

When Your Church Needs New Wineskins

One day a group of people approached Jesus, confused that his disciples were not fasting. After all, John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting. Why were Jesus' disciples not as committed to "doing the right things"?

Jesus answers the question about his disciples' lack of fasting with an illustration of a wedding feast. Jesus introduces himself as the bridegroom who has a special relationship with his bride. When the bridegroom is here, it is time to rejoice---to feast. But when he is gone (a foreshadowing of his death, resurrection, and ascension), fasting will resume.

Jesus was not against fasting; he was against fasting for the sake of checking fasting off a spiritual checklist. To show that the man-made system of religion could not contain his grace, he used two common cultural illustrations:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new patch pulls away from the old cloth, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost as well as the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins (Mark 2:21-22).

The old clothing cannot handle the new patch; the old wineskins cannot handle the new wine. The old man-made legalistic system of the Pharisees could not handle the grace revolution of Jesus.

While the illustration Jesus gave is clearly about the inability of a system to contain his grace, I also find his illustration helpful in thinking about the growth of a ministry/church. In many churches, what the Lord desires to do will disrupt the current structure. Often new wineskins are needed.

Church Architects

As church leaders architect their staff structures, they must design them in a scalable manner, in a way that allows for growth. But growth creates new problems and sometimes demands new structures. Here are three common philosophical tensions that confront leadership teams as they consider their structure. There are godly and wise advocates on opposite sides of each spectrum. My goal is not to convince you of one philosophy over another or to resolve the tensions, but to help you surface the discussion points. The more a leadership team aligns on a philosophy of each of these "tensions," the easier it will be to stretch the wineskin/broaden the structure.

As you read these, please understand I am not addressing the people---merely the structure. Having the right leaders, who fulfill the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and love well, is infinitely more important than structure. In fact, a good structure will never make up for bad leadership. But godly and great leaders can overcome an inhibiting structure. Still, that is no excuse for eschewing wisdom on how to steward the responsibilities given by God to church leaders.

(1) The 'Flat/Span of Care' Tension

Typically, a flat structure has less management. Here is an extreme example: A middle-school pastor may report directly to the lead pastor in one church. In another church, he may report to the senior student pastor, who reports to the pastor of spiritual formation, who reports to the executive pastor, who reports to the senior pastor. Those who advocate a flat staff structure point to the obvious advantages: cheaper and faster. Each additional level of staffing adds costs to the church. And each additional level of staffing slows down communication and decision-making.

But before you sign on to the flat line structure, consider a potential pitfall: **the flatter the staff structure, the less development and energy each staff member receives** from his/her supervisor. At one point in my tenure as Christ Fellowship Miami's executive pastor, I had 18 direct reports. As the church grew, we kept adding to the team without adding layers. I loved the speed and the stewardship, but at that point, I could not provide the care and coaching as I should. And to encourage spiritual transformation in churches, staff teams should be nurtured. So while flat structures express stewardship, span of care speaks to the issues of discipleship and development. Span of care theorists would argue for 4 to 6 direct reports to managers.

Your leadership team should wrestle with this tension. How flat do you desire to be? If you lean toward the flat side, how will you ensure the staff receives coaching and care?

(2) The 'Lean/Ahead of Growth' Tension

The biblical argument for a lean staff emphasizes the priesthood of believers---every believer is gifted to serve others---and reminds pastors that they equip the body. If all of God's people are invited into the ministry of the church, staff members are not hired to "do ministry" but to "**lead and train others**" for ministry.

Often churches that spend 45 percent to 55 percent of their budget on personnel costs are considered to be in the average range. We find tension here, though, because some advocate that church leaders hire "ahead of the growth." For example, a church in a college town has few college students attending---not enough to justify a staff member in the minds of many on the leadership team. They could wait for college students to attend, though they haven't shown up in the last decade. Or they could staff ahead of the growth and invest in the role now.

Those who staff ahead of the growth point to fruit of individual pastors/leaders. They are not as concerned with having a lean staff, because they believe their investment in staffing bears ministry fruit. Those who staff lean often point to the releasing of ministry to volunteers and the investment of resources in other areas.

(3) The 'Leader/Manager' Tension

Many churches are over-managed and under-led. They become slow-moving institutions designed for control rather than mission. Decision-making is cumbersome, empowerment is low, and movement is lethargic. They are unlikely to change because, after all, no one loves

management as much as managers.

On the other end of the spectrum, churches are led by visionary and passionate teams with few systems in place to support the mission. And because they lack the systems and processes provided by capable managers, the church quickly becomes chaotic and unfocused. While we are much more attracted to leadership, management is just as necessary. The "down with management" and "up with leadership" thinking is unhelpful and unhealthy.

Ultimately, **structure produces no life change**. Nor does it produce health. Healthy churches have myriad staffing structures; same with unhealthy ones. But structure is important, because it can provide clarity. It can enable effective communication and help ensure ministry is executed well. Wise leadership teams will wrestle with these philosophical tensions beneath the structure and develop convictions that guide their staffing as they trust God with the growth he grants.

Read more from Eric [here](#).