

Chapter 2

To Accomplish More, Do (and Spend) Less

Eddy: I once led a workshop at a church conference on the topic, “When You Have More Slots than Workers.” The room had standing room only. Before beginning my presentation, I asked each person to answer the question: “Why do you think churches so often have more slots than workers?”

One said, “People aren’t committed.” Another said, “The church is full of pew-sitters.” All fifty-some people gave some version of the same answer: “We don’t have enough workers.”

When everyone had had their say, I announced: “I think you’re all wrong! Nine times out of ten, the problem isn’t too few workers; it’s too many slots. If you came to learn how to recruit more workers, you may want to leave now and come back to this afternoon’s workshop on recruiting. This workshop is on how to solve the problem of too many slots.” No one left.

I witnessed a great example of this at Stillmeadow Nazarene Church in York, Pennsylvania, some years ago. Like most churches we’ve worked with, the church had three church-wide weekly programs for children--Sunday school, children’s church, and a huge Wednesday night program. To fully staff these programs that served about 150 people each week required 91 workers--or it would have if each worker worked every week. However, since there

weren't 91 people who were willing to work every week, Carla, the children's ministry director, had sliced many of the slots into smaller pieces, asking people if they would help out once a month, or once every six weeks. Total slots to fill: 187. When I asked Carla, "Do you have 187 people who are called to work with children?" she just rolled her eyes. Eight positions were vacant and others were filled by people stretched way too thin.

We suggested to Carla and her team that they come up with a way to do two children's ministry programs with excellence rather than trying to staff three programs that created far more slots than there were called workers. They decided to combine children's church with their Wednesday night program, using the best features of each, and hold it Wednesday night. On Sunday morning, rather than having Sunday school and two sessions of children's church, they changed their schedule so that they held two sessions of Sunday school simultaneous with worship. They also switched from small classes to a large group, team teaching model that required fewer teachers and eliminated the need for department heads. After the restructure, Carla had not 187 slots to fill, but 60, with every worker working every week. By June every position for the fall program was filled--a first--and all by people who were passionate about ministering to children!

The price of overprogramming

In the churches we work with, the too-many-slots syndrome is the rule, not the exception. Eighty to ninety percent of the churches we work with are stretched so thin that they are constantly scrambling for workers and unable to do ministry with excellence. The result: workers burn out, those receiving ministry are shortchanged, and people are not free to serve where God

has called them. While compromised ministry is the biggest casualty of overprogramming, there is a financial cost as well. It costs more to run three church-wide programs for children than to run two. It costs money to keep programs alive that have outlived their usefulness.

The financial cost of overprogramming is often hidden. Why? Because very little of the cost shows up in the program budget; it shows up mostly in the staff budget. A church, accustomed to having certain programs, often hires staff to keep them going, even when ministry impact would be greater with fewer programs done with greater excellence.

How we got here

Why has having too many programs become the rule rather than the exception? It goes something like this. God gives someone, or a handful of people, a vision for a new ministry. The new ministry is born with a flurry of excitement and good things happen. The next year another new ministry is born in much the same way. Good things happen. After a few years, the people who were called to start the first ministry move away from the community. Others step up to lead it. When those leaders step down, it proves hard to find a willing new leader. Eventually someone agrees to lead it, but more out of duty than passion. Meanwhile, two more ministries have started as God has planted vision in the hearts of new leaders.

We are eager to give birth to new ministries, but lousy at letting old ministries die. We seem to feel that if we end a ministry program, we have failed. Our programs become sacred cows. Once when I was speaking to the leaders of a church about letting go of ministries that have served their purpose, the church historian stood and said, "I think we need to be careful

when we talk about ending ministries. One hundred and ten years ago, God called a group of men to start one of our ministries. To end that ministry would be to disobey God.”

Really? I felt like saying, “Are those men still here? Are they still leading that ministry?” One of the most common reasons for slot-filling is that when those whom God has called to lead a ministry have moved on and God has not called anyone else to step into their place, we recruit people to do it anyway.

To be more fruitful, prune

Jesus’ most focused teaching on how to be fruitful in ministry is found in John 15, the word picture of the vine and the branches. One of Jesus’ secrets to fruitfulness in ministry is pruning. When branches are pruned, more of the life of the vine goes into producing the fruit. Without pruning, each year more and more of the sap of the vine goes into sustaining more and more branches and leaves, and each year the fruit is a bit smaller than it was last year.

And what is it that is pruned? Is it the diseased branches? The dead branches? No, those are cut off and thrown into the fire. It is the healthy branches that are pruned--the branches that produced last season’s crop.

Just as God prunes our lives, removing those good things that bore fruit in the previous season of our lives so all of our energy can be poured into new areas of growth, God does the same thing in the church. He calls us to new seasons of ministry, and at the same time no longer calls people to those ministries that bore fruit in previous seasons. When God is no longer calling

people to lead a ministry, it is time to let go of it. It is pruning time. God wants to redirect the energy of those people into something new.

The birth of new ministry is a sign of life. But an equally important sign of health is, “What ministry program have you ended this year?” If you can’t think of one, you may have an overprogramming problem.

Streamlining strategies

If God isn’t calling someone to fill a slot, perhaps it shouldn’t be filled. (There are short-term exceptions: If no one is feeling called to clean the toilets, someone still needs to clean toilets.) When you have an empty slot and it seems that no one is being called to fill it, ask, “What is God saying to the church through this vacancy?”

Here are some possible answers.

1. *Prune.* Is it time to let go of “last season’s” structures to which God is no longer calling people?
2. *Consolidate.* Can we combine programs with similar goals and participants? If we have two programs with the same purpose, we don’t need them both.
3. *Restructure.* Can we adopt a different model that requires fewer workers, such as replacing solo teaching with large group team teaching?
4. *Focus.* How can we find ways to do a few things with excellence rather than many things with mediocrity?

5. *Cap.* Would it be wise to limit enrollment in programs that tax available facilities and staff such as a day care center or school?

6. *Prevent.* Can we avoid some overprogramming by making sure we only start new ministries when called, passionate leaders are in place? Be especially wary of starting a new program that calls for lots of volunteers, unless it is clear that lots of volunteers are called to the new ministry and that it will not compete with their present calls.

7. *Practice the two-hat principle.* Most core church leaders work in four, five, even six ongoing ministries. Whenever I ask these leaders how many of those ministries they are able to do with excellence, they usually say just one or two. They throw their hearts into their top one or two ministry priorities, but “fill slots” for the others. Encourage your leaders to wear no more than two ongoing ministry hats--one big hat (up to 8 hours a week) and one small hat (up to 2 hours a week). As you encourage them to pour all their energy into the one or two ministries for which they have the greatest passion, you can replace the unhealthy peer pressure to say yes to every request for help with positive peer pressure to focus so they can do all ministry with excellence.¹ Of course, this will create empty slots. Those empty slots become clues to needed pruning, restructuring, or consolidation.

Quit trying so hard

Several times after meeting with the leaders of a church, one of them has come up to me and said something like, “I was dreading today. I assumed you were going to tell us to do more, and I’m already doing so much I’m exhausted. I never dreamed you would encourage us to do less.”

To accomplish more, do less. To bear more fruit, prune. To see God work more powerfully through you, listen and obey and trust, and quit trying so hard. In our workaholic culture, these words almost always come as a surprise, but they are also almost always welcome words for weary spiritual leaders.

Embracing this basic truth that our ministry is more effective not when we do more but when we do fewer things with our whole hearts is the first step in becoming a more-with-less church.

¹ There are exceptions to this principle--paid staff, for example, and those whose schedules allow them to volunteer full-time.