

MANAGING TO DO BETTER

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Thinking back to school days I recall that my end of term reports often contained the words “*Could do better*”, even if I had achieved a favourable report on a subject. I suspect that the majority of people reading this will recall similar comments on school reports. Was it, I have wondered, something all teachers scribble at the foot of the page, or could it be intended to be an incentive? If it was the latter, I cannot remember it firing me up to try harder the following term!

I recently got to thinking what it might be like if every church or Christian organisation had to have an annual report covering all aspects of its life. Take for example, its evangelistic aspect. If you had to score how effectively the gospel had been proclaimed in church services, how many of the church members had shared their faith, how many members had brought new people to church activities where they might engage with the gospel, how many outreaches have been held, and how much of the church expenses had gone on evangelism, what might your end of year percentage look like? If it falls short of 100%, then it “*could do better*”.

You could apply the same exercise to other aspects of church life such as growing disciples, releasing people into service, growing faith, pastoral care, etc. My fear is that, if we were honest, we might be setting a score below 50% for most aspects. Is that good enough?

It seems to me that most churches never undertake regular reviews of how well they are performing. The result is that we plod along, having little impact on the world around us, and often feeling as if we are caught up in the doldrums, becalmed and hoping that the wind of the Holy Spirit will soon come to move us on. But might it be that this is merely asking God to do for us those things that he has asked us to do for him?

Several of the parables that Jesus taught employed business language. The King James Version refers the *stewards* and more modern translations usually employ the word *manager*. Here are just two of these:

Luke 19:10-27 records the Parable of the Minas. First note the context of this parable. People were expecting instant blessing, but Jesus tells a story that suggests that implies that responsibility for bringing about what they desire will rest on them. An important man is going away for some time and entrusts each of his ten servants with one mina. A mina was the equivalent of three month’s wages. In 2016 the UK legal minimum wage would make that over £3,500.

The *responsibility* they are given is to put the money to work. But their master does not tell them exactly how to do this. So in addition to *responsibility* he has also given the *autonomy*. But before he leaves he reminds them that there will be *accountability* on his return. This reminds me of a time when I gave away a Sunday collection £5 at a time to members of the church (including children) on the understanding that they would try to use it to generate more money, which we would gather in six months later. Some pooled their resources; others chose to work on their own. One enterprising child invested in making cakes which were sold at school and made a great profit. Another bought a pig and bred from it, selling off the piglets as soon as they were weaned. Others purchased material for car-washing.

Back to the parable: when the time for accountability came, the first declared that the mina with which he had been entrusted had made ten more. The next man declared that the mina with which he had been entrusted had made five more. Note that neither claimed personal credit. The profit had come from the investment of the mina. Then a third man came forward. I imagine him tightly holding a small bag from which he produced the original min, which he has kept safe. Instead of the reward he might have received, he is punished for not at least earning some interest on it. The people in my church returned an amazing profit on the original £5 entrusted to them. The reward they saw was seeing it used for the purposes of God's kingdom.

God has entrusted so much to us that should be used to multiply the blessing for his glory and the good of others. But mostly we fail to put it to use. Take the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. How often we keep it to ourselves when it is meant to be so much more than something we hold onto for selfish enjoyment.

Luke 16: 1-12 records the Parable of the Shrewd Manager. At first reading the manager in this story might seem dishonest but note that his master praises what he has done. In this story the man seems to be the manager of an agricultural business or estate. That was his responsibility, but he has not been performing satisfactorily. He has been given notice that he is to lose his job, and wonders how he might gain a better future for himself.

As manager he not only has *responsibility*; he has *autonomy*. He uses this to strike a deal with at least two of the people who owed money (or possibly goods) to the business. He uses his *autonomy* to strike a deal to put himself in favour with these creditors. He was not cheating his employer, as he was using the *autonomy* granted to him. In fact, it might even have been good business as 100% of a discounted price is better than 0% of the full amount. It could have helped company cash flow.

But whatever gain or loss it made for the business, his master commends him for his shrewdness. Perhaps, if he shown such initiative and talent previously, his employment might not have been terminated.

Jesus seems to use this parable in two ways. Firstly, he contrasts the actions of selfish worldly people with those with better motives. But he also uses the parable to make a point about what we do with those things with which we have been entrusted.

