



It's Not about the Numbers . . . Actually It *is* about the Numbers

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Have you ever said, "It's not about the numbers" or "We don't want just numbers"? I have. But not anymore. I have decided it *is* about the numbers. A pastor's tongue-in-cheek parody helped me see the point.

Pastor Tim Stevens tells about going on vacation when his three children were quite young. The entire family was standing in a crowded hotel lobby in a big city when, to his surprise, he saw one of their children, a three-year old, in an elevator going skyward, her nose pressed to the glass with fright on her face. "What am I to do?" the pastor thought. "Nothing," was his reply. After all, two out of the three children were still there. And, after all, there were many things he and his wife had not yet done with the remaining two children. Maybe they should focus more on having a deeper relationship with the two remaining children. In fact, this pastor had never really been a numbers person. He was not the kind of pastor who, if he came to the end of a vacation with fewer children than at the beginning of the vacation, would feel guilty about the negative numbers. "I'm just not into the numbers game," the pastor insisted.

As I thought about this story, it struck me that when we end a year with two children fewer on our Sunday School roles, those are someone's children. Or when a campus ministry adds numbers to its participants, each of those students is someone's child. The world is full of children alone on elevators. They are the numbers we seek.

Bishop Hope Morgan Ward gives the number of church members in her conference and then asks, "But, who's counting?" "God is counting, that's who," she answers. "The Bible tells us so." Indeed, numbers show up quite regularly in the Bible. The author of Acts, for example, seems to be interested in numbers. In the first chapter, Peter stands up among the believers, a group numbering about 120 (1.15). In the next chapter, after Peter's sermon at Pentecost, "about three thousand persons were added" (2.41). Day by day the Lord "added to their number those who were being saved" (2.47). By chapter four, the believers "numbered about five thousand" (4.4). And, after Saul's conversion in chapter nine, the author describes a spiritually vital church that "increased in numbers" (9.31). While not everything, numbers do seem to be significant in Acts.

Why, then, do we have to use qualifiers when we talk about persons participating in our ministries? Notice how we say, "We want more members, but we don't just want numbers." We don't say comparable things for priorities we have. We don't say, "We want better salaries, but we don't just want numbers." Actually we do want the numbers, and we keep track of those numbers. We don't say, "We want diversity, but we don't just want numbers." In fact, we do want numbers, and we normally count them carefully and monitor changes.



Does this mean all churches should be growing? While growth seems to be the movement in the Bible, that is not the only biblical model of churches and numbers. As Pastor Tom Berlin points out, the Bible presents at least one alternative—churches that are persecuted and scatter.

However, it is not necessary to claim that numbers coming to church are everything, a position that virtually no one defends, to recognize that many churches demonstrate little sense of responsibility or accountability for the number of lives left untouched in their communities. Qualitative and quantitative measures of church vitality both have their place together in any useful ministry audit. Leadership that does not insist on careful monitoring of such measures is not adequate for churches in decline. A frequent indicator of ineffective leadership is a tendency either to ignore or to excuse actual outcomes and accountability.

But which comes first – an improved quality of church life that will attract others or numerical goals? Both have their place, and one without the other will not succeed. Conventional wisdom in the last generation has resisted numerical goals and concentrated instead on improving the internal life of the church. However, it may be that we will never make the right and necessary changes needed to attract new people until we first commit ourselves to reach those people.

One of the myths of American industry is that Henry Ford invented the assembly line, which then permitted him to build a car that could be sold for \$500, an amount that large numbers of working people could afford. The reality is just the reverse. Ford determined that \$500 was the most that large numbers of people could pay for a car, and inventing the assembly line was the only way he could devise to accomplish that task.

The same sequence may be necessary in the church. It may be that we first must commit ourselves to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people; and our very willingness to be accountable for such goals will lead us to discover what we need to do to accomplish the goals. We will then be forced to engage the people we seek to reach, to learn of their needs, and to understand the nature of their quest for God. In so doing, we will gather the information needed for worship and ministries appropriate for our changed context.

I was struck recently by the bold vision from an unlikely source. Here it is: By the Year 2015 the Virginia wine industry will double its market share within the Commonwealth. No qualifiers. Such a clear goal comes when you are proud of your “product” and want to share it with others. I know of few church groups today taking on such a measurable goal for reaching new disciples for Christ.

Does the church run the risk of being unduly guided by an emphasis on numbers? Not likely, given its record. As Bishop William H. Willimon puts it, after forty years of membership loss without any major changes to address the loss, “we have a long, long way before we are being driven by the numbers.”