

Measuring by tears

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August 3, 2016

How do you measure what is happening in a congregation?

I have been here for about a year now. I was reminded of this when the "check engine" went on in my elderly car, as that is what happened when I first drove into town a year ago. I spent those first three months frantically trying to fix things and become a legal resident of the state in which I was working.

But now it has been a year. On what basis do I evaluate the ministry of the congregation? The fact that my "check engine" light came back on can't be a good thing. Some people have moved away and don't come to church here. There are also some new faces. We have moved from two services to one, at least for the time being, and moved around some other aspects of the Sunday morning schedule. The one service contains elements of both of the services, which is an adjustment for everyone. It is neither contemporary nor traditional.

The Bible study that always took place between the services now comes before the one service. I am not sure whether it is the time change or just summer, but the attendance at the Bible study has been sort of erratic. A couple of weeks ago we had to put tables together. But this week it was really small. I wondered if we really wanted to study. Perhaps people just wanted to visit and have coffee instead?

"No, let's get going," one man said.

We were studying the journeys of Paul and opened by reading excerpts from [Acts 13 and 14](#). We read and noticed what seemed interesting or odd or what we had a question about. We noticed that Paul always took someone with him. He did not travel alone. We asked questions about Paul's preaching and going to the synagogue and the miracles he did. We talked about miracles, about how people thought Paul and Barnabas were gods and tried to make sacrifices to them.

Have you ever had an experience—like a miracle—that just made you want to worship or respond in some way? I asked the small group gathered.

Most people didn't claim to have experienced a miracle, although they had heard of them. We all believed they were possible. But we talked about the difficulty of believing in miracles and praying for them, knowing that they often didn't happen. Some people shared experiences in their lives and said, "If you believe, you see things that you might not see if you did not believe."

Then one woman shared her story about being in a car wreck and being injured when she was a teenager. Someone else did not make it. She was in a back brace from that and had to have surgery. A priest came and prayed and when she went back to the doctor, her back was fine. No one could explain it.

Later on she shared how she prayed for her brother, who was dying from cancer. And how he told her, when she prayed, that she could pray for healing for him, but she should make sure she prayed for God's will to be done. Because God might not want the same kind of healing for him that he had for her.

It was a holy, vulnerable moment, and I thought I saw tears when she shared her story, tears from that small group of scripture-studiers. We were standing on holy ground, and we knew it.

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At the worship service later in the morning, one young man affirmed his baptism. He wore a white robe, and made promises, and we laid our hands on him. We gave him gifts and applauded, and sang songs of praise. We pledged to share the light and love together, to live love and not hate, to live hope and not fear.

And I thought I saw tears in some eyes that morning, just pooling a little at the edges of the lashes.

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I can tally the numbers on Sunday morning. I can try to chart the volume of singing. I can count the visitors, subtract those who move away, add those who move in. I can be disappointed when turnout is small and elated when it rises.

Or I can measure by moments of bravery, stories shared, tears shed. I can trust that God is changing our lives, and changing the world through us.

Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)