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Strategic Planning Doesn't Work Here!

How to Be Productive When the Future Is Unclear

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Abstract

Mission and ministry certainly have changed due to the pandemic. In some cases, it was frame-breaking change. One thing we learned was that strategic planning doesn't work here! What we also learned along the way was that serious issues we had overlooked became starkly apparent. Furthermore, we learned we need a new helping skill to adequately address these issues.

Historically, church and ministry moved forward with strategic planning approaches that ran the gamut from detailed goals, strategies, and tactics to a more casual approaches that merely asked, "what did we do last year?" Most planning was based upon what we knew and was forecasted into the future. But then comes a pandemic. It upends not only what we had planned or hoped to do, but it also unsettles our assumptions. The impact couldn't have been predicted.

Meanwhile, other transitions continued. The family structure, people's time and energy, member and leader engagement or lack thereof has impacted the church. A member's commitment to two- or three-year terms of leadership is often a nonstarter. Then on top of it all are the racial, political and social tensions.

Taken together, these and other factors join the pandemic to catch ministry-minded leaders flat-footed and unprepared to meet the future. The first option is not to stop planning, but rather to approach planning much differently with the help of coaching. The blessed surprise is that when done mindfully, coaching can help to engage and re-engage an ever-widening circle of people including those who are



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further away from Jesus. Such coaching can empower more of the body of Christ to engage in mission and ministry. It also enables a ministry to be nimbler and to respond appropriately as cultures and people change or even when we experience a pandemic. The pathway to this is fraught with barriers and challenges but it is worth the struggle. The mission of God is always worth the struggle.

What Was Your Pandemic Experience? A Temporary Fix

What changed for you during the pandemic? You might say, “everything!” But think again. What really changed? What likely changed was the way you did a few, but very important, things, like celebrating the resurrection in-person every Lord’s day. We gathered as the “communion of saints,” but rules, laws, and common courtesy based upon Christian love (Rm 14:1; 1 Cor 8:9; 1 Thes 5:14-15) necessitated stopping in-person worship. Shock. What does this mean? Do you put everything on hold? Does a church hang on until things change or do we do something more proactive? How do we even approach this challenge? What is the solution? You didn’t plan on that happening nor could you. But it did happen and the consequences of how you responded probably had significant ramifications.

Many pastors and church leaders responded with an emergency plan to replace in-person worship with some kind of digital presence. In-person went virtual. YouTube got a lot of business. Job done. Or was it? Three cheers for those older generation pastors who learned how to record, edit, and upload video. It seemed like no one else would do it. Sincere admiration to those in poorer, ethnic, rural, or internet-challenged congregations who discovered using free conference calls where members could call in for worship and daily devotions. Some deployed their elders to collect the offerings hanging on doorknobs. Others even place printed copies of the service and sermon on front porches. Praise and thanks be to God.

So, what were the results? This may strike you as not a fair question. We cannot determine nor second guess the work of the Spirit working through the Word. The extra distance of delivering it online makes it particularly difficult. We leave the results to God. Some may say “I’m not a fruit inspector” or even quote the old saw, “man plans, and God laughs.” True! Yet does not God require a stewardship of not only the “mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1) but also of the church, its mission and ministry? God also requires a stewardship of the priesthood of all believers who are gifted for “works of service (*diakonia*)” (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:12). Our vocation as Christ’s shepherds and congregational leaders is a stewardship, as Hermann argues in his classic LCMS book *The Chief Steward* printed in 1951.¹ Such stewardship not only requires planning but also wisdom and evaluation and leadership.

While each congregation is different, with numerous elements to shape the outcomes. Some congregations have been more stable, but for most churches the results have not been good. Various research firms and our own experience confirm that churches are not seeing worshippers return to the numbers that used to be

“normal” pre-pandemic, let alone advancing the mission.² A significant portion of people have disengaged. Weaker congregations are considering closing their doors. Pastors are considering resignation or retirement. These are serious problems. The temporary fix of shifting from in-person to digital and back again is not a satisfactory solution. Good stewardship and good leadership require a deeper evaluation and response, which is not a simple fix.

The truth is that for a long time we have been seeing the lagging indicators signaling decline: slowly disengaging members, fewer baptisms and confirmations with shrinking worship attendance. Life events like weddings and funerals are increasingly happening apart from a church or clergy. There is less money to pay the bills and the pastor. There are fewer and aging volunteers. At the same time the general population increases. Such things have been easy to downplay; problems are often not acknowledged. Yet these lagging indicators persist like COVID-19. They point

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to serious problems and deeper issues. Then the pandemic occurs which not only accelerates the downturn of these numbers, but highlights them and screams for attention.

