

Thought You LEADERS MIGHT ENJOY THIS

GROWTH STRATEGIES

MAXIMIZING YOUR CONGREGATION

LESS IS Best

By Bill Easum

I never thought I would be writing an article like this one. I still remember telling churches they needed to be a seven-day-a-week church if they wanted to grow. But no more! Now, less is best.

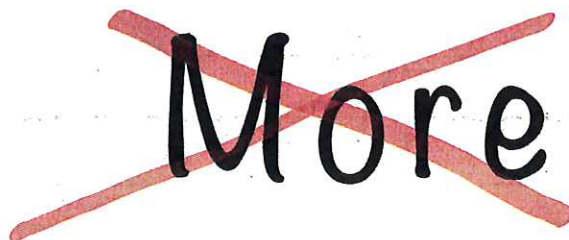
One of the new realities of the new breed of reproducing churches is the less they do the more they grow. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But it's true. Here's what I mean. I'm seeing more and more new, thriving churches doing only a handful of ministries (usually limited to worship, small groups, children and youth worship, perhaps a recovery ministry, and missions) and nothing more on a regular basis. Sunday and Wednesday nights are gone. Thus, less is more.

In fact, one of the churches I attend now and then is totally dark Monday-Friday evenings except on rare occasions. They have weekend worship and small groups during the week that meet in homes. And the converse is true. I see more and more declining churches with a full calendar of events. The goal of many pastors seems to be, "If I can get new people involved in something, I've got them." So, they heap one program on top of another in hopes

of involving more people.

Whereas this method worked when the church was more at the center of society and the best entertainment in town was the church, nothing now could be farther from the truth. All over-programming does today is split up families one more time, as if society doesn't do that enough. Along the same line is the belief that the more the church is used by the community the more likely it is to grow. That may have been true in the past when the church was the hub of the community, but that's not necessarily true anymore. Today, the more it is used by the community the more likely it is to be declining. The only common denominator today is such usage drains the church of badly needed financial resources.

Just today, I was coaching a young church planter three years into the plant with 200 in average attendance. He was struggling with getting more people to lead small groups. I asked him what he really wanted... a programmatic church with small groups or a small group based church. It is almost impossible to do heavy programming and effective small groups at the same time. As the con-



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versation evolved, I asked him to quickly evaluate all they were doing beyond worship and small groups. The list was long. Over the course of the conversation, he decided to end most programming and focus on Sunday morning worship for adults, children, and youth; small groups during the week that meet in homes; and outreach to the community.

So, what's going on? This shift is just another one of the major changes occurring as we pass from Modernity into the new world. The new world runs on relationships not programs. Activity and involvement in programs have little to do with the growth or health of a church. Keeping people busy doing things doesn't equate to fulfilled people. Instead of programs, people need relationships with people in your church if you want them to stay.

The other issue is that people are overly busy today. Programs eat up a lot of time that someone could have been using to establish relationships with new people or cementing people who are already at your church but haven't been assimilated. The more programs the more time will be spent by the pastor and/or staff making sure they come off well. Or, at best, they spend time equipping the lay people to pull them off. Either way, the time is spent in house rather than with those on the periphery or who have not even darkened the door of the church.

But something far more sinister is at work here. By tying up your people in so many church programs, you insulate them from their unchurched friends, and, within a couple of years, they don't

have any unchurched friends anymore. Instead of bringing your people to church two or three times a week, train them to spend time with their unchurched friends and let them see what it means to be a Christian. You'll see a marked improvement in the number of new people showing up.

So, why not do the following:

- ***Make a list of those programs you can do without and cancel them.***
- ***Make a list of those programs you have to annually prop up by begging people to attend and cancel them.***
- ***Look over all of the remaining programs and ask, "Which ones really contribute to the spiritual or numerical growth of our church?"***
- ***Start cutting the remaining dead wood.***

Now you are ready to redirect all of that energy spent on unnecessary programming into establishing relationships throughout the congregation and the community at large.

One word of warning - cutting someone's favorite program might result in a heart attack, either yours or theirs. In either case, be ready for some flack. RPN

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