

Evaluation in Church Ministry

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It's that time of the year again, and Pastor Chen has to conduct the annual performance review of the church staff who report to him. He wonders how he can do so in a manner that is true, objective, fair (just), and that will help the others grow and become more effective in their ministries as a result of the review. He also wonders whether any principles exist for evaluating the church's teaching. Is there any way of knowing for sure that the staff's students are learning to the extent that they are putting it into practice in their lives for the Lord?

Evaluation involves making a comparison. In evaluating a person's work, the comparison is between what he or she has done and a standard. In evaluating a class session, the comparison is between the outcome and the previously written objectives, which constitute the standard for comparison. In personnel evaluation the standard is either a conception of how people in that type of work typically perform (a "norm reference") or a specific, measurable, statement of what constitutes acceptable performance (a "criterion reference"). Both of these standards are used, though I prefer a criterion.¹

A third "standard" also exists, one that is unacceptable, because it is unreal and therefore unjust. I call it the "media standard." For example, it often occurs when church men and women evaluate the Director of Christian Education (DCE), and in particular his or her teaching. The media standard resembles that described by the late Robert Ebel.

There may be some teachers with a magic touch that can convert an uninterested, unwilling class into a group of eager learners. I myself have encountered such teachers only in movies or novels. Surely they are too rare to count on for solving the problems of motivation to learn, especially in some of the more difficult situations. For the most part, motivation to learn is an attitude a student has or lacks well before a particular course of instruction ever begins.²

Dr. Ebel was an outstanding researcher in the field of education, specializing in tests and measurement, including evaluation. What he said could be applied as well not only to DCEs but to other staff positions in the church. When it comes time to evaluate their work, great care must be exercised to be sure the comparisons are realistic, objective, accurate, just, and facilitate the staff persons' growth and development.

¹ See my essay, "Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers," on the Church Education page of my Web site at www.fromacorntoak12.com.

² Robert L. Ebel, "What Are Schools For?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1972, p. 7.

To be sure a grave mistake is not made, since such would be easy to do, would it not be best to avoid performance evaluations, especially since they are relatively new on the church scene from an historical perspective, and since it is difficult to quantify some aspects of the ministry? No. In fact for reasons soon to follow it is imperative that an evaluation is made at least once a year. Yet, to be realistic, objective, accurate, just, and helpful (for both the church and the professional) several understandings and principles should be employed in the evaluation.

Theological Basis

The impact of secular humanism and other theological and philosophical orientations has led many people to question the validity of evaluating the work of individuals. Some deplore such activity, because they think it fosters an elitism which has no place in a democracy. The opposite point has been persuasively presented elsewhere and need not be repeated here.³

Furthermore, a basic Biblical precept is the reality that all human beings are accountable to God and, since the Fall of Adam and Eve, need also to be accountable to others. As Alan Fleece has explained,

Before the Fall and consequent depravity of men, man was submitted to the authority of God. In this ideal state human relations were perfectly harmonious, and no institution of human authority was needed.

By the Fall all harmony in human relations was destroyed; sinful humanity now required that human authority be instituted for the regulation of human relationships. This authority was ordained of God for the benefit of his creatures and was instituted in three spheres of human relationships: the home, the church and the state.⁴

This reality is seen in the third chapter of Genesis. Immediately following the Fall, God instituted the system of accountability as one means he has provided to mitigate the effects of sin and to provide for order and wellbeing.

The apostle Paul wrote that “we are all sinful and have fallen short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23) and “I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15) Who of us doesn’t? It therefore follows that the accountability provided by evaluation is one means of

³ See Norman R. Phillips, *The Quest for Excellence: The Neo-Conservative Critique of Educational Mediocrity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1978), passim.

⁴ Quoted by Olan Hendrix in “Management Skills and Tools for the Local Church,” an address given at the National Leadership Seminar of the National Sunday School Association, October 22, 1971.

controlling (albeit not eliminating) sin. It's thus good for both the church and the staff member.

Philosophical Considerations

As has already been indicated, it is desirable to avoid using a democratic approach which attempts to obtain the approval of everyone in the church. The fact is that everyone's opinion, even within a local church, is not of equal value to accomplishing the church's goals.

Evaluation of a staff member is most effectively as well as efficiently accomplished by having him or her report to one person.⁵ It is that one person to whom he or she is accountable who should be responsible for evaluating his or her work. This does not mean the supervisor shouldn't listen to others or even occasionally inquire of others as to how the staff member is doing. However, the final decision as to how well he or she is functioning lies with the supervisor.