But we are often perplexed as to what to change. Strategic planning can be of value to save money for replacing old HVAC systems, but it can't plan for a pandemic. It's becoming clear that tweaking the annual plan or implementing a temporary fix aren't going to work.

Going deeper: Triple Loop Learning & Asking Questions

So what's the alternative? We need to pursue that deeper evaluation of our stewardship. Dr. Michael Marquardt, author of *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask*, describes it this way. “Through questions, leaders seek to learn not only what directly causes the problem or what solutions may work (which is single-loop learning), but also to seek to discover and learn what might be the underlying causes and solutions (double-loop learning) as well as the culture and mindset that creates these causes and solutions (triple-loop learning).”³

Chris Argyris, a pioneer in organizational learning and professor emeritus of Education and Organizational Behavior at Harvard University, argues that triple-loop learning is necessary if practitioners and organizations are to make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain circumstances. Yet, “most people define learning too narrowly as mere ‘problem solving.’”⁴ Certainly solving problems is

important but there are times when leaders also need to look at themselves. But this can be a huge challenge for highly skilled professional people who embody the “learning dilemma,” as he calls it. That is, when strategies go wrong such people ignore it and screen out criticism, become defensive, put the blame on others and what they believe is a lack of motivation in the other person. This impedes a leader’s ability to learn and get better, says Argyris. Today we might call this being in denial.

Most churches adjusted to the pandemic by going digital and making more phone calls. This is “single-loop learning” which answers how to fix the problem. In the case of a pandemic, the adjustment was fairly obvious, even though it wasn’t necessarily easy. It got us through the presenting problem. Yet now as we emerge from the shocking challenges of the pandemic, we are faced with the difficult task of needing to deal with the other factors or issues we have been able to overlook or avoid up until now.

So how do we face them as good stewards, in a way that will allow us to bypass our defensiveness, criticism and assumptions and look deeper? We need another helping skill.

Enter Coaching

No, we are not talking about sports coaching that calls the plays and gives advice. And no, we are not talking about coaching that is somehow infused with Buddhist or some other kinds of presuppositions that we must reject. We are instead talking about ancient skills that are incorporated into what is now called coaching. This skill helps people to change or grow without telling them what to do. The International Coaching Federation (ICF), founded in 1995, defines coaching as: “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”⁵

This type of coaching is a helping relationship and a way of holding a dialogue that creates a “grace space” where there is high trust and high collaboration as described in the ICF’s fourth core competency of cultivating trust and safety.⁶ In short, it is what Harvard Business professor Amy Edmondson describes as psychological safety.⁷ This is the surprise ingredient that explains why some teams flourish while other teams flounder. It was identified by Google through Project Aristotle which investigated the question.

As the president of the ICF explains, “Organizations that invite coaching in are building that muscle of self-awareness and self-knowing. It’s the realization that sometimes it’s going to get messy, sometimes it’s not going to go right, and that’s ok.”⁸ Then strengthened by that grace space, a team, an organization, especially a church, which knows the grace of Jesus Christ, can get busy discovering underlying causes and pursue real solutions.

The seventh of the eight core competencies of coaching identified by the ICF is especially relevant for going deeper to find root causes. It is titled: “Evokes Awareness.” The definition given is that when coaches evoke awareness they “facilitate client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy.” Additionally, they cite the following: challenging, asking questions, and helping clients to explore beyond their current thinking, including reframing perspectives.⁹ What this means practically is that good coaching won’t just ask, how can you fix this? Good coaching will help the client to be self-aware regarding their assumptions, desired outcomes, and motivation. Good coaching will explore perspectives from people the client respects, such as valued mentors. For clergy and ministry leaders that would certainly include Jesus and the Scriptures.

So good coaching in no way would diminish or undermine one’s faith. In fact, the coaching process likely will only encourage one’s faith! At the same time coaching does help the client to explore and identify mindsets and assumptions that are not true or relevant and may in fact cause them to be stuck in unproductive thinking and behaviors. Then growing out of that discovery or new awareness, good coaching will help the client to transform this learning and insight into specific actions with accountability.

