

Every Believer a Minister

Every Christian has a vital role to play in God's grand plan. None of us is called to be a spectator, passenger or B-Team player. Just because we don't have an official title or job description doesn't mean our contribution counts for less than "professional" men and women of God. At the end of the day what God looks for (and will reward) is obedience. Life is short. What we need to do is to grasp God's purpose and operate in the unique ministry to which we have been called.

Everyone called to minister

A pastor friend once told me he asked a simple question of God about every new person who entered the church he led: "God, what is your call for this person's life". He then made a point of working to see them grow in character and function in ministry. Did he make mistakes? Sure. Did people take advantage of his generous heart? A few did. He did not rise to prominence in his denomination but he had more of an impact on my life than any other man or woman of God. He pioneered several churches and I had the privilege of serving God with him for several years. He was not a particularly oratorical preacher, nor a Bible scholar, but he lit fires in peoples' lives. He was a mentor, not just a figurehead. He didn't feel threatened or precious when he encountered people with greater knowledge, people skills, experience, enthusiasm or ideas. Instead, he was always willing to harvest those ideas to further God's kingdom. Decades later, people are still involved in ministry in different parts of the world because of his openness and inclusive understanding of the concept of "ministry".

Every Christian, in every culture, has something to contribute to the world Christian movement, that glorifies God, has eternal value and will outlast them, like the woman who gave the last two coins she had and was praised by Jesus (her gift is *still* talked about); Joseph who gave his tomb for the burial of Jesus and the women who provided for Jesus and his disciples throughout their ministry. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit living inside them, a relationship with God, a born-again heart and a supernatural capacity to speak to the Eternal and hear His voice and message for their lives and their world. That is awesome!

Who is a "Minister"? Often the answer is: "The person in charge of a church". There is usually a title. Reverend, Doctor, Pastor, Bishop, Father, Archdeacon, Worship Leader. Sometimes the job comes with a uniform and hat; in many places it comes with badges and tools of trade, such as crosses and staves. There are other perquisites, such as reserved parking at churches and hospitals and free or subsidized accommodation beside the church (my wife and I once helped pastor a congregation; we lived *in* the church). The professional Minister has authority and dignity that flow from the office. That's not necessarily negative. Most bureaucracies have authority structures. A good friend of mine wisely observes that, "Autonomy can be tantamount to anarchy". Power can be abused, but that does not mean legitimate offices should not be recognized, only that "to whom much is given much is required" (Luke 12:48). There must always be humility and accountability.

Exploding the myths

Consider the myths that influence people's readiness to respond to God's call.

Myth No. 1 "Effective ministry must be divided between clergy and laity."

Embedded in common concepts of "ministry" is the assumption that non-professionals (the "laity") are not really ministers. The term "laity" comes from the Greek word "laos", meaning "the people". It is used to denote Christians outside of the recognized ranks of the clergy, who have roles in church services and functions. Since the laity are considered distinct from more "religious" parts of church life, functions such as teaching and leadership are usually reserved for professionals; in such cases, the laity are often not permitted to undertake the duties of the clergy. Lay people are usually volunteers. In "high" (very traditional) churches, members of the laity who cross the line and perform duties reserved to the clergy are deemed guilty of offences and subjected to sanctions.

Many Christians therefore think they can't do God's work because they lack denominational imprimatur. They buy into the notion that "men and women of God" are a special breed, a class apart. They believe "saints" are a hyper-caste of unique Christians, like Christian Brahmins, a cut above the rest for their spirituality and example. They sit in church, week after week, stagnant, bored or indifferent, largely ineffectual and spiritually barren and frustrated. Many of them desperately want to serve God, but don't know how or where to start. The structures around them are rigid and unyielding, all doors appear closed. Some of them have been in other churches, asking the same questions, looking for the same answers; their current ecclesiastical address is but a step along a pilgrim path that is likely to involve lots of other locations before they are finished.

