

I'm a lawyer in a large law firm, so keeping track of my time is important. Perhaps that's why I've developed the view that how I spend my non-work time says something about my priorities. You know the expression that you are what you eat? Well, there is something to the view that we are how we spend our time -- at least our free time.

I look back at this last week. A pair of baseball games in Ohio with my son Alec's roommate and friends in the stands; dinner with Alec and a drive back with my wife Janet; work at home Monday late afternoon instead of covering the snack stand at my other son Jack's baseball game at Langley; Men's Bible study Tuesday morning, where I volunteered to lead next week; a work dinner Tuesday night in DC that conflicted with another Langley baseball game; a Lenten study group at our house Wednesday night after the first inning of yet another Langley baseball game, and I miss the other 6 innings; dinner Thursday at home with Janet and Jack for the first time in a week, and I start work on this piece; an actual date with Janet Friday night (how cool is that, we can't remember when we had one last); this morning's sessions, a baseball doubleheader this afternoon by internet radio of Alec's team that conflicts with yet another Langley baseball game, and a dinner party tonight at the home of very dear friends.

So you see in that a schedule conflicts where I favored, where I could, but sometimes not successfully, family, and support for our boys and time alone with Janet. You also saw time for the church, including once at the expense of supporting Jack. That wouldn't have happened, except that his game was rescheduled at the last minute. Jesus is said at one point (at least) to choose God before family, but to me that doesn't mean necessarily church, and I see God in my family, as I'm sure all of you do too.

This perhaps suggests why I consider myself qualified to comment on Dr. Mercer's remarks. I'm pretty jazzed, actually, to feel qualified to participate in a conversation being led by two smart, spirit-filled, articulate church professionals! I choose to think of it that way rather than to think of myself as the merely equivalent of a guest on Oprah because I am the poster boy for the topic of the day!

I grew up in the 60s in a mainline Episcopalian church in Maine, and perhaps in that sense I am typical of many in this room. As some of you who know me know, where I depart from many of you is that I hated church growing up, because my parents chose to go to a church 20 minutes from home instead of going to the only church in our local community, a Congregational church. My father was honoring a genetic predisposition toward the Episcopal church, but it deprived me of feeling community or connection at church. I found everything about church boring, and I didn't know the other kids in church programs. There was a bottom of the ninth inning save, however, when the only positive experience I had just before leaving that church was confirmation class, which I was moved by.

I am proud to say that Immanuel, where my family worships, has served as the faith community I didn't experience in Maine. I have been active in youth ministry for years, and even agreed to do the one thing I absolutely was terrified to do -- teach high school Sunday school, until my boys walked in the front door of that Sunday School room and I decided to walk out the back door (without them discouraging me, OK, with them applauding). When they were young, I judged harshly parents whose teens were too exhausted to participate fully on Sundays and at other

times. Then my boys became teenagers, and particularly after they had to get up at 7AM Saturday for SATs, sports or whatever, we would sometimes let them catch up on their deep exhaustion Sunday. And, to the point I am about to make, not force them to go to a church program that they found uninteresting or uninspiring. Yes, sometimes parents do know better, and forcing a kid to participate can open their eyes, but we were at a point in their lives where we tried to teach them to make choices, and in their exhaustion caused by over-scheduling and academic demands that exceed what I grew up with, we joined the ranks of parents that I had judged negatively previously. Obviously, I don't judge those parents so harshly any more.

So our boys participated less than many in Immanuel's' programs, but I will say, without hesitation, that they absorbed what I think is most important, and that I didn't experience until my confirmation class. That is that a church community can be much more than a classroom for learning Bible stories and making friends in church. What our boys believe a church community can do is create a place where people go to support and nurture faith. They learned that as much from countless adults in this church who they consider friends as they got from their peers and their church teachers.

Put differently, there may be details that I wish we had jammed into or boys heads as they grew up, but I am confident that they have the foundation they need to put those details in when they're ready, at each stage of their lives. And I have had the privilege to know many youth pretty well at this church, and I feel the same way about them.

This background might explain why, after sitting here before you as the poster boy for Dr. Mercer's message, and enthusiastically agreeing with all of Dr. Mercer's points, which are very valid, I want to add a couple of somewhat different, but related points.

Also -- thus endeth the positive portion of my remarks. The rest of what I say may be less positive, but I hope the ultimate message you get is taken as a challenge rather than as simply criticism for the sake of criticism.

If the battle is over whether to get kids, and adults, to stop leading complicated, busy lives, where sometimes they can't participate in a church life, then we are losing that battle, and I believe we are wasting our time and our energy fighting it. Indeed, I dare say that fighting that battle and losing it saps our confidence in our ability to win on other fronts. I should know -- I have felt the same sorrow and guilt and failure that Dr. Mercer describes in that mother when it comes to the time we have spent away from church.

Rather, building on what I just said, I would focus on changing, in some cases dramatically, how the church provides Christian education and the faith community that has sprouted seeds for my boys. We should always offer the kinds of things we have offered -- church services of course, Sunday school, small groups, community service. But the church, in my opinion, needs to start thinking much more aggressively about how to work in our lives away from church. Otherwise, if we only claim attention while people are inside these walls, we will lose. I will repeat that. We will lose. We need to go where the need is in Christian education, the same way we do in community service. Jesus didn't build a building and demand that the blind man, the leper and the 5,000 he fed come to his building. He went to them. I mean much more than church leaders

attending youth sporting events and going into the homes and hospitals where church members are.

