches need to be growing in faith and also numerically growing. Church needs to be externally focused, we must be churches with a heart for the lost. Our churches are given a mandate by God to reach people for Christ and see those people assimilated into the life and vitality of a local church – preferably OUR local church.

I want to encourage church leaders we can have both good spiritual growth and have measurable numerical growth as well. So how do we count and what do we measure numerically?

A. Attendance:

The number of people attending every service should be counted. We need to know how many people we had in church over every given weekend. It's good to know how many babies you have and how many children are part of your church. It's vital to know these details as they will help you strategically plan and make goals for growth and for the transition of young members into active service in church.

Recording these numbers is also a reality check – you cannot grow or move forward if you don't know where you are. If you don't know where you are – the reality – then you won't know how to plot the course forward or even know when you have arrived at a destination!

How do you count? Let me share some experience:

Sunday services: Count the number of people who attend.

- Count the number of adults in every service.
- Count the number of children – most churches have a children's work and they will decide at what age a person is a child and when they become an adult.
- Make sure you count attendance for each service – many churches now have multiple service where they do 2 identical service in a day.
- What is the total attendance for the day?

Some care needs to be taken as you collect these numbers – some weekends are bigger in attendance than others – this is normal. Weekly statistics have a habit of going up and down – but monthly figures give you a more rounded understanding.

Annual figures are even better – looking at three years of figures should give you a good idea of whether your church is growing or not. Annual figures then give you an understanding of a percentage growth a year – anything between 5% and 15% growth per year is considered good.

Statistics are helpful as instead of looking at a low summer attendance you can encourage yourself by looking at the summer attendance over the last three years and see increase.

Instead of looking at figures from a special event where numbers go through the roof and then going back to "normal numbers" look at an average over a month or a year and you'll see where these wild numbers both up and down start to round out.

For a church to be growing there needs to be a steady regular increase of people actually attending weekly services. This measurable growth is a reflection that your church is growing. For instance at Proclaimers we have been able to see that in 2006 compared to 2007 records of total attendance saw increase in the size of our Sunday service. Comparing 2006 attendance figures with 2007 attendance figures we can calculate we sustained a 20% increase in attendance.

What do you do if the numbers are remaining static or worse going down? You could say this makes a good subject for another article. But let me make a few comments here. What if your church has not seen significant growth over a 3 to 5 year period?

What if your church has grown one year but decreased in attendance the next – it may look like this 50 in year 1 and 120 in year 2 but then down to 80 in year 3. Or 250 in year 1 – up to 350 in year 2 – no growth in year 3 and then down to 280 in year 4.

Let me make a number of comments here.

1. I have discovered that growing churches are led by growing leaders. Leaders who are not growing themselves will not lead growing church. If your church has not significantly grown in the last 3 years maybe it is because you are not growing and changing and developing yourself as a leader. (Check out my next article of developing an annual personal growth plan).

2. I have discovered that leaders of growing church know and understand about leading through their team. There are many leaders who for many reasons don't train, develop and trust other leaders to lead in their church. At worst they are "one-man-bands" or control freaks – or they are leaders with a few bad experiences from letting others have a go at leadership, or others still have bruises, cuts and broken hearts over betrayal.

The bold fact is that one person can only ever lead a certain amount of people – that number is determined by their personal capacity – some good leaders can lead a church of 250 – great leaders maybe a church of 500 but there will come a point when your personal capacity has been reached and that is where your church stalls.

3. I have discovered that pastors of growing churches understand the need to organize for growth, produce systems that sustain growth and manage and nurture the growth by training and instructing their leaders. If we want to lead a growing church where the numbers grow regularly then we will have to learn leadership and learn how to lead through others in our teams. (Look at my previous article on developing a leadership team).

B. Other important indicators of growth

1. The number of first time guests who visit your church are a great indicator of your ability to draw a crowd. Drawing a crowd is important because it is from a crowd you build a congregation – it is out of a crowd you see a growing group of committed people being added to the church.

If your number of first time guests is low or nonexistent then you need to have a time of brain storming on how to get more people through the door. You need to work out how to connect

with more people who in turn become first time guests to your services.