Nevertheless, if the ideal is not the actual case in a particular church, and the staff member reports to a committee, members of the committee can complete a questionnaire, containing questions such as those described below, and then communicate the results in a meeting with the staff person. The committee could also ask selected others (including especially those with whom he or she works closely and whose opinions are valued by the church leadership) to complete the instrument as well.

In considering the evaluation process, it is important to remember two vital aspects of church programming. First, the church leadership must not only be willing but actually encourage the staff member(s) to discontinue programs that no longer meet the needs for which they were originally designed. It is important to keep job descriptions flexible. The annual review time is a good opportunity to discuss whether any modifications in the position description should be made for the coming year.

⁵ Staff ministries sometimes involve significant dissension due to personality and other conflicts between the staff member and the senior pastor. Not all Christians are maturing in the sanctification process toward maturity in Christ as they should, and even those who are maturing still struggle with the residue of the old, sinful, nature. Some churches have an excellent situation in this regard concerning staff relationships, but many find considerable difficulty at this point. What is known with a high degree of confidence is that having a staff member relate to a committee does not resolve the conflicts that occur and can exacerbate them. Having the other staff person(s) report to the senior pastor or to an other administrator will not only provide for more efficient as well as effective functioning but even facilitate the outworking of our Lord's directive as to how to resolve conflicts in Matthew 18:15.

Second, the church must be willing to allow the staff member(s) to fail at some attempts in programming. Some programs that look good on paper, and in a committee meeting, don't produce. Only God is omniscient—and you haven't hired him—you report to him!

Theoretical Basis

Where does one begin in designing an evaluation? It is at this point helpful to draw upon some of the research in the field of evaluation in order to understand what is involved in the process.

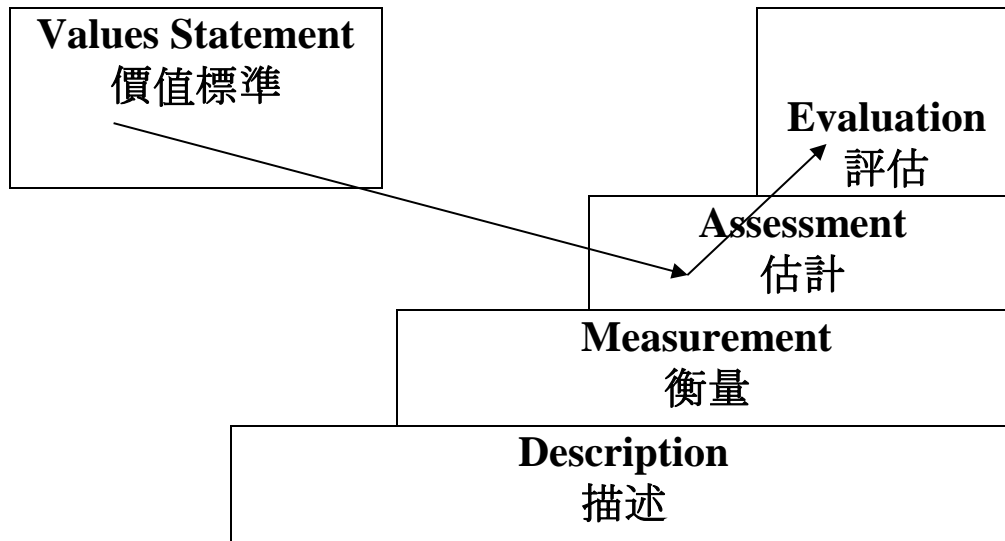
A useful model involves four steps. The first step in the evaluative process is a description of what is being evaluated in general terms. An illustration from an unrelated situation might be as follows: Peter is taller than Sam. At least Peter appears to be taller than Sam. Yet, is he really taller? And, if he is, so what? Is that good? Raising the latter question is an essential part of evaluation.

Even if it is readily observable that Peter is taller than Sam, to be fair in order to rule out any subjective bias, precision is desirable, even needed, thus measurement is required. Thereby, it is determined that Pete is 6'6" tall, and Sam is 5'6" tall. Hence, Pete is a foot taller than Sam. Is that good, of no consequence, or undesirable?

