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The Numbers to Know for Church Health

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Danny R. Von Kanel

abstract

The church growth movement has long been criticized as being only interested in numbers.” However, this article goes beyond simplistic attention to worship attendance to quantify a series of indicators of church health and suggest proper ratios that are consistent with growing churches. The study concludes with a description of the stages of maturity and provides a self-administered diagnostic tool for gauging spiritual maturity in the life of the believer.

Talk of numbers raises concerns when discussed in the church—particularly when it’s about church attendance or as a measurement of church growth. Yet, a cursory look in Scripture, and numbers jump off the page declaring, “If Jesus and the Apostles used me, why can’t the church?” Indeed, ignoring numbers as they reflect church health is just as deadly to the church as cancer is to the human body. So, with what numbers should we concern ourselves when it comes to our church health? Consider the following:

Though ministry participation doesn't give a complete picture, it is an indicator. How many people are involved in some ministry compared to your total active membership? That number shows how many God has touched to live out their faith. Though some may serve out of guilt or fear, it adequately represents ministry involvement. If that number is under 20%, be concerned.

Be sure you count real ministry involvement. Food bank, homeless shelter, unwed mother care, divorce recovery, marriage enrichment and counseling, prison ministry, and special ministries during the holidays are just a few ministries that can and should be counted in this number. Regular program involvement is left out of this number, unless strictly ministry related.

Unique ministries such as Lara Moody's should also be counted in that number. Lara Moody, founder and director of Walk by Faith Ministries, was challenged by her pastor to deliver peanut butter to Haiti. Read his invitation: "The Skippy Peanut Butter company has donated \$40,000 of peanut butter for the 1500 children who come daily to the feeding stations in Port Au Prince, Haiti," Pastor Freddie explained. "I need you to get it moved from Little Rock, Arkansas, to Miami, Florida, where it will be shipped to Haiti."¹ The rest is history. Such numbers reveal the true heart of your people.

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2. bible study attendance

Declining numbers in this area point to lost interest in Bible study, a sure measurement of spiritual apathy or indifference.

Conventional wisdom suggests that older adults are more likely to participate spiritually, and Barna research confirmed such thinking. Two-thirds of small group attendees as well as house church participants and three-fifths of church volunteers and Sunday school goers were ages 45 older. The most age-balanced activity was church attendance, with 56% of the spiritually active population being age 45 or older and 44% being ages 18 to 44. (Nationally, 52% of the population is 45-plus.)²

Though participation clearly does not indicate spiritual growth, the fact people are in Bible study and hearing God's Word suggests people's desire to grow.

¹ "A Phenomenal Story of the Lord at Work: The Peanut Butter Project."

<<http://walkbyfaithministry.blogspot.com/2010/04/phenomenal-testimony-of-lord-at-work.html>>.

² Barna Research. "Who is Active in 'Group' Expressions of Faith? Barna Study Examines Small Groups, Sunday School, and House Churches." June 28, 2010. <<http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/400-who-is-active-in-group-expressions-of-faith-barna-study-examines-small-groups-sunday-school-and-house-churches>>.

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Where desire is absent, so are members. The larger the senior adult population compared to young adults, the more you should be concerned. Without young adults, you have no young families. No young families equal no children. At that point, your church is a generation from extinction.

Gary McIntosh, church growth consultant says, “Even with the best small group ministry available, not all of your adults will choose to participate. Generally, a healthy church will have 50% of its adult worshippers participating in its small groups.”³ If your number is below this percentage, be concerned.

3. the number of children

A church without children in worship or Bible study has a limited future. Children bring excitement and encouragement to older members because they recognize this is their church’s future. Even the most self-absorbed senior adult recognizes that if his church is without children, it faces a very bleak future.

David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group says, Most American adults recall frequent faith activity when they were growing up. Moreover, it provides clarity that the odds of one sticking with faith over a lifetime are enhanced in a positive direction by spiritual activity under the age of 18. And it raises the intriguing possibility that being involved at least a few times a month is correlated with nearly the same sticking power as weekly involvement—especially among teenagers.⁴

Look at the number of children in Bible study and worship. Bible study numbers are readily available, but you may have to work at getting them for worship. Both numbers should give a good indication of involvement. Be concerned if you only have a handful on roll or if in a larger church, a handful in each grade (first through sixth).

