

Chapter 1

The Possible Dream

In 2004, Riverside Church in Big Lake, Minnesota, was at a crossroads. Attendance had increased more than 100 over the past year with average attendance of 670 in two services. Unless they added more space--and soon--they would in effect be posting a “No Vacancy” sign at a time when God was bringing them many spiritually hungry people.

Leaders had brainstormed several options:

- Sell their property, buy a larger site, and build.
- Buy land for expansion.
- Build a bigger worship center.
- Plant a sister church in a nearby community where some church families lived.
- Start a third service.

Riverside still owed \$700,000 from their last building program, was spending ten percent of the budget on mortgage payments, and had no building fund. Plus, the staff was stretched way too thin. Without more staff, the church would quit growing, and maybe even shrink.

Riverside had two options: quit growing or find creative ways to do more with less. So Riverside’s leaders enlisted outside coaches to conduct an in-depth assessment of all their ministries, staffing, facilities, and finances to identify barriers to healthy growth and help them develop a plan to remove those barriers. Over the next two and a half years, they implemented that plan, and then repeated the process, updating their plan.

Ten years later attendance has more than doubled with more than two-thirds of Riverside's growth coming through evangelism, with hundreds of people each year saying yes to Christ and bringing their families and friends to come and see what they have experienced.

As they say on TV, "These results are not typical." Since 1981, Living Stones Associates¹ has partnered with hundreds of churches in the U.S. and Canada to do strategic planning for ministries, staffing, facilities, and finances. Every church we have worked with has become our teacher. Riverside, though, has been unique. Of all the churches we have partnered with, Riverside's leaders have most whole-heartedly embraced the more-with-less philosophy that guides our work. So, while Riverside's results are not typical, we return to their story often in this book because it shows what God can do when a church fully commits to more-with-less principles in every aspect of its life--more-with-less ministry, more-with-less staffing, more-with-less buildings, and more-with-less finances. Skipp, who has been on staff at Riverside through all these changes, tells the story.

More-with-less facilities

Skipp: Riverside's immediate barrier to growth was worship seating. Without more seats for worshipers, our worship attendance would hit a wall. But that wasn't our only facility challenge. Hallways and stairways were congested. Half our offices were on the main level and half in the basement. The infant nursery was on one floor and the toddler nursery on another. In many ways the building made ministry harder rather than easier.

While we needed to increase worship capacity immediately, we had no money to build. In fact, a major building program would have inflicted even more damage on the church's already stretched finances. We needed a creative facility solution that was both quick and

inexpensive. Which of the facility options we had been considering did we choose? None of them. Instead, we created a second worship venue, a video café, which immediately increased our worship seating capacity by 100 per service.

Would it work? We didn't know, especially since the video café would not usually have live music. But to our delight, it was a hit from the start with worshipers of many ages making that their worship venue of choice. We later remodeled the video café to provide seating for 175. This added capacity gave Riverside breathing room to grow for six years before we needed to add a third service.

More-with-less finances

Riverside was bumping up against major barriers to growth in two key areas--facilities and staffing. Removing those barriers would cost money. Creating a video venue and remodeling the building to work better would cost a small fraction of the cost of new construction, but it would still take hundreds of thousands of dollars. Plus we urgently needed to pay off the church's debt so the 10% of our budget going to mortgage payments could be redirected to staffing.

In a three-year capital campaign, we raised \$1.4 million dollars with sixty cents of each dollar going to the building project and forty cents going toward the debt. Over those three years, the church paid cash for its remodeling projects and technology upgrades and burned the mortgage. We have been debt-free ever since.

More-with-less staffing

As important as facility solutions were, and as exciting as it was to get out of debt, unless these steps had been combined with staffing for growth, Riverside's growth would have ground to a screeching halt. The 10% of the budget previously going to mortgage payments was redirected to staffing. This enabled the church to hire administrative support in several key areas, freeing up pastors and ministry directors to be more productive. Hiring our first executive pastor freed up senior pastor Tom Lundeen to focus on his strengths of teaching and leading while creating the infrastructure required to manage a growing staff.

More-with-less ministry

Remodeling did more than increase seating capacity; it also enhanced ministry. Families with young children love the new nurseries which were more modern, convenient, clean, comfortable, interactive, fun, and safe with secure check-in. Knocking out walls allowed the children's ministry to transition from small classes to a large group team teaching model, increasing capacity and making ministry more effective. Changes to the foyer and nearby areas, along with a change in the Sunday schedule, made it possible to create a Connections Time between services so people leaving the first service could connect with those arriving for the second, and guests could connect with members over coffee and snacks. Creating an office suite brought the entire staff together, increasing efficiency and, more importantly, enhancing teamwork.

We had always had Sunday school classes for all ages, but our growth forced us to rethink our discipleship strategies. We began moving adult discipleship to home-based groups and small groups that meet on the church campus during the week. That was a huge shift. Not only was it a smart use of space, but the small groups have proven more effective for building

community, changing lives, and caring for a growing church. On Sundays our students are learning to minister by serving on many of our teams—children’s ministries, the tech team, ushers, greeters, the parking team, and our café team. This has been exciting! Today, all but a few classrooms are filled with excited children every Sunday morning.

Our biggest stride toward more-with-less ministry came five years ago. The church had two church-wide children’s ministries--Sunday school and a Wednesday night program. While both had good leaders, they constantly struggled to recruit enough volunteers. Plus, the Wednesday program was not accomplishing one of its main purposes—reaching new families. Almost all the community kids coming on Wednesday already attended other churches.

As our children’s ministry leaders realized how much duplication there was between our Sunday and Wednesday programs, they decided to combine the strongest elements of each to create a first-class Sunday children’s ministry.

This was also a better fit for our ministry philosophy. We were asking our families to be at church two days a week, attend a small group, serve, and spend time reaching out to neighbors and friends. That was too much. Eliminating one meeting a week would give families time for small groups, service, and outreach.

Since focusing on a single children’s ministry, excellence has skyrocketed. When new families come, their kids beg their parents to come back. It’s great to see kids so excited about church.

The journey continues

In the ten years since beginning our more-with-less journey, Riverside’s average weekend attendance has more than doubled from 670 to about 1500. This has all been

accomplished without adding a single square foot to the facility that we thought was maxed out ten years ago. Now, we are truly using our facility to its full capacity.

Over the past two years our leaders have been exploring options for making room for the next wave of growth. We recently decided to launch a second campus with two services.

New people coming, people saying yes to Christ, people's growing commitment through serving and giving—in all these areas the church is stronger and healthier than ever.

Would we love to have a bigger building? Of course! Finding creative ways to meet the space needs of our growing ministries is a constant challenge. But we would never trade the opportunities God has given us to reach more people than ever before in the past few years for the conveniences of a bigger building.

This book explores the principles and strategies that have guided Riverside and many other churches to do more ministry with limited resources, even during financially challenging times. To benefit from these principles, your church's leaders will have to be open to exploring new ways of thinking about church, new ways of doing ministry that use limited resources more strategically. It will, at times, require leaving your comfort zone, but the payoff will be more fruitful ministry.

¹ Originally called Ray Bowman Consulting.