These distinctions are entirely without Biblical foundation. Organizations that use the concept of laity are usually hierarchical. Submission is more important than mission. The style of priesthood is more prominent than sacrifices offered. Particularity of role is emphasised, rather than service. Human institutions take precedence over humans. Participants end up being parochial rather than pastoral. Lay persons are felt to be less authentic than clergy, in terms of spiritual responsibilities. They tend to be shut out of important decision making. Their paradigms and abilities are assumed to be secularist rather than spiritual.

How this duality came about is quite complex, but emphatic distinctions between clergy and laity were allowed to develop in early church history, placing erroneous emphasis on ecclesiastical titles and authority and the obedience expected of non-professionals. Eventually, hierarchical elements of the Church came to predominate, while non-clergy remained in the shadows. The institutional Church was seen by many as the domain of the ordained clergy. However, honest appraisal of the Bible reveals that the notion of "laity" is a myth. A lot of Christians are frustrated in their work and church life because they don't have a Biblical understanding of what ministry is. They don't consider workplace ministry to be as valid as Sunday-at-church ministry. (The first Christians integrated work and serving God. They didn't practice a sacred-secular divide.)

Myth No. 2 “Only full-time workers can serve God effectively.”

This myth implies that believers who are not paid for Christian work are not serving God. What about Paul’s command to slaves in the New Testament to serve their Masters as though they were serving Christ (Ephesians 6:5-9)? (In doing so, they served God.) What about Paul’s own ministry? There is evidence he would have preferred to work for Christ with the financial support of the churches, but this was not always possible, for a range of reasons. Whether working in churches, old peoples’ homes, offices or factories Christians can serve God because they have a relationship with Him and are modelling Christian character on a full-time (life) basis. In fact, the challenge for full-time workers in some church situations is frequently the absence of non-Christian friends. A pastor once lamented to me that she “didn’t know any decent sinners any more”.

If a man or woman is called by God and inclined and able to undertake Christian work, that is great (1 Timothy 3:1). They should be obedient to the call, whether to function in a large established congregation in a familiar comfort zone, pioneer a new outreach, work with students, go to another country, or serve in urban mission. If the call is to live for Jesus in more pedestrian walks of life, they should not feel downgraded by God, or infer that their station is inferior. It is God who calls, commands and rewards. Sometimes non-recognition is a hard pill to swallow, but we need to keep an eye on eternal perspectives. Guilt about non-recognition is a downside of the generation of books about self esteem, mega churches, highly effective people and laws of success that have been prominent in Christian bookstores over recent years. (Consider the “success” vs “discipleship” or “missions” ratio in any Christian catalogue – the result is scary.)

Myth No. 3 “All you need is faith to step out.”

I once did a web search on “limits to Christian ministry”. The responses were interesting. All sites identified by the search engine were in the West. Each proclaimed there were “no limits”. Some Christian organizations include these words in their banners, publications and names. I love to see bold faith in action. I am encouraged by Christian friends who aim high and purpose to do great things for God. After all, Jesus told us to “disciple the nations”. But, in some countries pastors are not permitted to preach, let alone work full-time in churches. In certain Muslim countries the existence of churches is against the law. Pastors in Yemen told me they were spied on whenever they tried to meet with believers. In refugee camps, Christian workers who are refugees often do not have the economic means to do more than survive. But they can be effective representatives for Jesus. What about Christians struck down by serious illness, or imprisoned for their faith? If they cannot “expand their horizons and opportunities”, they can use their faith and faculties to do what God asks.

Myth No. 4 “Only full-time workers are adequately trained to minister.”

This myth confuses the call of God and positional functionality. Christian workers obviously need training to do the job. This occurs in most industries (mechanics, teachers, electricians, bank tellers). Who would willingly submit to a heart surgeon who admitted they had no preparation?

