

A Process for Determining the Need for and Structure of Additional Staff in Congregations Considering Alternative Forms of Public Ministry

By Paul E. Kelm

The decision to add ministry staff is individual to each congregation. Needs and opportunities are unique to each church. The traditions, priorities, history, strengths, weaknesses and “personality” of each congregation create a unique context for the decision. The (senior) pastor’s approach to ministry, style of leadership, strengths, weaknesses and openness to change affect the decision. Probably only two factors can be generalized: the initial reaction of many members will be financial, and change will pose a threat to people who look to their church for a sense of stability.

The decision to add ministry staff, therefore, should be weighed in a larger context of self-study and strategic planning for the future. Until a congregation has a clear picture of current ministry, strengths and weaknesses, as well as a sense of mission and vision to direct where it wants to go and what it wants to do, adding staff will only be a reaction to a perceived problem. Good decisions take time, information, planning and—to the degree possible—consensus building.

Reasons For Adding Ministry Staff

A frequent reason for adding staff is simply that the pastor is too busy and needs help. That is certainly a valid reason and one that is increasingly apparent as the nature of parish ministry changes and expands, while demands on the pastor’s time and competence grow. The down side of this reason is that it is reactive, usually too late and without vision or planning for the future. The tendency is to create a position that “clones” the existing pastoral position. Without clear position descriptions, and depending on the personality and leadership style of the present pastor, a “cloned” second pastor can become a glorified vicar or a “rival.” More of the same ministry is accomplished and more discretionary time is provided the pastors, but without planning actual ministry and outreach won’t expand to the degree people anticipated.

A second and related reason for adding staff is particular and pressing need in one or more areas of the congregation’s ministry. Frequently, youth ministry and evangelism are identified as glaring weaknesses that can only be addressed by assigning ministry staff to these specific areas. Family ministry, counseling and administration will be identified as pressing needs by other congregations. Again, without careful analysis and planning, this trouble-shooting approach may face problems. A multi-hyphenated position description (e.g. Children’s Ministry—Youth Ministry—Counseling—Evangelism) diffuses energy and suggests a “gift mix” unlikely to exist in the person called. Adding the expectations of a pastor-generalist (good preacher, good teacher, good bedside manner, good people skills) further diffuses energy and attention. The new minister is expected to produce results, but without a timetable or realistic goals clearly defined. Unlike the first reason, which often leads to a “co-pastor” arrangement, this second reason usually results in an “assistant (or associate, which is the same thing sounding more impressive) minister” structure. Clear position descriptions and accountability lines, together with some growing by the senior pastor in administrative/managerial skills, are important.

Perhaps the best reason for adding staff is anticipatory. The congregation, in this case, recognizes the potential for an expanding ministry both in outreach to the community and in serving its own members. Ideally, the focus for additional staff is to deepen ministry that “equips the saints” for their volunteer ministry in the church and for their personal ministry as part of the universal priesthood of believers. “What could or should we be doing that we aren’t or can’t now?” is the question that focuses the nature and structure of new (and existing) staff ministers. A potential problem in this approach is the tendency to over-sell the idea that “this person will pay for himself,” especially when there is no long-range strategy within which such expectations are couched.

Sometimes additional ministry staff is considered to compensate for gifts and interests lacking in the

current pastor. “He’s a good preacher, but there’s no sense of planning and organization to the man” or “I love his Bible classes, but he seems so aloof or distant when you try to talk to him” are examples of this reason for new staffing. A variation on this theme is the aging and beloved long-term pastor for whom the congregation wants to provide assistance (and perhaps groom a successor). This approach requires clear and honest communication with the pastor, whose support of additional ministry staff is critical. A long tradition among Lutherans portrays an “effective” pastor as a solo-generalist. Team ministry matched to the ministers’ gifts is a major adjustment, emotionally and professionally, for most pastors.

