



Discovering Ministry in the Midst of the Stuff

By James G. Poitras

I'm working and writing on the premise that God speaks best through me what He has been speaking in me. God has been prodding me onward and helping me wade through some of the tough stuff in every day ministry.

A missionary associate recently discussed with me an AIMer (short-term missionary) that had arrived on the field. He/she felt bewildered and blameworthy he/she wasn't doing actual "ministry." It's a repetitive regular restlessness among those in kingdom business. In 1999 I visited one of the executives in his office at World Evangelism Center. I asked if it were possible to do ministry in the midst of his administrative responsibilities. He pointed to a large stack of files and said, "Ministry, every time I want to do ministry, there is all this work staring at me."

Lest we think this is a phenomenon isolated to World Evangelism Center, or AIMers on the mission field, I wonder how many pastors feel the same way. I recall, after marrying my wife, Linda, receiving a letter from her pastor-Dad. He wondered if he was truly making a difference in the small church he pastored and was close to giving up and throwing in the towel. Thankfully, he faithfully pressed on.

Regardless of the particular aspect of ministry one is involved in, it has its own share of unexciting, undesirable aspects and assignments. It's inescapable! Sometimes ministry is reduced to a four-letter word: "W-O-R-K!" And it is repeated day after day.

"And David said unto his men, Gird ye on every man his sword. And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword: and there went up after David about four hundred men; and two hundred abode by the stuff" (I Samuel 25:13).

Notice what a few other translations bring out:

- Stayed with the supplies (NKJV)
- Stayed with the equipment
- Stayed with the baggage (ESV, NASU, NASB)

Admittedly, there are a few things in my ministry and serving the Lord that feel a whole lot like baggage to me. But, every traveler knows the frustrations of arriving at one's destination and baggage has been delayed or lost. This worsens when one forgets or ignores packing an extra set of clothes in the carryon. Guilty!

“But David pursued, he and four hundred men: for two hundred abode behind, which were so faint that they could not go over the brook Besor. Then answered all the wicked men and men of Belial, of those that went with David, and said, Because they went not with us, we will not give them ought of the spoil that we have recovered, save to every man his wife and his children, that they may lead them away, and depart. Then said David, Ye shall not do so, my brethren, with that which the Lord hath given us, who hath preserved us, and delivered the company that came against us into our hand. For who will hearken unto you in this matter? but as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike. And it was so from that day forward, that he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel unto this day” (1 Samuel 30:10; 22-25).

It is intriguing to note those that went into battle and those involved in keeping the stuff received the same rewards. It humors me that “staying by the stuff” reaped the return of more stuff. **“Stuff” may very well be what ministry is made up of.** Add to that, people coming to God have a lot of life's baggage that they have to deal with and sometimes offload some things to upload some others.

As I started to Google those words “staying by the...” here is what popped up.

- Staying on course
- Staying in the Word

All involving focus. Staying by the stuff (involves focus). Simple as that or should I state it is as hard as that. Maintaining focus is never easy. It requires deliberate determination.

“No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13, New Living Translation).

I came to Global Missions, two years ago, after spending twenty-eight years on the mission field, because of love:

1. Love for God
2. Love for missions (Missio Dei)

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3. Love for the missionaries
4. Love for souls

That's the big picture; one that I cannot allow to become blurred. It's a matter of survival. Without the big picture I lose focus and become frustrated. I start sweating the small stuff.

Many have heard of the book, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff" Don't Sweat the Small Stuff and It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things From Taking Over Your Life (Don't Sweat the Small Stuff Series). It's encouraging stuff; light reading with huge punch.

One person wrote, "In fact one of the greatest things I read in the book was a little chapter called 'Remind Yourself That When You Die, Your In-basket Won't be Empty'. Some other thought provoking chapters are entitled 'Ask Yourself the Question: Will This Matter a Year from Now?' 'Search for the Grain of Truth in Others Opinions', 'See the Glass as Already Broken', 'When in Doubt About Who's Turn it is To Take Out the Trash, Go Ahead and Take it Out'"

I struggle with the finding ministry and productivity in the small stuff I do. The challenge is to find the Mission in the minuscule, mundane, menial, and minute; to view the moment in light of eternity; to go beyond the mediocre for excellence. We've got to have that. It's a matter of survival; life and death for success in overall ministry.

"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:1-4).

"The Word of God Prospered: During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers — "Hellenists" — toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, "It wouldn't be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we'll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we'll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God's Word" (Acts 6:1-4, from THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language © 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. All rights reserved.)

