

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

Dr. George O. Wood

My father, as most of you know was a pastor and I can remember there were certain occasions Dad would stand up to preach and he would say, “This morning I don’t really want to preach to you. I want to talk and share my heart.” That’s what I want to do today. I’m not in a series right now and it’s giving me the opportunity to just address some things that are on my heart.

For this Sunday and next Sunday I especially want to talk about our mission and ministry as a church. Today looking at our ministry here in this community. Then next Sunday looking at our ministry as world oriented Christians.

I take as a scripture Acts 1:8 “You shall be witnesses of mine in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world.” In my earlier years I was associated on the staff of a church that had a great foreign missions emphasis. But they had absolutely no emphasis to their community. As the youth pastor in that church I kept trying to say, But what are we doing for the kids that are living within a stone’s throw of this church. I had some proposals and some ideas what the church should be doing. Every one of my proposals and ideas was turned down because it would cost money and it would take away from our foreign missions’ emphasis.

I must tell you that that experience for a while soured me on missionary oriented churches. I had to come back to balance and realize that a church for its mission must be both. Oriented to its community and oriented to its mission to the world. I would tell you today that that particular church that I was associated with 25 years ago is pretty much spiritually and numerically dead. You can only neglect your home front for so long and it will catch up with you. If you don’t keep your Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria which is your close proximity and keep ministering at that base where God has called you geographically you will lose your ability to be a strengthening force throughout the ends of the world.

When I speak of our mission and our ministry at home I felt that what I need to do is perhaps sound a note that hopefully I have sounded through the years as pastor. The oboe or the piano hits note A and all the instruments are tuned to A. I want to tune first of all my instrument to what I understand to be the A of scripture and the A of the Lord’s heart. Then as I hit that note I’d like us all as the symphony of God, the orchestra, that is this church cooperating together to tune our instruments to this clarion call to what our mission is.

I want to share with you some perspectives, seven in all of what I see as essential in our mission as a church. Then I’d like to invite you to make ten responses. This is going to be a *list* sermon. In fact I was thinking this past week that it was this coming week, the first week of June sixteen years ago that Jewel and I packed our two little kids four and two in our car and headed for the great trip west to pastor this church. I was coming off several years of teaching a course at Evangel college called Church Leadership. It was at that time a required course for all students and no one of the other faculty liked to teach it. So whoever was the newest faculty member got the privilege of teaching the course.

My first year out of seminary I wind up teaching this course in church leadership. Other than personal experience as a pastor’s kid and as a lay young person involved in church I knew little about how a church functions. But here I was now to teach college students how to be involved

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

in the local church. It was being assigned to teach that course however that really revolutionized my life and made me ready to hear a call to the pastor. I came across some biblical principles in that course that I had not seen in sufficient strength before in my life. They are principles that have galvanized me and continues to galvanize me as a pastor. I repeat them for you today.

First principle is one that should be so obvious it may be ought not to be said. But it needs to be said. The church belongs to Jesus. This church that we're involved in is not your church and it's not my church. I realize that all of us have a pronoun language, which we use. I will sometimes inadvertently say "my church" or we will say together collectively "our church." But it's really not my church or our church. If it is the church of Jesus Christ then it is exactly that. It is his.

Paul never refers in his writings to my church. It is also the church of God or the church of Jesus Christ or the *ecclesia*, the Assembly of God. I think that's so critical that we always keep that mentality, that we do not have a possessive aspect toward the church that somehow it's our own personal property.

I was with a pastor on one occasion whom I served under. Wherever I would go he would introduce me to his colleagues as "I want you to meet my youth pastor." I, under my breath would say, "I'm not your youth pastor! I'm God's youth pastor! That's the whole problem with this church, pastor. You think everything belongs to you including the people in it and that's why it's going through all these struggles." It's how I felt. I have a thing about the fact that our names as individuals ought to stay off of buildings and we don't have plaques up anywhere saying this pew is given by this person or whatever. And we honor all of those who have given. But the way to honor is not to somehow create a plaque and say this is yours or this is mine or whatever. It's the Lord's church.

If someone is a very distinguished person and they give me something and say "Take care of this," I would take care of it a lot better than I would take care of my own. And I take care of my own rather well.