Include number of children in children’s church and adult worship, but have your staff wrestle with any implications of children not being in corporate worship with their parents. Consider the article by Dr. Rob Rienow, marriage and family pastor at Wheaton Bible Church, entitled, “Do Children Belong in Church? A Biblical Overview” as an argument for leaving children in adult worship.⁵

³ Gary McIntosh. “McIntosh’s Church Growth Answer Book Diagnoses and Prescriptions for Growing a Healthy Church.” 1998. <<http://www.churchleader.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=yRGkdudNtQ%3D&tabid=77&mid=525>>.

⁴ Barna Research. “New Research Explores the Long-Term Effect of Spiritual Activity among Children and Teens,” 2009.

⁵ Dr. Bob Rienow. <<http://www.visionaryparenting.com/documents/do%20children%20belong%20in%20church.pdf>>.

Related to number three, the absence of young married adult participation or significant marital problems (separation, divorce, etc.) reveal deep spiritual health needs. Barna says, “One of the challenges for churches that rely on small group strategies is that they are the ‘oldest’ form of participatory faith expression (median age of 56) and they are least likely to include parents of young children.”⁶

Young adult singles have left the church in droves, but, according to research, 70% of those dropouts return at age 23–30.

- **51%** were influenced by the encouragement of either family or friends
 - **39%** say parents or family members encouraged them to attend
 - **21%** say friends or acquaintances encouraged them to attend
- **34%** simply felt a desire to return
 - **41%** women
 - **22%** men
- **28%** felt that God was calling them to return to the church
 - **34%** women
 - **18%** men
- **24%** had children and felt it was time for them to start attending
 - **31%** women
 - **13%** men
- **20%** got married and wanted to attend with their spouse.⁷

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An important observation is if you don’t see these kind of numbers returning, be aware you may be in trouble. Begin a concerted outreach to this age group.

As you look at these numbers, less stress should consume your thinking if you only have traditional Bible studies (Sunday school), and numbers of young families are low. However, do become creative and begin to offer home Bible studies or other small cell groups—groups for which faith expression is more common for young families.

If you already have such groups, and participation is still low, then be alarmed. Examine present groups for leadership, location, schedule, and timing issues.

⁶ Barna Research. “Who is Active in ‘Group’ Expressions of Faith? Barna Study Examines Small Groups, Sunday School, and House Churches.” June 28, 2010. <<http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/400-who-is-active-in-group-expressions-of-faith-barna-study-examines-small-groups-sunday-school-and-house-churches>>.

⁷ LifeWay Research. “Why Young Adults Stop, Start, Restart Attending Church.” <<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:piqKMA7VYeIJ:churchrelevance.com/why-young-adults-stop-continue-and-restart-attending-church/+young+married+adults+attending+church&cd=8&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>>.

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5. the number of members showing obvious growth in their spiritual walk

According to Barna Research, “Effective and periodic measurement of spirituality—conducted personally or through a church—is not common at this time and it is not likely to become common in the near future.”⁸ That must change, though, if we are to secure the growth we want.

Although this number is the hardest to obtain, it is worth the effort. Begin by making an assessment tool describing your understanding of spiritual growth (see the stages of maturity and the assessment tool at the end of this article).

A team of spiritual leaders (lay or church staff) should go through church rolls, complete an individual assessment on each member (excluding children), and average the scores of team members. Though differences of opinion will surface among team members, for the sake of unity, don’t allow for debate. Use the averaged score as your measure.

Sort the stacks of forms. If more than half of your church membership falls in the “Growing” category, be encouraged. Look for ways to enlarge that number.

6. the number of givers

Growth in giving can be traced to growth in spiritual knowledge and understanding. The more we fall in love with Jesus, the more we will want to be obedient in all areas of our life—especially related to giving.

Though all churches have been affected by the economic downturn, “One measure of American generosity that has stayed relatively consistent—despite the economic turmoil—is the practice of tithing.”⁹ So measuring growth by giving patterns is still a realistic evaluation instrument.

The typical church has “10% who provide 40% of the income; 30% provide the next 40%; and 60% provide the last 20%.”¹⁰ Become uneasy if giving numbers stray far from these percentages. The top two need to stay constant or increase if true church health is to continue.

Nothing shows where our heart is better than assessing what people do with their finances. Check tithing records, and get a number of people who have contributed to your church the past year. Don’t concern yourself with finding out

⁸ George Barna. “Barna Studies the Research, Offers a Year-in-Review Perspective,” 2009.

