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Vacancies can alert you to better ways of doing ministry

MORE SLOTS THAN WORKERS?

by Eddy Hall

With a growing Sunday school, children's church, and full-scale Wednesday night program to staff, Carla struggled constantly to find enough workers for Stillmeadow Church's children's ministries. As Minister to Children in a congregation where about 150 children showed up on Sunday, Carla needed 91 workers to staff the three major children's ministries. Or she would have, if 91 people had been able and willing to work every week. Since there weren't that many weekly workers available, she asked people if they would work in a nursery or preschool class once every four to six weeks. Total workers needed for all slots: 187.

When I first talked with Carla, eight of these positions were vacant, and many of the other 178 positions were being filled by people already overextended with other responsibilities.

At First Presbyterian Church in a north Indiana town, Gus, the Christian education director, felt stymied in his attempt to grow the adult Sunday school. He wanted to see most of the congregation's adults active in a Sunday school class, which would involve increasing the number of adult classes from four to about nine. But Gus was finding little enthusiasm for his goal among potential attenders, nor was he having much luck coming up with teachers to start new classes.

At the same time the associate pastor, Ron, was finding it harder than expected to grow the church's small group ministry. After initial enthusiasm, the growth of the groups had plateaued. Ron, like Gus, was having trouble finding more leaders. Both the adult Sunday school and the small group ministry seemed stalled about half way to their goal of total congregational involvement.

In most of the churches I work with I hear something like: "Every year we have trouble finding enough workers." Rarely do I

hear anyone say, "We have too many positions to fill." Whenever we have more slots than people to fill them, we seem to automatically assume we're short on people. While sometimes we certainly need to pray for more workers, could it be that often the root problem is not a worker shortage but an overabundance of slots?

Case study: Children's ministry

At Stillmeadow Church when I asked Carla, "Do you have 187 people who feel called to work with children?", she rolled her eyes. If even 91 people had been eager to work with children, she would have never had to resort to chopping up jobs into smaller pieces. Carla knew that some of her volunteers preferred to be involved in other ministries and were helping out with children only because of the "worker shortage." Quite a few were mismatched to their assignments.

Carla went to work to streamline the children's ministry. She recognized that the Sunday school and the weekday Christian education program had similar goals, even though some of the learning methods were different. By identifying ways existing programs duplicated each other, working with others, she developed a plan for blending two of their programs into a stronger single program.

Stillmeadow also changed teaching methods. Though the church had grown to 650 in worship attendance, they were still using a small-church class structure—small classes with solo teachers. Combining children into larger groups of 20 to 30 with each group led by a ministry team including a master teacher produced several important advantages.

The ministry teams allowed each team member to work in his or her area of giftedness rather than having to do everything (teaching, worship, crafts, care giving). The teams created a support system for the children's workers. And the switch to ministry teams eliminated the need for the seven department supervisors since each team became basically self-organizing.

In restructuring, the 187 slots needed to fully staff three programs were cut to just 60 needed to staff the two restructured programs. And, of course, every volunteer was working every week, not every four or six weeks, which was wonderful for building strong relationships between children and adults. With only 60 positions to fill, Carla lined up all the workers for the fall programs by June—a first—with every position filled by a person whose heart was in children's ministry.

Case study: Adult discipling

At First Presbyterian, the basic problem was the same, though the age group was different. Both Gus, who coordinated adult Sunday school, and Ron, who oversaw small group ministries, were trying to recruit leaders from the same leadership pool. They were also trying to recruit participants from the same group, and people were saying they didn't have time for another weekly meeting.

When asked to name the primary ministry goal of adult Sunday school and small groups, Gus immediately identified "fellowship" as the major purpose of both.

Which ministry setting served that ministry purpose more effectively? Without hesitation, Gus said "small groups." These two programs were trying to meet the same need, competing for the same participants, and competing for the same leaders. That explained why both programs had stalled out halfway to their goal.

