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64 oz. Pastors in 8 oz. Churches

AUTHOR(S): CHARLES M STONE
 september/october 03 - counselor or coach?



Who hasn't faced it? Invigorated by the most recent church growth conference and with our minds brimming with great ideas, we return to our home turf with renewed passion. Visions for our churches dance like sugarplums in our heads. We imagine ourselves on a speaker platform one day recounting our successful "mini to mega" church growth story to awestruck pastors. So with our freshly polished "church-growth-swiss-army-knife," we jump into ministry with fresh vigor. And then it happens. We slam against the Wall—that formidable obstacle that resists our efforts to lift our ministry to new heights.

The Wall shows up in different ways. Chris, a successful church planter in Atlanta, discovered that the slow pace of his church hampered his goals. Mike, a pastor of a small church in the Midwest, found that deficient staff and financial resources hindered his plans. As a youth pastor in New York, Brian painfully discovered that a harsh church board stifled his efforts. I hit my Wall when our church made a programming decision that severely limited the use of my primary spiritual gift. Through this difficult experience, however, I learned three ways to navigate this space between my ability and the actual ministry opportunity.

After 14 years as a founding and senior pastor, my wife and I felt God nudge us to move into a new ministry. After a Web search, I discovered a large, growing church 2,000 miles from our home that sought a teaching pastor to begin a Christ-follower-focused service. I explored the position and realized the opportunity matched my gifts. In this church I could exercise my primary spiritual gift, preaching, to a larger audience. We accepted the position, resigned from our church, uprooted our kids, and dove into this new, "limitless" opportunity in California.

I began the service and envisioned huge crowds awed by my self-perceived superb exegesis and eloquent sermons. However, my bubble of pride soon popped. Two years later, we dropped the service. Attendance dwindled to the point where we could no longer justify investing our resources in the service. That hurt! Now I'd preach only once every six weeks after 16 years of preaching every week. This gap between my preaching ability and the present opportunity created a huge inner void.

As I began to process this disappointment, an image came to mind that described my feelings in concrete terms. I imagined a 64-ounce plastic milk jug full of water in one hand and an empty 8-ounce coffee cup in the other. I poured water into the cup, and after 8 ounces of water filled the cup I couldn't pour any more into it. Now I held a full cup and a mostly full jug. The cup represented my current ministry opportunity, and the jug represented my gifts, experience, and passion. The capacity of the cup (my current ministry setting) limited what I could pour into it from the jug (my personal abilities).

I found myself, a self-assessed 64-ounce pastor, in a church with only 8 ounces of opportunity!

As the disappointing reality sunk in, two questions confronted me. The "What happened?" question elicited an easy answer. At that time, the type of service I'd been hired for didn't fit into the church's priorities. The second question, "Now what?" posed my dilemma. Although I served in other capacities, the current circumstance severely limited the opportunity to exercise what I enjoyed most—preaching. During that time, however, God taught me three lessons that navigated me through this ability-opportunity gap.

Be Angry and Sin Not

Because I felt underused and stuck in an unfulfilling role, my anger festered into an emotional, poison-filled boil on my soul. I could deceive myself, pretend that all was well, and wait for things to change for the better. Or I could squarely face the disappointment and attempt to lessen its toxic effects. I chose the latter. My pen became the spiritual scalpel God used to lance this boil.

For many years I've practiced the spiritual discipline of journaling, but at first I only recorded "spiritual-sounding" insights in my journal. As my journaling has matured, however, I now often include conversations with God about my deepest inner struggles.

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Journaling kept me emotionally healthy during this time because it gave me a safe forum to express my gut feelings. As a result, I usually vented my pain onto paper rather than onto others. This process disentangled my unhealthy emotions from the appropriate ones and helped me keep them in perspective.

Journaling also took me one step beyond a simple expression of emotions. When I recorded these unhealthy feelings on paper, I could visualize their impact on others. For example, my anger created an inner critical spirit toward other staff. My disappointment turned into impatience with my family. When these emotions became concrete and I isolated the unhealthy responses, I could craft areas for focused prayer.

I found five specific areas of struggle that I paired with complementary Scriptures. I then began to pray daily for myself in these areas: wisdom to know how best to leverage my gifts given the current reality, patience with others, greater peace, healthy anger management, and less of a critical spirit. When I pinpointed those areas and committed to pray about them, the results amazed me. God drastically reduced my struggle with each of them. I still remain vigilant, but journaling keeps the unhealthy emotions from festering.

Rev. thoughts:

- Have you found yourself in a similar situation?
- Have you allowed bitterness to take root, or have you given it to God?
- What about journaling? Try it for a month and see how God uses it in your situation.
- Consider the five areas of struggle the author deals with or discover your own. Have you given them to God?

(Peripheral) Vision Matters

In a dusty gravel parking lot one fall day, my youngest daughter, Tiffany, showed me another important lesson as I taught her to drive. Three brain surgeries have impaired her peripheral vision in her left eye. She realizes that this loss will create a tough challenge as she learns to drive. As I thought about her limited vision, I realized I had narrowed my vision for ministry to the borders of church work. I so desperately wanted to impact others through my preaching gifts that I missed the ministry impact I made on others in nonchurch settings.