⁹ Barna Research. “The Economy’s Impact (Part 3 of 3): Donors Reduce Giving, Brace for the Long Haul,” February 8, 2010.

¹⁰ Lovett H. Weems, Jr. “Understanding Giving Patterns in Your Congregation.” <<http://www.churchleadership.com/leadingideas/issues/pdf/2009/090107.pdf>>.

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if they are actually tithing. You really don't want to go there, nor is it necessary. Whatever number you come up with, subtract 20% (those who give but don't actually tithe—that is the probable number of true givers. If this number is less than 20%, you are most likely having money issues. If not, a worse crisis confronts you—one or a handful of members are supporting your church.

Prolonged, poor giving status in the local church hinders church progress. It is an indicator that other things are more important than God's kingdom. Seek to increase this number through stewardship messages, a tithing emphasis or campaign, or one on one impromptu discussions on giving with key members.

Numbers matter. Knowing which ones impact church health is crucial to becoming God's church in the twenty-first century. As you determine the number in Bible study and numbers related to children, young families, spiritual growth, and giving, you are on your way to securing your church's future—and its ultimate health.

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stages of maturity

Trusting Stage (Spiritual infancy: 0–3 years as a Christian)

- Basic understanding of the Gospel.
- Living on the “milk of the Word.”
- Initially excited about telling others about Jesus immediately after conversion.
- Struggles with gaining victory over sin.
- Tends to be easily offended by others.

Training Stage

- Knows Bible facts; little understanding of application.
- Still on the “milk of the Word” but occasionally understands a deep spiritual truth.
- Begins training to gain the fruits of prayer and Bible study.
- Becoming comfortable with religious language.
- Still struggles with gaining victory over sin.
- Less offended by others.

Testing Stage

- Begins to apply Scripture but hesitant to tell others.
- Testing the waters to take the next step towards spiritual maturity.
- Early steps into the “meat of the Word.”
- Moving into memorization and meditation in the spiritual disciplines.
- Starting to gain victory over sin; new sins of the mind the biggest battle.

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- Sees the need to make things right with those who offend and those offended.

Talking Stage

- Sees the need and begins talking to others about Christ.
- Reads and studies Scriptures to find, hear, and do what God is saying.
- Fully engaged in the “meat of the Word.”
- Continues to gain victory over sin.
- Is willing to lovingly confront others if needed.
- Has a hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Teaching Stage

- A bold witness for Christ.
- Engaged in discipling another person.
- Lives a life of surrender and sacrifice.
- A prayer warrior.
- Able and willing to teach others the “meat of the Word.”

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assessment tool

1. I am able to understand basic Scripture:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

2. I have a hunger and thirst for righteousness:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

3. It is true of me, I am not offended by others:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

4. I am experiencing the fruits of prayer:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

5. I consider myself spiritually mature, not an infant in Christ having to partake of “the milk of the Word”:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

6. I am comfortable with using religious language:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

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7. I know Bible facts and how to apply them:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

8. I am able to tell others about Jesus:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

9. I am not easily offended by others:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

10. I am taking steps in eating “the meat of the Word”:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

11. I am gaining victory over sin:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

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12. I see the need to make things right with those who offend or who I offend:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

13. I step out in faith and do not “test the waters” in order to take the next step toward spiritual maturity:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

14. I see the need to talk about my faith:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

15. I read and study Scripture to find, hear, and do what God is saying:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

16. I am willing to lovingly confront others if needed for the cause of Christ and their spiritual health:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

17. I am winning the victory over sin:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

18. I am able to understand deep theological truths:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

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19. I am a prayer warrior:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

20. I am fully engaged in eating “the meat of the Word”:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

21. I am a bold witness for Christ (verbally and by the life I live):

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

22. I am able and willing to teach others the “meat of the Word”:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

23. I am memorizing and meditating on Scripture in the area of spiritual disciplines:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

24. I am living a life of complete surrender and sacrifice for our Lord Jesus Christ:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

25. I am presently engaged in discipling someone else for Christ:

Always	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
4	3	2	1

Scoring: 85–100 Teaching Stage (Mature follower of Christ)

70–84 Talking Stage (Maturing but not there yet)

54–69 Testing Stage (Mediocre Christian with room for improvement)

38–53 Training Stage (Making progress)

25–37 Toddler Stage (Babe in Christ)

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