To obtain such information, an assessment (comparison) is required between the data so far obtained and a preset (in order to be fair) standard or **values** statement, as in the illustration below. The only way we can tell if it is better (an **evaluation**) that Pete is a foot taller than Sam is to compare this reality with the previously established values standard. Thus, if the present situation involves an evaluation for recruits for submarine duty, a check with the standard will show that Sam is more desirable since he is under six feet tall. Thus, the evaluation on that point is that Sam is acceptable. If, on the other hand, the recruitment was for the position of center on a basketball team, he would be less desirable on that point, and Pete would be the man for the job.

Now, regarding a church staff position, specifically Pastor Chen's DCE, Jim, the description should include the items in his job description, which are usually broad indications of what is desired in the areas of work assigned to him. Take them one at a time. For example, "The DCE will have oversight of the Family Night Program."

The question which next arises is, “What does Jim have to do for Pastor Chen to conclude that he is in fact having “oversight of the Family Night Program?” This



question calls for a listing of very specific actions that are observable and quantifiable indicators of acceptable performance in fulfilling the job requirement of having oversight of the Family Night Program. For example, “The DCE will obtain at least one teacher for each class.” It is thus readily apparent that Jim has or has not accomplished this task. It is quantifiable and can be subject to measurement.

When the measurement data are in place, assessment becomes possible. The assessment is accomplished by comparing the measurement findings to the previously established values standard. That conclusion results in a realistic, objective, accurate, just, and (depending on how its presented and received) helpful *evaluation*.⁶ What is the standard which will provide the opportunity for an assessment that will result in such an evaluation?

The church leadership must decide what constitutes an acceptable performance from the DCE. Must he or she accomplish everything in the performance statement exactly as written in order to be retained for another year or before he or she is given notice that he or she needs to improve or will have to leave? Or, may he or she be retained in

⁶ This model is from Ted Ward in a class presentation on “Methodology for Educational Research” in the course “Curriculum Research Seminar,” Michigan State University, April 12, 1976.

good standing if he or she accomplishes only 95% of the standards as written? Or 90%? Or 85%?

It must be reemphasized that the values standard must be established before the measurement data are examined in order for a just evaluation to occur, let alone one that is accurate and helpful. It is not fair to set a standard after the fact and make a judgment after looking at the performance. Doing so is tantamount to moving the goal posts after the game has started. Such a practice would allow too much room for what researchers call “observer bias,” the personal preferences all humans have which color their perceptions and lead them to conclusions that may or may not reflect reality.

To review and add to this vital point in evaluation: *If we only describe something we’re looking at, how do know whether or not it is good? Before we can tell if something we’re looking at is good and meets our needs, we have to have a standard of judgment, a values statement, to inform us as to what should be in this matter. To be fair such a statement must be made prior to beginning the evaluation process **and given to the people whose work is to be evaluated BEFORE their work begins.***

Some may object that such an approach is “too businesslike.” Yet this is the general process that people in the church, members and supervisor(s) alike, already use in thinking about their professional staff. Such thinking should be given guidance to arrive at accurate evaluations. Furthermore, it is God’s business at hand, and this awareness warrants the most careful use of the best business practices.

Instrument Design

The needs of churches vary significantly. Therefore, each church must write its own instruments based on its own job descriptions.⁷

Individual questionnaire items should be constructed as described in the preceding section. They should be refined to be as specific as required to satisfy the supervisor (or supervising committee).

At the same time the supervisor is filling out his instrument (questionnaire), the staff person should be invited to participate in his own performance review by completing

⁷ Since job descriptions vary almost as widely as the number of churches writing them, the author’s purpose in this chapter is to guide the development of an instrument to suit the reader’s needs rather than to reproduce an inappropriate one that has been used elsewhere. For example, a DCE in one congregation will have different responsibilities from a DCE in another congregation. The examples cited herein are typical.

the same instrument and by responding to the following four questions: "Please list your (a) strengths, (b) limitations, (c) successes, and (d) next year's objectives."

Involving the staff member in the evaluation establishes an element of fairness (where he or she senses an opportunity to be heard) and a learning experience for both sides. Certain matters exist of which the supervisor is neither aware nor understands due to one or more factors such as his or her being in another field (e.g., if the senior pastor is evaluating an educator and has little or no educational training him or herself) or having a limited amount of time to be aware of all significant details pertaining to the job of the one whose performance is being evaluated.

