

# DEVELOPING A PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

*By Jeremy Pace*

Developing a philosophy of ministry is like building a house. You must start with a proper foundation in order to ensure stability and integrity of the home. Once a solid foundation is laid, the framing is put up which provides the boundaries and floor plan for how the house will function. Finally, once the framing is complete you can begin to move in the furniture, which allow the rooms to fulfill their purposes.

To demonstrate how developing a philosophy of ministry is like building a house, I will work out philosophy of ministry for pastoral leadership, and afterward provide some tools for how you can begin to build your own house.

Faithful pastoral leadership begins with a proper biblical understanding of the church. An understanding of the church as an institution, a place, or even a gathering skews the building plans of its leadership. An understanding of the church as God's mission and joy allows the leadership to build on a sturdy foundation.

## THEOLOGY = FOUNDATION

Every house starts with a foundation. Depending on how well that foundation is laid, the house will either stand firm or have problems. The same is true when laying a foundation for pastoral leadership. As believers, we must do all things based upon our knowledge of God through the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:3–4). If our foundation is anything other than our knowledge of God through Christ and the Scripture (1 Corinthians 3:10b–11), then we are simply building on sand (Matthew 7:26–28). Theology gives us the Rock on which we build our house (Matthew 7:24–25).

The role of pastoral leaderships assumes that you are leading a local church. You are shepherding and overseeing God's people. If you do not have a proper understanding of

who God’s people are and for what God’s people are purposed, then all of the skills and methods available to you are useless. You are leading them to no end.

“The Mission” of God is to glorify himself through the reconciliation of humanity—of every tribe, tongue, and nation (Revelation 5:9)—and creation (Colossians 1:20) to a right relationship with him (2 Corinthians 5:12–21) through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9–10).

Christ, then, is the hope of the world. The church is simultaneously a goal and means of the mission as God’s reconciled people given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). The “who” are God’s reconciled people. The “what” are ministers with the message of reconciliation. If Christ is the hope of the world, the church is the instrument by which the hope is made manifest (Ephesians 3:10; 2 Corinthians 5:20).

Once this foundation is laid, then we can build on it the framework for the house.

## PHILOSOPHY = FRAMEWORK

By “philosophy,” I do not mean a way of thinking that is autonomous, but rather one that is informed by the scriptural foundation discussed above. A philosophy is a comprehensive manner of viewing a particular subject (in this case the church) based on our theological understanding of the subject. A philosophy of ministry helps us begin to move from the “what” to the “why,” which in turn provides a grid through which to make decisions on what we do and do not do regarding our pastoral leadership.

Like the framing of a house, a philosophy of ministry is built on the foundation. Our philosophy provides the boundaries (walls) in which Scripture allows us to do the work of ministry. Framing has two primary components:

### LOAD-BEARING WALLS

Load-bearing walls are those walls that support the structure of the home. The load-bearing walls in a house are pivotal. If they are not set correctly then your house is bound to sway, crack, and eventually crumple. These walls are non-negotiable,

unchangeable regardless of context of ministry or people within the ministry. Scripture determines the boundaries in which we are called to lead the church. There are at least three primary load-bearing walls:

## 1. *Church Leadership*

The first load-bearing wall, the non-negotiable consistent across all contexts framework, is that a local church has a leadership structure, and that leadership has specific responsibilities and is made up of particular people.

- *Structure:* Regardless of how a church is organized from day to day, it is important to understand and practice ministry under the truth that Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). All authority comes from him (Matthew 28:18).
- *Responsibilities:* The responsibilities of church leadership can be summarized as building up the body to maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 1 Corinthians 3:10–17; Hebrews 13:17).
- *Particular People:* The character and calling of pastoral leadership are consistent across all contexts (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; Ephesians 4:11–16). Not everyone is called to the role of a church leader, though every believer is called to be a minister of reconciliation.

## 2. *Doctrine*

The second load-bearing wall is that a local church must be set and guided by biblical, God-centered doctrine. Scripture is clear that an evidence of maturity in a believer is his or her firmness in his or her doctrine (Ephesians 4:13–14). Solid doctrine begins with church leadership, for they are called to: 1) Guard the doctrines (1 Timothy 4:16), 2) apply the doctrines to everyday life and ministry (2 Timothy 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:3–4), and 3) keep the church focused on the purpose of the doctrines (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

### 3. *Mission*

The final load-bearing, unchangeable wall of our philosophy of ministry is the role of the church and her members in the mission of God. The church is instrument by which the hope of the world, Jesus Christ, is made manifest to the entire world (Ephesians 3:10). There are two ways to look at the role of the church in the mission of God.

