

I can't throw and catch at the same time

What kind of church doesn't have Sunday school? An honest one.

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When the New England Patriots lost Super Bowl 46 to the New York Giants in 2012, Gisele Bundchen, supermodel and wife of the Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, angrily assessed the reason for the loss: “My husband cannot [expletive] throw the ball and catch it at the same time.” Brady had thrown plenty, but several of his teammates dropped those passes, especially in the last quarter. And the Patriots lost.

I’ve found myself thinking about that quote quite a bit lately in my role as pastor and teacher of a small church in the middle of Maine. Old South, the congregation I serve, is blessed with very dedicated people who work hard for the church, and for its various ministries. But, the church is a small one and it can’t do everything.

How do we let go of those aspects of church life that we simply cannot do anymore?

At the top of Old South's list of problem areas: Sunday school. Christian education has been riddled with challenges for almost the entire time I've been with the church. We don't have adequate volunteers. And we don't have many children.

Letting go of the Sunday school, though, has proven to be a most difficult proposition. What kind of church doesn't have a Sunday school?

But, the reality is that we don't—at the moment— have anyone who has a sense of call about Sunday School. We have a few who are willing to help out, mostly because they have young grandchildren who attend Old South regularly. But, no one teaches Sunday school for the love of Sunday school. No one talks about Sunday school like a few people talk about the choir, or a couple of other people talk about the preservation of our physical plant, and so on. In our small church, there's no one with a call to teach, or to organize, Sunday school.

And, I can't do it, since Sunday school takes place during worship. I can't throw and catch at the same time.

Yet, many conversations about our dilemma end up with people turning to me, as if I possess the key to unlock this mystery, as if I can turn someone into that called person we are looking for. Still others lay before my feet their ideas and proposals for how to tackle our very unfortunate problem. All of those ideas involve additional work—sometimes considerable work—for me. My plate is already more than full.

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Instead of courageously admitting that we simply can't do it anymore, we limp along. It probably doesn't take much for visitors and newer families to get the message that Christian education is just not one of Old South's strengths.

Is it important, then, that we continue to have something, little as it is? Or, would it be better for us to admit that it's time to let it go?

I wish for the latter, but I find myself, time and time again, stuck with the former.

For the last few years, especially at this time of year, when the school year has begun, we get a few families who come to visit. And we enter once again into the

insanity of trying to organize Christian education. But with no one with a sense of call, it's plain that there's not much in the way of Sunday school. And, even though we usually manage to throw something together, none of those families ends up staying with us. They move on.

But we do not. Perhaps it's because we can't let go of the hope that maybe one of these days the effort will pay off. Or perhaps it's just another sign that we are in denial.

The whole situation signals, for me, an unsettling inability to come to grips with the reality that we are a small church, not a big church in disguise. Small churches can't do everything. But they can do a few things—and do them well. When small churches try to do everything, they unwittingly create not only unrealistic expectations, but also a sort of dangerous vacuum into which a lot of time and effort go and vanish—including my time and effort.

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I'm certainly aware of how painful and disillusioning it is to consider having no Sunday School at all. What sort of church doesn't have a Sunday School? For many, the answer is a dying church. For me, the answer is a more honest church, a church that, though it may not be quite ready to embrace its limitations, at least understands them. We ought to spend more time focused on what we do well, on those things to which we feel called, and find the courage to admit that we can't do everything. We can't throw and catch at the same time.

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