

THE NEW METRICS OF MINISTRY SUCCESS

BY JOSEPH SOJOURNER



While I live in Atlanta now, I am from Akron, Ohio. There, I grew up in a Church of God church.

Everyone knew me at the church, and when I was in high school, I started inviting my friends. Now, my friends looked nothing like me and didn't grow up in the church. It took me months to get them to come to church. Then, I remember the first Sunday we visited, they had snapbacks on, fitted caps on, and had really loose-fitting clothing. As we walked into the church, one of the ushers, Brother Bones, said, "Young men, young men, you need to pull your pants up and take your hats off in the church." All three of the guys were like, "What?" So I said, "Hold on, gentlemen; hold on, gentlemen."

I then said to Brother Bones, "Can you help me out? This is the first time they are coming to church."

And he said, "You don't enter the Lord's house with a ball cap."

**WE HAVE A
GENERATION,
AND WE HAVE
COMMUNITIES THAT
ARE STRUGGLING
TO TRUST IN THE
CHURCH.**

Now some of you know about the Brother Bones in your church. They are just not having it.

And, I remember this negotiation began to happen.

I said, "Listen, they have confidence in me, but they do not have confidence in this church or, sadly, in God.

They aren't sure about any of this, and right now, they are feeling judged. Can you do me a favor? We will sit in the back row and not disrupt anyone, but I am trying to get them to hear the Word."

He said, "You know the rules."

I said, "That's not a real rule. That's your rule."

So he finally lets them in. Two of them ended up coming back, and I remember every week him looking at them with his jaws tight.

This began a conversation about the next generation's confidence in the church.

I know some of you may be thinking that you would never put a Brother Bones at your front door, but the reality is we still have a very similar situation when it comes to the church at large.

We have a generation, and we have communities that are struggling to trust in the church.

In fact, according to a Springtide report . . .

When young people ages 13 - 25 were asked to rank their trust in organized religion on a scale of 1 to 10, their average answer was 4.9.¹

¹ *The State of Religion and Young People 2020: Relational Authority*. Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2020.

**WE WON'T MESS
WITH OUR MISSION,
BUT THERE ARE
SOME WAYS WE
CAN ADJUST
OUR MODELS
AND STRATEGIES
TO BETTER
ACCOMPLISH
OUR MISSION.**

We did score higher than politicians, but there are a lot of people they trust more than the church. Before we get too nervous and start playing a tiny violin, this trust crisis is happening not just with organized religion but also with institutions as a whole.

Consider this . . .

According to Gallup, average confidence across any institution is at a new low of 27%.²

So, we are all in this weird season where we are trying to re-engage people who don't have confidence in us yet.

So, I am going to ask you the same question I was asking Brother Bones that day.

"On behalf of the mission, are you willing to adjust the model?"

For a generation that does not understand our model, does not understand our ways, does not understand our strategies, and does not understand our traditions, are we willing to adjust the model for the sake of the mission?

THINK ABOUT THIS

What comes to mind when you think about adjusting your model?

Do fears come to mind or new ideas?

² Jones, Jeffrey M. "Confidence in U.S. Institutions down; Average at New Low." Gallup.com, May 31, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx>.

Now, we all have the same mission: to lead the next generation toward authentic faith in Jesus that influences their faith and their future.

You might use different words for your mission statement—that's okay. We won't mess with our mission, but there are some ways we can adjust our models and strategies to better accomplish our mission.

That starts with changing how we measure success. Because outdated metrics cannot measure updated people. That's why we need to talk about some shifts in metrics and understand where we are moving from and where we are moving to.

MOVING FROM ATTENDANCE TO DIALOGUE

First, we are moving from attendance to dialogue.

Right now, we are measuring success by asking, "Did we get people in the building?" Your boss, executive team, or pastors are saying, "I need X amount of people in the seats to justify that this is working." What if you could shift that metric? What if you were moving towards measuring your ministry, not only in terms of attendance but in terms of dialogue?

So, what is dialogue?

Dialogue is what is happening between the small group leader and the kid or teenager.

DIALOGUE



What is happening between the small group leader and the kid or teenager.

