Stressed or Stretched

by

Richard Koehneke

Stressed or stretched? Which is it? Sometimes in ministry it’s difficult to tell the difference. But it’s important to recognize that there is a difference.

For the purposes of this conversation I’m thinking of stress as something that’s not good. I know that stress can be a good thing (like exercising a muscle), but right now I’m thinking of it as something like anxiety, worry, and wasted energy. It’s having too much pressure and not enough resources to handle the pressure.

But being stretched – now that’s something else again. When I was considering the call to a certain congregation, my father said to me, “If the Lord guides you accept this call, you will be stretched in ways you have never been stretched before, and you’ll find out you can do things you didn’t know you could do.” I did accept the call, and he was right. The key point was, “You’ll find out you can do things you didn’t know you could do.”

That’s the joy of being stretched: discovering new ways to serve God and His people. As I have told seminarians and vicars and DCE interns over the years, in ministry you can use all your gifts. Everything you have can be useful and valuable. That’s part of the ecstasy of ministry.

Sometimes when we’re stretched too much or too far or too fast we can move into the stress zone. Ecstasy can change to agony. That’s when you start feeling distracted instead of focused, exhausted more than excited. Then it’s time to take stock and reset your priorities. Decide what’s of greatest importance and concentrate on those things. Just because you CAN do many things doesn’t mean you SHOULD do many things.

A person with many talents and interests can find great joy in ministry. But ecstasy can become agony if we don’t stay focused on what matters most. It’s a beautiful thing when you’re using your gifts on what’s most important in doing the ministry God is calling you to do.

How do you tell the difference between “stressed” and “stretched”? How is God stretching you to discover you can do things you didn’t know you could do?

How might you be making demands on yourself that God isn’t asking of you, thus creating stress for yourself?

As someone once told me, “Every time you say Yes to something, you’re saying No to lots of other things, whether you realize it or not, so make sure you’re saying Yes to the things that matter most.” How do you decide when to say Yes and when to say No?