

Half-efforts, low expectations? Be intentional!

A pastor may begin a new year choosing a word that he feels will typify his ministry or the needs of his congregation over the coming 12 months. A word like renewal, or discipleship or change.



Photo courtesy of Stan Person.

It might be a word intended to inspire people, or one held privately as a touchstone to achievement over the course of the year.

There is a word that I've noticed showing up more often in print or conversation in church circles that has a power of its own. It is one that pastors and church leaders might adopt for 2008 — it's the concept of intentionality.

Properly employed, intentionality, the focus of being intentional, has the power of changing a church, a church board, a ministry or agency board — a word that can propel them to new heights.

George Yancey wrote about it in *One Body, One Spirit* (IVP, 2003) in the context of developing multiracial congregations: "Such churches are the

result of intentional work," he notes. He uses other terms like proactive action, special efforts, going out of your way, not accepting the normal ways things are done, and demonstrating an attitude of intentionality.

There is at times much about churches and ministries that take a "good enough for church work" approach to achieving a plan of action or a ministry program.

Like a church with which I am familiar that wanted a prayer ministry but put little staff or strength or resolve behind it, leaving volunteers without support.

How many times has a church sought to put in place a new program but failed to give it a budget line item?

More often the church has been known to accept half-efforts for what should have been better staff work, or set lower expectations from volunteers and accepted a lesser quality outcome.

Doing a quality job or achieving a quality outcome aren't concepts that often appear in faith-based organizations. Mostly because we don't expect or demand it. But congregations and church agencies that are intentional in what they do and how they do it are more likely to succeed, no matter the definition of the term.

Author and pastor Mark Atteberry has written in *The 10 Dumbest Things Christians Do* (Thomas Nelson Books, 2006), "No individual, team, business or church that achieves remarkable success is ever just lucky... Excellence is intentional. It happens when people make a conscious choice to meet its requirements."

But many times we just "settle" for what we get, while praising the volunteer or member who delivered something but not really enough. High

praise for meager outcomes sounds hollow even for the volunteer.

Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research, likes intentionality too, using the word often in his new book, *Comeback Churches* (B&H Publishing, 2007). Asked about it, he told us:

"Comeback leaders described the necessity of being intentional throughout the study — in leadership, in outreach, in prayer, in mobilizing God's people for ministry, and in creating a particular mood of worship. Therefore, it's not enough to just work hard or work harder.

"Comeback leaders were intentional about the right things. They had a grasp of the Bible, people, and context in addition to being intentional about process and strategy. In addition, intentionality means being intentional about making changes. Comeback leaders did not hesitate to make changes as God revealed the need."

What can ministry do to excel, to avoid mediocrity, to be intentional about quality, performance, results and goals?

First, have standards. Know what it is you hope to achieve with any given program or initiative or new venture.

Second, walk alongside. Assign a staff member to every committee and council and chairman. Empower them to plan agendas, expectations, follow-ups and anticipated results.

Third, conduct training. Include the staff member and volunteer in aggressive and mandatory training about goals, processes, tools, expectations and outcomes.

The church is less successful today because it accepts mediocrity in much of what it does. Seek out excellence, do what it takes to make it happen, and be intentional.

Portions of this commentary have appeared in the newsletter *Boardwise*.