

Metrics: A Tool for Learning, Not Judging

The current focus on setting numerical goals for ministry and reporting results is not new, though now greatly expanded. In the past, virtually all goals churches set related to money. The clearest example is the annual budget: it is a goal the church works all year to achieve, monitors closely, and reports regularly on progress. Usually no one gives more attention to monitoring and achieving those goals than the pastor. The same attention now is being given to people categories, but the concept is the same.

This expansion of goals, monitoring, and reporting, however, could easily miss the point as we often have done with finances. Any time conversations turn to setting goals, many think it is a way to set a standard on which they will be judged. Judging should not be the primary use for such metrics. The most important benefit of defining numerical goals is that goals become the opportunity to shape planning your church already needs.

Progress comes when we have a goal toward which we are moving. “Come up with the ending before you figure out the middle,” says Pixar storyboard artist Emma Coats. It does not help to talk about “what we should do” until we have a clear definition of what we want our activities to accomplish. Setting goals does not suggest they will capture all we hope to achieve. The Spirit works in amazing ways to do more than any statistics can reflect, but usually the Spirit accomplishes those unexpected signs and wonders when we are generating our own holy energy through prayer and hard work.

But What about Reporting?

Report honestly but never think reporting is the true purpose of your efforts. The numbers may show you reached your goals. They are just as likely to show that you missed them. Remember that most churches do not achieve 100 percent of their budget goals each year; but that does not keep them from setting new budget goals next year, working hard to achieve them, monitoring results diligently, and reporting them.

The real benefit of results you report comes from what you learned from them. Perhaps you set a goal to reach 60 children in Sunday School and fell short. But if you learned that teachers need more training, the time needs changing, and age groupings are too broad, your “failure” may be the beginning of fruitfulness that will benefit children for years to come.

“But won’t we be judged negatively for coming up short on the goal?” you may ask. If you identify what you have learned (showing you are paying attention), name the changes made from those learnings (showing you intend to improve), and illustrate that progress has been made despite falling short of the original goal (showing you are acting on the right learnings), I cannot imagine anyone judging your church negatively. Whenever numbers are reviewed, always include learnings thus far, changes made or planned, and progress from any changes.

Fruitfulness is God’s Alternative to Success

Success is not a biblical concept; fruitfulness is. Fruitfulness always holds within it passion for faithfulness, for no lasting fruitfulness is possible without faithfulness. But fruitfulness also captures a comparable passion for repeated biblical mandates to bear fruit. Fruitfulness is vastly different from success. Goals help fruitfulness, but fruitfulness does not require attainment of all our goals. Fruitfulness is not about personal or congregational glory but the advancement of God’s reign. Church leaders care about results because results are ways to go beyond doing good ministry to active participation in God’s hope for all to experience the abundant life revealed in Jesus Christ.

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