

Ministry Headaches & Heartaches

It is 17 years now since we decided to sell the family business and set out on the road of following Jesus in a life of ministry. Across those years we have taken plenty of strange forks in the road, we've gone via the scenic route many times. We've hit road blocks, landslides and found ourselves heading down what turned out to be a one way street going the other way. And yet there is no other life for me, such is the fullness of joy, the richness of grace, and the freedom of loving service.

But Ministry is full of headaches and heartaches.

I admit that I've fallen over, been run over, and been thrown over-board, and now I regularly hear stories and meet ministers of the Living God who are experiencing all of the above.

I accept that it's not inconsistent with the biblical story, I accept that it's inevitable, but what I struggle to accept is that we do it to each other.

In children and families ministry I classically hear of loneliness, being isolated out the back with the kids. There is good community there, but somehow it's become unhinged from the pastor, the leadership and the congregation.

But then I hang out with Senior pastors, sole pastors and grown up pastors, and what is their biggest burden? The isolation and loneliness. "I need a team" I hear so often.

This looks simple to fix, don't you think? If there were two children in the playground, one sitting alone by themselves, and another tugging on my hand saying "Mrs B no one will play with me", I'd match them up, get them going on a game or story telling or bug watching, and move on to busting the bullies who I know are in full swing behind the bike shed.

What can I do about the Senior Pastors and the Children and Families ministers (many of whom are volunteers)? I guess not a lot, but here are some things I've been noticing.

There has been a growing trend to see Pastors as a different category from the congregation. In some extreme circumstances we have needed mediation between a pastor and a congregation, as if they were two separate entities from one another. This model tears at the fabric of the models we are given in the bible to help us understand who we are. A body, a family, an ecosystem, a building. All of these are presented as unities, in which all are called and gifted in different ways. This includes leaders and teachers and pastors.

Leadership comes from within the body. Growth comes from the seed and the soil and the sun and the irrigation.

And there is a bunch of ordinary followers of Jesus, who read their Bibles and find that we are all ministers. No distinction – we are all called to serve one another, and a world that's running low on grace, faith, hope and love.

Leadership

Ministry Headaches & Heartaches continued...

This (false) division between 'Pastors' and 'Congregations' is particularly awkward for those exercising their gifts in children and families ministry. The separation of pastor (active minister) and congregation (passive faithful) – I know I'm over-stretching the caricature a little, but bear with me, because I have seen it in lots of incarnations – leaves the children and families ministers belonging in neither camp. Most people involved in children and families ministry are non-staff, or part-time staff at best. Very few have been through a formal ordination or accreditation system, so they do not inhabit the 'professional' territory that emerges around Pastors.

But neither are they passive within the church system. Children and families ministry is a strong shaper of community. It flexes muscle as faith is exercised. Actually I am sure this is true for other ministries in our churches as well, for the same reasons, and my guess is with the same results of tension and – unfortunately, disenfranchisement.



In some communities, a children and families minister is appointed, but rather than empowering the whole body in the nurture of families (on both sides of the church welcome sign), this can often simply underline the separatism – and in some cases, make it worse. The pastor is still separate from the congregation, the children's minister is separate as well - from the pastor, because the pastor doesn't regard the children's minister as an equal partner in the gospel, and the children's minister is now separate - from congregations, as he/she is beginning to come under the professionalisation process that afflicts our pastors.

On the surface, everyone has encouragement and praise, warm hand shakes, 'you're so gifted with the children' 'our pastor is such a gifted preacher' as well as a few back room whinges 'that multi-age service isn't what we're used to!' 'why do we have to make room for the children at all?' 'can't you just tell the old people to "suck it up, Princess".'

And many introverted Pastors (and I'm one of them) are more comfortable on a day to day basis with isolation. I could spend my whole life sitting at a computer or piano keyboard either writing or musicking, or going for long contemplative jogs by myself. To do this is often beautiful, and sometimes produces beautiful things that others appreciate, but it's not ministry.

Leadership

Ministry Headaches & Heartaches continued...

Ministry is what we all do together (not the same, but together) as one body. It is the connection of our lives together in God, where the products of our introverted moments are transformed into something more than a beautiful artifact, but because of the dependence of children, they readily engage in connected, communal expressions of life. That's where they thrive.

So children's ministry is often the place that transgresses the boundaries of our separatism. Having our children amongst us blurs our edges, because children don't need professionals as much as they need community. Perhaps you've experienced this – 30 children integrated into corporate worship, and two other people, uncomfortable with the closeness, backing away? We find this so difficult to reconcile, because almost always, the back away-ers are grown up (I'm not going to say mature) and able to articulate their ideas. Their values sound more familiar to us, to the pastor, and are expressed with the clarity of singularity. The ethos of community is harder to argue forcefully – relational, experiential, formational and incarnational values, while now part of our po-mo buzz word list, still lose against the rationalist-agenda over and over. Have a listen this week in your meetings and conversations at church (and also outside the church – perhaps for an interesting comparison?)



For those Pastors who are struggling with the burden of isolation at the top, I wonder if the community orientation of children and families ministry offers a gift. And I wonder for those who are happily successful as a lone leader, whether you might think about how those strongly and actively engaged in ministry with children can connect and integrate with you and with your congregation.

Grace and Peace,

Beth