

Small Churches

by Mike Thomas

It is not uncommon for people to measure a church's success solely by the numbers it has in attendance. One of the first things I am asked when people learn I am a preacher is how big the church is where I attend. They will then use this as a benchmark for whether or not I am a successful preacher or if the church is a vibrant congregation. I guess we all have done the same. For one reason or another, we are convinced that all we need to know about a church is found in its numbers. This perception leads some Christians to ask, "Have we failed because we cannot get more people to join our effort? Are we doing something wrong when the numbers are low?" This reflects the erroneous belief that a church's faithfulness is determined by its attendance. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The church at Sardis had a reputation as a growing and active church, but from God's perspective they were dead spiritually (Revelation 3:1). Perhaps their pews were filled to capacity and everybody who was anybody went there; with other churches in the area wanting to emulate their every move. But Sardis was not the ideal church from God's point of view. They still had a lot to learn from Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13) in demonstrating faith and zeal. This does not mean that every large church has compromised with sin to get to that size (Acts 11:21). Nor does it mean that fewer numbers guarantees faithful, dedicated members. Some churches are few in number because they have a toxic environment of bitterness, slander, and hate; while others are small because they lack good leadership and are in constant turmoil. These environments force those who walk circumspectly to look elsewhere to work and worship. Yet at the same time, some churches are overflowing with people despite their poor teaching and leadership. Truly, numbers are not the final measurement of a church's dedication to the Lord. As long as a church as a whole is striving to keep the Lord's will, they should not feel like a failure when the numbers are not booming as in other churches. As Noah proved, sometimes the most dedicated disciples can only find a few others to join them in keeping God's word (1 Peter 3:20).

A church with few numbers can still have a very positive, uplifting, and encouraging atmosphere if it is willing. One of the finest churches I know of has attendance in the 20's to 30's every week. The world looks at numbers like that and says it is time to close the doors and go elsewhere to worship, but don't tell these brethren that. They are genuinely committed to worshiping God in spirit and truth —with no thought whatsoever of self-pity and disappointment. Their time in worship is deliberate and unhurried. Their singing is plentiful and with purpose. Their preaching (the kind they demand from visiting speakers) is straight out of the Bible. Any time they have together is time to let each other know how much they genuinely appreciate one another. They even keep the building up-to-date and clean. It's hard to believe a church like that will stay small for long, but then again that's measuring success with a different standard than God's.

In any setting and in all things may our attitude be *"not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord"* (Romans 12:11). There is always reason to rejoice when gathered with fellow Christians to worship, especially when Jesus promises that *"where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them"* (Matthew 18:20).

— Beaver Dam, Kentucky

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