

Finding and Developing Ministers

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I attended a preachers' luncheon a few months ago in which the conversation moved to observations about the lack of ministers and the decreasing number of those preparing to be ministers in the contemporary church. Many of the preachers present had personal stories which showed how ministry has often been passed on the context of families and churches. Some of those present were third or fourth generation preachers.

I must admit, I felt a little out of place. I do not have a heritage of preaching. So far as I can tell, no one has been a preacher in my family (based on fairly extensive genealogies) since before the Revolutionary War. When I arrived at Oklahoma Christian as a Bible major in the fall of 1968, I quickly learned that very few Bible majors came from broken homes. My journey to ministry was different than most, or perhaps all, of my fellow-Bible majors. Yet, here I am, still working at ministry over four decades later.

The conversation at the preachers' luncheon caused me to contemplate again the question, "Why does a person choose to become a minister?" How does a minister develop? What are the factors that are most important in finding and developing ministers? Given the dropout rate of those who begin in ministry and eventually choose other vocations, what will help us find and develop ministers who will stay with it? I wonder if we are using the right criteria in identifying and encouraging ministry. I wonder if some of the least likely are being overlooked because we, as Samuel of old, are looking at the outward factors rather than the inward.

Let me suggest seven factors or principles that are essential in finding and developing ministers.

Effective Ministers Have an Awareness of Personal Calling

A minister is called to serve. Ministers serve in a variety of ways, according to their gifts and skills, but one who does not seek to serve is not worthy of the description "minister." Service may be the natural result of some personalities, but only a sense of calling from God will see the minister through the difficult days when it is easier to quit. Minister is not a title. Ministry is more than a job; it is more than an occupation (that which occupies our time). It is more than a profession (although ministry should be done as well as possible). It is a vocation (calling), in the sense in which that word was used in times past. God deliver us from those who seek to minister without a sense of having been called by God to that task.

God's calling to ministry may take various forms. Not all are called to evangelize. Not all are called to preach, just as not all are called to be missionaries. Some do not like the idea of churches having ministers—such would prefer to have evangelists or preachers. All three—minister, preacher, and evangelist—are biblical concepts.

The calling of God is both personal and communal. The awareness of God's calling may come through personal experiences, aptitudes and gifts, personal desire, opportunity, and even closed doors. How unfortunate that the contemporary church has mostly lost sight of fact that God calls people into his kingdom and to service in his kingdom. The calling of God is

communal, that is, it is a function of the Christian community. The Christian community identifies those with the gifts and abilities to serve and reinforces those gifts in various ways—encouragement, opportunities to develop skills, validation. Spiritual discernment (of the work and will of God) at its best is the result of a combination of personal and community insights and perceptions.

Effective Ministers Are Concerned about Spiritual Matters

A minister must be a spiritual person. One who would communicate spiritual realities to a Christian community or to the world should have personally experienced those spiritual realities. Ministry requires some level of spirituality—spiritual interest, spiritual focus, spiritual discernment. While those who minister—and all Christians—share experiences in faith and spirituality, Christians live out those realities in their individual lives in many different ways. Each of us makes choices about how we experience our relationship with God and how we live out the presence of God in our world. We use the gifts God gives us as we approach him and reflect him into our world. The fact that God makes us individuals, with the ability to see and experience God and the ability to share our God-awareness with others, makes ministry unique, varied, and plastic.

Urban Holmes (*A History of Spirituality*) outlines a spiritual typology to describe the ways one may approach and experience God. Each represents a combination of approaching God and experiencing God. A simple way of describing what this means is to think of “approach” as how we transmit to God and “experience” as how we receive from God. It is not necessary here to outline the typologies of Holmes; our purpose is only to note that there are variations of spirituality which will be reflected in the lives of those who minister. Holmes (*Spirituality for Ministry*) expands his study of spirituality in relation to ministry by outlining the importance of character and context. Both of these works by Holmes emphasize the importance of living out an integrated, balanced, holistic spirituality. This view of spirituality underscores the statement of Abraham Maslow that a person with no tool except a hammer begins to treat everything like a nail. Those who minister must not become so enamored by those ministers who hammer well that they conclude that all are called to be hammerers!