In 1Corinthians 4:2 Paul uses the same term for manager when speaking about his apostleship. He states here that a person who has been entrusted with something must show himself to be trustworthy. This is a passage of scripture that had been misused appallingly. How often have I heard people say that God does not want us to be successful, he only asks us to be faithful. But that is *not* what this verse is saying. It is about stepping up to the mark and proving you were worthy of being trusted.

In the senior year in my school I was appointed as a prefect. My form master informed me that he had voted against that decision but he hoped that I would prove him wrong. For a year I did my best to do so, and seem to have satisfied him.

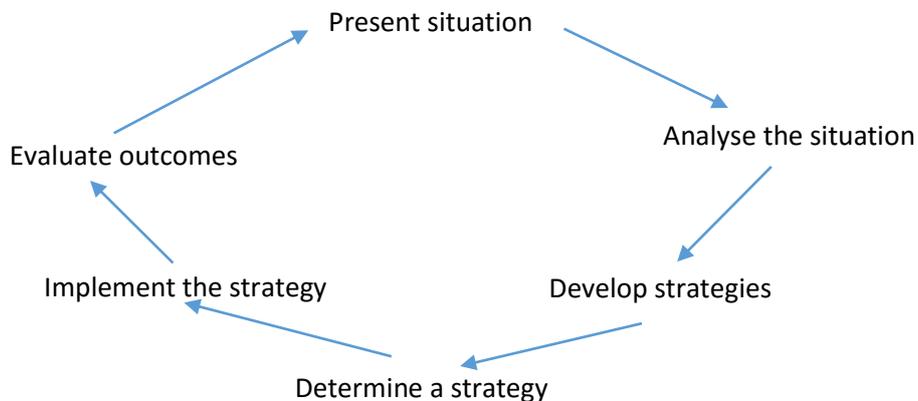
We need to reflect on all the good things that God, in his grace, has brought into our lives. With each blessing come the *responsibility* to use these experiences well. This includes whatever gifts and ministries God has given us, every moment of our lives and every opportunity he puts in our way. On two occasions in his letters, Paul speaks about making the most of every opportunity (KJV says, “redeeming the time”). The Greek word used is *kairos* which is about that opportune moment. But every breath we breath and every moment we live is a gift from God that we can either manage well or waste.

It is clear then that God has expectations of us. But all too often, when things are not going well we expect God to do something about it, when perhaps it is down to us. We need to put in the effort. Writing to Timothy, Paul urges him to be diligent – we might say apply yourself – to win God’s approval after being examined (2 Timothy 2: 16). In Timothy’s case it is with regard to the handling of God’s word, but the principle applies to every aspect of our lives.

Of course, it is not all down to us. We need to recognise our dependence upon God’s help. But while he is always faithful, we do not always apply ourselves as energetically and enthusiastically to getting our side right. *Since we will stand examined by God, could we do better?*

Take a moment to consider any aspect of the life of your church, or your personal life, where things could definitely be better. In one church I was called in to help I saw that membership (which also reflected on the size of the regular congregations) had steadily declined over a twenty-year period. Sometimes events take place that can explain why a sudden change in attendance might take place. But a consistent steady decline over a long period of years indicates a different kind of problem. I asked the members what might be an appropriate action if a similar situation existed in a business where sales and profits had steadily declined and where the Board of Directors did nothing about it. They suggested firing the members of the Board! In this particular church the existing members functioned as would a Board of Directors. Clearly, they needed to examine the cause and apply a remedy.

One useful tool for addressing such issues is sometimes called an organisational development model. In practical theology it is often referred to as a pastoral cycle. There are various versions. Here is one:



Step 1. Identify the present situation. In the example above the issue is that membership has been steadily declining over a period of several years.

Step 2. Analyse the situation. The first question is what would happen if there is no change? Clearly the church would become unsustainable. But then we needed to see if there were any causes we could identify. Was it a common experience? We discovered one other church having the same experience. But there were other churches not far away that were growing, so the problem did not seem to be contextual. We explored whether there had been any noticeable change in the local population, such as demographic changes? This seemed a partial explanation. We also explored whether any change internally might have contributed to the problem? We made a list of all the things that had changed in society over a 50-year period, and then listed what had changed within the church culture. There had been relatively little change. Further enquiry revealed a growing discontinuity between the church culture and the culture of local community.

