

STOP COMPETING WITH THE HARVEST

**Serving the Church, Serving the Kingdom,
and the Places We Call Competition**



I have been in more than a few conversations with pastors who are frustrated about all the things competing with Church. Little League. Soccer. Ballet. Golf. Pickleball. Travel. Hobbies. Community events. Weekend activities. There is no shortage of things competing for people's time anymore, especially on Sunday mornings.

I understand the frustration. But every time I hear these conversations, I am struck by what the language reveals.

When we describe these places and activities as competition, we reveal what we believe the destination is. We need people here. We need their attention here. We need their participation here. We need their time here.

But I have seen those same places very differently for a long time.

What the Church sometimes sees as competition, I see as the harvest.

Think about the golf foursome that meets every Saturday morning, the parents sitting beside each other at soccer practice three nights a week, the group that plays pickleball together, the runners training for a half marathon, the neighbors who gather around someone's pool, the friends who go fishing every weekend, the community theater cast rehearsing together for two months, the coworkers who meet after work, or the cycling group riding forty miles together every Saturday.

These aren't simply activities filling calendars. They are relational environments.

People spend hours together. They talk. They laugh. They complain. They celebrate. Eventually they tell stories. They talk about their marriages, children, careers, disappointments, fears, hopes, questions, and heartaches. Trust forms. Life happens.

And sometimes the Church looks at all of that and sees one thing: competition.

That is what I find so revealing.

We are looking at places filled with relationships and wishing our people spent less time there. We are trying to get Christians out of the very environments where they are naturally developing relationships with people who may never walk through the doors of a church.

The question isn't, *"How do we get our people back?"*

The question is, *"How well have we equipped them for where they already are?"*

Because what if some of the places we have been trying to get Christians out of so they can come to Church are the very places Jesus has been trying to send the Church into?

EQUIPPED FOR WHAT?

Paul writes in Ephesians 4 that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

I've heard that passage quoted countless times. But somewhere along the way, I think we made "the work of ministry" much smaller than Paul imagined.

In many churches, serving has become almost synonymous with volunteering inside the activities of the church.

Ask someone where they serve and the answers are familiar. The nursery. The worship team. Guest services. Student ministry. The parking team. Production. Small groups.

Those things matter. Caring for children matters. Welcoming strangers matters. Leading people in worship matters. Communities require people willing to serve one another.

The problem begins when our imagination of ministry becomes confined primarily to the things required to operate the gathered Church.

Equipping the saints becomes staffing the Church.

And those are not the same thing.

If most of our energy is spent recruiting Christians to operate ministries for other Christians, we need to ask whether our definition of "the work of ministry" has become too small.

Paul's vision is much larger. Leaders equip the saints. The saints do the work of ministry.

And where are the saints?

They are everywhere.

They are teachers and nurses, accountants and mechanics, engineers and servers, managers and artists. They are parents, neighbors, coaches, teammates, coworkers, golfers, runners, musicians, volunteers, and friends.

They are already embedded in places filled with people.

Your church is already everywhere.

The question is whether we have equipped them for where they already are.

SERVING THE CHURCH OR SERVING THE KINGDOM?

There is a distinction here that matters enormously.

Serving the Church and serving the Kingdom are not necessarily the same thing.

We often use those phrases as though they were interchangeable. Jesus announced the Kingdom. Paul described leaders equipping God's people for ministry. Yet much of what we call equipping prepares people primarily to participate in the organizational life of a local church.

We help people discover their gifts and then ask where we can use those gifts inside what we have built. We develop leaders and give them responsibility for one of our ministries. We encourage people to "get involved," which usually means becoming more involved with us.

The gravitational pull is inward.

And the larger the organization becomes, the stronger that gravity becomes because increasingly complex ministries require increasing numbers of people to sustain them. More programs require more volunteers. More services require more teams. More environments require more leaders.

Eventually, a tremendous amount of the available capacity of God's people is required simply to keep the machinery running.

That's accumulation.

