



# Leadership in Scarcity

BY MARK MILLER-MCLEMORE

## Where I Come From

**M**y church was located across from an abandoned strip mall and the local “No-Tell Motel,” where drugs and sex were peddled. We worked closely with homeless people through a shelter program in our building. It was a place of great contrasts: a couple miles in one direction was a wealthy suburb, a couple miles in the other was the poorest town in the nation. Area colleagues included pastors of large, affluent churches, as well as pastors of dying mainline congregations and poor ethnic churches. My congregants mingled and compared themselves with friends and neighbors from all around.

The situation in the church mirrored that around us. It had once been sizeable, strong, and thriving, with a great choir and a beautiful sanctuary. When I arrived, community and congregational needs were plentiful, but resources hard to locate. In church, we couldn't find enough people for all the ecclesiastical machinery or enough dollars for the budget. It was a balancing act between the costs of the building and the opportunities for ministry. I think we were extremely creative and competent, and the quality of congregational life was excellent. But we remained small, we felt poor, and we wondered how long we could hang on.

## Ministry in a Time of Decline

When I speak with mainline ministers, we wonder if our entire career has been spent in a time of institutional scarcity and decline.

The externals include decreasing numbers, locations away from the growing part of town, buildings that are too old and too large, squeezing more from less, leaning on resources from the past to support the present, the loss of cultural influence, the move from the political center to the margins, and the decline in status of the ministry as a vocation. More mainline churches get attention for conflict and scandal than for doing good.

There is internal impact, too: when visitors come to our churches, they expect a different agenda than ours. When our members consider ecclesiastical "success," they worry that we are somehow doing something wrong. Have we fallen from divine favor?

And now comes a massive economic downturn to accentuate what is already hard. Very tough ministry situations have been made all the tougher. If there is "a time for every season under heaven," then this is a time for "Leadership in Scarcity," indeed.

Leadership and faithful, creative ministry happens in many contexts, often small and poor and not so well or widely known. I have the greatest respect for my colleagues in small or struggling or out of the way churches, and they are doing some of the most innovative,

effective ministry possible, with scarcity a constant fact of life. It is a challenge worth considering more carefully.

Yet good leadership is often confused with what happens in large, prosperous, trendy churches noticed by the media. Most of the literature of congregational leadership ignores the quality and amount of resources available, especially as institutions seek to transform and renew. Clearly, leadership in a situation of abundance and growth is very different than leadership in a situation of scarcity and decrease. People act differently. Bertold Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* says it well:

*For even saintly folk will act like sinners  
Unless they have their customary dinners.*

What can we say about leadership in the context of scarcity? Let me try to describe some challenges and gifts and offer a few proposals.

## The Challenges of Scarcity

**1. The received heritage is ambiguous.** It can be a blessing to inherit grand buildings and endowments or a communal story of faithful life together. At other times, the past is overwhelming. We all know of churches struggling with expensive, inefficient, oversized facilities and the demands of long supported but obsolete programs. Less obvious, but perhaps as wearing emotionally, are the unmet internal expectations of restoring a past "golden age" when things were grand.

**2. External expectations are often frustrating.** From outside, people expect more services than the church or the pastor can give. When the resources aren't there, even answering the requests with a kindly-expressed "no" or "we can't" is wearing. How many times can we tell people we don't have the funds to help, without it costing other ministry and hardening our hearts?

**3. The reality of limitations means that many good ideas cannot be pursued.** We make progress, but cannot sustain it. A church had numerous gardeners and a good location, and they knew that local food pantries rarely had fresh vegetables for those in

need. They tore up grass and started an organic vegetable garden in their front lawn, calling it the "Garden of Eatin'." A more distant goal was to find a way to begin an urban garden with neighbors as partners. But their limited energy ran out. As the pastor said, "What we did was great. What we hoped to do, we fell short."

**4. The pace of change is different** from situations where resources are more adequate. When we are poor, we often seem to take two steps forward, followed by two or three steps back. Leaders in poor churches experience those same patterns. As the earthquake in Haiti made clear, disruptions are simply more disruptive when the margins are thinner or nonexistent. Every crisis is a huge setback. A colleague in a local front-line relief agency was asked once why his clients had so much trouble getting out of poverty. He replied: "It's kind of hard to start a retirement account when increases in the electric bill force you to decide between groceries or heat."