It will be observed that the emphasis in the instrument is upon performance, what the staff member has *done*, not what he or she *is*. What he or she is, personality matters, should have been included in the interview process and the checking of references at the time of hiring.

Since the overall functioning of the church program is most effectively and efficiently accomplished when the relationship between the senior pastor and the staff minister being reviewed is healthy, one or more questions pertaining to what the senior pastor *does* to help or hinder the staff minister are sometimes added. This addition is made by the senior pastor who has a strong ego, can accept corrective feedback, and who, therefore, usually has a good working relationship with others on the staff. A church should check to be sure this communication is taking place, either in such a manner or as part of the senior pastor's evaluation by the board to whom he or she is accountable.

The Evaluation Session

Educators distinguish two different types of evaluation. *Formative evaluation* is that process by which decisions are made throughout the progress of a program or other type of activity (in its development or formation) as to whether any changes should be made in order to accomplish the objectives which have been established.

Thus, when Jim does something wrong during the year, Pastor Chen will discuss it with him, who in all likelihood already knows it was wrong. Yet, Pastor Chen will want to give corrective feedback if Jim isn't aware of the situation, and this meeting should be held soon after the occurrence. Supervisors should meet with their staff members concerning negative matters the staff member has done as those things occur throughout the year. For many reasons such observations must not be held until the

year-end evaluation session and then dropped on him or her like a bomb. Such reasons include the fact that if too much time elapses it is harder, and sometimes not likely, to repair damage, which can also have ripple effects. Also personal relationship dynamics are improved when supervisor and staff members sense that everything is going well.

Then, once handled in April, for example, it is best that they be forgotten. (Cf. Ephesians 4:26) They only need to be brought up again if they continue in such a way as to hinder the function of the church, its programs, and relationships, and are counterproductive to the accomplishment of the staff member's or others established objectives.

It is also good for the supervisor to avoid nitpicking and micromanaging. Some things just aren't worth mentioning. Keep in mind that no one is perfect. As one wise senior pastor said, "Some things you just let roll off your back and overlook." Focus on the matters that are significant and work on them.

The evaluation about which most people think when they hear the word is referred to by educators as *summative evaluation*. It is the process by which the total of the performance of a program, activity, or person, is examined and conclusions are drawn concerning its, his, or her effectiveness in meeting the stated objectives. It's an evaluation of the sum of all that has been done.

Thus, pertaining to a church staff member, such an evaluation would be accomplished at the end of the calendar or fiscal year. At the same time he or she would learn of any commensurate changes in his or her compensation, which will be discussed later in this section.

Since any negative aspects of the staff member's performance have already been dealt with as they occurred throughout the year, the tone of the year-end evaluation session should be generally positive. This approach puts the staff member at ease, reduces his or her need to raise a defense, and enables him or her to be more open to suggestions and requests for the coming year.

The tone should be set by "speaking the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15) The supervisor must remember that he or she is speaking to one of God's children whom he loves and for whom Christ died.

The one being evaluated needs to be given support, especially respect. The best psychological studies on this subject show that respect is the major source of self-

esteem, especially for men.⁸ And the church wants a staff member with a strong sense of self-worth, for it has also been established that in order for a person to be able to reach out to others in love and caring he or she has to have a strong sense of self-love. (See especially Matthew 22:39.)

If it is concluded that the staff member's performance is acceptable, a raise in salary should be given. It should take into account any cost of living increases in the church's geographical location and the staff person's merit on the basis of his or her work performed during the past year in accord with the job description. As we read in God's Word, the worker deserves his or her wages. (1 Timothy 5:18) The question is only how much, and a just evaluation helps guide and defend that decision-making.

The salary differences made from year to year speak volumes to the staff members concerning their sense of accomplishment and how the church feels about their work. The staff will see the changes (or nonchanges) as a strong message to them either indicating a value placed upon their work, or a strong negative statement concerning their performance (which they will also interpret as a view of themselves in both cases).

