

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

Pruning: How to Bury a Ministry Program & Communicate Change - Episode 280

How to Slim Down Your Ministry in 2023 (Part 3)

In the first two episodes of this series, we discussed the critical steps needed to kick off the pruning process and work towards health again. But once you've built consensus on your team and gained clarity about what to prune, how should pastors and church leaders appropriately "bury a ministry" and communicate the change?

In this episode, we'll talk through proven steps and strategies to move forward in the pruning process with consideration and courage.

How to Bury a Ministry Program

Once you've gone through the process to decide what ministries need to be pruned, consider these "end of life" steps to help people process pruning changes:

1. **Determination:** Check the pulse of the ministry or event. We walked through this process [in the last episode](#).
2. **Pronouncement:** Call it what it is. You have to communicate that the ministry or event is no longer producing fruit as it once did.
3. **Arrangements:** When someone passes away, the immediate family members make the arrangements. Where it's appropriate, invite those who were closest to the ministry or event to be a part of planning the "end of life" celebration.
4. **Funeral:** Private or Public? The team needs to decide what kind of funeral is needed. For example, a ministry that had high visibility in the church might require some sort of public statement, announcement, or even a "celebration of life." A behind the scenes or smaller ministry may be handled in a more private arrangement with those closest to it.
5. **Burial:** Write it in stone. Once the ministry is buried, it's written in stone, meaning, we aren't going back there. *(This is imperative because when a new strategy or new plan hits obstacles, the tendency/temptation for most churches is to go back to what "we used to do.")*

Regardless of how well a ministry funeral is planned, there will always be a level of grief involved. This is especially true if a ministry has been around for a lot of years and experienced a season of booming and high visibility. Here are some key things to remember when working through the pruning process:

- **Have Courage.** Stay committed to the hard decision.
- **Lose to Gain.** There will always be people who do not agree with the decision to bury a ministry. As a result, some people will threaten to leave the church. It is important to understand that in order to gain, you sometimes have to lose. Don't allow people to take you hostage. Stay true to God, stay true to the vision, and the rest will fall into place.
- **Celebrate Life.** It's a big mistake to treat a dead ministry like it was never important. Just as it's common to hear people share meaningful memories at a funeral to encourage and comfort the family who is grieving, it is important to celebrate the wins of yesterday of a former ministry and allow those who were involved to share stories.
- **Move Forward.** Once a ministry is buried, it's time to let it rest in peace—meaning it's time to move on and see what God has next. Determine which 'living' ministry can best use the resources from the one that was just buried.

Communicating Change

In our work throughout the years, we've helped many churches engage this process of pruning from start to finish. Here are some more successful strategies for pruning ministries and communicating the changes:

- **Define clear expectations for measuring success *before* the ministry starts.** When everyone is clear on what the win looks like from the beginning, it helps to remove the emotional impact of ending a ministry that may have been successful in the past.
- **Engage the key stakeholders early.** Who are the leaders and influencers most impacted by the change? Present the challenge to them early so that they can be involved in developing and then owning the solutions as well.
- **Don't delay before or after initiating the change.** The most common refrain from those who have done this before is that they should have acted sooner and not let the change process drag on too long.
- **Communicate openly, honestly, and with kindness.** Communications need to be sequenced with the right people at the right time. Communicate the "why" frequently.
- **Begin with one-on-one conversations before meeting with groups.** Give individuals the opportunity to identify key questions that need to be addressed and allow them to speak into the solutions. Ask them who is going to be most impacted by the change and then talk with those individuals, too.
- **Replace what you're ending with a better option.** What was the underlying value behind the ministry or event you are stopping? It's very possible that the value is still important to the ministry—it just needs to be revived with a new strategy or initiative.

- **The top leader must lead the process.** The senior/lead pastor has to be the primary leader any time significant change is involved. Leading change cannot be delegated.
- **Recognize that it's a stewardship matter.** Ask yourself, "What's the best stewardship of God's limited resources? With limited money, volunteers, space, leadership, staff, etc., what's the wisest investment to see the most life change?"
- **Take a break rather than canceling immediately.** Whether it's a Sunday evening service, the Awana program, or the annual outreach event, just push the "pause" button. Take a break to test-drive a new solution. You don't have to commit to canceling it forever until people have the opportunity to see what a better future looks like.
- **Be courageous.** Even the healthiest of changes can be difficult for anyone who is on the receiving end. Keep your focus on the bigger picture. Will more people be reached in the end? If so, take courage and act.

Final Thoughts

The more you practice pruning (while also test-driving new strategies to accomplish your mission as a church), the easier it will become over time. **You can do this!**

And if you need a coach or accountability partner to succeed in this "get healthy challenge," don't hesitate to [reach out to us](#).

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