A final reason for adding staff, one that doesn’t really stand alone, is a numerical formula. Harold Westing, in his book *The Multiple Staff Handbook*, compares ministry staff-to-membership ratios in protestant churches over three decades. In the 60’s the conventional wisdom suggested one full-time-equivalent minister for every 250-300 members. In the 70’s that dropped to one for every 175-200 worshippers. Ratios as low as one to 125-150 worshippers are touted in the ‘80s. Westing also points out that the management ideas in society and economics in the church will likely reverse the trend line and suggest more alternatives. Two appendices demonstrate how some denominations create a numerically formulized pattern as a starting point. Lyle Schaller, a prolific author writing from his experience as a church consultant and researcher, suggests that churches averaging 200 in worship need a full-time secretary and a part-time “program” minister (either directing volunteer programs of ministry or specializing in one program area) beyond the custodial and music staff—however these are provided. (We have traditionally employed unwritten staffing ratios in the Lutheran Elementary School for years.) No formula is adequate to the myriad combinations of part-time and full-time, ordained and non-ordained, paid and volunteer staffing possibilities a congregation can consider. Therefore, a consideration of alternatives is in place.

Alternatives to Consider

The first staff position to consider is not “ministerial.” A full-time administrative secretary (part-time initially, perhaps, but paid and with a clear position description) can free the pastor’s time for ministry with the Word and with people, while at the same time providing administrative order to the congregation. As Acts 6 demonstrates, typing and duplicating bulletins and newsletters, manning the phone, managing property and supplies, filing, record-keeping, correspondence and internal communication are “urgencies” that keep the pastor from the important. A secretary is cost-efficient staffing, though no answer to unmet needs in ministry program or pastoral care. The twin necessities are finding a competent and discreet administrative secretary (not just a typist or receptionist and, many suggest, not a member of the congregation) and “retraining” the pastor to work effectively with a secretary. Several books may help: *The Time Trap* by R. Alec Mackenzie (New York: Amacom, 1972), *The Organized Executive* by Stephanie Winston (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), *The Church Secretary’s Handbook* by Patricia M. Seraydarian (Wheaton, Il.: Tyndale, 1986), and *The Church Office Handbook* by Carol R. Shearn (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1986).

A full-time ordained pastor is the common consideration for a second staff position (a far better consideration for the second position in ministry staff than for the third such position, for reasons that may be gleaned from what follows). Typically, this man will be a ministry “generalist” by training and experience, like the first pastor. Frequently, he will be a seminary graduate without much parish experience or an older pastor who would appreciate a reduced level of stress. The advantages in calling a second pastor are many. He will have a level of acceptance accorded his training and “status.” His training provides flexibility in that he can be expected to do everything the senior pastor does. There is immediate “back up” in the event that the senior pastor is on vacation, is ill or takes a call. Disadvantages can become apparent when the two “peers” are placed into a competitive posture by their own human nature or that of members. Unless there are clear position descriptions, consensus mission/vision/philosophy of ministry and a working relationship that emphasizes effective ministry, some unproductive redundancy will lessen the impact of the position. Unless the gifts and temperament of the two men complement each other (and work is assigned according to gift and interest), vital areas of the congregation’s ministry will not be well served. When one is clearly a better preacher than the other, but pulpit time is shared equally, the congregation isn’t best served and a wedge may be driven between

the two men. Inherent in the training and mindset of a pastor-generalist is that he should be involved, hands on, in the full range of parish ministry. By definition, though not always in actuality, a generalist lacks specific training and experience for specialized ministry areas (youth ministry, evangelism, counseling, small-group ministries, etc.) If the position description targets specific areas of ministry and the congregation provides time and resources for the pastor to “grow” into a specialized area or two of ministry (and the pastor-generalist wants to focus his ministry in that way), the best of both worlds is the result.

A variation of the “second pastor” alternative is a part-time second pastor. He may be a semi-retired pastor or a bi-vocational pastor (earning part of his support elsewhere). One version of bi-vocational ministry has the second pastor working part-time in the secular world; and there are benefits for outreach and understanding in doing so. Another version of bi-vocational ministry has the second pastor serving two churches, whether as sole pastor of a small neighboring church or as staff in a specific area of ministry to another large church or the church body. Dividing time bi-vocationally is often accompanied by extra stress, especially when roles and expectations are not clearly defined. On the plus side, a bi-vocational or semi-retired pastor is usually in a staff (rather than co-pastor) role clearly. Lack of such tradition, models and pastors willing to work bi-vocationally (there is no surplus of seminary graduates driving bi-vocational ministry) suggests that this option be studied carefully before being implemented.

