

December 6, 2007

21 Conclusions from 20 Years of Ministry

... in no certain order ...

just be there

A lady who just lost her husband of some 56 years, the friends suffering from yet another miscarriage, the young man who just found out he has cancer, the college graduate who after 9 months can't find a job, the marriage ending in divorce in a week, the student who is convinced his parents hate him, the teenage girl's boyfriend who just left her – you get the picture – they need you to just be there. Be careful not to say anything stupid, but don't feel you have to say anything astounding either. Company is what is needed, not clever words or theology. Be a presence, pray with them, and let God do His thing.

be real, be you

Seems people today want to know the truth. “Tell me like it is,” their hungry eyes say. Too afraid of hurting feelings and turning people off, we often miss opportunities to help people find the truth they are desperately looking for in our grey painted world. But before you can be real with others you've got to be able to be real with yourself. Don't pretend to be someone you are not, or worse, say something you don't really believe. Be consistent with the teachings of scripture with the way you live – and acknowledge that the most practical way you can do this is by putting your own family first, and helping your ministry teammates to do the same.

give up on your own abilities

When it comes to preparing a sermon or devotion I completely get that it's not going to be effective because of my abilities or efforts. Only when I am led and prepared by the power of the Spirit will lives be impacted. Give all you've got but know that nothing good comes from you. We've no ability, no power, to change lives. You just aren't that smart, good or talented. Good news: He's graceful and He desires to work through you to accomplish His purposes.

lead, don't manage

Maybe more people would be involved in and committed to the ministries of our churches if they had ownership of the ministry, and not just an assignment in it. They want more than a role to play from a staff member's too-thoroughly-thought-through playbook; they want involvement in discerning, creating, refining and delivering what God would have them help birth. People don't want to be used - or managed - they want to be led. Oh, and if you find yourself an overseer of other church staff, they want the same.

impress them with authenticity, not knowledge or experience

When was the last time you heard a sermon that seemed more like a history lesson, a recounting of all the minister learned in seminary, an academic dissertation or a summary of the minister's years in ministry? Sunday morning messages are not the time to impress the listeners with what you learned in seminary or all that you've accomplished. Be real; be appropriately transparent; be authentic. Don't make your sermons or counseling sessions all about you, but be real enough to be authentic. Give those listening hope from the example you are living before them.

don't clone

I love Saddleback, Willow Creek, North Point and all the other big names I could drop. Being on their campuses is inspiring. We all have a lot we can learn from them. But don't try and be them. The calling and personality of your ministry and your church isn't the same as theirs. Your context is different and the expression of how you are to live out biblical mandates is unique. God's strategy just isn't to use clones.

help the lights come on

Second only to helping others embrace salvation through Christ and live in His ability and day-to-day strength, is the joy of helping them find their unique ministry calling and place of service. When people discover and live into their gifts and calling grand things happen, in heaven and on earth. Saddleback's S.H.A.P.E. is a great avenue to begin accomplishing this imperative. Helping people find their individual ministry fit is among the greatest joys I've experienced. I once provided some opportunities for a young lady named Miriam, who did the same for Nicole, who did the same for Morgan, who did the same for ... well, after four generations I don't know their names. What's your legacy?

don't get stuck

It's so easy to do the same thing over and over, especially when it seems to work and receives compliments. Being dynamic means that we allow for change and look at things from different perspectives and varying strategies. The Message doesn't change, but how we communicate and live into it surely changes. Enlist the elders and influencers when trying something new or launching a new idea. Doing so keeps you on target, and makes transitions easier. While consistency is prerequisite to progress, insanity – as you may have heard - is doing the same thing and expecting different results. Help the key players of ole have a place in the new day things.

give away your weaknesses and inabilities

Admitting your weakness is important. It's good we are weak in some areas. Our weaknesses allow room for others and force us to work in teams, if we prize excellence. Find and partner with others whose strengths are your weaknesses. Doing so helps to ensure you are building His

Kingdom and not your own empire. If giving away things that need to be done is difficult, give yourself an ego check. It's not all about you and things don't have to always be done your way.

practice what you'll say, so you'll say it well

“Look at me when you're talking to me,” sounds like a variation of something a mad dad would say. But it's a principle worth considering when delivering the most important message. I wonder if those in our congregation, classes and small groups ever think, “you know if what you are saying were real to you then you wouldn't have to look at the notes so often.” Put down the manuscript and speak from your heart. If God gives you a specific message to deliver then know it well enough to deliver it, not read it. Don't be slick when presenting spiritual things; be genuine. Jesus isn't for sale and your job isn't to convince people of spiritual truths. If you find yourself selling something stop and check to see if it is more yours than His. If it is His pray it lands on receptive hearts – or, when He gives you permission, shake the dust off your feet and go some place where it will be received.

