

Most Christian ministries today are exercised at three levels:

1. The large public meeting
2. The small group
3. Individuals

Frequently the large public meetings are the shop front of the Christian movement. There, people perceive what Christianity is and does. It is important that these ministries are conducted in a way that is attractive to the outsider and faithful in their representation of the gospel. For many of us the power-house of Christian growth lies in the ministry of small groups. Here we learn and teach and are cared for and we care for others. However, the care for individuals outside of a group context is important both in evangelism and in nurturing Christians. Unless the structure of our Christian ministry is that of 'pyramid selling' we tend to be very haphazard in the organisation of individual ministries.

Different Strategies

Some Christian ministries commence with individuals and build towards groups. The individual evangelist finds another person who he teaches and encourages until the two of them go out evangelising to make further contacts. When the pyramid has slowly developed the whole membership comes together to form a group. Most ministries start the other way by establishing a public meeting where a group can be formed. From this group, individuals are cared for. Both strategies are right and effective, each having its advantages and disadvantages. However, to conduct ministry without caring for individuals is to fail to provide for the membership adequately.

Advantages of Ministry to Individuals

Each person has different questions, problems, background, interests, and gifts that need to be cared for. While group meetings, both large and small, do provide some ministry of the gospel that is applicable to each individual, ministering privately to people enables the work of the gospel to be applied directly to their situation. It is impossible to anticipate in a public meeting the varied situations of the individuals who are forming the group; thus the importance of meeting with people privately to share with them in the truth of the gospel. However, this work is more threatening in order to care for them properly.

Warnings

Problem-centred ministry

The most common ministry amongst individuals is that of solving problems. Problem solving ministries have the advantages of people wanting help and we know we can help in many ways. However, problem-centred ministries create problems because the only way in which people can relate to us is by discussing their problems. Therefore Christians are always perceived as people with problems and ministry is always perceived in terms of sharing problems. Consequently, people

have to create problems in order to have a relationship with each other. Furthermore the best we can ever hope for is that Christians may become problem-free, we cannot hope that they will grow in strength or ability or make any progress in their Christian life. Ultimately, this reduces Christian ministry into Christian counselling.

Gender Issues

Because so much of the ministry to individuals is that of modelling, it is important to seek to minister to people of the same sex. People of the same gender relate to each other differently than those of the opposite gender. To most of us ministering to people of the opposite sex is easier and more attractive. However, this does not come from a spiritual perception so much as from our created sexual instincts. That is, while it is easier for us to establish a warm, caring relationship with someone of the opposite sex, we are not better at truly understanding each other's growth in godliness. Especially when we are single we have the likelihood of other agenda than purely Christian encouragement. If we do not have hidden motives in our relationship we still cannot be sure that the other person has no hidden agenda. This is particularly the case with evangelistic ministry. If a person is unwilling to talk to some one of the same sex about the gospel it is highly unlikely that they are genuinely interested in the gospel.

Dependency Issues

Ultimately the goal of Christian maturity is that of Ephesians 4 where the person can stand firm, not tossed to and fro but growing in Christlikeness of character. Without going as far as the ungodly self-reliance of our modern society it is true that our aim is to produce independence. This needs to be remembered in personal ministry for there is a tendency to try and produce dependency. To develop other people's lives so that they are dependent upon you is not to encourage them into Christian maturity. It is an example of sinful egocentricity. We want to see self-starters: people who will seek to go on growing in godliness; Christians who will look for the opportunities to minister the gospel wherever they go.

Getting Started

The first fundamental of personal ministry is establishing relationship. It is important to be in a warm, friendly, faithful and committed relationship with somebody in order to minister to them. While it can be a deliberate choice to establish such a relationship it must also be a deliberate choice to be a faithful and loving friend. To relate to people only in order to minister to them and therefore to break the relationship when there is no ministry is to treat them impersonally. The warmer and closer the relationship the more profound is the effect of one upon another. Thus a certain amount of time and energy must be given to establish and build relationships. This will almost invariably involve spending time and efforts outside of the context of specifically Christian ministry. It may mean going to concerts or helping in study. It can involve visiting or writing letters.

The second key element of personal ministry is the willingness of the person to share in Christian ministry. For those people who do not want to hear the things of God and who are resistant to what the Bible has to say there can be little ministry offered other than the example of a godly life. Genuine relationship and friendship will continue with such people but ministry will be curtailed.

However, with people who are willing to be ministered to and who are willing to minister we can

develop our relationship in a way that will be mutually helpful. It is important that the helpfulness be mutual. No one person has a monopoly on all that can be learnt about godliness. It is important for us to be able to be ministered to by the people to who we wish to minister. De-professionalising the relationship is essential for genuine Christian ministry. The Scriptures speak of "iron sharpening iron" as the parallel to man sharpening man. Likewise James tells us that we must confess our sins to one another. Individual ministry needs to be mutual ministry.

For many of us starting a friendship is not a particularly difficult task as we have learnt it in pre-school days. However, creating a context of positive Christian ministry seems to be a step beyond reach. We need to take courage in both hands and initiate Christian fellowship by conversation. It is important to engage our friends in discussing the things of the gospel. This can be done after a sermon or Bible study when we can try and pick up the issues discussed with our friends. Usually people are more willing to discuss these than they are to initiate the discussions. They are often thankful that somebody has taken the trouble to try and engage them in serious conversation. However, we need to go further and suggest the possibility of meeting for prayer or to discuss a matter further or to do some Bible study together or to engage in some activity together. Making such an offer always involves risking ridicule or friendship. The inhibition is very powerful. It is here that Bible study and ministry training tools are helpful in initiating a ministry relationship. It is not hard to ask a member of your church whether they would like to go through particular Bible studies with you, they don't need to be a new Christian. Engaging in such a process would help both parties to grow spiritually, as well as prepare you to follow up new Christians when the opportunity arises. They give a framework for meeting regularly with each other and discussing the things of God.