It is exactly this “evoking awareness” that is the “secret sauce” of coaching. Such awareness rarely if ever comes through mere information sharing or advice. Instead, it happens through the coach asking questions. Then as the coaching client travels this thinking path with the coach, they avoid well-worn neural pathways and draw upon God-given latent wisdom or information they’ve overlooked in their thinking process. Most of us can relate to a time working in the yard or even taking a shower when an insight hit us and we may have even said aloud, “why didn’t I think of that before?” We didn’t because our brains are very efficient and think along well-worn neural pathways and ways to past successes. Then at those times when we are not concentrating, such as when we are at work doing something else, the insight can come to us and be strikingly powerfully in addressing perplexing problems. That awareness is what coaching does through an intentional conversation. Furthermore, since it is not imposed from the outside but emerges from the clients, they are far more likely to own it and take motivated action.

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Practical examples

The following are real world examples of flawed assumptions and their default or unthinking behaviors; then comparing them to new insights or awareness. These are not isolated cases but are commonly found among ministry professionals and leaders.

- The flawed assumption and behavior that growing disciples requires a formal class and instruction. The new awareness is that a person's insight is more powerful than another's instruction or advice. This is what Jesus did repeatedly with His disciples as He debriefed what happened with them.

- The flawed assumption by the overworked pastor that he should be everywhere and play a lead role in virtually everything. The unspoken message sent to members is they can be passive, compliant, inactive, and more critical. The new awareness consistent with Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 2, and other passages is that the pastor can instead empower and grow disciples through involvement and debriefed experience.

- The flawed assumption that ministry is primarily directed to the membership and happens on the church property. The unintended consequence is an inward or predominantly church-centric focus while avoiding the fields that are "ripe unto harvest" (John 4:35). The new awareness is that the pastor "equip the saints" and deploy them to be "salt and light" in externally focused ministry. The results will be more personal, leadership and conversion growth, with a tsunami of mission and witness in the community. It will also be an antidote to burnout for both pastor and lay people. This external focus also addresses a related flawed assumption that "ministry" (*diakonia*) for lay people is by default serving at the church within the church's positions, programs, structure, and property.

- The flawed assumption by busy ministry leaders that they know what people (members, but especially not yet members) want and need. Then when programs and activities falter, additional assumptions are made to explain why and cast blame. The new awareness is that they need to know the community intimately, including their wants and needs! This will drive church leaders to make friends and listen to people's hopes, dreams, and fears which will shape the church's response. This "business research" should be standard practice for any organization looking to steward resources and initiatives.

- A related assumption is when ministry leaders inaccurately assume why worship attendance is shrinking instead of doing the hard work of seeking out the people of the church and community and listening.
- Ministry leaders inaccurately assume how people are growing or not growing in their faith instead of prioritizing certain marks of discipleship to measure progress, which are then publicly celebrated in praise to God.
- Ministry leaders incorrectly assume just doing what we've always done, but doing it better, is the solution. A related flawed assumption is the goal that the church should strive to be like it once was in its heyday. A new awareness is that this is a different time, so goals and priorities need to shift to bring others closer to Jesus.
- Another flawed assumption is that a lack of money is their greatest problem. The new awareness is that people and their development is their greatest asset.
- Ministry leaders falsely assume they need a silver bullet such as: a younger staff member, different worship form, updated space, signage, etc. The new awareness is to take a sober audit of their vision, goals and actual programs, including attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes and make appropriate adjustments.

The list can certainly go on. Coaching helps one to evaluate and re-evaluate motivation, purpose, and many things and to identify those served. It then clarifies desired outcomes and determines how best to steward and focus resources and every activity for people development and bringing them closer to Christ.

Conclusion

We didn't plan on a pandemic, but it came. What will happen? This is a pregnant time for us to think deeper and more fully consider our stewardship of ministry and the gospel itself. This will happen by seeking to intentionally learn and use skills like coaching to make appropriate changes. It will require a willingness to go beyond the quick fix, to admit shortcomings, try on new assumptions, and begin to try on new behaviors for the sake of Jesus Christ and His mission.

Endnotes

¹ J. E. Hermann, *The Chief Steward, A Manual on Pastoral Leadership* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951).

² <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

³ Michael Marquardt, *Leading with Questions - how leaders find the right solutions by knowing what to ask*, Jossey Bass, a Wiley imprint (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2005) Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 338-340).

⁴ Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1991.

⁵ <https://coachingfederation.org/about>

⁶ <https://coachingfederation.org/core-competencies>

⁷ There are numerous resources for Amy Edmondson's work available online from her report to her Ted Talk to reviews and opinion pieces about her study. Here are some links:

<https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=54851>

https://www.ted.com/speakers/amy_edmondson

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?_r=0

⁸ Quote from International Coaching Federation President, Magdalena Nowicka Mook, from an ICF social media post.

⁹ <https://coachingfederation.org/core-competencies>