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WHEN THERE'S NO BURNING BUSH

Following Your Passions to Discover God's Call

by Gary Morsch and Eddy Hall

How fear of failure cripples ministry

The Danger of Playing It Safe

by Eddy Hall and Gary Morsch

Thomas Edison recalls:

After we had conducted thousands of experiments on a certain project without solving the problem, one of my associates, after we had conducted the crowning experiment and it had proved a failure, expressed discouragement and disgust over our having failed to find out anything. I cheerily assured him that we had learned something. For we had learned for a certainty that the thing couldn't be done that way, and that we would have to try some other way.⁽¹⁾

When we hear stories like this, we are quick to nod in agreement. But when it comes to our own lives—and our own personal ministries--most of us try to run from failure. Why?

Because our culture conditions us to avoid failure. In school the ultimate disgrace is to get an F. When we play, we divide people into winners or losers, and few insults are more biting than being

called a loser. Is it any wonder, then, that when it comes to doing ministry, our first instinct is to play it safe, to avoid trying things that might not work?

The problem with this is that always playing it safe cripples ministry. Discovering the most effective ways to meet needs requires trial and error, risk-taking. If we are afraid to experiment with new approaches, the best we can hope for is to repeat what worked last year or ten or twenty years ago. In a fast-changing world, that approach guarantees that our ministries will soon be out of date, culturally irrelevant. "Without change the church will die," writes Kirbyjon Caldwell. "So either you choose to change, or you choose to die."⁽²⁾

In many churches if someone has an idea for a new ministry, the member presents a proposal to the appropriate committee. If the committee is sold on the idea, they in turn present it to the church's governing board. Only if the board approves it is the new ministry given an opportunity.

Most ministries proposed in this way never see the light of day. Why? Partly because boards don't want to be responsible for authorizing failed programs. Like most people, church boards don't like to fail. But there's another reason that is often overlooked: God hasn't called most of the board members to do that ministry. It is not realistic to expect board members to be as excited about a ministry as the people whom God has called to actually do the ministry.

This system, though, doesn't just kill most of the ideas that come up; it also guarantees that most members will never come forward with dreams for ministry in the first place.. When churches are structured to control, the very structure sends a powerful message to the congregation: Starting new ministries isn't your job; it's the job of the staff and board. As a result, members are not encouraged to discern their calls, and the church doesn't provide

support systems for birthing and nurturing new grassroots ministries.

The importance of failing often

This problem is by no means unique to the church. Many businesses are more concerned with avoiding mistakes than with encouraging creativity. People who work in those companies either learn to avoid taking risks or they find another place to work. Such companies, though, lack the ability to renew themselves and seldom survive more than a generation.

We heard of three engineers who came to their CEO with an idea for a project that they believed could be the next big money-maker for their company. After listening to their idea, the CEO gave them the green light to pursue it. After months of intensive work, the engineers had to face hard reality: their idea wasn't going to work.

Upon hearing the news, the CEO summoned the three engineers to his office. The mood was nothing like that of the earlier meeting—no excitement, only the dread of what they were about to hear. Once the engineers were gathered, the CEO presented each of them with a gift. "I know this project didn't work out the way you hoped," he said, "but the future of this company depends on just the kind of creative thinking the three of you have been doing. I want to thank you and ask you to keep it up."

Now that is a company with a future.

Idea has been called "the largest and perhaps the most innovative industrial product design firm in the world."⁽³⁾ Their motto? "Fail often in order that you may succeed sooner."

We heard of one company where employees rang a bell every time they tried something that didn't work, their way of celebrating that they were that much closer to finding what did work. Perhaps it would spark more creative and effective ministry if every church had a "trial and error" bell and used it often.

Whether you are starting a ministry or joining one, expect to make mistakes. Like an inventor, make it your goal to learn through trial and error what does and does not work. In some of our most innovative churches, only about one out of every three new ministries attempted actually flies. Does one out of three represent failure? No. A major league baseball player with a .333 batting average is probably in contention for the batting title. What would it do to your willingness to take risks for ministry if you rejected the notion that it is somehow disgraceful to try something that doesn't work?

Just do it

A few months ago I (Eddy) had lunch with a man who had a clear vision for a new ministry. Several others strongly shared the same sense of call. His pastor and church board, though, had shown little interest. I said to him, "Jake (not his real name), God hasn't called your pastor or the other members of your board to this ministry. You can't expect them to be as excited about it as you are. But God has given you a ministry team and all the resources you need to start this ministry. Go ahead and act on the vision God has given you. When the ministry begins to bear fruit, perhaps then the people of your church will get excited about it." That proved to be all the encouragement he needed to go ahead, and now the ministry is up and running.

Are we saying you shouldn't seek wise counsel in launching a

new ministry? Not at all. What we're saying is that if God has given you the passion for a ministry, if God has given others a similar passion, it may be time to start the ministry. Don't assume that new ministries have to come from your church staff or board. Don't assume that new ministries have to be officially sponsored by your church. Take responsibility for saying yes to God's call.

Getting out of the boat

Jesus' disciples had endured a stormy night on a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. As dawn was breaking they saw a man walking toward them on the water. "It's a ghost!" they cried out in terror. Then Jesus called to them, "It is I. Don't be afraid."

Peter answered, "Lord, if it is really you, command me to come to you on the water."

"Come," Jesus said, and Peter got out of the boat and began walking to Jesus. Then the wind caught his attention, and in his fear he began to sink. He cried out for help then and Jesus reached out and caught him.⁽⁴⁾

When you read this story, which do you notice first—Peter's amazing faith, or his temporary failure? If fear of failure paralyzes us, we're likely to think Peter was foolish to get out of the boat. But if we are people of daring faith, we see a man who trusted Jesus for the impossible, and, when he fell down, trusted Jesus to pick him up.

How many of Jesus' disciples ever walked on water? Only one, so far as we know. And why? Because he was the only one who got out of the boat.

Peter, the only apostle who got out of the boat, the one who

floundered in the waves, was also the one whom Jesus named "the Rock." Could it be that he deserved this nickname precisely because he learned to depend so radically on God rather than playing it safe?

If we attempt only what we can accomplish in our own strength, we will never fulfill God's call in our lives. Allowing God to work through us means getting in over our heads. It means committing to humanly impossible goals. It means that unless God intervenes, we are doomed to failure.

God invites you to quit playing it safe. It's time to get out of the boat.

Adapted with permission from *WHEN THERE'S NO BURNING BUSH: Following Your Passions to Discover God's Call* by Gary Morsch and Eddy Hall (Baker 2004).

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1. Thomas Edison, American Magazine, January 1921.
2. Quoted in Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 176.
3. Ted Koppel on Nightline, July 13, 1999.
4. See Matthew 14:23-33.

