

A NEW WAY OF MEASURING NEW CHURCH EFFECTIVENESS

For decades, American churches counted two things - attendance and offerings. In March of 2020, all of that changed. Unable to meet in person, many churches went online, which raised a new question: *“How do you count online attendance?”* Churches came up with all kinds of answers. Some counted how many unique devices were connected. Some counted those devices and then applied a formula to arrive at how many people they estimated were looking at that screen. Some only counted devices if they stayed for a certain amount of time. This in turn created a new challenge - interpretation. While methods of counting physical attendance did vary some, this new metric of online attendance varied greatly. We readily acknowledge and frequently warn new church leaders about the inherent dangers in comparing one church to another. At the same time, metrics are fundamentally about comparing one time to another, one strategy to another, one community to another. This kind of comparison requires meaningful and reliable metrics.

The primary purpose of this paper is to call attention to the emerging failures and inherent flaws in existing metrics. They simply don't provide the information needed to know whether a church is effectively accomplishing its mission, much less whether or not churches as a whole are accomplishing their mission. It's time to reimagine how we will measure the effectiveness of a new church.

EMERGING FAILURE OF CHURCH METRICS

Taking a step back, we quickly realized that this problem was not created by the pandemic. The

ineffectiveness of church metrics has been growing for some time - for several reasons.

CHANGING CULTURAL NORMS

A change in cultural norms regarding church in the American context has been well-documented.¹ Fewer and fewer people have been attending church less and less often. If you asked a church leader in 1970 how many people attended their church, the number they reported was likely close to reflecting the actual number of people who were part of that church. If you asked a church leader in 2020 how many people attended their church, the number they reported would likely be less than half the people that were part of that church. Before the pandemic, estimates of normal church attendance in the US were between 1.5 and 1.7 times per month.² In Stadia's own research with new churches, we observed a range from a low as 1 time a month to as high as 2 times a month. These patterns imply the number of people who consider themselves part of a church is anywhere from two to four times larger than average weekly attendance. In our experience, many church leaders still thought of the size of their church as the average attendance. This was clearly a broken metric long before the pandemic arrived.

NEW EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

As culture changed, many leaders responded by creating new expressions of church. Over the last few decades, we've seen the emergence of missional churches, micro churches and now, virtual churches. Each of these new expressions of church included some kind of gathering of people, and thus the possibility of counting attendance.

But what does attendance in a missional, micro, or virtual church have to do with attendance in a typical church? More importantly, what does it tell us about whether those who are in attendance are becoming followers of Jesus? Just as there is no standard for counting online attendance, there is no standard or guideline for how to count or measure in these new expressions. In the absence of this clarity, the numbers mean very little. Even worse, they provide very little guidance in helping a church determine their effectiveness in making disciples and adjust their strategies in order to be more effective.

DENOMINATION AND NETWORKS

The lack of clear metrics for new church effectiveness is only magnified when you step back to the denominational or network level. Without a clear understanding of what to measure and a common understanding of what those metrics mean, leaders in these organizations are practically blind to the real effectiveness of the churches they start and serve. Beyond internal strategic decisions, this confusion makes external communication and collaboration very difficult.

So let's name the elephant. In American culture, it is generally assumed that more is better. More churches started with more people in attendance creates the perception that one network or denomination is more effective than another. But the reality is, without a common understanding of what is being reported, we actually have no idea whether any or all of these groups are effectively accomplishing their mission and making disciples. We simply have numbers without meaning.

INHERENT FLAWS OF CURRENT METRICS

Changing direction and zooming in, rather than out, we discover the problem is even greater, because the foundational concept was, from the beginning, inadequate. Church attendance and giving were

never adequate measures of church effectiveness for several evident reasons.

MEASURING DISCIPLESHIP

Prioritizing attendance as a metric assumes it leads to transformation. Imagine a professor measuring the effectiveness of their class by how many people attended. You could have two professors teaching the same subject, maybe even at the same time. The first has a lecture hall full of students. The other has a small classroom with just a handful of students. Does the fact that one professor has larger attendance mean they are a more effective teacher, or their students are more learned in whatever the subject matter is? The assumption that the professor in the smaller class is more effective is equally false. This is why students must pass tests. Colleges have understood for a long time that attendance doesn't automatically lead to transformation. We're not suggesting churches should start giving tests. We're simply pointing out the fundamental error of believing that attendance is a measure of effective disciple making.