WHEN YOU BEGIN SHIFTING YOUR LANGUAGE, YOUR LEADERSHIP WILL BEGIN REALIZING THAT YOU ARE USING NEW METRICS AND NOT JUST LOOKING AT A SUNDAY OR WEDNESDAY ENVIRONMENT.

Basically, dialogue is the conversation happening between leaders and kids or teenagers. In the past, we measured attendance—and subsequently the dialogue—by who is in the room on a Sunday or Wednesday. Now we understand that we are living in a different connected age, so we have plenty of opportunities to connect all week long.

Imagine having a conversation with your leader, boss, or team and being able to answer the question, “How many connection points did we have this week?”

Sure, maybe 70 people showed up within the last few weeks, but we did have 700 connections. Not only that, but we have had X amount of interactions—that’s leaders and students engaging them in a back-and-forth conversation.

When you begin shifting your language, your leadership will begin realizing that you are using new metrics and not just looking at a Sunday or Wednesday environment. The environments are still beneficial, but we need to start using other digital tools like social media.

For instance, what would happen if we began to ask our small group leaders to make 10 valuable connections each week with their few and report back what those look like?

Then you are able to come back the next week and ask if they were able to make the 10.

THINK ABOUT THIS

How many connections do you think your small group leaders currently make with their few every week?

What could you do to encourage more dialogue?

What steps can you take to implement a system to measure and report dialogue?

I saw the importance of this when I was a Small Groups Director for the high school ministry at my church. In that role, I had the opportunity to really talk to people every week to understand what was happening in their groups.

And, we had great numbers, and I thought everything was going great until I visited the University of Georgia to visit some of our former students. As I tried talking to them, many of them didn't want to talk to me. I realized many of them had walked away from faith but were too ashamed to say it to my face.

I began to ask myself if what we were actually doing was a success. Sure, our ministry was the place to be when they were in high school, but they weren't sticking with it. Our metric of attendance was showing success, but we didn't have a metric to measure dialogue so we could understand what type of conversations were happening.

**IT STARTS WITH
ACTIVE LISTENING
SKILLS TO MAKE
SURE WE'RE PAYING
ATTENTION.**

So when it comes to dialogue, we need to ask our leaders and ourselves this question:

Are you following the breadcrumbs the kids or teenagers are laying out for you to find?

As we empower our leaders to make these connections, we need to tell them to listen for breadcrumbs. So often, students will say things that are so provocative that they don't even believe. It's a breadcrumb. It's a test to see how you are going to respond.

This is how we earn that confidence back. It starts with active listening skills to make sure we're paying attention.

MOVING FROM REPLICATION TO REFLECTION

The next metric to shift is moving from replication to reflection.

Often, as church leaders, we can start to be on autopilot. We'll start to say to our kids and students, "This is what Christianity looks like. You walk like this. You talk like this. You think like this. You don't watch this or do this." That's replication.

Reflection is saying to kids and students, "Hey, we want to know what's happening on the inside. We want to know what you care about and what you are thinking about."

DIALOGUE



What is happening between the small group leader and the kid or teenager.

REFLECTION



What is happening internally within the kid or teenager.

Dialogue is what's happening between the small group leader and kid or teenager.

Reflection is what's happening internally within the kid or teenager.

So, we aren't just standing on stages asking them to care about this, this, and this. Instead, we actually listen to them, too. Then we have the opportunity to reflect on the things they care about most. We may not be able to reflect on everything, but we can honor the individuality of each kid or teenager. This generation loves individuality, and at times we need to help them not live in a me-centered world. But, we have to first start by honoring them and helping them understand that they are made in the image of God.

In order to start moving towards reflection, we need to ask open-ended questions that allow us to go deeper. Essentially you are trying to do two things:

Affirm their answers and empower their questions.

Small group leaders need to affirm kids' and teenagers' answers. That doesn't mean they have to agree, but it does mean they say something like, "Hey, I really appreciate you saying that. We need more honest answers like that."

Then we want to empower the people who have a question. You can do this by saying, "I'll play the other side. I don't know if I agree with this, but some people might be thinking . . ."

