

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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What's important— numbers or purpose?



Many churches are putting more emphasis these days on data. They count members, attendance, and programs, and measure how fast all those are increasing or decreasing. This concern with figures is partly a response to decline. In order to turn membership and attendance numbers around, we have to measure them accurately.

Some congregations seek to tie numbers explicitly to leadership. They've seen that the pastor plays a key role—maybe *the* key role—in whether a congregation thrives, though even an outstanding pastor can't succeed without the support of lay leaders. The health of a congregation and the spiritual growth of its members therefore depend on holding all these



leaders accountable for their effectiveness, in part by counting and comparing numbers. Metrics is one of the “in” words for this counting. Many church leaders are currently debating whether a greater emphasis on metrics will help or hurt.

Focus on metrics in several fields

In the secular world we're seeing an upsurge of interest in metrics. From local schools to giant corporations, a key determinant of effectiveness is the quality of leaders, and quantitative measures are currently a popular way to assess leadership quality. In the age of high tech and big data, crunching more numbers can help organizations of every kind see new patterns and measure the effects of change.

But how important are measurable aspects such as test scores and sales figures, compared to the charisma of leaders and the focus on a compelling goal? More importantly, how should schools, businesses, and churches contribute to larger social purposes?

Inclusive data, inclusive language

I was dismayed when in an article advocating use of modern data I read this as a United Methodist organization's purpose: “to help the church become more clearly focused on *her*[sic] God-given mission.”

It's astonishing to me when church leaders want to use the latest data and analysis, yet cling to ancient language and ideas about the purpose for that data. Masculine words for God perpetuate unjust patriarchal stereotypes, from a time when men treated women as slaves or possessions. Failing to remove those metaphors from our hymns, creeds, prayers, and conversations implies that women in the church are only followers and second-class citizens, not equal leaders and decision-makers. That's as bad as counting with an abacus in the computer era!



Time to stop calling the church a bride

Calling the church the bride of Christ, the source of the pronoun “she,” is the other side of this unjust and outdated pattern. It not only emphasizes the maleness of Jesus rather than his humanness, it also makes churchgoers as a group appear passive, child-like, and powerless. A traditional bride is led to the altar and “given” by her father to her husband, because she is seen as naive, immature, and unassertive. Her delicate veil and gown, high heels, and fancy hairstyle aren't meant for serious work or vigorous activity in the outer world. Instead, she is merely displayed as a fragile symbol of purity, performing a passive ceremonial role.



That is the opposite of what the church needs to be today! Both men and women are now called to be the body of Christ in the real world, going out actively into the community to share with the poor, welcome outsiders, and promote justice and compassion. Our language must show that we all are that church.

United Methodists can express their views about gendered language for God in a survey sponsored by the UMC Commission on the Status and Role of Women, at www.surveymonkey.com/s/names4god.

Like society at large, the church needs people who will help support others as well as supporting themselves, and who can identify and correct shortcomings as well as celebrating virtues. We need to measure our progress toward our goals, but we also must keep reexamining the goals themselves.



An analysis of metrics in the church

Gil Rendle, a United Methodist pastor and consultant with long experience in investigating what makes church congregations thrive, is addressing the subject of church metrics in a series of five articles written for the Texas Methodist Foundation. It's called *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness and Metrics*. The first three articles were published earlier this year and are available from the TMF website, www.tmf-fdn.org, and the other two articles will be available there in coming months.

Rendle acknowledges that emphasis on metrics has advantages and disadvantages. He points out that measurable goals alone do little to motivate or cause change in the church. Many pastors, he finds, feel (like schoolteachers, perhaps?) that it's unfair to be held accountable for variables over which they have limited or no control. Many also see the emphasis on metrics as mere pressure to preserve the institution, without regard for whether it is accomplishing a worthy goal. Not only is worthiness hard to measure, but today's changing mission field often makes traditional standards outdated.



Despite these reasons for being skeptical of metrics, however, Rendle emphasizes that leaders must be informed about their congregation and its environment if the church is to accomplish its purpose.



Support for both views in the Bible

Gil Rendle points out that support for each of these attitudes toward metrics can be found in the Bible. Followers of Jesus are urged to sow their seed and then trust God for the results, recognizing that seeds fall on both productive and unproductive soils. Christians are urged not to worry about the future, but rather to be like the lilies and birds for which God provides. Yet those who embark on building a

tower are urged to calculate the cost and prepare, and to recognize readiness and measure results.

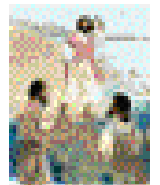
Very few vital congregations

As an example of using metrics in the church, Rendle discusses a UMC effort named "Call to Action." It has tried to identify what constitutes a vital congregation, and to persuade and help UMC congregations to acquire the characteristics needed for vitality. Because the UMC's official mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and because UMC leaders believe Christian disciples are most often made in congregations, Rendle explains, the "Call to Action" emphasizes measurable features such as church membership, attendance, baptisms, growth, per capita giving, programs, groups, and projects.



