

Still Crazy after All These Years

Educational Ministry for the Long Haul

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled[b] you[c] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

—Colossians 1:9–12 (NRSV)

I remember being interviewed for my current job. The committee was coming to the end of their questions and one person asked, “As this is your first job out of graduate school, how long do you imagine you will stay here?” I had my answer at the ready. My grand plan was to take a job and stay three to five years, at which point I would go back for further education or look for another amazing opportunity. I was twenty-three I knew I didn’t have a good idea of what it might mean to have a full-time, forty-plus-hours-a-week job, let alone a career! So much more serious! On the other hand, I had committed to a four-year college and then a two-year graduate school program. I could commit to three to five years at a job in a new town. This length of time seemed like both nothing and forever. The committee was satisfied, I was confident in my plan, we shook hands, and my career began.

At the time, the published statistic in church magazines stated the average stay at a church for a youth worker or educator was eighteen months. Yikes. I would hardly be unpacked. With that daunting statistic in mind, I began my career as Director of Christian Education.

Little did I know, the three to five years I had imagined would turn into thirty! Children who were entering kindergarten when I arrived had returned to the church with their spouses and children, anxious to re-engage in the life of the church. As I look back at the great cloud of witnesses, I have had the honor of doing ministry alongside, I am amused at my naivete in thinking I would leave this church family after just a few years. I would have missed so many good relationships, important opportunities, and challenges to grow in my own faith. I have had colleagues who have left churches after a year or three. For the most part, these have been for good reasons. And I am not faulting people who find themselves in congregations that are not a “good fit” or where there is a toxic environment. Yet, I can say that when you stay in a church or in a profession for multiple decades, your ministry must continually change and your own understanding of discipleship transforms.

If you are going into educational ministry that you pray is formational for those in your church, here are some things I have learned over the long haul:

Don't Be Afraid to End a Program

I do yearly evaluations of all the programs and events under my supervision. I do this personally and with the education committee. This includes training and appreciation programs, trips, studies, lunches, dinners . . . truly everything. I provide information on cost; amount of time spent in preparation, facilitation, and clean up; and the number of people it involved and/or impacted. Our evaluation process is not one where we conclude

that a program is too expensive, so cut it. Or only impacted two families, so wasn't worth it. Those factors are part of the equation, but don't hold us hostage. Our primary conversation in the evaluation is, was this foundational or transformational? Does it have the potential to deepen discipleship? Does it have possibilities for future growth? Are there ripple effects in who this ends up serving? Are there ways to change this program/event/class to enrich more people's faith? Are there ways to create more connections in the church or with the community? Does it allow us to welcome more folks into the church family or challenge new people in how they serve Jesus Christ?

We spend more time brainstorming ways to change even our most beloved and well attended programs than we do discussing the expense of any program. We tweak and dream, and there are plenty of times when we absolutely discontinue programs. From this, I have learned: Do not be afraid to discontinue a program. Churches hold onto relics of programs because they like the idea that they offer them. But if a program is no longer serving its purpose or is no longer seen as relevant, then it is time to put energy into something with the potential to be transformational or foundational. If you have a regular schedule of evaluation and re-creation of programs, people will see you aren't simply taking things away but are including educational offerings that are significant to the life of the congregation.

Programs That Give You Energy Will Give Others Energy

Once you evaluate your programs, think clearly about what you do that is giving you energy and what is sucking energy dry. Talk to your committee. Some programs or events may still have to happen even if they don't stir up your creativity. But others on the committee may be willing to take more leadership on a program that is crushing your spirit. Or brainstorm ways that the program might be changed to excite both you and others. If nothing you are doing gives you energy, maybe a sabbatical is in order. Planning and facilitating week after week is draining. Intentional breaks for study and rest could be the most important thing you do for your health and the church's stability.

Participate in Intentional Continuing Education

For a while, I chose my continuing education for who was asking me to lead a workshop. That did not help me learn new things or experience a time of sabbath. For me, breaking the habit of not choosing CE events with intentionality meant enrolling in a new program of study at a nearby seminary. The coursework stretched me. The time away from work to read, write, and take classes gave me a new outlook on the work I was doing. The networking with other working professionals gave me new ideas and a new network of friends who understood the rigors of the career I had chosen. Though it meant some time away from the church a few times a year, the church was very supportive of my endeavor. When I graduated, they were proud of what I had accomplished and how I would use what I learned to better our educational ministry programs. You don't have to enroll in a new degree program to be intentional about the CE you choose. But you may look over the year and see what places and organizations offer events that you are interested in. Give yourself a learning theme for the year: mental health and youth, active games to build community, confirmation. . . Then look for CE events that have course offerings in that area. To give yourself some accountability, share what you learn with those back home.

