

Every Member Ministry

Mark Heath, 6 Sept 2004

1 Cor 12:14-26

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body", that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

The phrase "every member ministry" is commonly heard in our churches. Everyone is agreed that this is a Biblical principle. From time to time, sermons will be preached on it, and it probably features prominently in any courses for new church members. But just because we think it's a good idea doesn't mean that it will automatically happen. In many churches the leaders complain of members who are not getting involved and the members complain of lack of opportunities to be involved.

In fact, all over the place Christians are moving from one church to another in the hope that they will be "used". Or they are staying put growing bitter and critical about the way that things have not worked out for them. Others try to view things positively, remembering that, after all, your identity is not in your ministry. And didn't Joseph, Moses and others go through long periods of waiting to be used by God? Yet at the same time they can't help feeling that something is wrong.

This is a serious problem that needs to be addressed by the church as a whole. Rather than trying to work out "who is to blame", we need to go back to the Scriptures and ask "How is every member ministry supposed to work". 1 Corinthians 12 has lots to teach us on this issue, particularly in highlighting some areas of misunderstanding.

What is ministry?

Part of the problem surely lies with our definition of the word "ministry". For example, when someone talks about the ongoing theological debate concerning "women in ministry", what they actually mean by "ministry" is some form of leadership role, whether job with a title (such as "elder" or "house group leader") or a job involving leading from the front of a public meeting (such as preaching or worship leading).

Ministry is far more than this. Any activity performed as service to the Lord rightly counts as ministry. In fact, there are many "ministries" such as evangelism, prayer and helping the poor, which regularly go on outside of the context of organised church activities and without any direct oversight from church leaders. This means

that no Christian can claim that they have no opportunities for ministry. These tasks do not require being specially commissioned by church leaders. In fact, you don't even need their permission. Jesus has commanded them, so we can simply get on and do them.

Even within the context of activities of the local church, ministry is more than leadership. Toilet cleaning, tea and coffee serving, crèche and children's work, PA and administration are all areas of ministry that need many people to resource them. Very often these ministries require a sacrificial, humble attitude. They are usually not high profile and don't necessarily provide scope for people to exercise many of their spiritual gifts. But never are we more closely following the example of Jesus than when we are selflessly giving ourselves in the service of others.

We are a body

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul has been explaining that there are a wide variety of gifts, and these are given for the benefit of all. The gifts he lists in verses 8-10 have a focus on those that would be used in the context of a church meeting. Of course, there are many others listed in other places, but here Paul specifically has the Corinthians' worship services in mind so selects appropriate gifts as examples.

In verse 12, we are introduced to the familiar metaphor of the church as a body – the body of Christ (v27). Members can be likened to parts of the body, each with different functions but all working together. Whatever gift we have, it was given by the sovereign will of the Spirit with the specific purpose of benefiting all in the local church. Verses 14-26 develop this thought, using various body parts as examples to counter four distorted views of every member ministry.

You are needed

The first distorted view that must be addressed is "*most member ministry*". This is where someone looks enviously on at other's giftings and ministries and says "I've got nothing to offer, I'm clearly not needed here". Verses 15 and 16 strongly disagree. You are a part of the body whether you like it or not. The foot may feel inferior to the hand, and the ear to the eye, but they actually both serve the rest of the body in important ways.

We need to help people realise where they fit into the body of Christ. This may involve spending time talking with them, or letting them try serving in different ways without having to commit long-term. It may be that there are existing areas of ministry desperate for help that these people are simply not aware of, or perhaps were afraid to volunteer for. It may even be that new small groups, meetings or outreach events will be started as a result of these people's giftings becoming apparent.

Have you ever wondered why the "wicked and lazy servant" in the parable of the talents was the one with only one talent (Matt 25:14-30)? Jesus normally told stories where the last became the first. Perhaps it is simply a statement of reality. Those with many gifts tend to get on and use them, but those with fewer compare themselves to others and think they have nothing to offer. They start to believe that they have no gifts at all.

A church that truly believes in every member ministry will not be content to leave these people on the sidelines. They will need to be encouraged if they are timid, helped if they are weak, warned if they are idle (1 Thess 5:14), but should not be

simply ignored. With some it will require patience, but there are many who just need help to take the first step.

