

Assessing Your Success

A Recipe for Frustration in Just Five Easy Words Or The Three Numbers Every Youth Minister Must Know

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As I stepped out of seminary and into full-time youth ministry, my new senior pastor spoke five words, designed, I'm sure, to communicate that I could count on his support. But I made the mistake of believing him.

What were those five words? "I don't care about numbers."

He meant well. I know he did. What he was trying to say is that the work of the kingdom is about a lot more than will ever show up on a balance sheet, that the work of ministry cannot be limited to how many warm bodies show up for our meetings. And, of course, on that score he was right.

But, as I learned only after a few long, unnecessarily frustrating years, this was not the whole truth. The truth was that he was not concerned about numbers, *as long as we had enough kids coming to our meetings*. And, of course, exactly how many "enough" might be remained shrouded in mystery for years. The unspoken assumption behind those five words seemed to have been that there exists, perhaps in some parallel universe, a truly spiritual assessment tool that can measure youth ministry success without using a measuring instrument.

But after working with scores of churches, I have yet to find a single youth ministry that has ever found an effective number-free assessment tool. And what is worse, those who cling most firmly to freedom from numbers tend to become the most frustrated and bitter, usually destined for the longest ministry headaches and the shortest ministry tenure.

I would like to suggest, then, that we get beyond the question of whether numbers are right or wrong. The better question is whether we are looking at the right or wrong numbers. When I look at assessing a youth ministry, I look for answers to three quite numerical questions:

- *The Most Important Number: How Many Targets Do You Have?*

If your answer to this question is any more than ONE, no reasonable assessment of your youth ministry can ever take place. In my consulting work, I have discovered that *few things are less common in youth ministry than a clear target*. Because most youth ministers have never taken the time to identify their values, their goals, their mission, and their structure—and establish broad-based buy-in for those ideas—those youth ministries are consistently evaluated in criticism-laced “parking lot committee meetings,” based on undeclared, often competing agendas.

First Church of Gary, Indiana (the church name and city have been changed) had a youth ministry in search of a target. After meeting with five or six focus groups there, I wrote these words in their assessment, a description typical of the vast majority of youth ministries in the country:

Try as I might, I was unable to hear any focus group agree on a single vision of what an effective youth ministry might look like....But until this picture is developed, agreed on, and pursued, the future leadership

of the youth ministry will remain mired in petty programmatic debates that will result in little more than "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

Nowhere is this programmatic debate more common than in the tired arguments over "substance" vs. "fun." Without a common goal, parents, students and youth leaders often find themselves locked in an endless, useless debate over whether the program should be "more fun" or "more spiritual." But without a clear target, the two sides are loose canons, firing self-destructing explosives at each other.

- *Sheep Census: How Many Students Do You Have?*

Ask a youth pastor how many students he or she has. Just try it sometime. Chances are, you will get a hesitant answer that sounds something like this, "Well, um, our roles are not really up-to-date right now, but we've got, more or less, around, sort of, approximately...give or take a few..."

Contrast that answer with the kind of answer we might expect if we asked Jesus the same question. Jesus wouldn't hesitate. He would say, "Twelve." Jesus knew his number and, in fact, often referred to them with the numerical nickname, "The twelve."

Ask a good shepherd *how many* sheep he has in the fold, and he can likely tell you the condition of each. Ask a good parent about her children, and she will know exactly *how many* she has.

I learned a long time ago that when we are talking about kids, we are not talking about mere numbers. And our church cannot very well provide for the Christian nurture of its students unless it knows exactly who those students are. If

you are in a small church, the number might be twelve or less. If you are the president of Compassion, International, the number might be in the millions. But we can't possibly evaluate our success if we don't know how many students we are responsible for.

- *The Structure Factor: How Many of Your Students Are Taking the Next Steps of Discipleship?*

In spite of everything I have said about numbers, I know that, at a deeper level, success in youth ministry can only truly be measured from a longitudinal perspective. In many ways, we can't possibly know the long-term effectiveness of our ministries until 10 years or so down the road. And even then, apart from extensive and expensive research apparatus, these kinds of conclusions are next to impossible to arrive at.

And so, acknowledging that the best I can do is to have a series of shorter-term evaluation instruments, I have created three questions that serve as signposts to help me know if I am on track.

1. Signpost #1: What number of students do we hope to have involved on a weekly basis?

The pressure and anxiousness about my youth ministry decreased dramatically when, back in 1993, the leadership of the youth ministry and the church agreed on a clearly articulated picture of how many students ought to be involved in the life of the church in any given week. Youth ministry is not just the "youth programs." The youth ministry includes everything a church does to help its teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood. For example, from my perspective, the student who sings in the adult choir but who never comes

to youth group “counts.” The teenager who helps her mother teach the 3-year-old Sunday school class “counts,” even if she ever darkens the door of any youth-ministry-sponsored event.

2. Are we building lifelong relationships between our students and Christian adults in the church?

Because one of the foundational values of our youth ministry is that students are most likely to grow toward Christian maturity when they are surrounded by Christian adults, we make a priority of helping every student build a web of friendships with adults in the church. In addition to their youth directors, interns, Sunday School teachers, Bible study leaders, and trip leaders, each student, *whether or not he or she ever shows up for a youth meeting*, is assigned a prayer partner and a COW (the affectionate name we use for our youth leaders, based on the phrase Cloud Of Witnesses).

3. How many students are proactively pursuing their faith?

Our final assessment question is “How many of our students are practicing what we call the Habits of Godliness” (HOGs, of course). In addition to participating in our youth ministry and building connections with godly adults, we ask our students to experiment with 6 basic habits, spiritual practices, based on the habits that Doug Field’s outlines in Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry. How do we know if students are practicing the habits? We ask them...in annual surveys and informal conversations that help us learn which practices have become a part of the ethos of our ministry and which we need to emphasize more.

My senior pastor was right. It's not just about numbers. But neither are numbers our enemy. A focus on the right numbers can go a long way to reduce headaches, prevent burnout and keep us on track with what really matters most in our work.

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