Given the tendency of many ministers to develop a private spirituality, it is important to note that mature spirituality is not developed solely through individual efforts. Spirituality is developed in context of the faith community. The faith community that affirms the calling of those who minister should assist ministers—present and future—with spiritual development in the context of the community.

Effective Ministers Develop Meaningful Relationships

A minister is one who can build relationships. This capacity is usually demonstrated first in the context of the faith community. Christianity is about relationship—both vertical with God, and horizontal with other human beings. The horizontal relationships that are essential to effective ministry develop as a part of one’s vertical God-relationship.

Ministers develop relationships in different ways, based on their personality and gifts. At times I think I could be a pretty good hermit, but my extraverted personality style causes me to think best when I am being stimulated by other people. I can sit in my office all day and fail to develop many new sermon ideas or illustrations. I can go spend a few moments with people

and the ideas and illustrations are everywhere. Because I like to think, and because all people help me think (whether I agree with them or not), I like to be with people.

Some ministers are naturally loners and have to push themselves to develop relationships. Others are naturals when it comes to relationships. Some of us get there through a “misdirect”. Regardless of the personal journey, ministers must ultimately love people, desire the best for people, and be able to develop and model healthy relationships. God deliver us from ministers who don’t like people!

Effective Ministers Have Hearts Focused on Ministry or Service

A minister is interested in service. A minister is a servant. Ministry must never be taken as an occupation or profession for selfish gain. Ministers have a heart of service, compassionately caring about other people. I am troubled by some of what I am hearing about ministers today. More than once in the last couple of years, I have heard about a minister who wasn’t available at a critical time of crisis, surgery, or death because it was his day off. I realize that in the 24/7 nature of ministry, that time away is essential, but ministers called by God are dedicated to serving, whenever and wherever that need may be.

Further, imitating God in service is always contextual and is never cloned. Ministry is not imported as an idea that worked somewhere else and will probably work here. Ministry is about meeting the specific needs of those served. One of my joys in ministry across the years has been the realization that genuine ministry is a pioneering effort. None has been this way before, and the nature of ministry in any given context is always fresh and new. How the word of God will be spoken and heard depends on the specific needs and experiences of God’s people. Ministers who focus on serving others will find their preaching alive and relevant, because as heart touching heart at the points of need and hurt, all are touched by the heart of God.

Effective Ministers Develop and Use Their Skills While Depending on God

No minister can get by long without an adequate set of skills to do the work to which God has called him. A minister usually does one or more of the things generally associated with ministry—preaching, teaching, organizing, leadership, visiting, evangelism, etc. It seems that some ministers possess the desired skills by nature, but most ministers will be more effective as they develop the necessary skills. Even when skills are present, they can be honed and developed for greater, more effective service.

A minister should strive to develop those skills which are consistent with his abilities and desires. Ministers should be encouraged to ask, “What are my skill sets, interests, and aptitudes?” Ministers find their passion in ministry through dwelling in the word and asking the right questions.

Regardless of the the strength of the minister’s skill set, effective ministry is ultimately done by the power of Christ. Effective ministers combine these human and divine elements to accomplish God’s purpose and will.

Effective Ministers Live Lives of Integrity

In the ebb and flow of life, ministers have the opportunity to demonstrate genuine Christian ministry. The power of a life of integrity is best seen when the minister is present in

the lives of those whom he serves. It is in the rigors and challenges of daily life that the holistic nature of the gospel is made obvious. Ministers with integrity live balanced lives. They are vulnerable, not afraid to let others see the entirety of their lives. In this openness, ministers provide a model and mentoring.

Effective Ministers Have a Personal Relationship with God

Perhaps it should go without saying, but a minister is one who has a relationship with God. One who is going to speak to others about relationship with God should have experienced firsthand the reality of which he speaks. I wonder if we sometimes encourage Christians toward ministry because they have a lot of the desirable, outward characteristics in place, forgetting that the most important qualification for ministry is an awareness of the change God's grace has wrought in the minister's life. That we have been changed is ultimately the basis for our hope that he can change others. That we have been saved is the evidence and constant reminder that he desires to save others. That he hears our prayers encourages others to pray. That we regularly listen to his words gives us something to say when we are called upon to present a word from God.