First Presbyterian decided to make small groups their primary setting for community-building and discipling. This meant redefining the purpose of adult Sunday school, placing less emphasis on relationship-building in class groups and more emphasis on teaching with short-term electives. While all adults would be encouraged to join a small group for discipling in a context of committed relationships, they would be invited to take elective classes only as they had time and interest—not 52 weeks a year. If some adults—particularly older adults—preferred to continue to relate in their Sunday school class as a "small group," that would be great. But they wouldn't be expected to also join a weekday small group.

This change in expectations removed the pressure to add classes, which also meant that those five new class rooms on the drawing board wouldn't be needed.

The cost of overprogramming

Most of the churches I work with suffer from overprogramming. A church in Ohio with an average attendance of 135 had 21 boards and committees. Almost every warm-bodied adult was pressed into service on multiple committees. One member, upon moving away, wrote 16 letters of resignation from ministries and committees. This church is now streamlining its decision-making structures so people won't have to put so much time into committee meetings, but can invest more energy in doing ministry.

What causes overprogramming? It isn't some diabolical plot. Almost every church program is good, started in response to very real needs. Though churches occasionally start unneeded programs, a far more common problem is that as new ministries are created, we try to hang onto all the old ones as well. We are not very good at letting yesterday's programs die with dignity, even if the original reason for the

program no longer exists, or even if two or more programs are targeting the same need and each inadvertently weakens the other, or even if there is no longer anyone in the church called to lead a particular ministry.

Overprogramming cripples the church in several ways. When we have too many slots to fill, we tend to view people as potential slot-fillers. When people serve not because of God's call, but because they have been drafted, the quality of ministry suffers. Rather than being energized by doing ministry, workers burn out. And they are robbed of the joy and fruitfulness that comes from healthy ministry.

Overprogramming can also lead to overbuilding. With rapid growth, Stillmeadow was facing the unwelcome prospect of having to build more class rooms just five years after moving into a new facility. Streamlining children's programming removed the immediate pressure to build, though a modest addition will eventually be needed to provide space better suited to their programs.

First Presbyterian was also feeling pressure to build class rooms. A review of their major ministries resulted not only in refocusing their adult discipling ministry, but also redefining the goals of their weekday preschool and shifting their children's Sunday school from solo to team teaching. While the main motivation for these and other changes was to enhance ministry, they also yielded a wonderful bonus: The two floors of new class rooms in a projected building won't be needed at all—at least not until attendance more than triples.

Call-driven ministry

But streamlining ministry isn't just about doing less; it is about doing the right things with passion. A church can scale back its programs to a manageable level and still be caught up in slot-filling. Cutting back is necessary, but it falls short of being empowering.

Empowerment happens when we embrace a new paradigm, replacing program-driven ministry with call-driven ministry. In program-driven ministry, our starting point is programs. We start by asking, "How do we fill the slots?" This approach can produce many good matches, especially if the church has a good system for evaluating spiritual gifts and call and making placements, but it inevitably leads to some square pegs in round holes. Why? Because the selection of "pegs" available never perfectly matches the existing holes.

The starting point for call-driven ministry is not the hole, but the peg. Rather than asking, "What slots do we need to fill?" we ask, "What is God calling you to do?" A person or ministry team guides each member through the process of identifying spiritual gifts, discerning call, and dreaming creatively about ministry possibilities. When a person's call matches an existing ministry opening, the assignment is made. But when a person's call does not match an opening, the square peg isn't forced into a round hole. A job description may be rewritten around the abilities and call of the person—the round hole, in effect, reshaped into a square hole, the ministry redesigned to fit the person.

Or a new call may give birth to a new ministry. As people name what needs God is calling them to touch, they are encouraged to dream. What would they dream of doing if the sky was the limit? Many people have had ministry dreams lying dormant for years, but have never dared to speak them because they assume they're impossible. When the church gets into the business of empowering members to obey call and fulfill their ministry dreams, doing church takes on a whole new level of excitement.