Step 3. Develop Strategies. My time was limited with that particular situation so I am unable to share with you how they progressed. However, to get the most out of the process there are two key lessons to learn. The first is that where it is a church or organisational issue that is being reviewed, ensure that you engage as many people in the process as possible. We already know that in the example given there will be need for change. This will be more easily achieved if you take everyone with you through the process. So maximise and encourage participation. The second lesson, is to unlock imaginations. The solution to the problem might well be something not already considered. As you encourage some creative thinking, take care not to disparage any solution.

One DIY business found that they urgently needed to increase sales if they were to survive. All the staff got together for an idea storming session. During this one person suggested that they could scatter nails on the road outside so that passing vehicles would have to stop instead of rushing past. This might have been meant as a flippant remark but it became the solution to their problem. Their analysis stage had revealed that they were in a busy area but that was also a problem as most were in vehicles driving past. The owner approached the local bus company and pointed out that their row of shops did not have a bus stop. One was put in and business started to grow. Never fail to consider any suggestion – even if it seems ridiculous.

Here are four ‘ridiculous’ biblical solutions to problems. A boy has five small loaves and two small fish, while 5,000 people need to be fed (John 6:1-13). A young man has a sling and a river with smooth stones lies between him and a gigantic enemy (1Samuel 17). Four men sick with leprosy sit dying outside a city that is besieged (2Kings 7). A bottle of oil is the only resource available to a woman in serious financial crisis (2Kings 4: 1-7). Never discount anything in God’s economy.

Besides idea-storming engage everyone in doing what is often called SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. I prefer to use the word *constraints* rather than *threats*. Strengths and weaknesses refer to properties that belong to the object under review (in this case two churches). Opportunities and constraints are properties of the context. In the DIY example above, an abundance of nails would have been a strength. A handy bus route was an opportunity.

Another useful tool that the churches could have used was a community appraisal. With the right questionnaire they could have discovered something about the local demography, religious interests, church attendances, main interests within the community, and possibly something about services (other than religious ones) the church might be able to offer. They might also have discovered other resources within the community with which they could partner.

Once you have some idea of what you are seeking to achieve develop as many possible strategies as you can. At this stage you cannot have too many ideas.

Step 4. Determine a Strategy. Keep involving as many people as possible. Often there are multiple objectives. In the example of the two declining churches they might hope to grow their membership, share the good news of Jesus, lower their average age, reach families, reach teenagers, etc.

Draw a table in which each of the objectives are the columns. Use the various strategies suggested to form the rows. Then in each square where these cross place a number from 0 to 5 to indicate how successful each strategy might be in achieving the objective in the column. When you have completed the table, total each row. The row or rows with the highest scores will indicate the best strategies. But don't lock yourself into having to choose the high score. Take time to pray over them and seek God's guidance.

Step 5. Implementing the Strategy. Develop a clear plan. When will you start? Who will be involved? Have you considered all the ifs ands and buts? What resources will you need? What possible difficulties do you need to be prepared for? Do you need a launching event and publicity? These and perhaps other questions should be thoroughly discussed. Then give some time for earnest prayer – perhaps some dedicated prayer meetings.

Make sure that you get off to a good start and are comfortable that your strategy will be sustainable. Then get going.

Step 6. Evaluate the outcomes. The first step is to plan the date or dates when you will evaluate the outcomes. Ensure that the time interval is sensible. You will have determined the outcomes you hope your strategy will achieve. How does the actual outcome compare to your hope for estimate developed in step 4? If it has not been as effective as hoped spend time trying to understand why this is so. Have there been any unexpected outcomes you can celebrate?

Make sure that you share this stage in the process with as many people as possible.

You will now have a different situation to the one with which you started the process so you are ready to start the journey once again. This might mean merely fine-tuning or adding to what you achieved in the process. Or you might tackle a different situation. Whatever the outcome, don't stand still.

If the four sick men had sat still a city would have starved. If a young lad hadn't parted with his lunch 5,000 people would have gone hungry. If David hadn't started off towards Goliath, the people of Israel would have been in slavery. If the woman hadn't started pouring the oil her sons would have been imprisoned and she would have been in penury. Don't stand still.

In this paper I have tried to draw attention to the fact that our service for God is a partnership in which we need to engage heart mind and strength, using wisdom to ensure that we manage to do better. I have also based this on a theological principle drawn from scripture. But be careful not to think that whatever problems we seek to tackle, we can succeed by our own abilities. Offer the best we have and the best we can do to God, then soak it in prayer both before and during the whole programme. Without God we can do nothing. With God, all things are possible.

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