When the Staff Member's Employment Should Be Terminated

The scope of this section must be limited to the termination of employment of individuals who fail to perform acceptably. An additional comment is in order, however, concerning two practices that are being done by some and discussed by others: namely, the practice of terminating staff members when the senior pastor leaves a church and allowing new senior pastors to unjustly cause the dismissal of staff members, even ones with whom they have disagreements but who are not hindering the accomplishment of the leader's objectives. In both cases, the practices of requiring staff members to resign when a senior pastor leaves, and allowing a new senior pastor to dismiss staff members without warrant, are unjust to the staff member(s) and their families and a detriment to the church. The congregation can benefit from the stability and resources long time staff members provide during the interim vacancy while a search is being undertaken for the new senior pastor as is testified by many churches that have retained their staff members. Moreover, with each additional year the staff person, as well as the new senior pastor, can accomplish more. A long-time staff member can uniquely provide a treasure trove of resources for a new senior pastor. Longer pastorates are more effective, for the senior pastor and for the staff members alike.

⁸ James C. Dobson, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 64 ff.

Yet when a staff member fails to perform the tasks that have been carefully and concretely specified in accord with the above procedures, he or she needs to receive corrective feedback as a part of his or her ongoing formative evaluation. If after the summative evaluation it is determined by the supervisor that he or she is not performing satisfactorily, or exhibits a reluctance to do so, the staff member must be notified that he or she is entering a probationary period.

He or she should be informed that during this period his or her performance will be carefully monitored by the supervisor. At the same time, all this information should be conveyed, orally and in writing, with the added message that the supervisor's job is to help the staff member succeed (yet not to be responsible for that success). In other words, the supervisor, as a *servant* leader (Matthew 20:26-28), is there to support, love, and help him or her to function in accord with the expectations that have been developed to indicate whether the work is being accomplished in accord with the job description.

If, after the probation period's summative evaluation has been concluded, it is determined that the staff person simply is not performing acceptably, and is unlikely to change, he or she should be asked to seek other employment for the good of the church and him or herself. He or she is likely also not enjoying his or her work; few people are who are not doing well.

Prior to informing the staff member of his or her dismissal, it is necessary to check established procedures of church policy both on the local level (who else in the church needs to be consulted and agree to the decision) and on the higher level of the denominational judicatories involved. For example, if the staff member is an ordained minister, he or she cannot be dismissed by a local church in some denominations without the approval of a judicatory beyond the local church council or board. Furthermore, that judicatory will likely have procedures which have to be followed as well. Refer also to the distinctions between a call and a contract.

When all preparatory work has been completed, and the supervisor has received any authority he or she needs to terminate the employment of the staff member who reports to him or her, a face-to-face meeting should be arranged. It should proceed according to the apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 4:15; the supervisor is to "speak the truth in love." A good way to begin is to ask the staff member how he or she feels things are going. With all the prior communication and help, he or she will likely

conclude and so state that it is not going well. This self-observation gives an entrée into the discussion that must follow. If the staff member does not make such a statement, and even if he or she does not agree that such is the case, the outcome will still remain the same.

In love and compassion the supervisor reviews with the staff member that this is the end of the probationary period, and an insufficient (or no) change has occurred in his or her performance. The supervisor then states that it is his or her desire the staff person seek employment elsewhere, beginning immediately, and reiterates that the decision has been made solely on the basis of inadequate performance in spite of corrective feedback and assistance to make the needed changes.

The staff member is then told that he or she will be given help in relocating and will be allowed time off to interview at other churches (or other places of work); counsel will be made available if the staff member wishes to identify his gifts and talents so as to make a more satisfactory match in another place of work; and if necessary his or her work load may be adjusted to accommodate the search for another position elsewhere. Depending on how long the staff member has served this congregation, a severance package is also offered if the term of service has been a long time and especially if it is expected that he or she will leave soon, whether or not another position has been found.

The staff member should be informed that he or she should plan to end his or her work by a specific date (e.g., one month from this date). In the business world it is common to ask a person who has been fired for his or her keys and to inform him or her to clean out his or her office that day. In the church that is usually not necessary or desirable, unless strong animosity that issues in counterproductive behavior occurs or if immoral or illegal behavior is involved. Between the time of this meeting and the time the staff member leaves, the supervisor should monitor the departing worker's progress carefully and lovingly, while still assuring him or herself and any other church leaders that the staff member is actively engaged and making headway in the process of relocating.

If a condition such as a hostile relationship, moral issue, or another problem necessitates immediate termination of employment, the staff member should be provided with a fair amount of counseling and financial support (including severance pay) for a reasonable period to enable him or her to find other employment. As with the worker who has lost his or her job as a result of inadequate performance, love and

compassion are also to be extended to the other members of his or her family who will also be greatly affected by this decision.