So it's the Lord's church, not mine. I'm going to take even better care of it belongs to him. You are God's people. You're not my people. I love you dearly but you're not mine. You're the Lord's because everything is his and the church must always proceed on that assumption. We're the Lords.

The second thing that I have as an enduring principle about our ministry as a church is this. Pastors are not the stars of the team. They are the coaches of the team. I know that's an athletic language but it's taken directly out of scripture. Ephesians 4:11-12 "Where he gave some apostles, those who found the church. Prophets, those who have a ministry of correction and admonishment. Evangelists, those who have a ministry of evangelism and salvation. And pastor teachers, that collection of individuals along with those who serve in leadership in the church are given to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. The word ministry there is *diakonia*. To equip the who church for deconing. Or practical serve. So therefore those in leadership role are not there so that people can admire them or talk about them and say, I go to so and so's church or whatever.

But we who are in leadership roles in the body of Christ are really your servants who hopefully see our ministry as equipping you to do the broader phase of ministry. That has been such a freeing aspect. I grew in an era where it was expected that the pastor do the ministry and we

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

were to support the pastor in his ministry as lay people in the church. While that was certainly a wonderful attitude of respect to have toward a pastor, the real biblical aspect is that it is the role of the pastor and those who join with the pastor in leadership role to serve you who are doing the ministry. Our ministry is to help you do your ministry better. And it will be a very impoverished church if it only has a “star.”

We did a count just this last Christmas as to how many persons in this church body were involved in at least one ministry within the body itself. Not counting all the ministry that may be involved in that people in this church as that is related to outside the church efforts. We came to the conclusion that out of a base of maybe 1200-1300 adults in this congregation that we have between 600-700 that we can identify a shaving a specific task oriented function within this congregation ministering within the body itself.

I would think that probably we missed a lot of people in that count and included in the people that we missed would be of course the many that are involved in ministry that is outside the apparatus of organization in this church.

That’s important that we see each one of ourselves as a minister. Pastors are coaches not stars which leads me right to the third point.

Every believer is a minister. We are all ... I have in my notes “reverends.” If there’s one term that I absolutely hate and despise and won’t use it’s the term reverend. I think it’s so officious and obnoxious. I’m no more reverend as a pastor than anybody else. Just because I’m an ordained clergyman, just because I pastor a church doesn’t mean I’m more holy than the rest. But if we could all be reverend. If we’re called of God, if we’re God’s people then we’re saints so in that aspect we’re all set apart for a mission. And we must see ourselves as that.

But you say, “I don’t see myself as a minister.” Then really begin to look at what God has placed in your life and the fact that he’s calling you to be more than a follower of his. He’s calling you to be a disciple. To be a servant.

There was a wonderful moment in the gospels where Jesus called to him his disciples, and the text of Luke says, He called to him his disciples from whom he chose twelve whom he named to be apostles.” In that act there was a transference taking place. Up till that moment they had been disciples or followers. Then Jesus took them apart and said now I’m going to do something different for you. I’m going to call you apostles which means “sent ones.” A disciple is a follower. An apostle is one sent out. And there is that transference that the Lord wants to make in each one of our lives where we come in addition to being a follower of his a sent one from him, doing his work in the world.

The fourth principle that I have lived with and believe in very deeply and the one I’m going to take the most time on today is that as the body of Christ the church takes its mission, it derives its mission from the head.

A body can only do what the head suggests and what the head directs. My hands and feet do not operate independently of my mind and if they begin operating independently you know I’ve got some serious health problems.

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

It is the function of the body of Christ to operate at the direction of its head. Lord, I want to discern where you want me and want your church to go.

When we were writing our church bylaws a long time ago we focused on this theme, that the church must derive its mission from the head. If we know what Jesus came to do then we'll know what the church is supposed to do. If we search the scriptures we discover that you can reduce the mission of Jesus to four basic aspects and that the church itself must reduce its mission to these four things. In every ministry of the church we have always in each facet of our ministry to be focusing on these four things. Are we doing this in what we're doing on a local and individual and cellular scale?

