



## Leadership Letter

### *Do you have enough margin?*

I was reading Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's book called *Spiritual disciplines handbook* the other day and she relates the following story: A friend of mine tells of how the word of God came to her one day through her four-year-old daughter. The mother was busy hurrying her daughter out the door when the little girl replied, "Mommy. Stop. Why are we always in a hurry when we never go anywhere important?" The little girl intuitively knew that hurry got in the way of what was important. Life is too precious to miss and the faster we go the more likely we are to miss what really matters.

Have you had a delay on your evening flight because of a problem earlier in the day? Or perhaps had the feeling of running late all day because your first meeting went over 10 minutes? In his book *Margin*, Richard Swenson, says progress (and success) sabotage margin. We are robbed of any margin because we are needed and the work must go on. However, it's our fallenness that moves us in this direction – success doesn't have to cause lack of margin but if we let ambition take over, or neglect boundaries in our lives, it will. Margin exists for relationship whereas progress is focused on ministry goals.

Margin is the amount of time, space or resource allowed, beyond that which is needed. It is something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Margin is the opposite of overload. For some reason, we don't immediately jump to the realisation that we need some margin when we are tired, stressed or overloaded. We conclude that all this stuff in my life has to be done, so I had better do it.

Lack of margin is a fairly new phenomenon. I grew up without a mobile phone, computer, email or films and TV shows to access at will. My family bought our first TV when I was 6 and even then it only had programmes for part of the day. We didn't travel anywhere apart from a holiday for two weeks that we could reach by driving half the day. I wonder sometimes, "What did I do with all my time?" Well, as I think about it now, I spent time learning piano, riding my bike with friends, enjoying Epping forest at the end of my road with my dog, and having a relaxed enjoyable life. Today hurry sickness has taken over our lives with time pressures, deadlines and expectations of accomplishing more this year than last.

Can you imagine reading a book without margins? A page full of words without any spaces would be too much to take in – our eyes need the margins and spaces to be able to read easily. What about reading a long sentence without commas? Commas are there to enable us to pause and take a breath. What about driving on country roads without margins. Last weekend we went away for the weekend to celebrate our anniversary, another lovely margin. The road to the hotel was made of tarmac but it was very narrow and to pass another vehicle wasn't so easy. Even when the margin is cut down on motorways when road works are in process, it adds a little more stress to your driving. Think how much it costs to put in all those

hard shoulders along motorways. They are there for emergencies and how important they are.

We seem to constantly want to live our lives without margins. Over this coming week or month where do you need to create margins?

- Are you present for people? If every minute is scheduled with agendas, and you are pushing on to the next thing, when will those sacred conversations take place?
- Do you process decisions enough? Important ones require time and waiting on God for clarity.
- What about a date night with your spouse or organising something special for family time?
- Do you go from one meeting to the next without any space in between?
- What about yourself? Do you set aside some time for quiet meditation, devotion, and catching up with yourself?
- Some may need to create some margin for more sleep, others might need find some margin by sleeping less. Do whatever is needed, but let's not wait until we are sick before we are forced to have some margin time.

Our creator God, put a margin in place after he had created the world, in order to spend time to evaluate, reflect and enjoy the fact that "it was good." Taking a Sabbath is an important margin practice. Taking the dose weekly can save our lives!

In preparing for the present LDC (leadership development course) that has been running for many years, we added a 15 minute margin space in moving from the first session into the second. Just 15 minutes has made all the difference to lessen stress, give people time to breathe (and a needed bathroom break) and pause before moving into something new.

Another change was on Wednesday afternoon. Instead of having our normal afternoon session going into the meal at 6:30, we prepared a sandwich evening meal that could be prepared after lunch and had an early session, enabling everyone to have a long break from 4:30 through the evening. Everyone has enjoyed the extra margin.

I think margins are important throughout our days and in whatever we are doing. We run retreats for much of the year and we recognise how important breaking up even a 60 to 90-minute session is, with a number of margins. Human beings can only sit still and focus for a limited time and so having break out groups, activities, games and role plays enables us to take in so much more of the content and process it more effectively. This change of pace, movement, talking and involvement acts as a margin. Having even a one minute silence at the end of a talk creates a margin for thinking personally and applying something into our own context, that can easily be lost if we move straight into the next thing.

I enjoy (well perhaps endure might be a better word) exercise. To help my motivation, I often use a motivational video presenter to spur me on. After a strenuous exercise, he always provides a margin to be able to catch your breath and breath more deeply. At the end there is a cool down. These again are necessary margins. We realise our bodies need them, but often don't realise our emotions, minds and hearts need them too.

Relational margins are probably some of the most important times we need to schedule into our diaries. Times to simply talk, process and catch up with all that has taken place. When friends or married partners don't have regular time to share their hearts, unload, and talk about the joys and challenges, we miss out on life. Over this past year, I have added a grandparent role to my life and have had to create new margins in order to spend time in Australia and Calgary. Creating margins means cutting something out which isn't always easy. We have to recognise that we can't continually keep adding things into our lives without letting some things go.

Here are a few more simple thoughts for adding some margin space:

**1. A commitment at the start of the day.** It is so easy to start the day in a rush and carry a sense of anxiety, pressure, challenge or stress with us. Right at the beginning of the day offer God the main concerns of our heart. Ask him to take care of these things as you go about your daily tasks. When they sneak into your heart again, take a moment to hand them back to God.

**2. Time to be present in a meeting.** Before you begin a meeting, allow time for people to become present. Allow some catch up time and provide a welcome cup of coffee. Give some time to breathe, before the next agenda. You may want to have a creative ice-breaker to help people share where they are at, how the week has gone, to identify the pressures and take a moment to listen and connect with others.

**3. A meaningful prayer to start a meeting.** Of course, we hope all prayer is meaningful but often we start with that prescribed prayer rather like a traditional grace before a meal. What about giving a one minute time of silence for everyone to focus on Jesus and hear if he something to say to them.

**4. Take a pause.** Instead of rushing from one thing to the next, just add in a margin space. It can be as little as a minute or extend it to 5, 10 or 15 minutes. You may want to sit still or take a walk. Take some deep breaths, ask the Lord if he wants to say anything to you, or just enjoy the silence. You will feel your body, soul and spirit coming back into alignment.

**5. Enjoy some reading.** Read slowly and read for transformation rather than information. When a word or phrase stands out, stop. Let the words resonate as you meditate and allow the ideas to inspire, encourage or challenge.

**6. Journal.** I use the day 1 app for my phone that syncs with my computer. When I have a spare moment, I take out my phone to journal thoughts or go through some of my spiritual rhythm practices. This creates those pauses in the day for me that bring me back to focus.

**7. Time for relationships.** Book into the diary those important times with people you want to connect with before the time is robbed by the urgent and not important.

Adding margins, is the way we counter our fast paced, urgent, busy world. Adding space works as an antidote to our workaholic, helpaholic, stress focused teams and work places. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun says, "We can get so busy doing urgent things and so preoccupied with what comes next that we don't experience the NOW. Afraid of being late, we rush from the past to the future. We don't get to our futures any faster if we hurry.

So, look at your days, weeks and months and add in those pauses, those 15 minute retreats from the day, those margins that will keep your mind, emotions, hearts and bodies all on the same page. Remember, margin has to be cultivated, it doesn't just happen.

Until next month

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