Another way of initiating is to invite people into prayer partnership. It is important to invite people to share your vision rather than become part of your institution. Thus it is easier to invite people to join with you in prayer for 'X' (Beach Mission or our church pastor or Sunday School) than it is to join a prayer meeting which has no particular agenda. Once people start meeting regularly to undertake such an activity keeping the momentum rolling is much simpler.

Different Goals

There are several goals in Christian ministry that are applicable to ministering to individuals. Sometimes we minister in order to evangelise, on other occasions it is to establish Christians, and at other times it is in order to equip people for ministry. Meeting with individuals for evangelism is a very powerful form of preaching the gospel. In it we are able to answer their real questions in their specific situation. They are also able to see a real Christian at close quarters and to understand what a difference it makes to our life. Frequently when we see a person converted to Christianity we need to stay with them to establish them in the Christian faith. All too often people have made the step of commitment to Christ but are then left to flounder for themselves. In churches everywhere you will find Christians, people committed to Christ, who are continuing in babyhood. The need to encourage Christians to growth and stability is enormous. Part to this work of establishing Christians is to challenge them to minister to others. To grow like Christ is to grow into other-person centredness. To grow like Christ is to be concerned for the salvation of other people. Therefore people need to be challenged to look to others and their needs and salvation. However, to challenge people to ministry without equipping them for the task is to ask a lot. Thus part of Christian ministry has to be in helping people learn how to minister to others. This equipping phase

of the work of ministry is again something that is easier to do in individual ministry than amongst groups.

Thus in our ministry to individuals we need to look at people's understanding, at their obedience and at their personal development. A lot of the problems that non-Christians and Christians face is a lack of understanding and knowledge of the word of God. Part of what we need to do as we share with people is to teach the word of God. This can be done in structured patterns using Bible study tools or reading through a book of the Bible together or in the unstructured pattern of conversations about the word of God, answering questions, discussing sermons. However, some element of our Christian ministry will be a sharing in the understanding of the word of God. Of course, true understanding of the word of God always involves obedience. As we meet with people sharing the gospel of Christ and teaching his word we will be facing together the issues of obedience to that word. Christians, especially young ones, are faced with many decisions in life that involve choosing the way of God. Having a friend who cares for them and shares in their life is an enormous assistance at making godly decisions. These decisions can range over ethical issues, over work, over home, in the way we drive our car or control our temper. As we grow in our understanding of the obedience to the word of God so we develop as Christians. We develop in a pattern of life that brings glory to Christ. We develop in our concern and ministry for other people. It is this growing maturity that we wish to encourage in others.

What do we do when we meet?

So what are we to do when we meet with individuals? There are many elements and ways in which we can minister in these personal relationships. Sometimes it can be in teaching. It can be going through passages of the Bible and explaining them to people. Sometimes it is in sharing our vision, struggle, our obedience, our disobedience, our lives. Frequently it involves praying with the other person and in prayer sharing our understanding of the word of God and our hopes and aspirations in life. Frequently it involves doing things together. It is as we do things, in particular as we do Christian ministry things, that we teach and model and share and pray with our friends. Modelling is a key element of Christ's ministry to individuals. Paul says to Timothy, "you, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings.." (2 Timothy 3:10-11). Sometimes we can meet with someone just to read together or to share in discussion with each other the things that we are reading in Christian books and /or in the Bible. The easiest way of conducting this kind of relationship profitably is to do things together such as praying or sharing the gospel door to door or preparing Sunday School lessons.

Value of long term ministry

Most relationships which have contributed to your life have been long term friendships. Friends who see you in many different contexts for a long period of time seem to have the most profound influence. One or two long, deep, heavy conversations do not seem to have the same impact. There is a tendency in personal ministry, especially if it is problem-centred ministry, to try and achieve too much in too few contacts. The light touch of a casual word here, a perceptive comment there, a piece of friendly advice on another occasion, built over years of friendship is more likely to have a deep effect upon the lives of others. Sometimes people limit their ministry by seeking to establish deep and meaningful relationships which will consume enormous amounts of time. It is unlikely

that you will do as an effective job with any one of these relationships as you would with more relationships and a lighter touch. Frequent small chats over morning tea after church, in the car on the way home, down the street at the shops, on the telephone or by letter can have an enormous impact on other people.

Asset for a life-time

Learning to undertake this kind of ministry is a valuable asset for a lifetime. This kind of ministry is transferable to any context in which you find yourself. It does not require structural institutional approval. It requires no ordination, examinations or qualifications. Whenever you join a new church you only need to look around for like-minded people who would be open to your offer of Christian fellowship. As you work with them, building them up, encouraging and challenging them so they will learn to likewise look after people to whom they can minister as you have ministered to them. Thus slowly but surely you can build a whole pyramid of ministry.

Discussion Starters

- 1) What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of the three levels of ministry:
 - a) The large public meeting
 - b) The small group
 - c) Individuals
- 2) What Christians do I nurture? In what direction am I encouraging them? Why? How?
- 3) What priority does this work of building up individuals have in my life?