

## Evaluating your church on purpose

by Tom Holladay

We bristle sometimes when people use numbers to measure ministry results.

When you go to the doctor and he checks you out and writes down a few numbers, you don't say, "You're not interested in me. You're just interested in numbers." Of course, they're interested in you. Those numbers represent something about you. When we talk about numbers involved in diagnosing church health, we're talking about important information that helps us diagnose how we're doing, whether we're growing in a healthy manner.

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Tom Holladay, teaching pastor at Saddleback Church

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When you go to the doctor for a checkup, he'll start off by asking a few simple questions that will let him know whether you're healthy or not. He'll stick a thermometer in your mouth and pull it out. Hopefully, you're somewhere around 98.6. Then he'll check your blood pressure. That should be around 120 over 80. He's not looking for an exact number; he's looking for a range.

There are healthy numbers when it comes to personal growth, and there are also healthy numbers when it comes to church health. We need numbers that track the kind of commitments people are making, not just how many people are attending.

If our goal is to move people into the purposes of God, then we need to get some numbers to evaluate church health based on whether we're doing that.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to get an idea of what numbers would be important for you to know about your church.

### 1. What is the most important information for us to know?

You'll want to build your evaluation tools around what your church considers important. At Saddleback, we value the New Testament purposes of the church (worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism), so that's what we evaluate. For example, we focus on these numbers:

- **The number of first-time guests in our weekend services.** We want to compare that to the numbers from the year before. If you don't have new people showing up, something is wrong.
- **The number of commitments at C.L.A.S.S. 101, 201, 301, and 401.** Since these base classes form the foundation of what we do at Saddleback, we need to know how many people are attending them. But the most important question we want answered about these classes is how many people are signing the purpose-related covenants at the end of the class. That tells us the commitment level of our people.
- **Number and development of leaders.** We want to know how many leaders we have in each of the five purposes of the church. We also want to know how many of our leaders have been through our purpose classes, particularly C.L.A.S.S. 301.
- **Percentage of our congregation in small groups.** At Saddleback, small groups are a crucial part of our strategy of growing smaller as we grow larger, so we want to know how much of our church is connected through them.

- **Per-capita giving.** We want to know whether people are giving more or less. Giving increases in healthy churches.

You may have other information you'd like to know for your church. Think about what information you need to know to tell you if you're fulfilling your purposes.

## **2 .What do we compare our numbers to in order to make them meaningful?**

A lot of times church leaders will compare numbers with those of another church. But that doesn't do us any good. I used to fall for this often before I came to Saddleback. I remember calling Rick Warren, who is my brother-in-law, and telling him when I passed 200 one Easter. He was very gracious, but somewhere in the conversation I asked, "How many did you guys have?" He'd say 5,000. I wondered what our 200 would have looked like in that 5,000. You'd probably not even notice they were there. That was wrong. Each one of those 200 people was precious in God's sight. Breaking through that barrier was an incredible victory in God's sight.

Always compare your numbers to your own numbers. For example, compare this year's Easter numbers to last year's. Compare your current worship attendance to your attendance at this time last year. Use percentages when possible. You may only have 20 people more than you had last year, but if you've grown by 100 percent, that's great!

At Saddleback, we'd like to know what percentage of those who attended our membership class (101) have also taken C.L.A.S.S 201. That's a helpful number by itself, but we can also compare where we are this year with where we were last year in that area. That tells us if we're improving in our ability to get people from our membership class to our introductory class on spiritual maturity.

## **3. What do we think is healthy?**

You need to have some idea of what is healthy for your church. You can actually grow too fast. When it comes to God's Kingdom, we obviously want to reach as many people as possible as quickly as possible. That's the ideal. But there is difference between the ideal and what is really healthy for our church. There are times when you can have so many people that it overwhelms the existing ministry and everything crashes. In the early years of Saddleback, Rick always said that one of his greatest fears was that the church would grow too fast and outpace the church's ability to handle the growth in a healthy way.

Now what's healthy for you will depend upon where you live. Saddleback is right in the middle of an area that's been growing quickly for several decades. We've got to grow just to keep up. Some of you may be in areas that are declining in population. For you just staying steady in attendance would be healthy.

Here is what we have considered "healthy" at Saddleback:

- Twice as many in our Community (those who have attended the church at least twice a year) as in our Crowd (those who attend on a weekly basis)
- Our Crowd at least twice as large as our Congregation (our church membership)
- 75 percent of our Congregation in our Committed (those who have attended C.L.A.S.S. 201)
- 50 percent of our Congregation in our Core (those who have attended C.L.A.S.S. 301)

That's healthy for us. I think those numbers would represent a good target for many churches in communities that are growing rapidly. Depending on your community, your goals might be different. The point is, you must decide what is healthy for you so that you can then evaluate it.

Numbers matter when evaluating the health of your church – not because they’re important as an end in themselves, but because they represent people being connected to their God-given purposes.

Article by Tom Holladay

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