

Editorial: Defining ‘influential churches’ is a complicated task

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How would you identify an “influential” church?

The question surfaced in an email from a minister of music and administration who serves a congregation in another state. The question caught me off guard, but more about that later.

“Would you mind supplying me with a list of your 20 most influential churches?” the emailer asked. “The criteria I’d suggest using for determining ‘influential’ is what churches have standing so as to make things happen in Texas. This isn’t intended to be a ranking of any kind. ... I am not looking for the top 20 in financial gifts, baptisms, Bible study attendance, etc. My hope is to contact the worship leader(s) and ... examine specific aspects of worship practices in churches you would consider influential.”

Not so simple

Not so long ago, that would have been an easy question. In an era of homogenous worship and strong denominational bonds, almost anyone active in a state or regional convention could have answered. And no



matter how many replied, every regional list probably Editor Marv Knox would include 15 churches in common. The hardest part

of responding would have been settling on only 20 congregations.

But now? Not so much. How could I provide a list of our “20 most influential churches”?

To prepare, I visited the questioner’s church’s website. It’s an apparently healthy so-called moderate Baptist congregation in a Deep South county-seat college town. Judging by context, I decided he isn’t interested in Texas Baptists’ most influential African-American, Hispanic, intercultural or western-heritage churches. So, I narrowed the parameters to Anglo congregations. The 20 most influential among them? Still hard to say.

I shared the email with friends and visited with others. They weren’t much help. In fact, they validated my initial impression. Drawing up a list of the “20 most influential churches” is—to use a highly sophisticated theological term—hard.

The question suggests ‘another time’

Church life just isn’t Top 20 simple anymore. Or, as one of my friends explained, the question suggests “another time, another subculture, and really doesn’t have the same definitions now.”

To buy time, I replied: “The answer to your question is complicated” and promised to get back to him. Complicated, indeed. Our culture today—churches included—is so fragmented, “influential” is more ineffable and harder to define than ever before.

What’s more, churches that possess historic name recognition as the traditional “leading” or “most influential” congregations don’t necessarily garner much respect anymore. In fact, many of them fell behind the curve of influence precisely because of their former success. Known for conducting a style of worship or producing a program with excellence, they have held on for heaven’s sake. Meanwhile, trends and expectations propel

other churches forward.

And especially, when it comes to worship, churches that seek ideas and inspiration rarely consider the historically influential congregations. They certainly don't restrict their consideration to other churches within their denomination, whether it's Baptist or anything else.

Nowadays, ideas easily cross boundaries

Most take their cues from other churches within their worship niches, which now are as varied and bountiful as notes on a musical score. They find each other at myriad worship and leadership conferences, the largest and most influential among them completely unaffiliated with any denomination. Beyond that, the Internet—which recognizes no geographic boundaries or denominational affiliations—facilitates widespread observation, idea-sharing and relationship-building.

Ultimately, I sent a list of 17 Texas churches divided into four categories—affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and influential across the state, affiliated with the BGCT and influential in their geographic regions, affiliated with the competing convention in Texas, and non-Baptist congregations.

How about you? Which congregations influence you and your church? Where do you look for congregational inspiration, ideas and best practices?

The process isn't as simple as it once was, but the possibilities have expanded exponentially.