Every Christian sensing the Holy Spirit drawing them to serve in a particular area should to all they can to be equipped to do the work effectively, with His anointing. That will involve on-the-job experience and life-long learning. Let's do all we can to get ready to excel in fulfilling God's purpose. But let's not be frozen in time, or in tiers beneath the belfry, until we feel totally prepared to do so.

Defining ministry

What is ministry? The list usually includes pastors, worship leaders, musicians, creative artists, youth pastors, chaplaincies, broadcasters, missions, student ministries and other "religious" work. This exclusive concept of ministry fails to acknowledge that there are many who don't fit the template, but are nevertheless serving God. For a long time this bothered me. Trained in theology and ordained in my denomination, I have worked in secular professions for most of my life. In some countries I have served as part of the local church, preaching, leading, and teaching Bible college courses, but usually on a part-time basis. For years I unfavourably compared my role with those who were working in church structures and differentiated their roles from others. I felt my calling and contribution were inferior because I wasn't working for God "full-time". I eventually realized that God opens and closes doors, waters the seed we plant and gives the increase; that there are many avenues to Christian service; that satisfaction in work for God does not come from the visibility of the position, but our relationship with the Holy Spirit, our personal walk and growth in Jesus' character. I also came to realise there are "seasons" in the way we serve God.

In the Bible "ministry" literally means "service". It is not position, but relationship. Jesus ministered by humbling himself and serving those closest to Him, even though he was greater than all. He didn't assert his "rights" as a leader, striving to prove he was a better figurehead, a more qualified CEO. He didn't have to; people saw the work of the Holy Spirit in Him and the rest was academic.

Ministry involves God and other people. Character involves "being"; ministry is "doing". One flows from the other. The world is full of hurting, alienated, ordinary people in need of authentic and meaningful Christian ministry that will connect them with God and change their lives. When Jesus came he stressed that he did not come to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28), to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of God's favour (Luke 4:18, 19). He didn't live defensively, over-reacting when sincere people didn't fit moulds (although he was scathing about "Don't approach me. I'm holy" hypocrisy). He related to high and low, rich and poor, educated and illiterate alike. He sat with businessmen and drew "sinners" into the circle (sometimes to the chagrin of his hosts). He touched them when they were dirty, went into their homes when all they had were hovels, loved them when they were alienated by racism and social taboos and turned them to God. He didn't fake humility (people see through that), but gave what He had out of a godly heart. These are the true tests of "ministry". If only we could say that all Christian ministry reflected the Spirit of Jesus. If it did, many more people would respond to the truth of the message.

Another pastor friend admitted to me that he sought a senior position in his church so that fellow-ministers would see him at conventions accompanied by a team of subordinates. It is easy to feel slighted because others don't appreciate our efforts. If it is status we crave (worship?), we should heed Jesus' warning that peoples' fleeting adulation may be our only reward (Matthew 6:1-6).

All ministries born in God's heart are different but complementary (Colossians 1:25- the Greek text indicates God uses people for different ministries as one who "manages the household well"; His calling matches His eternal purposes). Imagine, just for a second, if every eye functioned as an eye, every ear as an ear, every finger as a finger, if every part of the body did its bit, not competing with others, not getting into a huff over every disappointment and injury, not jealous of more prominent members. They the eyes would be able to rest from feeling obliged to do the work of the noses and ears because the latter didn't carry their weight. Paul uses such an analogy in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). His application is simple. The church is like a "body". Christ is the head. We are the remaining parts. Every member of the body should do its unique, God-given part, no more, no less, not striving, nor slacking off and definitely not atrophying.

The Bible tells us that Jesus gave ministries to the church to prepare Christians for "works of service" (Ephesians 4:12). One of the mandates of Christian leadership is to equip believers to do just that, by identifying gifts and callings, training people and releasing and supporting them. This multiplies the effectiveness of Christian witness and promotes healthy church growth. When leaders teach God's word with insight and accuracy they contribute to the growth of Christians from spiritual childhood to maturity; when they help them implement those gifts they are doing their job. When the focus of Christian workers of all types is on Jesus and the Church He is building, it is one He can use and bless.

