

We thought bigger was better. “Church growth” and “numbers” dominated our thoughts and conversations. But more than ever, people are feeling disconnected. Vaters invites us to consider how removing church size from the equation can be an essential element in rebuilding trust, restoring relationships, and renewing our spiritual lives.

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Chapter 1

The Danger of Idolizing Outcomes

Though we act, and often work hard, it is after all not our battle, and the outcome is in his hands. We don't "battle" outcomes.

DALLAS WILLARD

Before earning my Bible college degree, I spent two years attending a local junior college. One of my first classes was Economics 101. The professor began by putting a slide on the screen with a jumble of words that included *family, faith, job satisfaction, ethics, morality, fairness, education, wisdom, art, justice, happiness*, and so on. Pointing at this group of terms (what we now call a *word cloud*) he told us, “This is what matters in life. Money has an impact on them, but they are all more important than money.”

That's a surprising, but wonderful, start to an economics class, I thought.

“But that's not what this class will be about,” said the teacher as he removed that slide and replaced it with another. This new slide had one word on it in huge block letters. MONEY. “That is what this class will be about,” he said, gesturing toward the screen. “For the next

thirteen weeks we will talk about money as if it is the most important thing in life. We will talk about how to make it, spend it, invest it, save it, and more. We will talk as if money is the only thing that matters. But it *isn't* the only thing that matters. The previous slide showed us what matters. Remember that.”

That's fair, I thought; *it is an economics class, after all.*

Over the next thirteen weeks, the professor was true to his word. He talked about money as if it was the only thing that matters in life. Then, at the end of the last class, he put the MONEY slide up again. “For thirteen weeks we’ve talked, read, and tested you as though this was the only thing in the world that matters. I want to remind you that it’s not.” Then he removed the MONEY slide and replaced it with the original word-cloud slide. “These are what matter in life. Don’t forget that. Have a great summer.”

I appreciated what the professor was intending to do, but between the first and final class, a huge shift had taken place. On day one, the body language of my classmates affirmed that those were the most important things in life. But thirteen weeks later, their body language was very different. At best, it was apathetic. In many of them, there was a feeling of mockery and disdain—not toward the teacher, but toward the idea that the values on the word cloud were what really mattered. No wonder their attitude toward those values had changed! For thirteen weeks we’d treated money as the *only value* in life. One slide on the screen for a few seconds at the start and end of the semester had no chance of competing with the relentless drumbeat of that message. The word cloud was what we were supposed to pay lip service to so we could see ourselves as members of a polite society. By now we knew better.

In many ways, the last forty-plus years of relentless church growth teaching has felt like that. We’ve heard constantly about how to increase our attendance numbers. We’ve been told that this is done in service of the true values of worship, discipleship, ministry, and

more. But CHURCH GROWTH is what we talk about *as though numbers are all that matters*, while the word cloud of values increasingly feels like lip service. It's naïve to think that the relentless drum-beat of "How to increase your attendance!" "A proven plan to break growth barriers!" "What you need to know to scale up!" and "Have the faith to 10x your church's impact!" won't overwhelm everything else. Of course, it does.

In *Multipliers*, Todd Wilson indicts the predominant church growth strategies of the last generation. "When a leader's scorecard is rooted in accumulation, he will take his eyes off God and obedience to His commands. Our focus on accumulating more easily becomes a form of *idolatry*, rooted in wrong motives."¹ He later adds that Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird call this pursuit of growth an "*addiction*,"² and "the bottom line is that we're facing an epidemic of addition *lust*."³ Our obsession with numerical addition is "idolatry," "addiction," and "lust." Strong words? Very. Too strong? No. We're obsessed with bigness. Enamored with size. Entranced by churches that keep getting bigger. Worried about churches that don't. But why? Have you ever met anyone who has left the faith saying, "I wanted to serve Jesus, but the church I attended wasn't seeing any numerical growth, so I just couldn't believe anymore"? Numerical growth doesn't impress anyone but pastors and church leaders, and lack of growth doesn't bother anyone but us.