I've often read that familiar passage and accessed that the two priorities, and wings of ministry, are prayer and the ministry of the Word. Unarguably those are certainly paramount and pivotal in the life of the church and in advancing God's kingdom. Acts 6

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gives a wider perspective of ministry. It shows the ministry big picture and unfolds the body ministry Paul later annunciates. It's easy to skip through the chapter thinking it's all about establishing deacons. It's beyond that and moves into the realm of clarifying roles in ministry. "Ministry" is the big idea here: not people doing big ministry and others doing little ministry. One group doing big stuff and the other burdened down "in stuff." It's about discovering and defining "ministry" in the midst of the stuff.

The apostles weren't saying waiting on tables lacked ministry. They were saying it wasn't their ministry in that particular season of life. It wasn't their priority, calling, and gifting. That begs the question: so, **what is ministry** anyway? Several definitions emerge from random, rapid research:

- **Ministry means service. It involves preparing God's people for works of service (diakonia).** A minister is one that serves. We often think of Acts 6 as where deacons were selected. That's true. But, it was also the place where the disciples chose to redefine and realign their own ministries in the midst of the stuff. Both groups of people were serving, separately, yet specifically.
- **"Faithful service of God's people rendered unto God and others on His behalf to bring Him glory, build up His church, and reach out to His world"** (www.Bible.org).
- **"Ministry is meeting people where they are and taking them to where God wants them to be"** (www.jrbriggs.com).
- **Ministry is alignment, agreement, and accomplishment of His purpose.** (Seek and to save the lost; (Luke 19:10) give life and life more abundantly (John 10:10); destroy the works of Satan (1 John 3:8); and so forth).

All the above are grand definitions but I prefer mine (I know; I'm biased). **Ministry is "anything we do to advance His kingdom."** Focus and faithfulness are imperative in getting the job done.

In order to advance His kingdom we must be ever mindful of our vision. The United Pentecostal Church International theme for this year is "Advance His Kingdom."

Advance:

- Move forward
- Progress
- Push forward
- Gain ground
- Draw nearer
- Improve
- Breakthrough
- Step forward
- Step in the right direction

- Proceed

Lest we briskly bypass it: ministry is what we do to move, push, and proceed with His kingdom. We are in His service and it is not designed to serve-us. It's not about us. It's about Him. No personal kingdom-building satisfies the call of advancing His kingdom.

Kingdom:

- A country ruled by a king or queen
- Realm
- Domain
- Dominion
- Spiritual world of which God is King

On the mission field, praying for those that work in the office, I developed a habit of visually moving from office to office, cubicle to cubicle, praying specifically for each staff member, hoping they realized the role they played in global missions and evangelism. I often still do that today in my daily devotions. I want others to see the big picture. Me too! I want to live the big picture.

“They say that it takes 20,000 hours of practice in any discipline to achieve a real talent for success. On the basis of an eight hour day—and for some it is much more—that translates into 2,500 days, or six years and 310 days, at seven days a week. Many of the Olympic athletes put in four years of daily training between each Olympiad. For a lucky few the sheer grit pays off. Four years of hard slog comes down to a few hours, a few minutes or a few seconds of competitive excellence. We should not be too hard on those don't quite make the medals tables. And they shouldn't be too hard on themselves either. For many Olympians, merely to have competed is satisfaction enough.

We are reminded of those old adages: no pain, no gain; no Cross, no Crown; the grit in the oyster makes the pearl; practice, practice, practice: for practice makes perfect. And some of the Olympic performances have been as close to perfection as human effort is every likely to achieve.” See more at: <http://www.iofc.org/olympic-spirit-london-2012#sthash.2hC0dMQW.dpuf> So, it is important to find ministry in the stuff; practicing for that moment when we shine the brightest for the Lord. The ministry mundane may manufacture in us ministry merit.

My secretary, Pat Morgan, has stayed by the stuff for nearly forty years. Last week I came around the corner and saw her busily working away on her computer. It's by far not the first time I've noticed. But, this time I thought, “How many hours has she invested in Global Missions? How many hours has she stayed by the stuff?” She started off in home missions before she went global. According to my calculations she has held the course for around 75,000 hours.

Keeping the big picture front and center encourages me (us) to take responsibility over choices and decisions. Focus begs for the question, “Is this advancing His kingdom? Am I doing this in a way that advances His kingdom?”

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Paul was able to proclaim at the end of ministry: “I’ve fought the fight. I’ve kept the faith. I’ve advanced His kingdom!”