Maybe the environment of your church isn't good for first time visitors, maybe you need to do some work on your presentation, the music, clean up the place a bit, find a new venue that encourages people to come and stay, you might need to consider offering great coffee or tea with some delicious snacks.

It may be as simple as organizing a great hosting team who welcome people from the car park or the tube station. A group of people wearing brightly colored T-shirts with an original design also wearing smiling faces and carrying a happy spirit meeting people at the door of your venue would help.

Upping the invitation rate of your church could be achieved through going out and inviting friends and work mates using tastefully designed postcards advertising relevant themes and special message series.

Upping the invitation rate could be centered on special times in the calendar like "Father's Day" or "Mother's Day" – in some cultures Christmas and Easter are good times as well. Valentine's Day has proven a good attraction time for some churches.

Others churches use a Church picnics, a children's special, a night at a pub, special occasions like a "wine and cheese night" or a church social event like a Ball. The list is endless as we begin to brain storm other special events to aid us in upping the invitation rate.

2. The number of people coming to Jesus or being connected with God receiving salvation. This is a direct reflection of your church's evangelistic appeal – the question needs to be asked, are people being drawn to Jesus? Are people connecting with Christ – are lives being renewed lives are people being transformed. Do people respond to your call for salvation?

Of all the indicators and reflections of growth, this one gauge or marker is a really important sign of growth. If I might be a bit blunt here too – the number of people coming to Christ is a main indicator of whether or not your church is being effective in the city, community or area. We've been called to call "sinners to repentance" not be involved in the game of reshuffling the sheep in the pasture. True growth is recorded as new Christians are added to the church.

Salvations are a key growth indicator of whether or not you are fulfilling the great and last command of Jesus. Churches exist to invite people to Christ – the church is in the world to connect other with Jesus Christ – as leaders of the church we validate our leadership by whether or not people are coming to Christ.

Jesus speaking in **Matthew 5: 13 – 16** says this; "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world."

"God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven." [The Message]

Seeing people come to Christ is vital – it is what we're here to do. So what do we do if they are

not? What needs to change if we are not seeing people receive Christ? Let me make a few comments here:

- Start asking people to receive Christ. In many of our service we simply don't ask people if they want to receive Christ – for whatever reason we stop short of asking people to respond to our message by accepting Christ as their Savior. Give a call for salvation in every service.
- For many churches there is no expectation that people will respond to an invitation. At this point the job of a church leader is to build the culture of expectation and develop a culture where you make it easy for people to respond to Christ.

To see more people responding to Christ may mean working on how to do church better – get rid of the boring bits or the bits that don't relate to those outside the church – it may be as simple as just changing the way you speak about God – stop using lots of Christian words and start speaking in a relevant way about Jesus.

It will most certainly involve you in teaching and training your church to be those who bring their friends. Bringing some one is easier than just inviting. Give your people something to invite their friends and family to – try a baptism service – a baby dedication service – or maybe a church dinner. Have other things mid week to get people to bring their friends to so they meet others from the church.

- Celebrate every salvation – scripture indicates there is some rejoicing that goes on in heaven when “one sinner repents” – it should be our practice to celebrate every salvation – clap – shout and train your people to go up and congratulate that new person for coming to Jesus and beginning this new life.

Conclusions:

There are many other indicators of growth – for instance finances are usually 6 to 9 months behind numerical attendance – it may take new Christians time to see and understand tithing before they begin. It is good to track your financial growth by measuring the amounts coming in by cash, cheque and by credit or debit card – it is also a healthy thing to see what percentage of your income comes by standing order or direct debit – it is a healthy sign when members automate their giving.

The numbers of baptisms reflect discipleship – the number of people on team is an indication of how well people are moving towards serving. It's good to know the number of children in your services as you plan for the future seeing them grow and move from one level of church life to another and to insure they make that transition well.

There are numbers that count – there are numbers we should be concerned about and numbers we can just watch. At the end of the day healthy things grow and as we major on our health as leaders and work towards a healthy church then it will grow.

1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”