In a typical program-driven church, 80% or more of the ministry positions are inwardly focused. It seems to take almost every available person just to "keep the church running." As a church becomes more call-driven, a wonderful thing happens: we discover that God is giving people dreams of all kinds of exciting ways to touch people's lives with God's love outside the walls of the church. Leadership Training Network estimates that in a congregation where the laity are fully mobilized, 50 percent of the people will be serving within the church walls and 50 percent will be serving in the community and the world.

This kind of creativity cannot be unleashed so long as the church is operating from a slot-filling mentality. It happens when we ask “What is God calling you to do?” then create ministry structures around call. When that happens, impossible dreams come true.

The key to streamlining

Call-driven ministry provides the key to optimum streamlining. If God is not calling anyone to do something, maybe it shouldn't be done. A church in Ohio voted to remodel a house next door to the church into offices. They then asked for volunteers to serve as a task force to direct the remodeling. No one volunteered. A few months later a house on the other side of the church became available. This house was better suited for the intended use, and immediately volunteers came forward, eager to work with the project.

But doesn't this approach endanger some existing programs? Indeed, it does. As Elizabeth O'Connor writes, “If the church were true to herself, she would help all her people to discern and be faithful to call. In such an effort, however, institutions probably recognize a threat to their own structures.... If church people begin listening to call, those we count on most will likely be off on some wild adventures of their own. Some of the tasks that we have depended on lay persons to do may not get done.”

But if we want churches where people live out God's call rather than churches where people fill slots, isn't this exactly what we want to happen? When a call-driven approach to ministry results in unfilled slots, these unfilled slots can clue us in to where we need to streamline.

To begin with, if God isn't calling anyone to provide the key leadership in a ministry, even if many of the “rank and file” positions have been filled, it is probably time to let that ministry die with dignity. Called, passionate leadership is essential to dynamic ministry.

When a ministry has strong called leadership but not enough volunteers to fill all the slots, it may be time to rethink the ministry strategy. Are there ways to simplify the program, sharpening its focus on doing one or two things very well rather than doing many things? Does this program compete with another ministry for the time of participants or for leaders? If so, can the two ministries be combined into a single stronger ministry? In the case of a school or day care ministry, should enrollment be capped at a level that does not strain available staff and facilities?

Of course, there will be times when an essential role has to be filled temporarily by someone whose primary call lies elsewhere. But if the temporary arrangement goes on too long, we need to ask why. Has the church erected conscious or unconscious barriers—expectations about education, social standing, gender, official church membership, etc.—that may discourage or prevent those God is calling from considering the job? Does the job description need to be reshaped to fit the abilities of a called person or persons? Is the support system for this ministry position inadequate? Does the church need to rethink its whole approach to this ministry? Or could it be that this ministry position is less essential than previously assumed? Just what is God saying to the church through this vacancy?

The power of pruning

In the story of the vine and the branches, Jesus says that fruitful branches are pruned. In pruning, what is cut away is not disease or rot, but the healthy growth that bore last year's harvest. Unless last year's growth is pruned, the vine's energy is diluted and its harvest diminished. The vine is pruned so all its life energy can be poured into producing this season's fruit.

Ministry, like the life of the vine, has its seasons. One season of ministry comes to an end and another begins. If I am to be as fruitful as God wants me to be in my present ministry, I have to let go of much of the activity that produced fruit during the last season of my ministry. This pruning is usually painful, because the loss is real, but its purpose is not to punish; it is to increase fruitfulness.

When we hold onto the structures and activities that produced yesterday's fruit even though they are no longer as fruitful, we dilute the church's energy. But when we allow the Holy Spirit to prune our ministries by listening to and honoring what God is calling people to do today, in this season of ministry, we avoid spreading the church's resources too thin. We allow the Holy Spirit to focus all the church's energy on what he is wanting to do now, in this season. This careful attention to the Spirit's leading by listening to the callings of our members is one of the most empowering things any church can do. It is an essential aspect of what it means for us as a church to abide in Christ.

And the result of that, Jesus says, is that we will bear much fruit.

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