The first mission that Jesus had and the first mission the body has is to glorify God. Jesus says it in his high priestly prayer of John 17 "I have glorified thy name." That is to say Jesus when he was all done with his ministry is able to say to the Father, I have left behind an accurate and true representation of who you, the heavenly Father, really are. That's really what the church is to do. To live in such a way and to believe in such a way that all those who come in contact with the church will have an understanding, an accurate understanding of who God is. That's why scandal in the body of Christ is so damaging. It strikes the very heart of our mission. It strikes the number one item of our mission which is to glorify God, to represent him in such a way that he will be compelling and attractive to the world. When the church is divided by schism and scandal it cannot do that.

Martin Luther said it so eloquently in his catechism, which is used today in the Lutheran church. How do we glorify God is the question. And the answer is when our life and our doctrine are truly Christian. When our life, how we behave. And our doctrine, what we believe, is truly Christian.

That's one thing we always want to do. Whatever we do we want to do it for God's glory.

The second thing we want to do as a body that takes its clue from the head is we want to see disciples made. Jesus came to make disciples. More than converts. I make a distinction between a convert and a disciple. I see in the contemporary body of Christ today many people who make a confession of faith. But that sort of then goes into deep freeze. Yes that person is saved but there is no active participation in the body of Christ or the life of Christ or service to Christ. It's like we signed the insurance policy and now we can put it in a safe deposit vault and let it park there. Jesus is saying in discipleship I came to do more than get you ready for eternity. I came to make you useful on earth. So we're here to make disciples.

Jesus made disciples through a number of ways. Two words that are big in the book of Acts that the early church used as a kind of context for disciples. One was an emphasis on teaching. And the other aspect of making disciples in the New Testament was *koinonia* or fellowship. The disciples were constantly in a mode of fellowshiping *koinonia* and in a mode of learning or being taught.

We do this as a church. That's why the emphasis of this church is on a teaching ministry. It is also upon a ministry that connects us to one another in fellowship. Because we learn to be a Christian. Both by taking this word and putting it in operation in our life. But we also learn better to be a Christian and disciple of Jesus Christ by sharing one another's life. Some of the

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

greatest growth I've had as a Christian is the growth I've experienced by watching how another Christian handled their experiences and transferred that spiritual maturity and learning to me.

There are formidable obstacles in contemporary southern California to building a church that makes disciples. Could I as a pastor share some of these with you that have frustrated me no end at times and caused me to lose a great deal of hair.

The church is the only institution in society that is inclusive of everybody from the cradle to the grave. Kiwanas doesn't do it. PTA doesn't do it. Rotary doesn't do it. These are focused on slice of the culture. The church takes in everybody from the littlest to the senior citizen. We have a wide span socially, a wide span educationally, a wide span age wise. The church in today's culture needs to minister both to the family, to the married person, to the single persons, to the divorced person. A wide span economically. Some within our congregation are on welfare. Some are obviously much better than that. A wide span politically. A wide span denominationally. We have this tremendous breadth from which we come. Which means that somewhere along the line we have got to find a common unity. What is our community unity? The fact that we like the pastor or like the music? But I hope more than all of that we like Jesus Christ. That's where we find our unity and that somehow what we have found in him is greater than any differences that we bring to this body. That's one formidable obstacle. The fact that the church is trying to straddle all dimensions of our culture in society in terms of including people rather than excluding them.

Another difficulty to building community and building discipleship is the fact that in our area we have a tremendously high rate of mobility. We have in the city of Costa Mesa an occupancy turn over in houses and apartments of 30% per year. Thirty percent of the homes and apartments will become vacant and will have new residents this year. That has gone on for every year for how long.

The same thing is happening in the church. We're always saying good bye to people. And hello. You can get frustrated with that at times.

Another thing against creating community is the fact that we live such an individualistic style in Southern California. We hardly know who is next door to us even if we're in an apartment complex. We live within certain security zones.

Then as a church it's hard to build community because we're an area wide rather than a neighborhood constituency church. We have people driving who are part of the church from Long Beach and some from Yorba Linda and Costa Mesa and Santa Ana and Newport Beach and Irvine. People are spread out and they don't walk to church like they did a century ago.

Then we have multiple services. That's another hindrance to community. Where will the 8:00 people get to know the 11:00 people?