MEASURING GROWTH

Another assumption, inherent in the prioritization of measuring attendance, is that growing attendance means more people are becoming disciples and following Jesus. We all know there is a constant rotation of people from one church to the next. One church experiences a change in leadership or programming - or even a change in the community - and as a result people stop attending this church and start attending another. Plus, the growing church reports its growing attendance as if that means more people are now following Jesus. In reality, however, more followers of Jesus are now attending that church. The data we have about overall church attendance would suggest that in this movement of people from church to church, the result is actually that fewer people are attending church.

TOWARD A MEASURE OF NEW CHURCH EFFECTIVENESS

As a global organization that believes new churches are the most effective way to introduce people to Jesus and teach them to follow him, we experience all of these inadequacies within our own organization. As a result, we have lacked the ability to measure effectively and report accurately about the outcomes of our efforts across continents and cultures. We have begun to ask the questions, “What can we measure?” and, “How would these metrics tell us about the effectiveness of the new churches we start and serve?”

As we begin to explore a new way to measure new church effectiveness, we have identified several characteristics or qualities a new metric must account for in order for it to be clear and meaningful.

COMMON LANGUAGE

First, and above all, we must develop a common language. When we use basic biblical language, words like church and disciple, they must have the same definition across our constituencies. As new models have developed, words like church, group, location and site are often used to describe activities that in fact look very similar to one another. Even more challenging, as foundational as a disciple is in the mission of Jesus, there is no common understanding of what is meant when the word is used to describe a particular person. Without common, clearly defined language, it will be impossible to develop meaningful metrics.

CROSS CONTEXT

The church is a global movement. The language and metrics we use must work across geographies. The world is shrinking. The distance between Memphis and Mumbai, measured in miles, is never going to change. Yet, the distance between Memphis and Mumbai gets smaller every day. You don't have

to go back very many generations to arrive in a time when people in either place would not even know the people in the other place existed, much less anything about the realities of their day-to-day life. Today, a person in either place can use a wide variety of tools to communicate with people in the other place instantly. This ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, and anytime continues to make the world a smaller and smaller place, so we must think in global terms.

CROSS CULTURAL

Similarly, the language and metrics we use must work across cultures. There is a paradoxical relationship between geography and culture. While the world is, on one hand, getting smaller, the world is at the same time becoming more divided and distinct. You don't have to travel from Mumbai to Memphis to experience a different culture. In either place, you might simply need to cross the street to find a group of people who live by a different and unique set of cultural norms and standards. This proliferation of cultural distinctions means we must think cross culturally and multiculturally in everything we do.

MULTI-MODAL

Given the dynamics of geography and culture we must acknowledge that the church is and will continue to be multi-modal. What all churches have in common is the mission to make disciples. How churches will accomplish this mission in a wide variety of geographic and cultural contexts will vary greatly. The definitions and metrics we use need to work across current and future models. They should help us determine whether the churches we are serving are thriving, growing, and multiplying. Stadia is serving leaders who are starting churches that meet in large gatherings and that are micro. We are encouraging new churches to consider the options of meeting physically, virtually and phygitally. The need for a common way to measure new church effectiveness has become urgent within our own

organization as we have ourselves have become multi-modal. The kind of universal metric we are describing will make it possible to evaluate whether these new models are in fact effective.

AN INVITATION

As a global organization, Stadia has the privilege of working with almost thirty partners on five continents (we haven't quite reached Antarctica yet), and we invite them to join us on this journey. In the U.S. context, we are honored to have helped start hundreds of churches with hundreds of partners. We invite them to join us on this journey. If you share our vision to see a world in which every child has a church, we invite you to join us on this journey.

Our hope is that together we can find a common way to measure new church effectiveness, enabling us to understand the impact of our joint efforts on individuals, churches, and the global population who are yet to follow Jesus.

¹<https://www.barna.com/research/watching-online-church/>
<https://careynieuwhof.com/3-statistics-that-show-how-quickly-radically-and-permanently-church-is-changing-in-2020/>
<https://www.npr.org/2020/05/20/858918339/things-will-never-be-the-same-how-the-pandemic-has-changed-worship>
<https://www.google.com>

²<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/churchformen/2016/03/why-is-church-attendance-declining-even-among-christians/>
<https://twitter.com/MichaelCatt/status/1175124069433389056?s=20>