You need others

The second distorted view is “*some member ministry*”. This is where one person, or more commonly, a few privileged people dominate all areas of church life. Only the most menial tasks are ever delegated and the majority of church members do not even dare to hope to be involved in a significant way. Meetings are cancelled if the person who normally leads them is unavailable, and new ventures are not started because “there is no one available”.

The reason often given for this state of affairs is the “woeful lack of spiritual maturity amongst church members”. Despite all the training courses and conferences that may be put on for them, none are deemed to have graduated to the point where they can actually be entrusted with some responsibility.

Verse 21 warns against the possibility of some members saying “I don’t need you” to others. The problem is one of pride – thinking that you have all the important gifts yourself, and viewing others as less spiritual than yourself. But every member is placed in a church by the Spirit and given gifts that are for the benefit of all. So if you want all that God has for your church, then you will want everyone to be fully involved.

A church that truly believes in every member ministry will not jealously guard the opportunities to serve but will actively seek those who are gifted to share the work. In particular, those whose gifts are apparent but not yet fully developed will be encouraged to grow in those areas by using them in increasingly challenging settings. If people are expected to reach perfection before they can be used of God, then no one will ever do anything.

We’re all different

A third mistake is to implement “*every member every ministry*”. This well-intentioned but seriously flawed approach assumes that every member of the church can do everything equally as well. So for example, preaching or worship leading is handed out indiscriminately to anyone who feels they want to “have a go”. Not only does this regularly subject the church to the floundering efforts of complete novices, but those who are truly called and gifted are only used on occasion.

Verse 17 gives us the comedy picture of a person who is just one great big eye. A person like that would be good at looking at things, and nothing else whatsoever. The point is, we all have different gifts, and that’s the way it’s supposed to be. In a series of rhetorical questions in verses 29 and 30, Paul stresses that not everyone has every gift. We should not make people feel inadequate because they don’t have a particular gift, but be appreciative of the unique contribution that they do make to the body of Christ.

A church that believes in every member ministry will appreciate the full variety of gifts in the church, rather than making one or two the all-important criteria for ministry or spirituality. A hand cannot do the job of an eye, nor should it, because it has an important role of its own to play.

Not all gifts are equal

The fourth mistake is to say that since everyone already has their gift we simply need to find out what it is and accept our allotted role. The danger is that we can discourage people from seeking to develop new giftings. Paul certainly does not want this and encourages us to eagerly desire the “greater gifts” (verse 31).

Not every ministry is high profile. Some gifts like prophecy, apostleship, teaching or working miracles are held in very high esteem. These gifts may be “greater” than others, but this does not imply that the people who have been given them are more valuable than others. In verses 22-26 we see that some parts of the body appear weaker or “less honourable” than others, yet they are all part of the body. And when one part suffers, the whole body suffers.

There will be some members of the body who are weak or more vulnerable than others, but they should not be looked down on for this. They are the ones who need special care and attention. And they too have a function to play in the body, which may not be high profile, but is still important.

A church that believes in every member ministry will urge people on to seek the greater gifts, but not value people based on what gifts they have. They will endeavour to show appreciation to everyone who serves in whatever way, but not pigeonhole them so that they are never expected to move out into new areas of ministry.

Conclusion

Spiritual gifts are not primarily given to individuals, but to the local church. One person cannot possibly have or use all the gifts, but a church can and should expect to contain people with every gift. To truly benefit from all the gifts that the Holy Spirit has so generously given we must be proactive in encouraging every member ministry.

Individuals will need to be challenged, encouraged and helped to reach all the potential they have in God. As they step out in their callings they will grow in faith and gifting. They will feel a greater sense of belonging to the local church. Many new initiatives will be also started, and existing ministries will be revitalised, allowing the church to reach out on an unprecedented scale to the lost.

God expects every Christian to be active in serving him both inside and outside of the local church. He has prepared in advance good works for us to do (Eph 2:10). Let us not hinder one another from fulfilling their God-given callings, rather let us spur one another on to love and good works (Heb 10:24).