

Should a Program Continue? User Friendly Evaluation



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Late spring is a good time to take an objective look at congregational programs. Do current programs still meet the needs of the congregation? Is there a need to make changes? How can good programs become excellent? Even programs that are considered fundamental to church life (e.g. Sunday School) can benefit from a user friendly program evaluation.

Who Should Do the Evaluating?

Invite the session of the church to choose a small group of people who will evaluate congregational programs. These people should be chosen for their ability to be fair, as objective as possible and compassionate.

The evaluation process will need to be done in three stages.

- The evaluation team gathers to decide what programs can be evaluated. In order to avoid anxiety (why are they evaluating my program?), decide on a schedule for evaluating. If all programs cannot be evaluated this year, post a schedule to include all congregational programs over a two-year period. The number of program evaluations may depend on the time available and the volume of programs in the congregation. At the first meeting, the evaluation team will also do steps 1-4.
- The evaluation team interviews the stakeholders (step 5) and records their findings.
- The team gathers for a third time and completes steps 6-10.

Each time the evaluation team meets, members should list notes on chart paper where all can see.

Evaluation Steps

1. Ask evaluators to list their hidden assumptions or biases.

It is important to be aware of biases because we all have them. Rather than pretend that the evaluators are totally objective, ask them, individually, to list hidden notions. Use questions like these: What are my assumptions about this program? Am I likely to see this program differently from others in the evaluating group? In what ways? Would the value I place on this program be consistent with others?

After the biases have been individually recorded, engage in a brief group discussion about the hidden assumptions.

2. Describe the background of the program.

How did the program begin in the congregation? Was it recommended by one person? The minister? Lay people? Who was the original audience? Is the program perceived as more effective than when it started? Has it lost or gained energy and momentum?

3. Describe the philosophy of the program.

Is the program philosophy consistent with your church's personality? Does the program complement the mission goals of the congregation? What are the key concepts of the program? Key concepts might be: nurture, evangelism, mentoring, and so on.

4. List the stakeholders.

The stakeholders are all people who have a vested interest in the program. The opinions of some stakeholders may be given more consideration than others. For instance, an after-school tutoring program may have as primary stakeholders the children who attend the program, their parents, teachers, and tutors who volunteer in the program. Secondary stakeholders may be the church janitor, the convenor of the property committee, the session and the outreach committee.

5. Interview stakeholders.

Elicit honest answers. When asked for an opinion on a program, people may tend to give a pleasing answer. You can elicit honest answers by:

- Providing a relaxed atmosphere
- Allowing time for the interviewer and interviewee to get acquainted
- Assuring the interviewed person of confidentiality
- Formulating the same set of questions to be asked for all groups
- Letting the interviewed people know exactly how you intend to use the information you receive.

6. List the value or worth of the program.

The value or worth of the program may be described like this: 'This program reminds the community that we care about young children.' Or, 'this program provides a service that is not offered by any other Presbyterian church in the presbytery.'

7. Decide if the program advances the unique character of the congregation.

Every congregation has something that makes it unique within its community. Does the program advance this unique character?

8. Define the tradeoffs for being involved in this program.

The number of people available to do specific ministry is limited. Being involved in one ministry also means that there is not time and energy to be involved in another. When the program was chosen was there discussion about other programs that could be offered in place of this one? Try to decide if this was the best choice.

9. List the side effects of the program.

Some of the side effects may be negative (more work for the over-worked janitor) or they may be positive (an article about your tutoring program brought three new families to the church.)

10. Decide if the program should continue.

Look over the chart paper notes. If the recommendation to keep the program is yes, list ways that the program can be improved, strengthened and supported. If the answer is no, decide on a dignified and sensitive way to bring it to a conclusion. A plaque outlining the program leaders, a worship service of celebration or formal letters or speeches of recognition might constitute appropriate endings.

*Adapted for The Presbyterian Church in Canada by Dorothy Henderon.
Based on principles developed by Jeff Woods, Alban Institute.*