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## Dave Odom: Overstaffed leads to overwork

*Deciding how many staff positions to have is not first a budget decision. Such discernment requires imagination regarding the possibilities, discernment about the consequences and clear expectations about the outcomes.*

by [David L. Odom](#)



iStock/Graphic by Alex Slobodkin

August 28, 2012

“Our church has six full-time ministers with an average worship attendance of 300,” reported the personnel committee chair. “Are we overstaffed?”

Twenty years ago, when I was first asked this kind of question, I would study the congregation’s ratio of ministers to average attendance and the percentage of personnel in the overall budget and then make a recommendation. But eventually I discovered that numbers alone could not fully answer the question or reveal the true cost of having too many employees: Overstaffing can lead to overwork, first among the volunteers and eventually among the ministers.

Determining the appropriate number of paid clergy and ministry leaders requires complex analysis of various factors, including the tenure and capacities of the current ministers, shifting demographics in

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the congregation and the community, and emerging opportunities for new ministries. But just as important, it also requires imagination regarding the possibilities, discernment about the consequences and clear expectations about the outcomes.

Clearly, the financial consequences of staffing decisions cannot be ignored. The most commonly used rule of thumb is one minister for every 100 people who attend on an average Sunday and overall staff costs ranging from 45 to 55 percent of the budget. Exceeding these numbers is a warning sign.

Many congregations, however – especially those that are passionate about how the church engages the world – also operate by another simple formula: the church's mission equals the needs in the community. Unfortunately, however admirable that equation might be, it provides no guidance about how many staff will be needed to carry out that mission. Instead, the congregation creates as many ministries as it can possibly do and afford.

When church leaders initially create staff positions, they seldom identify any metrics for measuring the impact of the ministry or timelines for review. Instead, they focus on the decision to begin the work without thinking about the scale that will be required for sustainability. Typically, congregations look at and decide to create each position individually, rarely considering the overall staffing impact for ministry and cost to the congregation.

Since the economic challenges of 2008, many congregations have seen income drop and health insurance costs soar. Facing limited resources, congregations take the obvious first steps, looking to cut the operating budget, defer maintenance on the building and trim anything else that provides short-term relief.

Whether in a business, a church or any other organization, cutting staff is extremely painful. Congregations, of course, are as much organism as organization. For them, cutting staff is like operating on yourself with no anesthetic. The pain is both excruciating and self-inflicted, and thus often avoided until the last possible moment. By the time a congregation is asking whether it is overstaffed, the leaders are almost always at the end of their rope. Like most of us when under stress, they experience tunnel vision that kills imagination.

In financially strapped congregations that are pleased with their ministers, people often feel overworked. If the ministers are dedicated, they have identified important outreach to do and seek volunteers to do it. The more work the ministers discover to be done, the more volunteers and volunteers hours are needed. Soon church members are overloaded. At that point, the ministers feel forced to either abandon important work or do more of it themselves. They become what businesses call “individual contributors” -- people who work in isolation, doing good work but not part of a team.

The real problem in this situation is that the congregation has more leadership from its ministers than it has the organizational capacity to support. Because overwork is more difficult to quantify than staff expenses, however, the challenge is framed as a budget problem.

But what happens if the issue is framed as too much leadership capacity -- too many identified needs that are beyond the congregation's ability to meet? The minister and other congregational leaders could identify those who care most about this ministry wherever they might be -- in the church, in other congregations, in other institutions and throughout the community. If the congregation has too much leadership but not enough infrastructure, how might that leadership be put to work building partnerships in new or unexpected ways?

At the same time, the congregation might need to rethink and expand how it views its work and mission. What if a congregation saw its role as an incubator of ministries, regularly launching them and looking for networks and resources to sustain them over time?

This is not a new idea. In the last 50 years, for example, many downtown congregations launched cooperative social service ministries to provide housing, food and other basic necessities. The popularity of this approach waned during the “church growth era,” when congregations had to focus on their own vitality as measured by average worship attendance or by the number of ministries they could wholly staff and fund.

The societal move away from United Way-style giving and toward more targeted, high-impact philanthropy has also contributed to the shift. Effective partnerships include building a network among all those involved in serving and being served, linking donations of money and time.

Theologically, these shifts in mindset require a belief in the abundance of God's blessings. Is overstaffing evidence of having too much invested in areas that are unlikely to show any return on the investment? What would it look like to redeploy the excess in a way that encouraged other forms of capital to be developed alongside the abundance?

Executive leadership adviser Laura Nichol describes how organizations need to develop [four forms of capital](#): network, service, intellectual and financial. Drawing on the work of venture capitalist and philanthropist Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen, Nichol contends that organizations should seek to build up all the forms of capital, not just money. Indeed, as Nichol points out, we often find the financial capital we need after we first focus on building up the other forms.

Some ministers, of course, believe that they are responsible for only one form of capital -- service -- and that other people are responsible for the rest. But such a split limits the prospects for achieving sustainability. Ministry depends on the interrelations of network, service, intellectual and financial capital. Planning and budgeting for these diverse forms of capital in their interrelations is not a task to delegate.

For example, consider how old-style food pantries and shelters often function as compared with organizations like Habitat for Humanity.

Both address critical needs. But they differ in how they approach their work and develop their capital.

The pantries and shelters typically require that clients seek help, donors give money and volunteers give time. Each invests in a way that maintains a role.

Habitat for Humanity, however, invites everyone to participate. Everyone raises multiple forms of capital, and the homeowner is as much a part of the process as anyone else. In such a system, the staff creates the conditions necessary for all to contribute and connect.

In an overstaffed congregation, exhaustion often results when leaders focus on meeting the needs directly. But when staff and other leaders focus on developing all the forms of capital related to a ministry, they will inevitably develop as well the conditions that invite more people and organizations into the ministry.

They stop asking, "How can we get more people to support us?" and begin asking new questions: "How can participants nurture service, ideas, fellowship and finances in one another and newcomers? How can we rally around a specific goal, accomplish it and celebrate progress?"

As the forms of capital increase, questions of overstaffing are replaced with questions about the best way to organize the ministry for its flourishing.