

HOW WILL WE MEASURE SUCCESS THIS CHRISTMAS?

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SURPRISE

The Christmas story is crammed full of surprises, the biggest being that the Word of God was made flesh and dwelt amongst us in the first place. Incredible.

Another is the relatively low key way this cosmic event occurs. In a smallish town with only a few shepherds to witness it alongside Mary and Joseph. Aside from the heavenly host gathered on the hillside and a fairly subtle sign in the heavens, there was no big announcement to the masses. They, we, were left to make that glorious discovery through the witness of the few. But that is how God chooses to work, isn't it?

SUCCESS

What would a successful Christmas look like for you in the church you serve? Pre-pandemic, many church leaders would answer that question in terms of numbers of people. For example how many people come to the Carol, Crib or Midnight services. But perhaps things are different now.

Last year the pandemic brought limits to gathering and singing. It may also have broken the habit of Christmas attendance for some. Many church leaders are wondering what will happen this year. Will fewer people attend than in the past because the habit has been broken, or concerns about Covid continue? Or will the numbers be greater than in the past as people 'go big' on celebrating after the privations of last year?

And do the numbers matter anyway?

Yes of course it is important that people hear the message of Jesus' birth and understand the incarnation. And yes, in theory, the more people who come, the greater the impact. So, the logic might be that if fewer

attend the impact is lower. But is that really the case? Quantity is not a great measure of impact and engagement. And it is engagement with the person of Jesus that we, and God, ultimately seek.

What if, in our current increasingly post Christendom culture, we view those who choose to come at Christmas to be more open to the message of Jesus? Does that free those who plan and speak at services to be more direct with the gospel message? This year, attendance numbers at onsite worship may well be down, but should our key measure be depth of engagement, rather than numbers? That may well be increased. If we thought of things in this way, does that change how and what we communicate? Is measuring the numbers what really counts?

NUMBERS

The Canadian pastor Jeff Lockyer has written recently questioning the measurement of ABCs; attendance, building and cash. He writes,

'Even through the pandemic – with the twist of pivoting online – many of the church leaders I've spoken with have focused their attention



most closely on these [ABCs] aspects of church life.

But when you think about the purpose of the Church – to incarnate the love of Jesus Christ in the world – is that what matters most? Is simply drawing a crowd, filling buildings, or paying the bills the full extent of what Jesus lived, died, and rose again to empower? Is this what Jesus really meant when he said, “I will build my church”?’

Lockyer argues that it would be better to count things that count for the kingdom, offering the following four possibilities for his context:

1. Measuring where money is spent rather than how much money is being given.
2. Counting how many people are involved in active kingdom ministry as opposed to just attending.
3. Counting how many people are drawn into the church community through its ministry, rather than how many the church reaches.
4. Seeking community feedback from those outside the church.

I wonder what this might look like for your church. Perhaps rather than pure church attendance it might be better to count seeds sown. How many invitations are personally given to a Christian basics course? How many conversations about Christian faith occur as a result of church activity, whether that be delivering Christmas

activity bags to families or serving a night shelter or other ministry? It could even make us review why we are spending church resources of time and money on particular activities.

I know of one church where every activity was measured against whether or not it made Jesus known, asking the question, if it doesn't, why are we doing it?

Lockyer's approach has wider implications. It challenges the temptation to measure the consumption of religious experience and instead urges us to measure the kingdom impact of our church activity. In counting what matters in the kingdom, the purpose of measurement becomes a tool in prioritising energy and resource.

As we prepare for Christmas, let's not be discouraged if numbers are lower, but rather give thanks for those who choose to come and hear and celebrate the incredible reality of the Incarnation. Let's be more confident in taking the opportunity to share the gospel with those who are present. Let's count what matters to God, and measure impact rather than just attendance.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

FOR REFLECTION

1. How confident do I feel in proclaiming the good news of Jesus' incarnation this Christmas and what might I do to increase that confidence?
2. How am I praying about Christmas services – for deep engagement or large crowds?
3. What do we measure and celebrate as a church? Can I plan some time in with other leaders in January to reflect on this together?