Train and Appreciate Your Volunteers

There are times when I have a church school teaching staff that have taught together for years, and I think I can forgo offering a training workshop. This always ends up creating problems for me down the road. It is important to offer training and orientation (or reorientation) to your teaching staff no matter how many years they have been teaching in the same grade. This time of training to remind volunteers why they serve in this capacity is so important. It is a chance to say out loud your expectations of teachers and give opportunity for

discussion about what needs your teachers have as well. It gives space to discuss best practices rather than fall into bad habits. It is a good time to include information about expected boundaries with students and about ways to be the caring church within those boundaries. It is a time to highlight the power of praying for each student as you prepare lessons. Even if you offer no new curriculum resource, supply, material, or even poster for the bulletin board, the training time will provide opportunity to connect with each teacher.

Appreciation for your volunteers—including those who teach, coordinate, or advise children, youth, or adults—shouldn't just happen at the end of the year. Volunteers should hear, see, and experience your appreciation throughout the year. This first happens at training when you personally thank each person for their service. It may happen again in worship when volunteers are commissioned to serve. Then, through cards, newsletter articles, minutes for mission, phone calls, emails, social media posts . . . from you and the committee. Public displays of gratitude make your volunteers feel the whole congregation's appreciation while also highlighting the opportunity for service to others who may be interested. So, in the end, thanking someone may be your best recruitment tool.

Foster Collegial Staff Relationship

Those who serve on staff together should find ways to laugh, cry, and support each other. The church is a wonderful way to experience community, and as staff, you help to make the community healthy and welcoming. But sometimes that beloved community or a member of it seems to undermine your patience, confidence, or abilities. You need the support of others on the staff who can listen to you and understand your situation. So, how might you create these relationships if they don't seem to naturally happen? Pitch in outside your area of programming. Be willing to lend a hand when asked and help when someone looks swamped. Invite staff members to coffee to get to know them outside the office. Send your own cards of affirmation, thanks, and encouragement to others on staff. Sometimes if a culture of care isn't already part of your staff, you can help to create this. See if others would be open to a staff retreat—even if “getting away” just means to another church's meeting room or to a local park. Bring birthday cake, bagels, or some treat to staff meetings to celebrate events in other staff members' lives. Remember, collegial relationships aren't just for those people on your church's staff, it may be with folks in similar positions in other churches in your presbytery. Nurturing relationships with these colleagues could be your lifeline as well as a great source for sharing resources.

Relationships—You need friendships in church and out of church. There are no people I am closer to, maybe even closer than my family of birth, than my friends in my church family. We share a special bond that is held together by love and by our common belief and experience of God through worship and service. But there are times when all I want is to get together with my friends who are not part of my church family and not talk about anything church related or talk about how tired I am of my job working at the church. Not that my church friends couldn't hear my occasional rants or raves, but my non-church friends are not hurt by me saying I am tired of people who volunteer and don't follow through, or youth's parents who schedule homework time during youth group, or whatever else is bothering me about my job. Relationships keep you going! You may be the church professional, but you are not a robot. You need a support system to laugh, cry, scream, and celebrate with as much as folks in the church need you there to do those same things with them.

Supportive committee to meet with regularly—You may work regularly with your education committee or the committee that called you. Having a team of folks who know what you are doing, support you in your work, and communicate their support for you to the wider church is important for longevity. Feeling like you are on your own at your job can be debilitating. Having no one understand all the hours it takes to find one good volunteer youth adviser or put together one evening's Bible study is frustrating. Hearing only what isn't going well is demeaning. You need folks who are interested in your well-being and your success to meet with you regularly.

Celebrations, Salary, and Benefits

It is hard to stay somewhere where you don't feel appreciated by the marking of milestone anniversaries or professional accomplishments or aren't respected by being paid fairly and reasonably or aren't receiving any kind of benefits. It is especially difficult to feel positive about staying somewhere for the long term if other people on staff are receiving these kinds of accolades and awards. If you don't have an active personnel committee or don't feel comfortable speaking to your clerk of session or head of staff about these kinds of benefits, use your search committee or education committee to determine the best ways to advocate for yourself. But don't despair or give up.

Non-ordained church professionals must often advocate more rigorously for benefits, recognition, sabbaticals, and salary increases. Thus, it is important to be educated about what is typical for your area or your presbytery. It is helpful to have a conversation with presbytery-level staff to see if they have guidelines for churches regarding salary and benefits. You may feel more empowered to go to your church's personnel committee, head of staff, or clerk of session after you have a conversation with someone at the presbytery level.

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