Non-ordained ministry staff is an appropriate alternative when the congregation has clearly defined areas of ministry to develop or augment and the position(s) is clearly related to the (senior) pastor’s ministry administratively. The possibilities for such positions range from administration of volunteer and program ministry to evangelism, counseling, visitation, youth, family or children’s ministries. Such a position may be part-time (semi-retired, bi-vocational, people supported by pension or disability income or home-makers placed in accord with Scripture) or full-time. Candidates for such a position may include: graduates of a synodical college (including teachers) whose gifts and interests match the position description and whose education and/or further training will prepare them for specialized ministry; members of the congregation who’ve demonstrated spiritual depth and maturity and whose experience coupled with additional training will qualify them for a specialized staff ministry; members of a sister congregation who meet the qualifications above as well as—certainly—those qualifications for ministry in the pastoral epistles.

While the synod develops appropriate curricula and processes to train people for staff ministry positions, congregations will be somewhat limited in their awareness of candidates and options for training. That some WELS churches have called members to staff ministry roles, then sought additional training for them, suggests this as a viable route, for the short term at least.

Rather than list the pros and cons of part-time and full-time staff ministers, of calling members of the congregation as opposed to people whose training and experience in ministry occurred outside the congregation, the encouragement to conduct such an objective weighing of alternatives is here given. The considerations range from the financial to the amount of time necessary to concentrate energy, from responsibility and accountability levels to the amount of impact a position may have, from “fit” in the congregation to objectivity and “fresh” thinking, from team-building in the staff to constituencies in the congregation. Careful consideration of the pros and cons *before* a specific candidate is considered is important. Frequently, however, God makes His man (or woman) available in contradiction of previous considerations.

A seldom considered alternative is *temporary* staff. When a particular need or problem can be addressed within a limited period of time or a particular person is available for a limited time, this temporary staffing alternative can be considered. Congregations situated near synodical schools or Lutheran high schools have part-time, temporary pastoral help available. Summer sabbaticals may provide a professor an opportunity to serve the congregation short-term. Seminary students have served summer vicarships. Gifted members may be able to dedicate a period of time to a particular need or opportunity in the congregation. The range of possibilities is extensive. Such temporary staffing may allow the pastor a leave of absence for continuing education or extensive planning in a “summer scenario.” A more extended, but temporary staff ministry can be addressed to developing an effective ministry of reclaiming inactive members or assimilating new members. It may be an 18-month project to develop a program of gospel outreach to the community. It could be a 12-month

project for training members in peer ministry. Again, the possibilities are endless. The *caveat* is that temporary staffing must either be aimed at a closed-ended, ad hoc issue or develop a volunteer structure for continuity. It only produces frustration when a highly qualified, but temporary staff person produces a marvelous program of ministry that dies when he leaves.

Perhaps the most obvious alternative to consider is volunteer help. Where the scope of ministry, need or opportunity is narrow and specific and volunteers are spiritually mature, trained and available, this may be the best alternative. The ideal in every congregation is to deploy as many spiritually mature and trained volunteer ministers as possible. A comprehensive curriculum entitled "Training Christians for Ministry" will be available through the synod's Board for Parish Services by 1991. However, the recruiting, training, placing, orienting, coordinating and supervising of volunteers in ministry is so critical and complex that unless there is adequate staff ministry (full-time and/or part-time) to assume these responsibilities, volunteer ministry seldom meets the needs and opportunities across the board and long-term.

Peter Drucker, the guru of management principles in the business world, says there are two questions for volunteers: "What may I expect from you?" and "For what may I hold you accountable?" Again, evaluation of pros and cons, possibilities and plans, should be undertaken before assuming that volunteers can take the place of staff. A better approach, normally, is to call people into staff ministry in order to enhance volunteer lay ministry.

Steps to Take

The decision-making process regarding additional staff will fit existing patterns in the congregation. What follows is a list of possible steps, from which a congregation can select those that are appropriate to its decision-making path.

A) Critical questions to answer:

What does our mission, from Scripture, suggest to us about our need for staff?

What areas of ministry here are under-developed? Can we address these areas adequately with existing staff?

What needs in the congregation are a growing source of concern, a barrier to further growth—spiritual, numerical, and fellowship growth? Can we address these needs without adding staff?