We sometimes have a failure of hospitality toward one another.

Then I think worst of all we have such full personal schedules. We're a family. Both spouses work a lot of times in a marriage. And there rare home improvements to do and second jobs and continuing education and weekends away and recreation and just one out of every three of our

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

church family on any given Sunday is going to be away somewhere. Either ill, recuperating, building a patio, sleeping in, visiting relatives, going to the mountains, going to San Diego.

I just determined as a pastor years ago I was never going to berate people. You're free. We're free in Christ. But being aware of this must make me more sensitive to the fact as a responsible Christian, as a responsible church member that we in this culture must work extra hard to help one another become disciples of the Lord and must find meaningful ways to give ourselves to each other and to the church.

If the church is to glorify God and to make disciples it's to be a witness, to save the lost. The temptation is always to judge our success by our results rather than by our witness. We're a success if we go ahead and witness. The response is up to God. We witness. The Lord gives the increase. We are to be faithful.

My own analysis is that currently in the church we are seeing less adults come to Christ than all of us desire. But we are seeing many, many children and youth. For the last several years we have witnessed at least 100 children and youth come to Christ every year for five years or more that I can remember. We are baptizing most of these. We have seen in our junior high ministry from 10 kids to over 80 kids on Tuesday night regular involved in junior high ministry. Over half of these come from non church homes and have had no prior Christian experience.

Our mission is to save the lost. There are 16,033 students in K through 12th grade in the Newport Mesa school district. We have in this church about 400 or more of those 16,000. There is a mission field out there of 75% of our kids. Not that Sunday school is going to be the only thing to reach them. We've tried to say to parents in our church, we'll help you spiritually parent your child if you give that child to us five hours a week. We have a program to give that child spiritual education and training.

We need to be outreach oriented and sensitive to the need to witness to other people. We're going to begin having once a quarter a special emphasis on Sunday morning, a friendship day. Either I'll speak or we'll bring in someone like a converted astronaut or something. Anything to give you a handle to say to somebody Why don't you come with me. We'd like through those Friendship Days to give you an excuse to easily bring someone with you whom you've been witnessing to. And to intensify our efforts as a congregation in evangelism.

Then the fourth thing that Christ wanted to do is he wanted to serve human need. He was at work serving human need. Healing the sick, meeting the needs of the needy. The church should be doing that. First to its own. "He who doesn't take care of his own house is worse than an infidel." Then we need to reach out and we've tried to do that. A church if it's going to be a body to take directions from its head is sort of like a four-legged stool. If a church is just glorifying God then what it is a worship community that spends all its time saying "I love you Lord," but isn't doing anything to disciple people, it isn't doing anything to evangelize people, isn't doing anything to serve. Some churches on the other hand say, we've got to serve, serve, serve. They forget evangelism. Other churches emphasize evangelism and not discipleship. They've got a great many people coming in the front door and a lot of people going out the back door. It seems time that all these are essential in a wholesome and healthy church. The church derives its mission from its head.

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

Every phase and ministry of the church is to take its cue from the head of the church who came to glorify the Father, came to make disciples, came to save the lost. And he came to serve human need.

That's my first four points – the church belongs to Jesus, pastors are coaches not stars, every believer is a minister, and as the body of Christ we derive our mission from our head.

Then the fifth thing is, a kind of principle by which this church functions, we are an inclusive church. As an inclusive church we have sought balance.

My favorite church is the Philippian church of the New Testament. The first three converts were from such radically different sectors of the culture. There was Lydia who was wealthy upper class, the Avon sales manager for all her territory. There was a Greek demon possessed slave girl who was on the low socio-economic end of society. Low educational end. Then there was the Roman jailer, representative of middle class. You've got the high class, you've got the low class, and you've got the middle class. Where in the world are you going to put three odd different interest people like that together and make it work. Only the church of Jesus Christ is big enough or broad enough to straddle that kind of cultural social and educational and even ethnic difference. The church of Jesus Christ united these people. I think we need to recognize the church of Jesus Christ is something more than a comfortable social club where we all think the same way and the like. We have a lot of differences as Christians. Rather than all try to be homogenous we need to find common unity in Christ.