ministry isn't a business

Now here's a raging can of worms, isn't it?! But the facts are your church isn't your firm, practice, retail store, customer service trade, etc. Sure there are things the operational side of your church can gain from considering the way local business cultures function, but at the end of the day the values and principles central to Jesus' work are different from those of your for-profit business. Biblical principles of leadership apply. Modern management strategies may look and sound good but too often are incompatible and inappropriate for Kingdom application. God calls us to lead people and be a steward of His resources, not treat people like corporate assets and manage resources to build and protect the organization.

be careful of your friends

Among the best things I've ever done for myself - my spiritual walk, emotional health, personal development, etc. - has been taking people out. Remove the negative and pessimistic. Expel the arrogant, prideful, and self-centered. Throw off the power hungry and attention seekers. Have nothing to do with controllers and manipulators. Doing so can be necessary in securing our own development. If they are allowed to remain in our inner circle or in places of influence or authority in our lives we will become repressed by their impact and eventually become just like them.

those in authority, can abuse it

I once forgave someone for relentlessly degrading me. The personal pain they caused as they abused their authority over me was one thing to deal with, abusing the authority the church had entrusted them with was another. People in authority may abuse it – and that's why everyone has to be authentically accountable to others and why checks and balances must exist. You will be disappointed by those in authority; know it's coming. Remember Christ is the model to follow

and praise Him for the solid examples you get to witness. Give grace when people fail and fall; you'll need some too in the days to come.

focus on meeting needs, not getting bigger

There's been a lot, maybe too much, talk in the last 30 years about church growth. To be succinct and to borrow from one approach, healthy churches grow. When we are faithful over small congregations or groups we get the opportunity to be faithful over larger ones. Organize yourself for growth, but focus on taking care of each other and God will take care of the increase. Count people because people count, but count them for God's glory and not for the sake of your own ego or sense of accomplishment.

teams and partnerships are biblical

Jesus traveled with a group. He sent his disciples out in pairs. Team ministry is the only biblical ministry model. Team members need harmony and a unified vision, but they shouldn't all have the same gifts, Meyer's Briggs Personality Type, DiSC Behavioral Profile or life experience. Let shared passion and supernatural camaraderie be the glue that holds the team members, including their mighty differences, together. Solo ministers are as dangerous as unaccountable leaders, and so are completely homogenous ministry teams.

a unified vision is crucial

I left the second church I worked in after two and half years. The last year and a half was really difficult, and for the longest time I couldn't completely understand why. After a while I came to understand I had a different vision for and definition of ministry than the pastor, and church. Once this revelation hit me knowing what to do next was easy. It was time to go. The pastor is responsible for the defining and leading the church's unique vision, and if staff can't get behind it then it's time for them to go. Schizophrenic churches will not accomplish much. The pastor is the leader; get behind him or get out of the way.

cultivate a right heart

Because administration is one of my gifts and organizing is one of my passions I can go on and on about ministry strategies and procedures and such. But how you do things must always be subservient to why you do them. Protect the heart of your ministry and its culture more than you defend how you do things, or else you'll lose your reasoning and not be able to explain why you do what you do. Protect your heart by being careful with your theology. Protect your heart by loving Jesus more than you do the people you serve or their approval on how to do things. Keep the Author and Finisher of your faith first and keep how you do ministry second to why you do it. Be culturally relevant, but stay biblically focused. The Word of God must be central to and the reasoning for everything.

cultivate your walk

“You can’t give away what you don’t have,” is cliché but true. It’s so easy to feel you *live* ministry so much that in doing so you automatically live Christianity. Being faithful in your ministry does not mean you are automatically being obedient in your faith walk. Your ministry should be because of your walk, not something that replaces it. Don’t let ministry steal from your faith walk. Don’t let the scars you get from doing ministry wound you such that it discourages your walk.

provide practical opportunities

Telling people they should feed the hungry isn’t enough. Connect them with how to do it. Plan a soup kitchen visit. Talking about how many marriages are in trouble is to no avail. Foster marriage enrichment experiences – and don’t be discouraged if those who seem to need it the most don’t take advantage of the opportunity. People need to know the tenants of their faith, and they need to be connected in practical, convenient and pointed ways on how to live it out. The ninth grade physical science “lecture and lab” model is a good one.

over communicate

Vision has to constantly be recast. Follow through with others by checking in to revisit processes, details, and responsibilities to get a clear and up-to-date plan of action. “Close the loop” with others by communicating, yes again, about previous conversations and strategies. Staying on top of things demonstrates what you are doing is important. Staying in touch with others tells them they are important. If you don’t like to communicate with those on the team, restock the team or find yourself a new role or a new arena. And when you communicate with written words don’t use too many but use enough so your audience knows what you are saying and isn’t left frustrated by all that you didn’t say.

be confident in your calling

Allow your identity, value, contribution and overall worth to only be defined by God and what His Word says about you. The opinions and perspectives of others can affirm you or tear you down, but what really important is Christ’s inspiration, leading and design. Define yourself only by what He says. The voice of others can be affirmation, but the authority for your life’s direction has to be Him. Let Him be Lord of your life; do not let someone else’s opinion lord over you.