
How to Stop Doing a Ministry

There comes a time in the life of every church when it's time to stop doing something.

Maybe it's a program that has run its course. Maybe it's a ministry that used to work. Or maybe the needs of the community have changed and it's time for something new.

If you find yourself needing to cancel a ministry program, you're really facing a stewardship issue. It's a difficult decision, but money and time spent on a ministry or program that isn't working are better spent elsewhere.

In fact, *what you stop might be more important than what you stop*. It's entirely possible your church isn't as effective as it could be because you're putting too much energy into something you shouldn't be doing.

But there's a right way and a wrong way to stop doing a ministry. In this article, I want to layout one principle and three action steps to help you stop doing a ministry or program.

Key Principle: Handle with Care.

Empathy is a critical pastoral skill. As you move through the process of evaluating ministries, making decisions, and communicating to the church, you must handle the entire thing with care. Here are three reasons you should move carefully when thinking about pulling the plug.

- **People don't like change.** As a leader, you know change is necessary. But most people don't like change. Don't get angry at your church for pushing back on a decision to stop doing something. People resist change, and it's up to you to lead them through it.
- **People in the church are often more committed to a particular program or ministry of the church than the church itself.** There's a lot of emotional attachment to ministries, particularly ones that have gotten a lot of time and focus from people in the church.
- **What needs to change was once the change.** The thing you want to stop doing was started at one point. The thing you want to kill was once an innovative idea. When you want to stop doing something, it's helpful to think about the reason it was started in the first place.

Show a lot of empathy. Put yourself in people's shoes and don't rush into changes. And when you're ready to stop doing something, here are three steps you can take.

Action Step #1: Start with honest evaluation.

Stopping a ministry or program must start with an honest evaluation. You must look at each program through the lens of your mission, vision, strategy, and resource and have an honest conversation about effectiveness.

Effectiveness really is the keyword when you are evaluating something. You're not trying to discover if people like the ministry. You're not trying to figure out if it was good or helpful. You're trying to measure effectiveness.

Unless you have a devil worship ministry, all of the ministries in your church are probably good. That's why good or bad can't be the measuring stick. But certain ministries, programs, and events are more effective at accomplishing your mission and vision.

When you're evaluating, you must do so honestly and without emotional attachment. There's a good chance some good comes out of each ministry, so you've got to look honestly as a good steward.

A while ago, I was meeting with a church leadership team helping them evaluate their ministries. One of the team members in the meeting was highly committed to a particular program. He said, "If just one person meets Jesus through this event, then isn't it worth it?" I think he was surprised when I said, "No."

Of course, it's great if one person meets Jesus. That's cause for celebration in heaven and on earth. But what if the time, money, energy were used elsewhere in a ministry that helped 10 people come to know the Lord? Wouldn't that be a more effective use of resources?

That's why effectiveness has to be our key measuring stick in evaluation.

Action Step #2: Replace it with something.

Let's say you've done the hard work of evaluating and have decided that a particular ministry or program is no longer effective. When you're ready to stop it, here's what you do next.

Don't just cancel it or stop it...replace it with something.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians not to be conformed to the pattern of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind. The secret to being a non-conformist was to actually replace the world's thoughts with Godly thoughts. The key to getting rid of ungodly habits is replacing them with good ones. The key to escaping the traps of the world below is to set your mind on things above.

This is a great teaching principle for church growth, but the same principle applies here. If you want your church to stop spending time and money on an ineffective program or ministry, show them the alternative. Cast vision for the better use of time.

When you're stopping a program or ministry, the idea isn't to give up. It's to refocus. It's to reorient your budget and your volunteers to a program that's more effective. It's not a retreat; it's an advance.

Now maybe you'll replace it with something new, but it's far more likely (and helpful) that you'll replace it with a renewed focus on something else you're already doing.

Here's an example.

Let's say your church does a mid-week Children's program during the summer. It's got worship, teaching, and snacks. It takes a dozen volunteers a good bit of time and you allocate some resources in the budget.

You've also done a week-long Vacation Bible School each summer. It takes two dozen volunteers, involves multiple planning meetings, and gets an even larger chunk of the children's ministry budget. As you look at VBS, you realize it's mostly church kids (from your church) and other church kids (whose parents love the free childcare). You evaluate and make the hard decision to stop doing VBS.

But instead of just pulling the plug, you take the volunteers and budget dollars and put them into the existing Wednesday night program. Suddenly, what you do every week is dramatically better. Volunteers are happier. Every Wednesday night is a VBS-like experience.

I'm not arguing you make this change (I'm a 6-time VBS graduate!). It might be the right call to do the exact opposite. But the goal here is to refocus energy and money, not cancel stuff to free up time for nothing.

Action Step #3: Create a communication plan.

Most people don't like change. And as a leader, you like change less than you think. If you don't believe me, try sleeping on the other side of the bed tonight

or go the entire day with your wallet in your other back pocket. Even if change is desirable, it's still uncomfortable.

That's why you must create a detailed and effective communication plan. Your communication will make or break any change in your church, particularly the communication around killing a ministry.

When you think about communication, think about an airport runway. Big planes need to land on a long runway. The bigger the plane – the longer the required runway. You can land a little crop-duster in a small field, but a large 747 needs a long line of concrete.

If you're communicating a big change that affects a lot of people, you need a long communication runway. It's not enough to make an announcement one Sunday or send a letter to people's houses.

When you communicate change, focus on WHY more than the details. If people understand the WHY behind the WHAT, they will be on board with the details. It's nearly impossible to communicate WHY too much.

If you want to stop doing a ministry, create a communication plan that involves multiple formats. Start by talking to people individually. Then bring in key leaders. Then use all the communication resources at your disposal. Things like...

- A Sunday announcement
- Vision for the change during a sermon
- A series of emails (not just one...several of them written from a different perspective)
- A snail mail letter to a select group of people
- A vision video
- Social media

Put all of this on a real calendar and let a solid plan drive your communication. If you've got a long runway, you've got time built in to address unforeseen problems or have one-on-one conversations.

What you stop doing in your church might be more important than what you start doing.

Follow these guidelines to stop ineffective ministries the right way.

Guide to Leading the Church

Feel like your church should be growing, but it's not? From someone who used to be a pastor and church planter, I know it can be frustrating.

Ultimately, church growth is up to God. But are we doing everything we can to ensure our church is healthy? How do we overcome the barriers we feel are in front of us?

We know you care deeply about leading a healthy growing church because it means leading more people to Jesus. As a result we created a free guide to breaking barriers that will bring clarity and help begin to alleviate your frustrations.

Get your FREE copy of the Senior Pastor's Guide to Breaking Barriers today.

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