We've sought therefore balance as a church. We've tried not to be carried away by every wind of doctrine. As I've been pastor of this church over the years I've seen a lot of winds of doctrine come along. I've seen them come in waves.

It's like Christians ride a wave. What's new out there? I don't want to be stuck in the mud and dig in my heels and be conservative. But I recognize the more I live that it's really the fundamentals that count. It's the fundamentals of scripture where we have the struggle and the problem. It seems to me that we need balance and stability in the body of Christ while at the same time tolerating doctrinal and denominational diversity. In areas where there are differences among Christians who are deeply born again and love the Lord let's not let that be a divisive issue which keeps people from being a full participating member in any role.

I think it's wonderful that as a Christian body we can tolerate divergence and love one another. Isn't the church of Jesus Christ big enough to handle all this?

I remember my parents telling me. They grew up in the early days of Pentecost. They said we got kicked out of denominational churches. They didn't like us because we'd had this new experience of infusion of the Holy Spirit. I said to myself if I ever get to be in a leadership role of a church we're not going to be kicking people out. You'd have to be a total heretic or reprobate or something like that.

Be inclusive. We need tolerance for political diversity. As a pastor I have felt at times an enormous desire to take stands on political issues. I've tried to be very careful to only take stands when the issue is related to some foundational, moral or biblical truth. I guess I got that from my missionary parents who were told by their missions board go to the foreign country and stay out of politics and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let people on their own get involved

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

in politics but keep the church out. In the 70s and 80s that has been almost impossible. I sometimes feel like I'm swimming upstream. But I'm comforted by various scriptures: Ecclesiastes 10:2 "The heart of the wise inclines to the right but the heart of the fool to the left." But that's matched by Isaiah 4:3 "Those who are left in Zion shall be called holy." And Deuteronomy 5:32 puts it best "So be careful to do what the Lord has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left."

Even the way we worship can be a matter of division. There are people in the body of Christ today that feel that hymnals should be thrown out. Others would be more comfortable if all the new courses weren't sung. Can we straddle that?

I've heard a new term recently that's been a real help to me: margin of error. All of us have a margin of error. There is not a single one of us in this room that would do something exactly like another person would do. And you know that if you're married. You are trying to get that spouse of yours changed. You grade people on a scale of one to ten, I guess. If you're comfortable with about 7 or 8 things you can tolerate the one or two things. And you're going to wreck a relationship if you're always in the other persons' margin of error, nagging them saying do it this way. Everybody needs a certain amount of freedom to make some mistakes, to have some latitude and say if you don't agree with me trust me.

I think that's true of churches. I have not yet found a perfect church. I don't agree with everything that happens necessarily in this body. Although I love everybody that's involved there's some times done that I wouldn't have done it that way. But part of the body of Christ is living with the kind of margin of error and in love baring up with one another.

That's what we have to do in family. Letting one another have a margin of error. So maybe there's one or two things that don't exactly in the body strike you well. Help us improve that then.

Six, the church should not be collected around a human personality. The church belongs to Christ, I want to repeat. God buries his workmen but not his work. I think the hardest thing that could ever happen to me is in the day that I come to be called home or the Lord releases me from the call to be pastor here, would be for the church to in some way have a diminishment of its ministry. That would say to me that the church had subtly collected around a leader, around a human personality. We're not collecting around human personalities although we respect the fact that God uses human personality. We're collecting around the one personality that counts. That of our Lord.

Then I think a seventh important principle for ministry here is the success of a church can never be measured by how many it's gathered on the inside. Right now if we went back two services we would have chairs all over the sanctuary and many Sundays we'd have people in the overflow room and we could say it's wonderful. We packed the church out. Instead we've gone to three services and there are a lot of empty seats. But even if we fill all three services and we don't have the new sanctuary we'll go to a fourth service. I think we will anyway.

Because why? Of the total people living in this community only 27% at the most are in any church – Roman Catholic or Protestant on any given Sunday morning. 73% are not churched on a regular basis. That's not saying anything about whether or not the people who are churched are really Christians.

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

Hopefully I do not just pastor this church. Hopefully I see myself as pastoring in this community. And hopefully all the other pastors feel the same way. Hopefully we don't see this as just our church and we're going to be uncomfortable if more people come. The heartbeat of the gospel is to reach out.

