

Group work (1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

Sometimes ministry functions like a group project at school.

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I'm not sure when, but at some point during my educational journey I determined that group projects were not for me. I don't recall any one particular horror story, just a general pattern. No matter how the group is created, no matter how the members are divided, no matter the instructions are given or the workload determined, a few people tend to do the bulk of the work—and then a single grade is awarded to the entire group. As a young person I couldn't figure out how such a system could be just. The truth was that, as a person with an at times unhealthy need to pull my weight and others weight too, group projects often left me drained, frustrated, and resentful.

As an adult, there have been a few situations when I realized midway through that my mind and heart were experiencing the situation as a group project I was forced to participate in. The pandemic, probably the worst group project ever, was one of them. The political season at times felt like another. But the group project that has been most difficult to identify and acknowledge as such has been the work of the church, otherwise known as ministry.

It may seem like an odd comparison at first, but so much of what we are engaged in as ministry is the coming together of groups of people that—no matter where or how the group is created or what instructions are given—tend to function such that a few people do the bulk of the work. I guess I shouldn't be surprised; even Jesus

acknowledged that the labor to laborer ratio was unbalanced (Matt. 9:37). But forewarned or not, the reality of the matter and the wear and tear on one's soul—on my soul—leaves an imprint that is difficult to shake.

The underlying issue is that ministry has felt like the giving of myself, the sharing of my gifts, and the commitment to the mission and people have been to my detriment. Burnout has felt like the inevitable outcome. And yet I have also been able to recognize that one of the challenges with such an outlook is that, along with firming up spiritual disciplines, I require a perspective adjustment. Ministry was never designed to be transactional.

We make investments in people, we support the work we believe we have been called to—whether we see the immediate benefit or direct outcome or not. Often we do this whether or not we have the partnership and support that are reasonable to expect. But this also requires an adjustment in the expectation that the work is for us to bear alone, regardless of the cost. No matter how gifted a person or how important an assignment, Paul reminds me that every gift given by the Spirit was given for the common good, for the benefit of the entire community of which we are also a part.

The call of ministry is one grounded in mutual care, reciprocity, and investment. For those like me who have had an overblown sense of responsibility for the work, it is a great reminder that if we find ourselves in spaces where we believe and work as if it is all up to us, then our lenses and intention need some clarifying and correction. Hopefully this can move us to develop the kinds of boundaries and practices that can help us do the work and be the kinds of workers who demonstrate care of neighbor and self alike.

These practices may not seem common, but they are helpful in learning how to serve faithfully and for the long term—whether we are fans of group projects or not.