But what if the purpose of gathering the Church was never accumulation?

What if it was release?

What if we gathered people so they could be equipped, and equipped them so they could be released into the places where Jesus had already positioned them?

That changes the question from "How do we get more of our people serving here?" to "How do we equip our people for the ministry Jesus has already placed around them?"

Those questions produce very different churches.

THE SOCCER FIELD LOOKS DIFFERENT NOW

Imagine discovering that twenty families from your church are involved in youth sports.

Through an accumulation lens, you see an attendance problem. Twenty families are increasingly unavailable on weekends.

Through a releasing lens, you see twenty families embedded in relational networks throughout your community.

You see hundreds of conversations waiting to happen. You see friendships already forming. You see parents sitting beside parents for hours. You see coaches investing in children. You see families sharing meals, hotel lobbies, carpools, practices, and long tournament weekends.

You see people experiencing marriages, divorces, job losses, promotions, diagnoses, celebrations, disappointments, questions, loneliness, and grief.

You see the plentiful harvest.

And this reaches far beyond children's sports.

The Christian spending Saturday morning with the same golf foursome has a harvest. The woman attending the same fitness class every week has a harvest. The man rehearsing with a community theater company has a harvest. The couple who regularly travels with the same group of friends has a harvest. The retiree playing pickleball three mornings a week has a harvest.

They don't need the Church to manufacture relationships for them.

The relationships already exist.

Now the role of the Church becomes incredibly exciting.

Instead of trying to pull people out of those environments so they can participate in our ministry, we equip them for the ministry already surrounding them.

We teach them to become curious about the people around them. We help them notice what others overlook. We teach them to express value without carrying an agenda. We help them recognize when trust is forming. We prepare them to recognize spiritual curiosity when it unexpectedly appears. We help them become attentive to what Jesus is already doing in someone's life.

Suddenly Ephesians 4 becomes much bigger than filling volunteer positions.

We are equipping saints for the work of ministry.

And the ministry is already waiting for them.

WHAT ARE WE MEASURING?

This raises an uncomfortable question about success.

Churches understandably measure attendance. How many came? How many served? How many joined a group? How many volunteered?

Those numbers tell us something. They don't tell us everything.

What if one of the primary measures of an equipping church wasn't how many people it mobilized inside its ministry, but how many people it equipped to recognize and join Jesus in the harvest where they already are?

Imagine asking different questions.

Where are our people already building relationships? Where do they spend their time? Who already trusts them? Where are they naturally encountering people who are curious, hurting, searching, celebrating, questioning, or simply trying to make sense of life? Where has Jesus already placed them?

Those questions turn our attention outward.

And suddenly the places we thought were stealing people from us begin looking remarkably different.

The soccer field. The ballet studio. The baseball diamond. The golf course. The pickleball court. The neighborhood pool. The workplace. The university. The hospital. The coffee shop. The gym. The community theater. The running club.

These aren't obstacles keeping people from ministry.

These are places where ministry is waiting to happen.

STOP COMPETING WITH THE HARVEST

The deepest problem with saying that Sunday morning is competing with soccer isn't scheduling.

It's imagination.

We have imagined ministry happening primarily where we gather. So when people aren't there, we assume they are somewhere else.

Jesus gives us another way to see.

The Kingdom is near.

The harvest is plentiful.

And the Church is already scattered throughout it. Our job isn't simply to bring everyone back. Our job is to equip them for where they have been sent. We gather to be equipped. We are equipped to be released. We are released into the harvest.

So the next time we find ourselves frustrated because Little League, soccer, golf, pickleball, travel, or something else seems to be competing with Church, we need to look again.

There are people in those places whom we may never meet.

But someone from our church already knows them. Someone already sits beside them. Someone already plays alongside them. Someone already shares meals with them. Someone already hears their stories. Someone already has their trust.

Someone is already there.

Stop trying to get them out of the harvest so they can come help us do ministry.

Stop competing with the harvest. Equip the Church for it.