Prior to departure an exit interview with the staff member should occur. It is important for the supervisor and the church leadership to hear from the staff member who is leaving what his or her candid observations are about these developments, and that, too, should be done by speaking the truth in love. There are always two sides to every story.

A Word for the Departing Staff Member

Dismissal alone is painful. It's painful for you, your family, and those in the congregation with whom you've had a good, including supportive, relationship. Complications compound the pain. Nevertheless, keep in mind the following realities.

First, remember God's Word. Pray and think especially about Romans 8:28, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Keep in mind also James 1:17, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...." Each day look for all you can count as good; there you will see God's hand and his ever-abiding and all-sufficient presence and help." Be sure to thank him for those blessings. Neuroscience research has demonstrated that offering such gratitude transforms our human worldview, perspective, and thinking.

Second, in accord with and correlative to the first point, be aware that such moves typically are perceived as being good, turning out well. Sometimes that viewpoint occurs sooner and sometimes later, but expect that it will be so. That perspective will also be more attractive to those who interview you for your next position.

Third, don't be too hard on yourself. Don't assume the congregation is looking down on you for losing your job. They are sad and praying for you and your family's well-being. They understand how it is in the workplace, especially in these times. They know that when two or more sinners live and work together there will be conflict. That is true also in marriage and family relationships. What the church needs and wants most to see is that these matters are worked through in love. (John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 4:15)

Fourth, learn from the experience and use it to do better in your next place of service for the Lord. No human being is perfect. Be sure to pray for God's help to get you and your family through this challenging situation and for his help to make the changes you need to make. Pray also for the church and the others on the staff, including your supervisor.

Fifth, as you leave take the high road. Say nothing negative to anyone, even to your friends, about fellow staff members, your supervisor, congregation members, or anyone else. Teach as you leave by what you say and do, and by what you do not say and not do. If you also speak the truth in love and be above reproach, (1 Timothy 5:7) you'll be able to teach a powerful lesson for God's people about how to cope with, manage, and overcome difficult circumstances. The people will also remember and respect you for doing so.

Evaluating Teaching a Program, Class, or Other Learning Opportunity

The four steps of evaluation model presented in this essay are also the basis for evaluating curricula and programs including classes, courses, retreats, seminars, and other learning opportunities in the church. I have explained how to do so in other essays I've written such as, "Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers," "Teaching-Learning Methods for Ministry in the Church: Faith and Works—Principles for Church Leaders to Help People Glorify God," and "Teaching-Learning Methods in Christian Ministry: Using Level III Objectives," and other resources which are available on the Church Education page of my Web site at www.fromacorntoak12.com.

What would be produced by using the information in these essays would constitute most if not all of the values standard. Following these procedures church leaders will have solid evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching and other work seen in the lives of their students who are actually understanding and applying God's Word in their daily lives.

Regarding evaluation of programs and personnel, use Peter Ducker's principle of planned abandonment: dropping programs that are not producing. When your evaluation shows that a program is not accomplishing its objectives, allow and encourage your staff member in charge to replace it with another program designed to accomplish those objectives.

Communicate to the staff and the congregation that your church's approach to ministry is planned and part of the church's corporate culture; it is not a failure. No solely human being is omniscient. In order to do our best for the Lord and facilitate the accomplishment of his purposes, and for stewardship of time, it is wise to keep only those programs that are achieving their objectives. Such an approach builds congregational support and staff morale, enthusiasm, and commitment.

The above procedures can be used as part of a staff member's performance review. Data from the accomplishment of teaching methods involving the use of performance objectives that are suggested in these essays provide highly useful information for the values standard. Very significantly, they will offer demonstrable documentation that the staff person is accomplishing

his or her job description objectives, which is greatly encouraging to him or herself, and to his or her family, supervisor, and congregation.

Evaluation is necessary, and it need not be an evil to be endured. If it can be accomplished anywhere with the optimum results, that location is surely in the church. The preceding guidelines, bathed in prayer, have demonstrated their usefulness many times, and, followed carefully, will provide an evaluation that is realistic, objective, accurate, just, and helpful to all involved with the congregation and far beyond as well. Most importantly, it will facilitate the accomplishment of the Lord's purposes.

A shorter version of this essay was first published as a chapter entitled, "Performance Review and Evaluation," in *Team Ministry: A Handbook For Planning and Nurturing Multiple-Staff Ministry in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988).

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