This is incredible because it makes kids and teenagers feel safe—they know you are aware of some of their doubts and you are willing to say them. It gives them the

**IN ORDER TO START
MOVING TOWARDS
REFLECTION, WE
NEED TO ASK
OPEN-ENDED
QUESTIONS THAT
ALLOW US TO GO
DEEPER.**

ability to ask questions. This is so important because no matter how messy the question may be, we want them to know this space is for them.

With that said, here are a couple of things to consider:

How many hard questions are you hearing from your few?

Or

What's the nod-to-question ratio?

Think about sitting down with your pastor or executive team and saying, "This month, our small group leaders heard two hard questions, and I think we can do better. I want to work on creating safer spaces, training our leaders in active listening, and reaching kids or teenagers who aren't currently attending our ministry."

That fundamentally changes the meeting when they ask you about attendance, and you can say, "We're measuring something much deeper. We are measuring authentic faith."

Now the nod-to-question ratio goes back to empowering their questions. If it's like 70% nods to 30% questions, how do we get them to move deeper? How do we get them to feel safe enough to ask questions?

THINK ABOUT THIS

What do you think is the current nod-to-question ratio in your ministry?

How can you empower your leaders to have better conversations?

What can you do to help small groups feel safe enough for kids and students to ask more questions?

**THE GOAL IS TO
CREATE DIFFERENT
EXPERIENCES FOR
DIFFERENT TYPES
OF PEOPLE.**

MOVING FROM DIRECTING TO CURATING

The next shift in metrics is moving from directing to curating.

Right now, we are focused on directing programs when we should be moving towards curating experiences. We can learn about this from the companies all around us. For instance, consider Best Buy. When you walk into Best Buy and see a bunch of experiences like the home appliance experience in one area and the computer experience in another. See, the goal is to create different experiences for different types of people.

When we do this, we say to kids, “We know you, and we want you to feel known when you walk through our doors.”

This can affect the people we recruit and the way we design our environment, so when a musician walks through our doors, we can say, “Oh, have you talked to that volunteer? They’re a musician, too.”

Or when someone is into anime, we can point them to another person who loves anime or even a volunteer who’s interested in art.

DIALOGUE



What is happening between the small group leader and the kid or teenager.

REFLECTION



What is happening internally within the kid or teenager.

CURATING



What is happening internally within the leader.

That also means we are intentional about making sure that the people on our stages and teams look like the kids and students in our ministries, so kids and students never have to walk into our buildings and feel like they are alone because no one looks like them.

There's more we can do to curate experiences.

But, imagine what happens when we begin saying to the kids and teenagers we serve,

"I'm listening to your interests.

I'm listening to your felt needs.

I'm looking at your story.

I'm taking all of that into consideration when I curate this environment."

So . . .

Dialogue is what is happening between the small group leader and kid or teenager.

Reflection is what is happening internally within the kid or teenager.

Curating is what is happening internally within the leader.

Now, this requires us as leaders to open our eyes and be familiar with their world.

A curator must be familiar with content + culture.

So, a curator needs to know the Bible—content—but they also need to know how to make it engaging and

relevant to the world kids are actually living in. In the past, we trusted that we were the authority on the definition of cool, but now we have to actually lean in and ask them.

THINK ABOUT THIS

Does your environment reflect the interests of your kids and students?

What kids or students may not feel known or comfortable in your environment?

What do you do regularly to learn about your kids and students and their culture?

Now let's move on to the next metric to shift, which is the ultimate conversation with your leader.

MOVING FROM GROWTH TO MATURITY

Before the question was, "How do we get people in the room?" We wanted to make sure there were more people in the room from quarter to quarter and year to year.

But, it can't just be about getting the numbers up every year. We need to make sure kids and students are actually growing in their faith.

That's not to say that the old way was wrong. We do still want to reach new people, but we want a deeper

definition of the word “growth.” Then we can create new metrics and measure based on the amount of questions kids and students are asking, how many students are serving, or how many kids and students are engaged in personal devotional practices.

If you’re in youth ministry, ask this question:

Have we followed up with students who have graduated our program to learn what they felt prepared for and what they didn’t?