In our skewed approach to church size, we often equate bigger churches with larger faith. In many church growth circles, it's not unusual to hear claims that setting big goals takes big faith, or even that if your goals don't scare you or stretch you, they mustn't be from God. But I have found no biblical basis for it. Not once did Jesus, the apostle Paul, or any early church leader even hint that we should set numerical goals, let alone that setting larger ones would increase our faith. According to Scripture, faith is far more likely to be increased when it's tested through trials (James 1:2-8), when we

love one another (2 Thess. 1:3), when we endure persecution (Rev. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:4–7), and when we lay aside worry and doubt (Matt. 6:28–30; 14:28–31). It's found in trusting Jesus (Matt. 8:10), hearing wise biblical teachers (Heb. 13:7), and seeking God (Heb. 11:6).

Not only is goal setting not in the long list of characteristics that increase faith, but the biblical examples go in the opposite direction. Numerical increase and the trappings of wealth and comfort that come with it are far more often seen as a challenge to faith rather than a means for strengthening it. In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus criticized the largest, wealthiest, and most prominent churches for leaving their first love (Ephesus), following false prophets (Thyatira), and being lukewarm (Laodicea), while He encouraged the smaller, persecuted churches for remaining faithful to the point of death (Smyrna), despite their trials and limited strength (Philadelphia).

It's not that there isn't correlation between faith and numerical increase. It's that the order of goal setting followed by faith-stretching is backward. While large goals are nowhere seen to increase our faith, sometimes a growing faith does result in numerical increase. In Acts 2, we read that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved,” not as a cause of greater faith, but as a result of the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, prayers, signs and wonders, giving to those in need, praising God, and meeting together regularly (Acts 2:42–47). We see a similar order of faith followed by blessing in Acts 11:24 where, after Barnabas' arrival in Antioch to assess their theological integrity, “a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” Then in Acts 16:5 we see faith first, numbers second, as “the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”

Goal setting is not the key to growing our faith or increasing the impact of the church. Doing the work of faithful ministry is. Obviously, some goal setting needs to happen. Sermons are due every Sunday, and projects have time-sensitive tasks. But most of the time, ministry is less about setting goals and more about doing good work,

one day at a time. The Bible regularly demonstrates this balance with admonitions about how we are to walk in obedience to God, including a wealth of instructions about how to live as the church. And it lauds the wise person for planning, while condemning the foolish one for not preparing.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? (Luke 14:28)

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (Prov. 15:22)

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. (1 Cor. 16:2 ESV)

Planning and preparing are not the same as setting goals and determining outcomes. Outcomes are always in God's hands, not ours.

- In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps. (Prov. 16:9)
- Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. (Prov. 19:21)
- Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13–16 ESV)
- I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (1 Cor. 3:6 ESV)

We need to stop idolizing outcomes. Let go of chasing after attendance goals, trying to create a buzz, or doing year-to-year comparisons. Just be faithful to the work. Day after day, church service after church service, year after year. When it all adds up, you'll have consistent, faithful ministry that changes lives and honors God.

This is true in every area of life, even in highly competitive arenas where outcomes are considered paramount. For example, Bill Walsh was one of the most innovative and influential American football coaches. He was famous for telling his players that if they focus on the fundamentals, the score will take care of itself. It became so central to his coaching that it's the title of his book *The Score Takes Care of Itself: My Philosophy of Leadership*. If focusing on the fundamentals and not the score works in such a competitive field as the NFL, it should be even more applicable in the kingdom of God, where we're not supposed to keep score at all.

Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl put it this way:

Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.⁴

Church Metrics: Our Three Biggest Mistakes

There are three big mistakes we tend to make with church metrics: overusing them, underusing them, and misusing them.