Many churches don't celebrate marketplace ministry; can it be because they are not involved? The Biblical thing for them to do is equip Christians to be filled with the Holy Spirit, bridge the gap and be effective in the workplace.

I don't like everything I see done in the Jesus' name. Sometimes the reasons are theological; at other times they are cultural. Jesus distinguished between those who practiced error and those whose approaches did not coincide with common practice but stemmed from hearts motivated to do His work. The disciples tried to stop people working in Jesus' name, because they didn't belong to the inner circle (Luke 9:49, 50). Even if we disagree with some of the methods, we need to keep in mind Jesus' observation to His followers about the woman who anointed his feet with expensive scent: "She did it for me" (Matthew 26:10).

Get involved

Some readers will have mixed feelings about what I have written. Sacred cows exist in most institutions. I like the bumper sticker that said, "Sacred cows make the best burgers". Faith, obedience, perseverance and sacrifice can lead to great results. But, at the end of the day, it is God who calls and anoints all His

people for service. Let's get involved and be the people of influence God called us to be.

Imagine what could happen in your life if you had support, mentoring, encouragement and help to be the man or woman God called you to be. Imagine if that happened in your cell group, church, home or office. Other Christians would be inspired to tap into their God-given potential. They would approach life differently. Church life would be enriched and varied. Not all of it would occur inside church walls, on Sundays, according to the "program". (If our plans are open to the leading and diversity of God' Spirit, this will no longer be an issue.)

Christian organizations that stress hierarchy at the cost of service become effete. Relevant church life involves every man, woman and young person doing what God has called them to do. Everyone has a gift from the Holy Spirit. Not all are preachers; nor are all leaders. Some are good administrators. Others are wonderful hosts. Some have a gift for making money and releasing it to Christian work. Others use secular knowledge to open dialogue with non-Christians about the things of God and their salvation. Every one has a contribution to make, if only they can be encouraged and developed. At the end of the day, it will not be titles or human prestige that make a difference, but obedience to God's call.

Wise Christian leaders prayerfully identify the call of God in others and seek to develop and release those gifts. They care for the gift, like tender plants, perhaps not yet ready to bloom. They are often misunderstood, because they make themselves vulnerable. People they trust let them down. But, like John the Baptist, they are not afraid to desire great success in the lives and ministries of others (John 3:30). Only great spirits are prepared to do this. Mean spirits despise the small days, the petty failures and growth pains of others. They avoid those who are filled with enthusiasm for God. Give me people with enthusiasm!

Someone once said that it is easier to calm a fanatic than resurrect a corpse. It is easier to shape someone who is prepared to get involved than it is to carve a beauty out of marble. If enthusiasm can be guided and demonstrativeness channeled into the right outcomes, more will be accomplished than is ever likely to take shape on white boards of vision statements, strategic plans and action agendas. Let the flame burn in peoples' lives, stoke it, encourage it to become ardent and it will spread, for God's glory (Colossians 3:17).

Imagine if every Christian you know were mobilized to exercise his or her God-given ministry, fulfilling their potential without fear of being diminished by others. Imagine if leaders identified those gifts and provided appropriate openings. Like wheat I once saw in the Cairo Museum, extracted from an ancient tomb but still capable of bursting into life, given the right conditions, men and woman with the call of God in their lives can be left high and dry, or be watered and germinate. The Holy Spirit creates opportunities for dry seed to be fruitful.

You are positioned to "be" Jesus to many people. They may never feel inclined to visit a church building, but "church" can be you, in the home, at work, or at college. You may be the only Christian who prays for them. (This puts the acid back on you to live the "Christian way" and not turn them away from Christ.) God

has given each of us the privilege of telling people about Christ. We aren't all called to be full-time Christian workers, but each of us is called to share His life-changing, transforming power with our world (Acts 1:8). With His help, let's do it.