

REEVALUATING MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH SETTING

By Bob Young

Introduction

Local church ministry is both science and art. Some parts of ministry can be learned; principles can be learned and applied. Other parts of ministry will always remain personal and will have to be adjusted in the context of interpersonal relationships. Another way to say the same thing—some things never change (the “science” of ministry, what the Bible says, the goal of the local church), and other things will change constantly (the “art” of ministry, personalized applications, methods to touch the lives of others).

Three Truths

Some things that are unchangeable

- God’s purpose and plan for the church
- The church’s commitment to making disciples—evangelizing, sharing the Good News
- The church’s commitment to making disciples—discipling, teaching, nurturing spirituality [including personal discipleship, corporately listening to the Word, and meaningful spiritual fellowship]
- The church’s commitment to sharing life—communion and community, both vertical in worship and horizontal in fellowship
- The church’s commitment to service

The message is unchanging

The message is unchanging; the meaning or application in the current culture is ever morphing, developing and changing. If a church cannot adapt to touch the lives of seekers to develop new members, it is ultimately destined to remain less than it could be or should be. Cultures develop new communication styles and preferences, new methods. When anthropologists can talk of the “language of a culture” they are not talking about English or Spanish or some other language. The church must learn the language of the culture around it to communicate the unchanging message.

The specifics of how the message is communicated and inserted into a culture depend on the culture. Methods must be constantly adjusted to maintain effectiveness and relevance. Some of what worked 10 or 15 years ago is no longer effective; some of what is “cutting edge” today will soon disappear. Change occurs more and more rapidly; advances in technology are staggering.

Effective ministry depends on applying the gospel with a certain cultural context

For half a century, I ministered in a variety of churches—small southern rural, small southern urban, large northern urban, large southern rural. During my time in the university I visited in and worked with numerous churches—small and large and every size in between, in the Midwest, in New England, up and down the Atlantic seaboard, and across a broad swath of the south. I have seen lots of different practices, customs, and traditions. Preferences vary, architecture is often regional. The common thread in all of these churches was a commitment to the unchanging message of Scripture.

I know personally that the strength of the local church is its ability to be God’s presence in its own context. The two churches where God blessed our labors most abundantly had significantly different cultures (south-north, size, leadership style, worship style, urban-rural). Success required the ability to be true to God’s truth, understand the culture, and bring the two together.

Four Essentials

The church that is serious about God’s purpose and culturally consistent ministry needs four things. These will help the church take the gospel to the world.

First, a plan for sharing the gospel, evangelism, making disciples, “converting”

The first step toward effective evangelism is to recruit every member of your local church as an ambassador “on mission” to bring people to share in the activities, worship, groups, and fellowship of the

church. The church without contact with non-believers or unchurched folks will seldom experience healthy growth. (Some churches grow by swelling, by attracting people who are attending other churches, but that is not the kind of biblical, healthy growth the church is seeking.)

When numbers of non-believers are present at worship, it is imperative that what they experience speak to them and touch them. The church that is serious about evangelism does not sing the songs it likes, it sings songs that visitors can embrace and enjoy; it does not voice jargon-filled or bland prayers, it prays in ways that visitors can understand and identify with; it explains those things that may not be familiar to the visitors; it preaches messages visitors can understand. Most days, worship is a pretty simple version of Christianity 101. This kind of preaching does not compromise the message, it explains it as you would teach a child (which many of the visitors—and members—are spiritually speaking). The uncompromised message will draw crowds (Jesus did!).

The unbelievers who are present probably came because they are searching—for meaning, purpose, love, friendships. They want practical advice—to make decisions, in their marriage and families, in life's tragedies. They want to know how to move on from the past (forgiveness) and how to actively pursue the future (hope). The Bible answers such questions, but millions do not listen to our explanations because we insist on communication that worked half a century ago.

When unbelievers are present, the church committed to evangelism does several things. The visitors meet the leaders (preacher, deacons, elders, Bible teachers who are always greeters); the visitors meet several members (to begin the assimilation process, the leaders can direct this process so the members whom the visitors meet have common interests); the visitors meet people who are trained in personalized evangelism. These know how to meet people, how to develop interest, how to conduct a personalized study, and are willing to invest their time to share the gospel.