That’s the question I had to face as I was leading groups and visiting students at their colleges. I realized we weren’t succeeding the way I thought we were. I wish we had asked small group leaders to serve in a different way that next year, to check in with their students after they graduate to see how it’s going.

THINK ABOUT THIS

If you are in student ministry, what students who have graduated from your program could you follow up with to learn how your ministry could better prepare them?

If you are in children’s ministry, what questions could you ask the student pastor to learn how to help kids grow in their faith?

What are some metrics you could use to measure maturity?

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS WE CAN DO IS CREATE SYSTEMS THAT PREVENT HARM AND ABUSE, PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS OF ABUSE, AND HOLD PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE WHEN THEY HAVE ABUSED OTHERS.

Finally, let's talk about the last one—and the awkward one.

MOVING FROM PROTECTING THE SHEPHERD TO PROTECTING THE SHEEP

We have to shift the metric from moving from protecting the shepherd to protecting the sheep.

We have to have this conversation with the next generation because as they watch all of these scandals, they obviously—and rightly so—have frustrations. They often feel like the church's goal is to protect itself and not the people it hurts. They feel like the church never wants to admit when it's wrong or have the hard conversation.

That's why one of the most important things we can do is create systems that prevent harm and abuse, provide support for survivors of abuse, and hold people accountable when they have abused others.

The next generation is also looking for the church to answer the questions they are actually asking. Instead, they are finding that content creators and podcasts are willing to have more honest, authentic, and complicated conversations than church leaders are.

So, now, every time we step on the stage, we have a decision to make. We have to decide if there comes a point in this conversation where we have to look out for the sheep, are we willing to, even if it comes at the expense of ourselves?

**WE HAVE TO BE
WILLING TO BRING
IN PEOPLE TO
HELP PROTECT THE
SHEEP.**

That doesn't mean you should say anything that contradicts the mission or your beliefs. You also shouldn't say whatever you feel strongly about without empathy or a full understanding of the nuances of the situation. But you should be willing to say something if it protects the sheep . . . even if it may affect you.

It's our responsibility to answer the questions this generation is asking—or they will go somewhere else to work through finding an answer.

And sometimes, it takes setting our ego aside, taking ourselves off the platform, and inviting in an expert. We have to be willing to bring in people to help protect the sheep.

If we are talking about mental health, let's bring in a counselor.

If we are talking about bullying, let's bring in a professional who specializes in bullying prevention.

If we are talking about relationships, let's bring in a relationship expert.

Figure out what works. Have a team around you to vet your content whenever you walk on stage so you can be confident you are approaching every angle you can to protect the sheep.

THINK ABOUT THIS

Do you have appropriate systems in place to protect kids, students, staff and volunteers from any type of abuse or mistreatment within your ministry?

Do you have systems or a plan to hold people accountable and provide support to victims should abuse take place?

What conversations would your kids and students benefit from that you may be avoiding? What can you do to have those conversations with care?

What experts could you invite to speak into your content?

WHAT'S NEXT

The truth is, we're forging into a new era of ministry. We're in uncharted waters. We don't know if the realities we are facing now will last the next ten months or the next ten years.

So, what do we do?

We begin with asking, "How do we measure success now?"

Then make the changes necessary to reflect our new metrics of ministry success.

NEXT STEPS

How can you shift your model based on these metrics?

What can you do to start shifting your metrics?

Which metric do you want to focus on shifting first?

What conversations do you need to have with your leadership and volunteers to start innovating?

**ABOUT
THE AUTHOR**



**JOSEPH
SOJOURNER**

Joseph Sojourner (aka Sojo) is a voice of creativity and leadership for this generation. Sojo is a trusted voice to next-generation business leaders for many events throughout the world, has been featured on NBC's Your Move in candid conversations with Andy Stanley, and inspires schools, churches, and teams as a speaker and host. He has also served as a creative consultant for Trilith Studios—a live-work-play experimental space for creatives—in Atlanta, GA. Sojo recently joined the Orange team as the Vice President of Leadership Strategies, where he is leading the team to innovate for the future.

THIS IS A PUBLICATION OF



©2023 Orange. All rights reserved.