

Why Numbers are Important

By Greg Wiens

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From My Own Experiences

The good news about getting older is that you gain perspective on what is really important. The bad news is that you can also gain weight! For me it wasn't dramatic; it was just that every three or four years I had to increase the waist size on my pants by an inch. I knew I was getting a little heavier but would say, "It's not what you weigh, it's whether you're in good shape." I continued to run and exercise, but I refused to buy a scale and weigh myself because I knew it would be concrete evidence of my weight gain. I was in denial. Finally, two years ago, I bought a scale and found that I had gained almost 30 pounds over the course of ten years!

At that point, I had a tough decision to make. Was I going to accept a new version of reality and rationalize my weight (saying things like, "It's okay to be heavier – I am over 50 years old now") or simply accept the numbers and take the difficult and painful steps to lose my weight? It took me six months, but I eventually lost the weight and have maintained it with difficulty for the past year or so.

In Our Churches

I believe that we do the same thing with the churches we pastor. We all believe Jesus calls us to reach the lost and disciple the found. But then we rationalize it when the numbers don't show us making significant headway in this direction.

Members from another state leadership board recently asked me to identify measures of church health. When I mentioned conversion rates and growth in Sunday morning attendance, I watched all kinds of spiritual dancing – much like the kind I used to do when asked about my weight. I was told there are a lot of other measures of a church's health (to which I agreed). I was told that conversion rates and growth history are too simple and don't measure the "quality of disciples". I was told that we don't want churches that are "a mile wide and an inch deep". But, when I asked them to name a Church of God congregation that had grown from conversion growth so rapidly that they didn't have time to disciple the new believers, they couldn't name any! We are so afraid of this nonexistent imbalance that we become guilty of the opposite extreme and don't focus on making those conversions or reporting the simple measures we could be using.

Taking a Closer Look

So ask yourself the tough questions: How many people have come to Christ through the direct ministry of your church this last year (2005), in the last five years, in the last decade? How has the attendance of the church grown this past year (2005), in the last five years, in the last decade? How has your church multiplied converts, disciples, leaders and churches?

As I have studied our state and national figures, I've found that we have good news and bad news to report. Within the Church of God, Florida congregations lead the nation in many of the growth figures, but we haven't even come close to keeping pace with the number of people who have moved into our state!

According to the Church of God Yearbook reports, less than 10% of our churches grew in number last year or, for that matter, during the last three years. That leaves over 90% of our churches either plateaued or declining in number during that same period.

I can almost hear some of you saying that the Yearbook figures may not be completely accurate. But, just like my rationalizations about my weight, I believe we can tell ourselves that numbers are not important, but, in reality, what better way do we have to measure our results? It's not embarrassing to admit the numbers, but it is embarrassing to deny them, rationalize them, and remain in the condition we're in.

Counting the Costs

In the same way that gaining good physical health is not an overnight change and doesn't come through resolutions or good intentions, we must assess our current church conditions and take the necessary steps to become healthy and growing as the Lord has commanded us to do.

Making the Changes

See the article, "The FLCOGM Coaching and Consolation Process" on page 3 of the Winter 2006 newsletter for a more detailed outline of the process we're committed to here at Florida Church of God Ministries. The coaching and consultation process has developed over the past seven years. God is already using it in Church of God churches all around the state who are taking steps to build healthy churches that multiply and transform their communities through Christ.

We can no longer live in denial as I was with my weight for so many years. We must make the tough decision to accept the reality of where our churches are today and seek the help we need to become healthy and to see people come to Christ – and to see those numbers moving in the right direction as our churches grow for the glory of God.