



Focus on Priorities and Results

By Kent Halstead

The Christian church exists to love, obey, and serve God and spread the Good News. These are the priorities and reason for our very being. How can church leaders, particularly those serving on governing boards, stay focused on these results?

Mission selection. The principal management responsibility of a church council or governing board is that of establishing mission priorities. Some councils are comfortable simply listing every commission without priority, "covering all the bases" so to speak. But in reality, congregations typically gravitate toward their strengths and favoring conditions. Resources are invariably limited; opportunities often are location dependent. Consequently, congregations gradually establish their agendas as much by assimilation as deliberate decision. And the alignment is invariably reasonable, if not optimal. However, rethinking priorities must follow as a yearly refining exercise and to accommodate changing conditions.

Entrusted to do our best. Our dependency on God does not allow us to waste our time and talent in idle fashion. Good intentions and well meaning actions need to be accompanied by productive effort. Beyond fostering spiritual growth, the most important work of any church council is to see that the congregation effectively serves the Lord, that is, engages all in achieving Christ-oriented results. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48) Thus, church activities must be "rigorously weighted against the standard of purpose," says John Carver, in *Boards that Make a Difference*. The choice of how we do something (means) is then determined chiefly by whether it produces the expected results (ends).

Means mistaken for ends. Governing boards too often become engrossed in the details and routines of church life, losing sight of the larger overall purposes such activities are intended to accomplish. "An organization can become so permeated by the belief that well-intended or reasonable actions (rather than the results) are the reason for existence," writes Carver, "that no one realizes something is awry. Services and programs are often treated as if they have value in themselves...rather than means to some end." Management consultant and author G. S. Odiorne describes the confusion this way, "People tend to become so engrossed in activity that they lose sight of its purpose...and the activity becomes a false goal, an end in itself." Thus both observers warn of "insidious counterfeits," activities associated with good intentions accepted as legitimate endeavors without demonstrable achievement.



Program evaluation. The most neglected management responsibility of church councils is the evaluation of ends. "How are we doing?" is simply never asked. Perhaps the all-too-possible negative consequences put everyone ill at ease. And, admittedly, challenging program value can be a risky, disruptive business if done in a sporadic, haphazard manner. It must be done in as "precise, systematic, non-intrusive, and criteria-focused" manner as possible. (Carver) Special assessment sessions can be held between the involved actors and observers in a non-threatening, supportive, and constructive context. Subject individuals should feel invigorated and replenished by a properly conducted performance audit.

In practice, program evaluation requires the church council and committees to be constantly vigilant to the effectiveness of each and every sponsored activity, i.e., that they are actually accomplishing what they intend to do and are not merely ends in themselves. The value of each activity in terms of desired outcomes must then be weighed against alternative resource use. "Is what we're doing, serving the Lord as best we're able?"

Outcomes measurement is not easy; however, evidence of some sort is almost always present. One can well begin with available physical counts – attendance, contributions, enrollment, contacts, distribution, etc. Over time, such indicators may reveal significant trends. But counts are only indicative of quantity. What we really seek from service programs are spiritual and psychological understanding and growth. And this information can be gained by carefully interviewing the involved participants. Whenever possible, participants should be invited to complete an evaluation questionnaire. The tabulated responses can then be converted into permanent "lessons learned" instructions for planning future similar events.

We must fully recognize and accept our responsibility to God alone as an external commitment transcending all human boundaries. This holy devotion gives true understanding of the church's mission and meaning to all its endeavors. Thus in Christ we seek real converts, not improved attendance; inspirational guidance, not polished rhetoric; true sharing, not re-distribution; joyful giving, not funding; and so on. Then, in this holy context we are able to adjust our efforts in terms of both ends and means, directing our efforts towards Christian goals, and succeeding through his guidance and grace.

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I see no golden age in the past or in the future, but I believe in the possibilities of...disciplined effort [and] in truth in its Anglo-Saxon meaning of "faithfulness." *Mary Parker Follett, 1924*



BOOK REVIEW

Church on the Edge of Somewhere: Ministry, Marginality, and the Future

By George B. Thompson, Jr., Alban Institute, 2007

Reviewed by Lewis A. Parks

Some books remind us of the church's mission to those on the margin of life. We read them; we feel bad. Nothing changes. Other books describe the culture of congregations. They show appreciation for its layers of meaning and its setting in the community. We read them and say, "Yes, that's how it is." Again, nothing changes. George Thompson wants to combine the biblical motivation from the first set of books and the relentless realism from the second set of books so *something* happens when a congregation remembers that they themselves were once strangers in Egypt.

Thompson classifies congregations into four types by their focus of attention (outward or inward) and by the social-economic status of their members (conventional or marginal). There is a next faithful step in ministry to marginal persons for the churches in all four groups.

- ***Inner-directed marginal churches*** are in a survival mode. Like the storefront churches of immigrants, they have little physical or leadership capital for reaching out to other marginal persons. It is enough for such churches to reach stability or conventionality as a precondition to having more empathy.
- ***Empathetic conventional churches*** serve marginal persons but without expectation that the marginal persons will become part of the worship and mission of the congregation. These might be vibrant inner city churches where ministry *for* those in need is a badge of membership. The next step is to move from *for* to *with*.
- ***Empathetic marginal churches***, the smallest number, move beyond obligation to help those on the margins to finding new vitality in ministry with them. Thompson points to the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC (small) and Trinity UCC in Chicago (large) as models.
- ***Inner-directed conventional churches*** are shored up by middle class members determined to promote the well-being of the congregation and its members. They have limited vision for marginal persons. Thompson places roughly 60 percent of American churches in this category. Many belong to denominations with declining memberships. Given the growing diversity of society and the disestablishment of religion, their future lies in moving closer to the contemporary equivalents of the Bible's orphan, widow, and resident alien.

In earlier books George Thompson provides some of the tools that it would take to lead a congregation to a better ministry to and with marginal persons, tools like building congregational consensus. The special contribution of *Church on the Edge of Somewhere* is to help leaders and their congregations to discern what that next step in principle might be.

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The Right Question

Leaders do not need answers.

Leaders must have the right questions.

Some find that occasionally using the last five or ten minutes of a meeting for this question is helpful.

What is something on your mind that you have not had a chance to say?