

Staffing the church for healthy ministry

October 31, 2018

One of the most frequent conversations we have with churches has to do with finances and staff. With the majority of churches plateaued or declining, intense pressure often is brought to bear upon church staffing models.

With finances tight, congregations are being forced to think carefully about the number of professional staff members they require and can afford, along with the focus of those positions.

Staffing can be a difficult conversation to broach in a congregation, and so we often delay and deny the looming issues. Unfortunately, the conversation then erupts as a crisis at budget or transition time.

Proactively leaning into the conversation is a much healthier alternative.

Guiding thoughts for a more productive staffing conversation

As you consider your congregation's situation, here are some guiding thoughts.

First, a church must clarify its mission, vision and strategy for its near and mid-future. Whatever we believe the kingdom is to look like in the coming season of our congregation's life is what reigns supreme when it comes to facilities, staff, structures and finances. Such clarity is essential if we are to make wise and appropriate staffing choices.

There are multiple options for doing this clarification work. Choose one and pursue it with energy until you are clear and united around a shared agenda for the future.

A **second** key factor is the relationship between professional staff and laity. What is the leadership culture of the congregation? Some churches seemingly hire staff to do most of the work of the church. Others seek a more balanced ministry model of an engaged laity and ministerial leaders.

What if you made this choice deliberately rather than by tradition? If you were to balance the responsibility for ministry between laity and clergy, what would it look like?

Third, there are several helpful ways to analyze staffing expenditures and congregational attendance patterns.

Simple ways to measure the staffing needs of your congregation

One is to analyze your congregation's budget and rebalance the budget so it fits generally accepted models for healthy operation. Break your budget into five categories: personnel, facilities, programs, debt and missions. Assign every line item in your budget to one of the categories. Hopefully, you are debt-free or paying down your debt using a parallel capital campaign.

Generally accepted best practices for healthy churches assign the following ranges to each of the categories. Keep in mind: These percentages are guidelines and need to be evaluated in terms of your context, congregation size and special circumstances.

Personnel	50-60 percent
Facilities	15-25 percent

Programs	10-15 percent
Missions	10-20 percent
Debt	0-5 percent

A key indicator of a healthy church is the combined percentage of personnel and facilities. When this number exceeds 75 percent, the ability of the congregation to engage successfully in ministry and missions begins to be impacted negatively.

Once you know your budget percentages, you can begin to make needed adjustments based on your ministry vision rather than emotionally in reaction to a crisis.

Another helpful metric is the ratio of weekly attenders to ministerial/professional staff. The generally accepted ratio for healthy churches is one ministerial staff member for every 100 regular attenders. Thus, if your congregation averages 325 attenders, the ratio suggests you can support three ministerial staff members.

This ratio has been around for many years and seems to hold up in current scenarios. However, attendance patterns are shifting dramatically. The frequency of attendance by regular attenders is dropping and may impact your ratio.

Do a quick check of the actual attendance habits of your congregation, and you will find that many of your most faithful, regular attenders often are present 35 to 40 Sundays a year. Not only does this have an impact on volunteer positions (class leadership, choir, etc.), it means a congregation actually must staff and prepare for a larger congregation than the weekly attendance average suggests you have.

Count the number of people who attend your church on a monthly basis rather than weekly. You may find an average weekly worship attendance of 300 actually may be an active congregation of 450-500, and that has

implications for your staffing ratio.

However you choose to approach staffing, there are ways to evaluate your congregation's staffing model that are tied to both metrics and mission. When you do, remember that each staff member is a real person with a real family and a real call to ministry. Any adjustments must be approached in a thoughtful, generous and Christ-like spirit as you move forward.

While church staffing is a difficult conversation, it is one we must have if we are to be good stewards of our resources and our witness.

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