A 2010 research report identified what seemed to be the main indicators of vitality in UMC congregations. They show whether a congregation is connected to its mission field, how many people are engaged in its ministry, whether it is emotionally and spiritually healthy enough to help people grow in Christ, and whether it can make the generational changes necessary for speaking the story of Christ to new people.

Then the research organization used these indicators to find out how many UMC congregations could be considered vital. Only 15% of the nearly 33,000 UMC congregations had the characteristics that were found necessary for vitality. This finding has led some UMC leaders to think that the UMC needs to redirect its resources not only toward its vital congregations, but also away from the congregations that show neither the capacity nor the willingness to become vital.



A means, not an end

Gil Rendle assures us, however, that vital congregations are merely tools, not an end result. They are only means to accomplish what he sees as the true end of ministry, which is making disciples. In his view, the church doesn't need more vital congregations merely for the sake of reversing membership decline, offering better programs, paying better clergy salaries, or fur-

nishing the funds necessary to support the denominational structure. Instead, it needs more vital congregations because that is where disciples are made.

What kind of changed people?

But what is a disciple? Gil Rendle describes it as the changed self that comes from encountering the presence and story of Christ. Church members therefore need to talk, Rendle emphasizes, about what the changed people would be like if the congregation were visibly progressing toward the goal of making disciples. But

such a description remains disappointingly vague.



I wish he had explicitly affirmed, for instance, that becoming a disciple doesn't just mean joining a church or filling a pew on Sundays. I wish he had said that it doesn't mean believing that every statement in the Apostle's Creed or every verse in the Bible is literally and historically true.

In analyzing how we analyze church, I want leaders like Rendle to say outright that the "changed people" who are the church's goal must actively practice and promote the kind of compassion and justice that Jesus advocated. They could remind us, for example, that just as Christians marched for civil

rights 50 years ago, many modern disciples are now urging legislators to make immigration laws more just and compassionate. How could we use metrics and modern technology to reach more people faster on this urgent issue? How can congregations better quantify their members' passion and determination in such a concrete worthy cause?



What else could discipleship mean today? Modern disciples might speak out for humane working

conditions in their own state and city, using metrics to show how hard it is to get out of poverty without a living wage and access to affordable child care and health care. They could use metrics to judge how well congregations are doing at welcoming non-heterosexual people, even if that means refusing to obey official church policies. They could measure how many local churches are actively working to keep non-Christians' religious freedom from being denied, by hosting interfaith groups and inclusive meetings and events. Church leaders could help make all these metrics of justice more visible and explicit.



A local part of a global purpose

I was glad that Rendle pointed out that the church needs to make a difference in what he calls the corner of the kingdom of God that a congregation has been given. The goal is part of a global purpose, but it must be a local means to that end, relating to a specific setting and the individuals in it.

I was also glad to see Rendle acknowledge that a congregation's goal must not be members' preferences or comfort. We aren't here to preserve and protect, he stresses, but to challenge and change.

Little time to make significant changes

That can be a tall order. Rendle points out that the average age of UMC members is 22 years older than the U.S. national average. The UMC's greatest strength and attraction is in the Anglo middle class, yet the U.S. is steadily becoming less and less Anglo-centric, and the middle class is disappearing as the



gap grows between a new educated, overpaid, high-spending upper class, and an exploding new struggling low-wage working class.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Other mainline denominations have similar demographics.

To Rendle, this says that the UMC is unsustainable as it currently is, and that it may have only a few years to make significant changes. Yet discerning God's specific purposes for a congregation, and learning how to live in today's new mission field, can take time.



That means, in Gil Rendle's view, that it's high time for church members to put action and discernment together. It's urgent that we begin now to think and talk about what the

church's real goal is, and to measure the progress each congregation is making or failing to make toward accomplishing that goal in concrete ways, in its corner of the world.

What churches need more of now, in Rendle's opinion, is conversation about purpose and clear outcomes. How could you nudge your congregation to talk more about what specific changes God calls it to make, in the particular mission field where it's located? How can you measure whether it's actually making a recognizable difference?

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Three kinds of church conversations



Consultant Gil Rendle sees three different kinds of conversations happening in churches.

- **Maintenance conversations** focus mainly on preserving who we have been and following the rules. They might address topics from dogma and ritual to facilities and hierarchy. Such conversations can be stultifying, Rendle finds, to a people who need to enter a changed cultural mission field where old ways are ineffective.
- **Preferential conversations** seek to satisfy people already in the congregation or attract those we wish were in it. They may focus on marketing or growth, or small groups or worship styles. Rendle warns that they can become a search for ways to keep people happy and unchanged, instead of challenged by the demands of the gospel.
- **Missional conversations** focus on purpose and on possibilities for the future. They look for ways to meet new needs in the community, and for ways to change the church and society in order to promote justice and compassion. They might measure changes in demographics, or compare financing and effectiveness of social programs. In Rendle's view, church leaders must show that these are the most important and urgent conversations. I agree and wish he had given even more concrete examples. How could you help guide conversation toward mission?