

## Items to Consider When Adding Programs to Your Christian Ministry

After six years of being an intentional catalyst for change in my position as principal of Immanuel Lutheran School in Hamilton, Ohio, it had now become time to explore the option of adding a 9th grade to our ministry extensions of church, K-8 school, preschool, and childcare. To identify and order my steps, I sought out the unique perspectives and concerns of three influential groups; stakeholders, the market, and legal.

### **Stakeholders**

As I saw it, the stakeholder group was composed of current students, families and donors. In Immanuel's case, the donors are primarily the tithing congregation who also protect their stake by electing members to the board of education and church council. Although these groups are on opposite ends of the user spectrum, they shared a common focus centered around quality, compliance, and reputation.

Stakeholder questions include "Does this align with our mission/vision?", "What are the possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of moving forward?", "At what point will it be profitable?", "Do we have the space to provide the students and teacher with what they need?", "Will students be prepared for the next step?", "How will this impact my child?", and "Will we be prepared and equipped to do this well?".

### **The Market**

You can have satisfied the concerns of your stakeholders, but if you have not met the demands of the market, success will elude you. Ministries whose primary work is eternal things, must still operate within the mechanisms of this world and the local economy. A standard business plan will walk you through some basic essential questions to ponder. We were able to do one better and hear from the source since we had direct access to our potential customers. Our K-8 parents were invited to a focus-group style meeting where we learned what need would be met if we offered a 9th grade. We were now informed as we set out to design our instructional model, develop extra curriculars, structure a tuition schedule, and construct our narrative for internal marketing.

Questions pertaining to the market include "What need is being met?", "Who is our customer?", "The presence of what items will instill confidence?", "What amenities would the customer expect?", "What initial investment is needed?", "What is the value of the offering?", "What would someone expect to pay and be willing to pay for this offering?", "How can we effectively communicate the benefits to the end user?", "What competition exists?", and "How can projections inform our decisions?".

## **Legal**

Although ministries have freedoms protected by the first amendment, they often utilize funding, accreditation, building codes, and general best practices that dictate specific regulations and guidelines that, when followed, ensure a standard of quality and safety. Immanuel wanted to make certain that our addition of 9th grade was not compromised by non-compliance. Compliance was also imperative in light of our desire to accept scholarships provided to families through a state program called EdChoice. It was also essential that we prepare the students in a way that they were not at a disadvantage after transferring into their next school.

Questions pertaining to legal issues include, “How can we be recognized by the state and in turn receive their funding?”, “What does our LEA require for credits to transfer?”, “What should be taught in order that our students are on course for meeting graduation requirements?”, “Are we meeting/exceeding instructional hours.”, “What must be the credentials of the teachers?”, “Can our schedule accommodate the required credit load”, “Is our space sufficient?”, “Do other governing entities have requirements?”, and “What liabilities exist and how can we mitigate the risk?”.

In talking to the three groups, it became clear to me that satisfying their curiosities was not enough. Doing so was of course essential as it ushered them past the initial hurdles that otherwise would have prevented them from ever considering the option but true motivation came by replacing the old visual for a new one. Over our 120+ years of existence, each group had formed an opinion of Immanuel Lutheran School and what it was and what it was not. For each audience we had to help them conceptualize how the new visual was consistent with the mission that had compassed us for so many years. The new picture we painted made it clear that despite the changes there would be continuity in outcomes and culture which they had always known and loved. We needed to package it as the new normal. Stakeholders now with more reach. The market having a much needed alternative. The governing entities acquainted with a new piece of the puzzle.

We are confident that this offering will grow over the years and with it our effectiveness in fulfilling our mission of leading people to Christ by sharing God’s Word so that they may grow together in faith and in service to our Savior and all of God’s children.