What opportunities for new ministries that can build up our own members and/or reach out to the unchurched in the community has God opened up for us now? Can we capitalize on these opportunities without adding staff?

What correlation, if any, can we anticipate between the addition of the staff member we're considering and...

reaching unchurched people with the gospel and adding new members;

reclaiming inactive members;

getting more members more deeply into God's Word;

equipping more members for personal Christian life and volunteer ministry in the congregation;

serving members whose spiritual and fellowship needs are currently not met well?

Can we, realistically, expect to cover at least half of this new staff person's salary and benefits in the first year? (Carl George, a widely respected church consultant, has suggested this guideline.)

What "vision" or long-range, strategic planning do we have, and how does this prospective staff person fit the vision?

What gifts and strengths of our (senior) pastor could be better utilized if more of his time were devoted to these areas?

What gifts and expertise are apparently missing in our current ministry staff and available volunteers?

What is our pastor's attitude toward staff ministry? Can we assist him in the skills of delegating, administering and team building if necessary?

B) A congregational self-analysis of some kind is essential to effective decision-making regarding additional staff.

An outside consultant may provide the most objective evaluation. The synod's Board for Parish Services can help with its two-year pilot program in church consulting. Whatever the results of that program, a full range of diagnostic instruments will be available, planning tools will be developed and district parish services coordinators will be better equipped to assist congregations in analyzing their ministry and ministry needs.

Northwestern Publishing House offers a complete self-study package to help congregations analyze their own ministry and identify what needs attention.

C) Long-range planning (including a vision for what the congregation, under God, wants to become) is a critical aspect of staffing decisions. Look for assistance in such a planning process from the synod's Board for Parish Services. Developing a clear mission statement with broad ownership and repeated emphasis is the first step toward strategic planning. A congregation needs to know who it is, what it exists to do and where it intends to go before shaping the ministry positions that will help take it toward its goals.

D) Evaluate the pastor's (and other staff members') workload and position description. Lyle Schaller suggests one creative approach. A set of cards is developed, one for each aspect of the pastor's work—including a thematic title and brief description. Categories can include such things as: Preaching, Teaching, Counseling, Administration, Leadership, Visiting the Sick, Evangelism, Visiting Inactive Members, Personal/Spiritual ritual Growth, District and Denominational Responsibilities, Equipping Volunteers for Ministry, etc. Cards are duplicated for each of the six to eight congregational leaders invited to participate. The question each addresses is "What should be the pastor's priorities?" Everyone has five to ten minutes to evaluate the cards, discard the four lowest priorities and arrange the remaining cards in priority order. In rotation each then "plays" his top card, explaining why he believes this to be the pastor's top priority. Discussion on differences occurs before continuing to the second round, the third, and so on. Finally, the "discards" are evaluated, to determine if there is consensus.

The exercise should help leaders appreciate the pastor's workload, identify areas for which assistance can be provided, and prioritize work. The pastor benefits from an understanding of the expectations and evaluations of his ministry.

E) Developing a position description is an important step in staffing decisions. Determine the specific tasks that the position is responsible for, directly and indirectly. Chart relationships, with clear lines of authority and accountability, reporting and coordinating. Identify the gifts, education, experience and temperament that are important to the position. Developing the position description is the final means of determining whether the position is full-time or part-time and what impact it will have on the total ministry of the church.

F) When the decision to add staff has been reached and the nature of the person to be called has been determined, there are still a host of issues to contemplate. Obviously, setting salary and benefits and obtaining a call list of candidates are primary concerns. But there are others. An orientation for the new minister, as well as additional training, should be planned. Helping the (senior) pastor develop a leadership style and administrative skills necessary to a changing ministry setting is vital. Building a team ministry is an ongoing process. And building consensus in the congregation for staff ministry deserves an entire "game plan."

Postscript

While each congregation is unique, no congregation needs to invent staff ministry from scratch. A valuable element in the decision-making process is to gather ideas, position descriptions and organizational charts from congregations which have faced similar decisions. Interviewing people from other congregations who were involved in the decision process, as well as senior pastors and staff members, can keep you from learning things the hard way.

Ultimately, we pray for God's guidance, confident that the Lord of the Church will grant wisdom and blessing.