First, there's a tendency to overuse metrics to assess the health and strength of a church. Relying on numbers as the only way to determine the health and vitality of a church is extremely problematic. The problems show up most obviously in the majority of churches

(up to 90 percent) that are regularly referred to as “stuck,” simply because their numbers aren’t increasing year to year. Many of them *are* stuck, of course. But a lot of them are doing wonderful, missional, kingdom-advancing work that doesn’t get the credit it deserves, merely because the numbers don’t fit our preconceived ideas. Stuck isn’t a number; it’s a mindset.

***Stuck isn’t a number;
it’s a mindset.***

On the other side of the obsession ledger are the churches that seem to be winning at the numbers game. Obviously, many of those churches are doing well, and we can learn from them. But numerical success has pitfalls. When the numbers start going up, the increase feels self-affirming, but soon the need for greater numbers becomes self-perpetuating, and eventually that all-consuming drive can become self-deceiving. It’s easy to hide many problems, even outright sins, behind the veil of numerical increase.

When chasing the numbers takes over a pastor’s head and heart, it can easily create an obsession that becomes more important than the people and principles that actually matter. This obsession tends to create an alternative reality that the church must wake up from. But we won’t wake up easily or without a great deal of pain and disorientation. I believe the church, especially the American church, is in the beginning of that stage right now. We’re reeling like a boxer who’s taken one too many punches but doesn’t know where the pounding is coming from. In many cases, to switch up the metaphor, the call is coming from inside the house.

Second, we mustn’t fall into the trap of underusing metrics. Numbers have value. The right metrics can help us keep track of many important aspects of church life and health. Often, they’re the canary in the coal mine, alerting us to impending dangers before

they become life-threatening. We typically underuse metrics when we assume a church must be healthy simply because it's growing in attendance. A deeper look might uncover warning signs like a corresponding drop in engagement and spiritual maturity. Catching these issues early can help church leaders address them before they eat away at the church's foundation. We'll explore this further when we look at the principle of Goldilocks Metrics in chapter 10.

Third, misusing them. The main way we do this is when we wield numbers as a weapon to exert power and control. This is the problem at the core of everything. The issue isn't really size. It's not even about numbers or metrics. It's about power and control. The pastor of a small church and the pastor of a megachurch are both susceptible to the allure of seizing power and staying in control. And at the root of that is idolatry—taking authority that belongs to God alone.

Chapter 2

When Bigger Is the Enemy of Better

It's a dangerous and misguided policy to measure God's blessing by standards of visible, tangible, material "success."

KENT AND BARBARA HUGHES

When I was a young man growing up in a pastor's home, there was a church we regularly attended on vacation. This church had been in decline for several years. After hiring an energetic new pastor, it grew quickly. Our next visit was exciting. The place was packed. It was church membership Sunday, so a couple dozen people came on stage after having completed the new members' class. This church hadn't seen that many new members in years, and now they were growing by that many official members every month, in addition to hundreds of new attenders.

After shaking hands with the new members, the pastor turned to the congregation and asked, "Would anyone else like to become a member?" Hands shot up all over the building, maybe a hundred or more. *Wow*, I naïvely thought, *their next membership class will be filled beyond capacity!* I assumed the pastor would instruct them to

fill out the “I’d Like to Become a Member” box on the visitor’s card. Instead, he told them, “Get out of your seats and come on up here! We’ll make all of you members *right now!*” They rushed the stage like shoppers at Walmart on Black Friday.

The pastor prayed over them, shook their hands to welcome them into membership, and sent them back to their seats to massive applause as the band pumped up the music for the next upbeat worship song. I was young, but I knew this was wrong. Instead of two dozen or so new members that morning, their next bulletin (and, no doubt, the report to their denomination) would announce, “Over 100 New Members!” And I had to wonder why the pastor felt the need to inflate the membership numbers that way. He had no idea if the people rushing the stage had ever been in that church before, would ever come back, or even had a relationship with Jesus. Plus, aside from being a dishonest way of inflating numbers, it was entirely unnecessary. Their growth was already enormously successful. It was legitimately the fastest church growth I had ever seen. The extra hype for inflated numbers certainly excited the crowd that day, but it left me feeling empty and sad.