One of the big shifts that has happened in the nonprofit world is the move toward greater accountability, efficiency and delivery of quality services. I represent a nonprofit now that is focused on helping nonprofits that operate in places like Haiti deliver their services more efficiently. I had the privilege recently of being invited to the Gates Foundation to discuss with them ways to improve the way they structure their deals to get the best performance possible out of the entities they invest in. The Gates Foundation is changing expectations for how those who receive grants are supposed to operate. You don't just study a disease now if you get a grant from them - you're expected to figure out how what you do can help deliver a product that improves human health.

Just as nonprofits historically have not been expected to have accountability high on their list of goals, I suspect the same could be said of churches. Of course, churches work very, very hard at doing what they do -- church services that reach people, opportunities for service that will draw people in, committees that produce results. But do churches have the ability to adapt that the private sector has shown for a long time? Or that the nonprofit sector is beginning to embrace? Are we willing to assess the effectiveness of church offerings?

One of the roadblocks to changing how churches can improve their effectiveness in delivering spiritual services -- I'm deliberately using secular terminology here -- is that it can be hard in a church, where we all want to be nice, and we tend to operate by habit, to honestly evaluate what works, what doesn't, and why. If evaluation is not done right, feelings can be hurt -- and change means mistakes will be made, and we'll have failure on a regular basis. Perhaps my perspective is because of growing up in a church where tradition mattered more than effectiveness, and because they almost lost someone like me who was predisposed toward the spiritual. As a result, I don't have a lot of patience with anxiety about change. Some of the best gains we've made here at Immanuel are from big change. Examples include the activities recently by our new Spiritual Growth Council, including an all-church retreat, and our children's IIQ modular teaching program.

To illustrate what I'm saying, here are a few random ideas, which I throw out at the risk that you'll focus on whether they are good ideas or not. I mean them to illustrate my point, not to propose the ideas as real, stand-alone ideas. More as examples of the kind of thinking that I pray for. They may not be good. But here are three:

- First, improve the method of dissemination of content that is developed inside our buildings. We are proud to put audio of our sermons online, but we don't push them out for downloading in Ipods and other devices so that those who missed can hear them while exercising or driving. Some might say that discourages church attendance. I prefer to say it encourages connection for those who actually feel they must bow before the other god -- the intense soccer coach who will bench your kid if he doesn't go to Sunday morning practices or games. I wring my hands about that like everyone, but only legislation will reverse the trend, and you know that's not going to happen. So let's stop

fighting that battle, and move on, and consider other ways to bring the spirit to those parents and their kids.

- Second, get way more embedded in the ordinary lives of people, and not just when they come here on Sunday or Wednesday night. Do we do enough to be there for kids -- and adults -- when they face difficult decisions in life? Such as difficult romantic relationships, school selection, choosing majors, deciding on a career path. I know some will go to a pastor for guidance, but why not develop church-based programs outside the church walls to help? How about trained church lay people to be available on a confidential basis to interject a deliberately spiritual dimension into the big decisions we make in our lives?
- Third, be more vigorous in improving the quality of programs we offer. What about a far more vigorous, bottom-up evaluation of our education programs and materials, with feedback regularly sought from those who participate? And using outsiders (experts and those we don't have to pay) to help us work on improving the programs we offer, and thinking about ways to connect outside the 4 walls of the church? I am as supportive as anyone of the quality of what we offer at this church, but no one would disagree that we could do much better -- particularly in thinking outside the box about how to interject the church community into the Christian education of its members, and those who could be members. We need to admit that sometimes people choose other things over church stuff because the church stuff is not that good. It's not simply the time conflicts that Dr. Mercer refers to, in my opinion. Sometimes what churches offer just isn't very compelling. Again, I think the church does wonderful stuff. There are a few programs at Immanuel that literally have changed my life forever. But I doubt anyone thinks we couldn't upgrade what we offer. We have to dare to be honest, and more demanding of ourselves. We need to regularly fight complacency which grows like kudzu, fed by a desire to be nice and by routine.

A quick final illustration to make my point in a different way. Years ago at Immanuel people were upset because church events were sometimes scheduled against Redskins games (obviously and sadly, that's not a conflict people would be so worked up about any more). We wrung our hands about it much the way we wring our hands today about all the conflicts that sap from church activities. To me, the right way to think about that was to schedule around the Redskins, but if you didn't, think about other ways to bring whatever program was scheduled to those who preferred to be in front of a TV or at the stadium. Instead of being upset that they chose something different, think of another way to offer that program, in different formats, times, and ways. In my law practice, clients who always follow my advice are easy to represent, and rare. The challenge in my practice is what you do after they reject the first thing you said. Same for us, here. The old 1960s model is gone, and we need to stop wringing our hands about it. If we move outside these walls, we might even attract some folks who would never otherwise come in, and we might offer something useful to the church regulars in categories of their lives that the church has never reached before on a regular basis.

Please don't mistake this for saying we should capitulate to those whose priorities put church way down on their list. And please, please don't put me down as one who says the church must be more entertaining, like a video game, to compete more effectively. I believe in the opposite. The development and deepening of faith, in my opinion, comes through sacrifice and hard

choices. Perhaps it's my Episcopalian roots, or my Yankee roots, but I deeply love the idea of rejecting cheap grace and spreading the message that intense commitment and study brings commensurate rewards. So I'm saying, let's stop thinking about the church of the 1960s, or whatever it is that we miss. What I advocate really is a battle, fought in the trenches, or actually in the daily lives of people who need what the church offers more than ever.