

Stop Worrying About Crowd Size—Just Be Faithful

There's nothing more disheartening to a preacher than to see empty seats in a church. I'll be honest—I like meetings where you have to pull out extra chairs and put people in the aisles. Why? Because I assume if God's blessing is on a meeting it will be packed. I like numbers because, in my carnal thinking, crowds are more significant.

Our culture puts value on things depending on how popular they are, and we are guilty of applying this rule in the church. We like big. We even rate the effectiveness of churches based on size.

According to *Outreach Magazine's* 2017 report, the largest churches in the United States are 1) Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama; 2) Andy Stanley's North Point Ministries in Atlanta and 3) Gateway Church in the Dallas area. These are incredible, Bible-based churches with impressive outreaches to their communities.

Other churches in the Top 10 List include Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina; Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church in Southern California. Every pastor would love to have a congregation of 40,000 like Church of the Highlands. And many pastors I know feel like failures because they've never broken through the 200 mark.

But we need to remember that God doesn't evaluate us based on numbers, nor does He rate our effectiveness by comparing us to someone else. God's ways are not our ways! We must remember these kingdom principles:

1. **Less is sometimes more.** Jesus attracted big crowds, but the numbers didn't impress Him because He knew many who

were healed in His meetings wouldn't follow Him to the cross. He even told one of His crowds that the gospel seeds He was sowing would be eaten by birds, scorched and withered or choked by thorns (see Mark 4:3-8). Only a small percentage, He said, would bear fruit. Jesus was looking for quality, not quantity.

In the end, after thousands heard Jesus' messages and ate His free lunches, only 120 of His followers gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. That is not an impressive number, and today's church growth specialists might say Jesus failed to break the 200 barrier within three years of ministry!

2. **We must follow the cloud, not the crowd.** There are a few crowd shots in the book of Acts. But most scenes of the early church are less impressive. An Ethiopian was converted on a desert road. The Holy Spirit fell on members of an Italian family gathered in a home in Caesarea. A woman named Lydia came to Christ at a small prayer gathering by a river in Philippi, becoming the first convert in Europe.

Why are these seemingly inconsequential stories highlighted in Scripture? Because God moves as powerfully in one-on-one conversations and small group gatherings as He does in big meetings. When we follow the cloud of His presence, He often leads us to the one instead of the many.

The book of Acts ends with a scene of Paul ministering quietly to people in a small apartment while he is under house arrest (see Acts 28:30-31). Paul certainly didn't measure His impact by large buildings, big mailing lists, media exposure or book sales. Paul never led a megachurch. And His writings didn't become popular until he was dead.

3. **Make disciples, don't entertain audiences.** Every man's work will be tested by fire, and every ministry will be

evaluated not by church-growth experts but by God's holy standards. Sitting in a church does not make a person a faithful follower of Jesus. Don't confuse disciples with pew-warmers. He will not evaluate us by how many people sat in chairs. His chief concern is how many disciples we made.

4. **Stop trying to be popular.** The largest gathering in human history is believed to be the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, a Hindu festival held in India in 2013. The largest concert ever held is believed to be rocker Rod Stewart's beachside concert in Rio de Janeiro in 1995. Did either of those gatherings change your life? Probably not.

Let's stop evaluating our own effectiveness—and each other's—by crowd size or popularity. If you are a leader, be faithful with the people you have, whether it is a home church of seven, a campus Bible study of 10, a rural congregation of 30 or a megachurch of 2,000. Whether you are ministering to a handful of inmates, a roomful of Alzheimer's patients, a dozen orphans or one depressed friend, forget your need for the spotlight.

Jesus gave us a refreshingly different perspective on crowd size. He told His disciples: "For where two or three are assembled in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). If He loves small gatherings, why should we despise them?

Learn to be faithful with what God gives you. Don't focus on numbers. Just make Jesus popular.