

Pastor says numerical success not ministry measure

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GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP)—During 25 years as a minister, every church where Jim Somerville has served had stories of a legendary pastor and glory days when they had to put extra chairs in the aisles to accommodate overflow crowds. Somewhere along the line, he noticed a common theme. Each pastor had served during the 1950s, when going to church was “the Sunday morning thing to do.”

The era coincided almost exactly with the so-called “baby boom” between 1946 and 1964, Somerville told pastors at a conference in January at Georgetown College in Kentucky. Young parents wanted their children to grow up in church just as they had.



Jim Somerville Churches struggled to find space and built bigger buildings. For a while, they were full or nearly full, and then for a number of reasons, things started to change. Some say it started when movie theaters began to open on Sunday. Maybe, Somerville said, it just marked the end of the baby boom.

“Whatever cultural reasons that used to push people through the church doors began to pull them out again,” said Somerville, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.](#) The result was “great panic” for congregations that watched numbers dwindle “as if someone pulled the plug in the bathtub.”

About that time, a young minister in Chicago started a new church at Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Ill. Willow Creek Community Church’s founding pastor, Bill Hybels, believed people were staying away from church because of outdated music, irrelevant sermons and because they don’t like to dress up on Sunday morning.

‘Seeker-friendly’

His response became known as “seeker-friendly” worship, and it sparked a church-growth movement many tried to emulate. Community churches popped up in towns across the country. People left their old churches for new ones, and the emphasis turned to attending church not out of duty, devotion or habit but because worshippers found it attractive.

Some churches did this better than others, Somerville observed. A few grew into mega-churches, while others struggled to survive.

Somerville emphasized he has nothing against relevant preaching or contemporary worship, but the reality today is “some people aren’t going to come to church, no matter what you do.”

“This is the perfect time to re-examine the church’s mission and purpose,” Somerville said. “Is it really to get as many people into our pews on Sunday morning or as many of their dollars in the offering plate? Is that really what Jesus had in mind for the church?”

Measuring success

Turning to Scripture, Somerville found little about the standards most ministers use to measure success. At the same time, he said, Jesus talked a lot about the “kingdom of God,” a phrase the Gospels reference about 120 times.

Viewing the church less as an institution to be preserved and more as a force for change in society, Somerville over the course of four or five years encouraged First Baptist in Richmond to shift from an “attractional” to a “missional” mindset. Instead of expecting the community to come to them, they would go out into the community.

Last fall, First Baptist kicked off a year-long “every-member mission trip” called [KOH2RVA](#) —an acronym for “Kingdom of Heaven to Richmond, Virginia.”

Partnerships were formed with community organizations to provide members with new opportunities to “get off the bus” and into hands-on missions. Somerville blogs nearly every day on the initiative.

Somerville reports the church staff still is working on the question of how to measure success.

“You could have a church full of people and offering plates full of money without ever doing the things Jesus told you to do,” he blogged Jan. 31. “The institution would be successful, but the mission would not.”

Striking a balance

“On the other hand, you could have a church so radically committed to the mission that its members never came to church or put their money in the plates. They would all be out there on the mission field, bringing heaven to earth. The mission would be successful, but the institution would not.”

Ideally, he said, “there would be a balance between institutional and

missional success.”

Somerville says he doesn’t know if every single church member is taking the challenge seriously, but many stop him in the hallway to tell him about the work they’re doing. Lay people increasingly remark about thinking of themselves more as missionaries and less as spectators who come to church to sit and listen while professionals perform the church’s ministry.

When he talked in January about KOH2RVA with a group of pastors in Arizona, Somerville said they wanted to know two things: “Have you seen an increase in attendance?” and “Have you seen an increase in giving?”

The answer he gave to both questions was “no,” but that is the way ministers have learned to measure success, he noted.

“Pastors of large churches are considered successful because their churches are large, and if they want to stay successful, they have to think about how to keep them that way,” he blogged about the experience Jan. 28. “I don’t blame them for asking if our year-long, every-member mission trip has stimulated growth and giving.”

Caring for ‘the least of these’

Somerville said he wouldn’t be surprised if attendance and offerings do indeed grow as church members become more engaged, but he finds nowhere in Scripture where success is measured by how many people come to church on Sunday and how much they give.

“I’ll keep looking, but so far I’m finding things like loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; things like loving our neighbors as ourselves; things like caring for ‘the least of these’—Jesus’ brothers and sisters,” he wrote. “That’s how success is measured in the kingdom, and it shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus told us a long time ago that in God’s kingdom, the yardstick is turned upside-down—the last are first and the least are

great.

“As that kingdom comes closer and closer to Richmond, Va., we may have to start measuring success in a whole new way.”