With scarce resources, everything takes longer. When fewer people must cope with greater needs and demands, momentum and time is lost simply in transitioning back and forth among tasks. Institutions with a greater margin of resources have what we call "capacity"—the ability to respond more quickly and adequately. It is no small accomplishment simply to sustain a congregation in scarcity.

**5. Scarcity impacts staff.** Since institutions in scarcity can't pay as well or offer good (or any) benefits, they tend to experience more staff turnover, even with committed workers. Honest assessments of the future can be demoralizing in their uncertainty. Turnover leads to less consistency and stability, more time spent in training and less in moving forward. In church work, there is a heavy cost in lost relationships.

**6. Urgent tasks force us to "work beneath our station."** Pastors joke about turning off the lights and locking the doors after church meetings. In scarcity situations, the everyday tasks

When I speak with mainline ministers, we wonder if our entire career has been spent in a time of institutional scarcity and decline.

of ministry are often below what we grandly envisioned when we first felt a “higher calling.” An older minister I knew told me (decades ago), “Never learn to use the mimeo.” But the reliance on support staff he implied isn’t possible when scarcity takes away all the support staff.

**7. Multiple demands require incredible and sustained focus.** Most pastors know the experience of having to manage three funerals, a youth retreat, and Sunday services in a hard week. In situations of scarcity, that level of demand is more the norm than the exception. I found the practice of *triage* a helpful reference point for decision-making about priorities.

There are two usages and meanings to *triage*. The first has to do with helping those who are in gravest need—a “preferential option for the poor,” put in medical terms. The second usage also is triage, as practiced on the battlefield: attending first to those with the greatest chance to survive, even when it means leaving those with the gravest needs to die unintended.

Ministers in scarcity settings usually feel more like they are on the battlefield. They experience the immense and repeated strain of saying “No” to many, many good things in order to say “Yes” to the one essential thing. We let things wither in order to give time to what may make the most difference for long term good. “The good is the enemy of the best.”

Resource-rich thinking imagines that we can have it all. Original sin says otherwise. Every choice has a cost that probably cannot be understood by anyone outside your situation.

The strain of constant no-saying is one of the most difficult personal aspects of leadership in scarcity. From time to time, we should not blame ourselves if we give in to that other meaning of triage and attend instead to the gravest need, no matter the chances of success or failure.

**8. Prevailing cultural perceptions of success, mixed with healthy self-doubt, eat at our sense that we are doing good ministry.** We live in a culture of success. Despite a message about the crucified Jesus, the church clearly falls prey. Situations of scarcity do not seem successful.

Without recognition, understanding, and support, leaders in poverty situations risk drying up. But the victories are small and short-lived because the next demand already needs all your attention. And recognition and understanding and support are hard to find.

It is hard not to feel undervalued or resentful next to those who are on a more comfortable path. Sabbaticals, cruise vacations, and better colleges for the kids may be out of reach if you choose a path of scarcity. Are you just not as good? Not working hard enough? What’s wrong? How have you failed?

**9. These factors lead to early morning panics.** Despite our trust in God, we still wake up in the depths of the night with a trainload of worries roaring through our heads. Will the church make it? Will I lose my job? What will happen to my family? Will I need to move? What about my career? Will I need to leave ministry? It’s hard to get a job anywhere now. Anxiety is real and powerful. These night demons cannot be avoided and sometimes they cannot even be resisted. What can you do to limit their effect? How can you keep them from overwhelming you?

## The Gifts of Scarcity

There are some bright sides.

**1. Crisis can be clarifying.** In scarcity, there is little time for distraction, trivia, and foolishness. It’s less likely we will argue about the color of the carpet—unless we take out our anxiety through fighting each other. If we can avoid the trap of Massah and Meribah, the demand for clarity of mission and focused action can keep us close to the heart of what is important in ministry.

**2. Scarcity makes it harder to live in denial.** Scarcity calls for honest assessments. Truth telling about needs and resources is the beginning of wisdom. Unfortunately, many forces work against honesty, especially in American churches, where the expectation is to accent positives and “be nice.” Scarcity can lead us better to speak the truth in love. The wise leader learns to check the temperature about how much hard truth can be tolerated. But truth telling can be easier when it is hard to avoid.

