
DEFINING A QUALITY MINISTRY PROCESS

How Good Is a Church (or a Program)?

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

Though most pastors claim they do not equate church size with church success (quality), our traditional church paradigm offers us few other indices of quality—ways to evaluate how good a job a church is doing. At best, numbers tell us only part of the story. For instance, a church planted in a booming suburb of a fast-growing city may well attract huge numbers of people, not because of anything especially noteworthy done by the pastor, but because it was the only “show in town.”

No one wants to be evaluated; large-church pastors are as intimidated by it as are small church pastors. We fear being told we aren’t doing a good job. We dread the final pronouncement, “*Poorly done thou bad and faithless servant.*” On the other hand, we are eager to make our lives count for more; and we can’t define more without taking an honest look at the job we are presently doing.

More and more, those of us who want to do a better job at pastoring—no matter what the costs—are asking for evaluation. We want to know what else we might do differently. As long as we can see evaluation as a tool to achieve excellence, then I think we can endure the pain of it.

The problem is, “How do we assess the relative quality of a church process?” Trying to evaluate the quality of a church is much like attempting to determine how good a college is. It is very difficult to do. In the field of higher education, researchers have been trying for decades to arrive at a meaningful model with which to evaluate the quality of education students receive at colleges.

The Folklore of College Quality Tends to Focus on Three Factors:

- Quality of graduates—achievement test results, salaries after graduation.
- Quantity of resources—number of library books, faculty, PhDs, tuition expense.
- Institutional visibility— size, name recognition, tradition.

Researchers know, however, that these are not legitimate indications of quality: 1) the reason such bright people graduate from Harvard is because such bright people enter as freshmen—the output is determined primarily by the input; 2) there is no correlation between institutional assets and students' intellectual development; and, 3) colleges become well-known through their sports programs, their highly visible professors, and their bigness—none of which actually impact the average student.

In other words, measurements of quality that are easily translated into numbers rarely tell the story of college quality. The same is true for churches. Quality ought to be a statement of what actually happens to people who attend a college or a church. Are they affected by their church or college experience? What changes occurred in them, which would not have occurred had they not attended that church? A large church that primarily collects, *already-been-Christians-for-years people*, may spin off larger church planting teams, for instance, but is it doing a better job than the small church that sends out fewer/smaller church planting teams because it grows mostly by evangelism?

Conversely, though small churches claim to do better at providing rich fellowship experiences, large churches with well-developed cell groups, great choirs, and adult classes may be doing an even better job.

The Real Question Is What Does this Church Do To/For Its People?

NUMERIC GOALS

To People:

1. Conversions.
2. Attendance.
3. Offerings.

With People:

1. Personal witnessing.
1. Inviting people to church.
2. Tithing/endowing.
3. Personal witnessing.

PROCESS GOALS

To People:

1. Message, altar calls.
2. Services/special programs.
3. Stewardship/financial instr.

With People:

1. Outreach.
2. Program Participation.
3. Worship/volunteering.
4. Testifying/teaching others.

For a congregation, quality is an issue of effectiveness, not of size or wealth. Effectiveness is the measure of how much of what a church intends to accomplish (its mission) does it actually accomplish.

This requires that the church define its terms of success—to spell out exactly what it is trying to do. There are two ways to approach *the task of defining success*:

- Determine specific numeric goals (attendance, conversions, baptisms, income, church plants, etc.).
- Envision an ideal process/environment (teaching settings, accountability networks, counseling programs, outreaches, etc.).

In both cases, the focus should be on the *value added*—the difference the church makes—not simply on outcome measurements. The best evaluation of church quality will come by combining product evaluation (numeric goals) and process evaluation (ideal environment), looking for connection *between* changes in results and changes in process.

Additionally, evaluation of the process and of the results must focus on what happens: 1) To the people who attend the church—how the church affects them; and, 2) With people who attend the church—how the church makes use of them. This means people are both results of the process and resources in the process. Thus, church effectiveness should be measured by the quality of its goals and the degree to which it has accomplished those goals in people and with people.

(CHURCH QUALITY: Evaluating Plans and Performances.)