This reduced spiritual peripheral vision struck me one Wednesday evening in a conversation with my son. He had just spoken to 100 students at our church's youth group, and I had attended to videotape his message. When he walked into our living room later that evening, he asked me for feedback. I praised him and gave him a few pointers. As I voiced those suggestions, Josh encouraged me when he enthusiastically penciled them onto his message notes.

At that moment, God gently reminded me that my impact far surpassed the confines of a Sunday sermon. He let me see that the hours I spent in a folding chair as I watched my son play Little League Baseball, and the hot days we spent together as we fished from our small bass boat mattered to God and to my son. The healthy ministry practices I unconsciously modeled for him through the years created trust. The relationship of trust allowed him to listen to and heed my advice. I then realized that my preaching gift could impact those with whom I would never speak directly.

The Lord used that conversation to expand my spiritual peripheral vision. My son now often speaks more than I do, and God helped me see that my ministry impact sometimes flows not directly from my own mouth, but through the mouths of others I've influenced.

Rev. thoughts:

- Is your peripheral vision impaired, narrowing your vision to the borders of the church?
- What other impact have you had on people beyond your primary gifts or ministry?
- Are you investing in others in ways beyond your ministry responsibilities?

Jiminy Cricket was Wrong

Walt Disney's beloved animated movie, Pinocchio, became another tool God used to help me navigate the ability-opportunity gap. The movie features Jiminy Cricket's song, "When You Wish Upon a Star." Jiminy begins the first stanza with these words: "When you wish upon a star/ Makes no difference who you are/ Anything your heart desires/ Will come to you."

I must admit that Jiminy's worldview influenced mine. I always believed that Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart," implied that if I delighted in God, he would give me what I wanted—a large preaching ministry. However, I learned through a recent sermon that I had reversed the order in that psalm. The desires start with God, rather than with me. God himself initiates those correct desires after I delight in him. I now realize that sometimes those God-implanted desires don't line up with my grocery list of wants.

When I began to correct that distorted view, the parable of the sower and the seed brought a new realism to ministry. The parable pictures the different quantities of spiritual crops that grow after the gospel seed falls on good soil of the heart—30, 60, or even 100 times what was sown. I assumed that God designed me to become a hundredfold producer, instead of what I considered the less desirable thirty- or sixtyfold. I now realize that I oversized my abilities.

A common business phrase further refined my understanding. A few years ago the corporate world replaced the word "layoffs" with the word "downsizing." To further reduce the negative connotation of downsizing, corporations invented the euphemism, "rightsizing." The tension between my self-perceived ability and my current opportunity helped me realize God was rightsizing my ministry. As I let go of Jiminy Cricket theology, I became more comfortable with ministry rightsized for my current setting. I can now relax in God's plan for me at this church. I still want to use my preaching gift more often, but I can trust his wisdom in placing me here.

Rev. thoughts:

- Have you at times placed expectations on God regarding your ministry that are invalid?
- Are you seeking after God's desires for your life and your ministry?
- Are you living a life of rightsizing in your ministry so that you can allow God to bring the increase?

That's good. I like it.

My Wall still confronts me through my journaling, and God reminds me to "be angry and sin not." My daughter, Tiffany, continues to teach me the importance of spiritual peripheral vision. I occasionally hum Jiminy's song, but it no longer tinges my theology. I often pray for God to give me a few more ounces of ministry opportunity. But I now recognize that larger ministry

influence doesn't always bring Jesus the greatest pleasure. Robert McQuilkin testifies to that reality. He tells the story of how he resigned his post as president of Columbia Bible College to care for his wife, Muriel, who suffered from Alzheimer's (More Stories for the Heart, Multnomah). A student asked him one day if he missed being president. He responded that he never looked back. The question, however, did cause him to reflect, and he posed this question to God: "Father, I like this assignment, and I have no regrets. But if a coach puts a man on the bench, he must not want him in the game. You needn't tell me, of course, but I'd like to know—why didn't you keep me in the game?"

His answer came from a surprising source the next day. As he and Muriel took their daily walk hand-in-hand, he heard footsteps behind him, and the local derelict staggered by. As he passed them, he paused, looked them up and down, and then said, "Tha's good. I like 'at. Tha's real good. I likes it." He continued down the street mumbling to himself over and over, "Tha's good. I likes it." McQuilkin later wrote that he knew God spoke through that derelict. Even though many in the ministry world considered him "benched," God viewed his tender care for Muriel with great joy, and the words, "Tha's good. I likes it," assured him of God's pleasure.

This story reminded me that sometimes God will give a 64-ounce minister an 8-ounce ministry. From our perspective, it may not make sense. But I take comfort knowing that faithful service, no matter its size, will one day bring us incredible joy when we hear God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And tha's good enough for this newly converted 8-ounce pastor.

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