**3. Scarcity forces us away from sloppiness and laziness.** With scarce resources, everything we do must be

Resource-rich thinking imagines that we can have it all. Original sin says otherwise.

considered in relation to multiple values to our mission. Can a proposal meet two or more needed purposes? We could call this economy or effectiveness, or we could call it intense stewardship.

**4. The demands are many and varied, and they call upon us to use our gifts more fully.** Ministry in scarcity can lead us to walk the walk, as opposed to merely talking the talk. It places a premium on imagination, inspiration, and creativity—interior resources without material cost that are often fostered by prayer, frequent contact with Scripture, worship, and Christian community. Ministry in scarcity calls forth the gift of persistence and its related virtue, hope.

**5. The triage we are forced to practice is a form of discernment.** Discernment is a way to wisdom. Wisdom is a spiritual gift.

**6. Dealing with scarcity brings us closer to the front lines of being human.** Most people on this planet live close to the edge. While it may be true that “rich people have problems, too,” dealing with life and death issues and seeing our positive impact is intensely satisfying.

**7. More, vulnerability is closer to our real situation before God.** In the face of scarcity, we more closely face our own human needs. When we acknowledge our needs, it opens the way for grace and love to flow forth, and the church can be the church in powerful ways. But such vulnerability goes against our myth of competence and mastery and planning and success. It isn't easy for any of us to let the Spirit flow.

## Proposals for Leading in Scarcity

There are implications from these challenges and gifts for ministry.

**1. In situations of scarce resources, the most precious communal resource besides faith is trust.** *Trust is the currency of leadership.* Its importance is magnified with scarcity, since everyone is anxious about the future,

and with good reason. There will be losses. Trust is the first quality leaders must nurture, before all else, for it opens or closes the door for everyone to accept the losses that are needed for the whole to move ahead. It creates confidence that those leading the process will make it trustworthy and fair toward all. Trust in the church is the antidote to anxiety and the oil of edification.

How to build trust? Leaders need to keep that question always before them. Three qualities in a leader promote a sense of *trust-worthiness*.

**Competence.** Do the best you can with the main tasks at hand. Wise pastors call this “paying the rent.” Leaders need to meet the expectations of their followers well enough so that followers feel they can count on their leaders to do what they say.

**Honesty is a big deal.** “Do no harm:” the minimum is the professional obligation that we not lie or dissemble. We also seek appropriate disclosiveness and transparency. It is demanding to be honest, especially when we feel vulnerable. But God usually does not work as well when leaders and churches practice self-deception.

**Love.** Though situations may require change, start with appreciation, not suspicion. Give the gift of attention. Listen with care. Try to understand.

**2. Creativity is free. Experiment!** Be opportunistic when you get the chance. Evaluate faithfully and let people know: what worked? What didn't? Why? But don't be afraid to try.

Cultivate a sense of humor about that which won't change. Our small

church frequently read articles about what was happening in the world of other churches. I recall we once read about the parking ministry at a nearby megachurch—how they wore orange vests and used walkie-talkies to communicate with a traffic spotter on the roof about where to send the thousand cars. This was so utterly foreign to our small church in a poverty location that we laughed out loud. It became a standing “family joke” that we would give a “Holy Orange Vest” to one of our faithful do-it-all deacons and send him up on the roof.

**3. Celebrate the victories,** even the little or the everyday ones. Mark the time with appreciation and the presence of God in the work of people. They may seem trivial, but in long haul change, they may be all you will have.

**4. As in all ministry, keeping your balance is crucial.** Work must share time with play and family and spirit and whatever. Two important reminders: Find and nurture colleague relationships—they let you be yourself outside of the demands of leadership but within a context of those who “get it.” And stay in touch with God. All of us are different here. But neglect of the Holy One is deadly.

**5. Persist.** Long-term ministries are necessary for deep change. But leave if you are dying. “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long” has sometimes been our theme scripture. There are other places and ways to do ministry than in scarcity. If it isn't your call, you don't need to do it. ♦

Ministers in scarcity settings usually feel more like they are on the battlefield. They experience the immense and repeated strain of saying “No” to many, many good things in order to say “Yes” to the one essential thing.