Jesus was already doing something wonderful in that church. There was no need to inflate the membership numbers. That invitation to join the church was not about soul-winning or a passion for lost people. At best, it was about getting caught up in the moment, at worst it may have been about ego. And behavior like this is repeated in churches everywhere, both big and small. The pursuit of bigness is a relentless monster that demands to be fed but will never be satisfied. It consumes everything and everyone in its path.

* * * * *

Howard Schultz, the former Starbucks CEO and the prime figure behind the company’s massive growth, said, “Growth covers

up a lot of mistakes.”¹ He was right. It does. And if you’re aiming to please shareholders so they overlook the occasional poor business decision (what Schultz appears to have meant in this context), that may not be a problem. But if you’re using numerical success to cover up shallow theology, abusive behavior, or unbridled ego, this is a huge problem, one we’ve seen far too much of in the church.

Tim Suttle tackles this in his book *Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture*:

We are going to have to stop our incessant need to make things grow the way we want them to grow, whatever the price. . . . The Christian leader does not pursue success or results the way the CEO of a Fortune 500 company does. The Christian leader pursues faithfulness. . . . I believe that churches that build on the foundation of business leadership principles are building on assumptions that are simply foreign to the gospel.²

For decades I was taught that if a church stayed small, it was the sign of a problem. Lack of numerical growth must be due to mission drift, controlling pastors, stubborn members, and so on. That is shifting. Today, the average person is as likely to believe that if a church gets “too big,” it’s surely the result of greed, theological shallowness, and a consumer-oriented mentality. I reject both presuppositions. Neither the big nor small church is morally or theologically wrong. But it is harder to maintain biblical integrity when a church gets bigger. Size has a pull. And that pull is seldom morally neutral and almost never positive. Wanting to reach people for Jesus and wanting bigger attendance are not the same thing. When we equate them, we get into trouble. I used to believe that pursuing attendance goals was morally positive. It was the fuel for the fire of evangelism. Even after I stopped chasing numbers myself, I saw the pursuit of increased

The pursuit of bigness in the church is morally, theologically, and emotionally damaging.

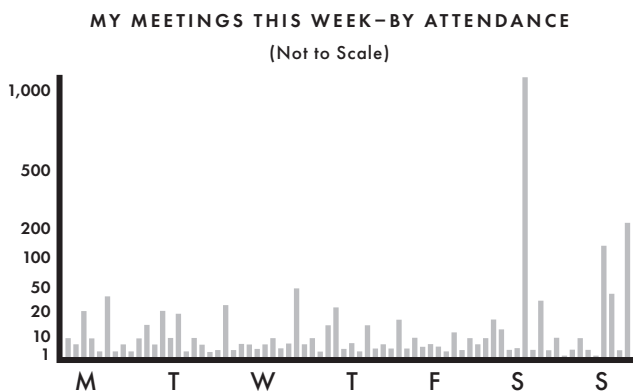
attendance as a good thing. Today, I still believe there's no qualitative differences between large churches and small ones, but I've heard too many stories of damaged pastors, churches, and members to believe that our obsession for bigger is morally or theologically neutral. So, I'll say it clearly: the

pursuit of *bigness* in the church is morally, theologically, and emotionally damaging. Dallas Willard warned us of this, saying, "The need to achieve is too great. Invariably it is the personal and spiritual life of the minister that suffers."³

We should prepare for growth. We should be ready for growth. But we should not pursue growth. We should pursue Christ, His mission, His glory, and the making of disciples. It is not possible to pursue Jesus and be obsessed with bigness at the same time without one of them becoming diminished in the process.

Every time we pay attention to numerical increase, we divert some of our time, attention, and energy away from pursuing the glory of God alone. Even when we structure for growth, we should be careful. "Structure is not neutral," warn Dan White Jr. and JR Woodward. In the hierarchical approach to leadership prevalent in US churches and being exported to the world, "the basic measurement of success tends to be counting people, money and the size of the building,"⁴ and this way of measuring success has bigger downsides than upsides.