Second, a plan for nurturing spirituality—individual discipleship and corporate spiritual development, making and maturing disciples, “discipling”

The church that is serious about touching lives will have a plan for helping people grow spiritually into mature disciples. The church that is serious about touching lives will have a plan for encouraging and developing corporate spirituality. Faithfulness and service depend on spiritual growth.

Discipleship is more experience than education. It is encounter more than enlightenment. Discipleship depends more on the practical than on the pedagogy. These statements do not mean that Bible truth is not important; they suggest that discipleship is not about knowing but is about doing. Our sermons are mostly intellectual. Our “new Christian” classes are mostly doctrine. How have we missed the point that people grow in the Lord because they become active?

Preaching must always be a call to action. Often people do not respond to the sermon because they do not know what they should do in response. Preaching is not sharing information. Hearing leads to doing. Transformation is demonstrated by how my life is changed, and my life changes by what I do. Preachers, are your sermon points statements of truth or action verbs? Effective preaching helps move people toward God; it helps them demonstrate it by their actions.

Bible classes must do more than share information. In the context of a smaller group, it is possible to build the kind of faith that moves God's people into service.

Small groups are not informational, they are relational. In the group, one sees the deep faith and committed actions of other believers. Transparency, genuineness, honesty—these characteristics of the small group will attract the multitudes.

Third, a plan for sharing life—both in worship and in fellowship

The church that is serious about impacting the world must carefully develop an effective worship experience and a multi-faceted concept of fellowship.

Worship. The church must maintain a dual-track focus in worship. First, reviewing briefly the ideas set forth above under evangelism and thinking about the visitors who are present, the church must constantly think about how the songs, prayers, sermons, words spoken and things done will impact those who are new. The church must also think about the needs of its members in planning worship.

Worship must touch the heart. Everything done in worship reflects the heart of the church. Through those who lead and through the participation and responses of those who are present, the heart of the church is made visible. The language of the heart is universal. When worship has to do only with various predefined activities and words, communication is hindered. Hearts fail to touch.

Let me share an illustration from my experience in missions. In the early years, my language skills were limited as was my vocabulary; I did not understand the culture as I do now; the words in the songs went by way too fast! The informal conversations between brothers or around the dinner table was hard to understand. I had trouble participating fully in the life of the local church. However, when I preached, using simple words, simple grammar, simple illustrations, and simple stories to share my heart, I found great receptivity.

Simplifying the gospel has to do with the words we use, but even more it has to do with how the gospel connects with the hearts of those present. The gospel must be simplified because the way we have become accustomed to explaining it does not hook with the majority of the unchurched and because they do not have the background to understand what we are saying. When we do not know the right words, the culture, the expectations, or the needs, what always works is touching hearts. Heart sensitivity is part of being all things to all people to save as many as possible.

Some people think worship must be culturally influenced and consistent. I believe worship can stand above culture and be effective multi-culturally when hearts are enabled to touch! Spiritually mature Christians cast aside their own preferences and cultural leanings in an effort to supersede the barriers that cultural contrasts present.

Fellowship. Planned fellowship activities are wonderful; spontaneous fellowship is often better. Too much of the fellowship in the contemporary church depends on organizational structures. Everything is planned, structured, organized. Much of it is based in our own selfish desires and preferences. As a result, when community groups exist, they are often closed groups. The same closed group sometimes meets for years.

The church that is really committed to touching lives of non-members within the cultural context must stop thinking and acting like an organization. The church is not an enterprise, it is not a business. The effective church is a community that wants to know how to reach out to the multitudes around it that are seeking community. Church is a place of belonging; church is family. Down at the church house, you are known as a person. Church is about people. Church is about what God has done, is doing, and will do in the lives of people. Church is not rules rehearsal. Church is not legal reminder.

Fourth, a plan for involving every member in ministry

A healthy church helps its members and those who participate in the church find relationship with God, spiritual relationships with others, and love for the world. Every member of the church is a servant, serving God, serving others, serving the world.

Finally, prayer is essential

Add a healthy dose of prayer to the mix and your church will reach the masses! The world that constantly changes can be impacted with the unchanging Word. Unsaved people are all around us. We encounter seekers every day, but often we do not recognize them as seekers. The church must have a plan to share God's Good News, a plan to touch lives through meaningful relationships—with God and with others, a plan for encouraging spiritual growth, and a plan for involving every member in ministry.