A church could even be outwardly successful, like the Ephesian church in Revelation 2 but the Lord saw that it had lost its inner first love. So we must always judge our success by what he thinks of us. And by what in our mission is yet to be done.

I committed to being in this church. I would urge you if you're a floater in the body of Christ to stop floating and sink roots down and grow and have a place of vital ministry.

How can you as an individual in this church effectively bless and support this church?

1. Pray for this church. Pray for its leaders and its outreach. Lift this church up continually in prayer. We have a prayer meeting tonight. Come and help us simply pray. As Christians we have become so functional oriented. What am I going to get out of this? Or, What am I going to do as a result of this? That we do not take the time as western Christians to adequately be in the Lord's presence. One of the things that prayer and worship does is it, it just gives us time for being. Pray.
2. Make the church your fourth priority. If I understand the scriptures right your first priority is to serve the Lord and love him. Your second priority is if you have a family, make your family your second priority. The third priority obviously is your work, you've got to put bread on the table. You've got a career and all that. But let the church come fourth. Before recreation. That's not exercise. That should be up there somewhere. You've got to take care of your body. Maybe the church should be fifth after exercise. Maybe that's my problem. Make it fourth or fifth priority.
3. Belong to at least one smaller unit within the body. Don't let involvement with the church just be Sunday morning worship service. But be involved in one smaller unit. It maybe a friendship group. It may be a Sunday school class. It may be a task-oriented ministry of some kind. But be involved.
4. Participate in at least one ministry. Have a title behind your name – choir member, usher, Sunday school teacher. Or if it's a ministry outside the church – school board member, volunteer at the hospital. Have ministry and see that as your ministry.
5. Be as faithful as you can in your attendance and involvement. Be as faithful as you can. You have to evaluate your priorities as to what's important. If for example there are times in your life when you need some space and get some rest and you can't make week after week commitment. But to always go through life with emphasis on I've got to keep free because I want to go have fun. And never made a commitment that would take 13 weeks or 26 weeks in a row to fulfill. That's not good for you spiritually either. Take time to make meaningful, faithful involvement in attendance and caring in ministry.
6. A way you could minister to the church is obviously in the area of finances is to tithe and beyond tithes give offerings. This is so critical. I really don't feel it's fair that only some in the

OUR MINISTRY AT HOME

church should carry the financial concern for the church. That's a function of all of us as a body. I believe the Lord established the system of tithing so that the whole church could really operate and function in all the ministries God's called it to. If you're not tithing begin to tithe.

7. Invite people to come with you. I grew up in churches I was embarrassed to invite my friends. I never knew when something really off the wall was going to happen. I'm talking about the person borderline psychotic and nobody had ever set down with them and said, In the middle of the pastors sermon you don't stand up and begin shrieking! I was scared to invite any of my friends. I hope you don't feel that way about this church. It concerns me that you come to church not just with an attitude to hear the pastor preach or the choir sing or whatever. But we come with an attitude of participation. As far as I'm concerned this church will always be free for administration and the ministry of any gift of the Holy Spirit that the Spirit wants to give in that particular service. When there's a gift we want to be free in that. If there's a gift and I feel it's going to be necessary to explain to an outsider what's happened I'll do that and I'll help them to be comfortable with what is going on. While at the same time letting the Holy Spirit speak to them in a deeper way. Invite people to come with you and witness to them.

8. Be longsuffering. You're going to need to be longsuffering with me and others in the church.

9. Be hospitable. See your apartment or home as a place of inviting others in the body. Be freely. Don't let somebody set near you and you say, I should have introduced myself to them and didn't. Make one another feel at home. Be hospitable to strangers.

10. Pray some more.

It seems to me that those are some of the things I need to sound as a note A to let our hearts be in accord with one another in this church.

So let our hearts be in accord with one another in this church.

Lord, we think of the hymn that says, "Renew thy church. Her ministries restore, both to love and adore. Make her again as salt throughout the land and as light from a stand." We pray that, O Lord, for us as your church. Let your Spirit be upon us. Let us in word and deed and heart glorify our Lord Jesus Christ through him we pray. Amen.