For example, imagine if every time you speak to anyone in a week, you chart it on a graph. At the end of the week, for the pastor of a mid-sized church, it might look something like this:



During that week, you had a staff meeting with ten people, conducted a Bible a study with twenty-five people, and held two church services with one hundred and two hundred, respectively. But that week you were also on a panel at a conference attended by a thousand people. If you assess those meetings numerically, the most successful meeting of your week is obvious: the time you spoke to one thousand people wins by a landslide. It might have outnumbered all the other meetings combined.

But take a closer look at the smaller lines. One of them stands for a heart-to-heart talk with your spouse leading the two of you to make a life-altering decision. Another talk was with a couple at the church who reconciled this week, instead of seeking divorce. Several of the four-person meetings were family dinners that imprint long-term habits and memories on the hearts of your children.

Now which meeting is the most important? That answer is impossible. We'll never know the true value of all the ripples from the simplest and smallest encounters. But when we categorize ministries and churches on a numerical graph, we retrain our brain to think that the small meetings are inherently less valuable than big ones. Even though our life experience assures us this isn't true, the constant drive to quantify everything assigns an incomplete, inaccurate,

and inappropriate value to the tasks we perform and the people we impact. There's a never-ending line of horror stories about hard driving executives, innovative entrepreneurs, and heavily committed pastors who do exactly that. They sacrifice the small but weighty meetings with the people they *should* be paying more attention to for larger meetings with people whose names they'll never know. By doing so, they're neglecting godly priorities.

The way we obsess over numbers is rewiring our brains and hearts in harmful ways. According to both the Bible and neuroscience, we value what we think about, then we *become* what we think about. We've all seen people who determine that "I will not become the kind of man my father was!" or "I'll give my kids a much better homelife than my mother gave me," but who end up being exactly like the parent they're trying not to mirror. When we think about something, even as a negative example, our thoughts draw us toward it. This is why Scripture encourages us to set our minds on things of God and to think about "such things" as godly character traits,⁵ while staying away from the negative attributes of our past. Following the list of negative character traits and behaviors at the end of Romans 1, for instance, the apostle Paul doesn't tell them to strive not to be like that anymore; he informs them that they *aren't* that anymore. Don't push back against them; respond to the pull of godliness. In the article "Pastor, Why Do You Want a Big Church?" on The Gospel Coalition blog, Graham Heslop suggests, "Perhaps we do need to explore pastors' hidden motivations behind the desire for a big church after all." He offered the balanced approach that "the desire for large thriving ministries is surely in many cases a healthy and prayerful longing for evangelism and conversions. However, we are deceiving ourselves if we deny that mixed motives may lie beneath."⁶

We tell ourselves that our desire for bigger is motivated by Christ and His kingdom, and the needs of our congregation and community, but we know better. Or we should. We're not running at an

unsustainable pace for *them*, we're doing it for *ourselves*. We've bought into the lie that the church can't move forward unless we *make* it go there. We tell ourselves we're building bigger churches to serve the kingdom, but a lot of it is building bigger barns to feed our own egos. We need to let it go. We're the only ones who want this. Christ is not a drill sergeant, demanding that we do more, preach better, lead more innovatively, streamline the church's systems, or get bigger each year—neither are most church members. That's on us. What if we decided to stop the cycle, slow down, and put some pastoring into our pastoring? Would our families be upset? Likely the opposite. Would the congregation push back? They'd likely feel relieved. Would we disappoint Jesus? Hardly. If we slowed down enough, we might discover that the Savior we've been working so hard for is waiting for us to do that, so He can take the wheel again and lead His church—and us—like He promised He would.

If you feel trapped by the endless obsession of chasing bigness, there's some very good news. The key to freedom is not a mystery; it's already in your hand. We can reverse this if we're willing to acknowledge and address the problem. But first we must take a clear, unflinching look at how we got here. Getting bigger is such an assumed part of our church leadership conversations that most of us aren't aware that numerical growth wasn't a central concern for most of church history. And it wasn't so long ago that it all changed.

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