1. *The Corporate Role of Mission (1 Corinthians 3: 6–10)*: A church is by definition a collection of people, a gathered people. Therefore, collectively a church is signpost to the Kingdom of God in how they live and engage the culture around them.
2. *The Personal Role of Mission (Acts 17:26; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20)*: A church is by a definition a collection of people, made of individuals and family units. Every believer is called to be a minister of reconciliation and has been placed by God in a specific place within culture to be an ambassador for God in that place (within and outside the church body).

## INTERIOR WALLS

While a house may be able to stand with only load-bearing walls in place, it is not complete until the interior walls have been put in place to finish out the floor plan. We call these interior walls distinctives. What this means is that they are distinguishing marks that separate what guides how and what one church does ministry, and what might guide how other churches and organizations do “ministry.” These distinctives help us define what we are about and what we are not about. They define the rooms in which we do the work of ministry.

Interior walls are no less grounded in the Scriptures than the load-bearing walls. However, Scripture is not prescriptive in every subject and interior walls reflect the descriptive nature of the church. Each local church is in a unique context, made up of unique people, and led by leaders with unique personalities and gift sets. The interior walls can only fit on the foundation and within the confines of the load-bearing walls.

The foundation comes first, the load-bearing walls are raised up, after which, the interior walls can be finished out.

For example, because pastoral leadership in our context is often viewed primarily as a vocation, one interior wall would be described as, “Pastoral leadership is calling not primarily a vocation.”

By building in this framework, we are saying that we are about identified called men, regardless of their current vocation or if the church desires to hire them as staff members. Many churches limit their leadership because they do not have this distinctive. They only raise up enough or bring in enough leaders to fill vocational positions, rather than identifying and confirming those in the church who will lead but not be on the church payroll.

## LIVING IN THE HOUSE

It is within the walls that we “do ministry,” both those called to pastoral leadership of the church and those called to be ministers of reconciliation as the church. These philosophies of ministry that are founded on Scripture allow us to do a lot of different things and allow individual gifting to be used for the glory of the Lord in unique ways throughout the body. Freedom and faithfulness are found when church leadership provides a solid foundation and clear boundaries (framework) for who and what the church is.

## METHODOLOGY = FURNITURE

It is difficult to live in a house without furniture, and while furniture helps distinguish style and define a room’s function, it should not be the controlling factor in a home’s design. Like good furniture that is designed to make a room or home function well, so too are methods of ministry designed to help the church function well. Methods, like furniture, only last for a limited time. While the foundation and the framing of the house remain virtually unchanged over time, the furniture needs to be replaced and re-upholstered. We must guard against the reality of making furniture the determining

factor in how a house functions, rather than the foundation and framework. When all three components are put together correctly then a house can function properly, so too with the church.

If the church's structure and mission are founded on the revelation of Christ through Scripture and then are used to determine the framework for participating in the mission of God, while using methods that fit the size and function of each room in the floor plan, she, too, will function as she should.

## DEVELOPING YOUR OWN PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

Regardless of where you go to “do ministry,” if you have a proper theology of church and from that are able to build out a philosophy of ministry that is faithful to the Scripture, then you can successfully lead the people of God. Learning methods can be helpful, but what is key is not the how to's but what and why. What follows are some questions that can help you as develop a philosophy of ministry for your church, ministry, or organization. You can use the above philosophy of ministry as template as you work through the questions. Here are the components of a philosophy of ministry:

### 1. VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS

A vision statement is a clear and concise articulation of where you want to take the people in your ministry, both those being served by you and those serving with you. A mission statement is the biblical distinctive for your ministry. For instance, Mars Hill Church's mission statement is “To make disciples and plant churches to the glory of God.” This statement outlines what Mars Hill is about based on her biblical convictions.

The mission statement is the critical piece, as it will set your trajectory for your vision statement. Your vision statement should be contextual and compelling.<sup>1</sup>

Before you create these statements, I suggest first answering the questions foundation section. Your theological foundation will give shape to your stated goals.

If you are developing a philosophy of ministry for a ministry within an existing church, your mission statement is simply how you will fulfill the mission for your church. For example, the mission statement for the Leadership Development department at Mars Hill is, “The Leadership Development department exists to fulfill the mission of Mars Hill Church by supporting local & global churches through the development of resources, opportunities, and processes that effectively identify and train future and current gospel-centered leaders.”

## 2. THEOLOGY = FOUNDATION

The hardest and most time-consuming part of building a home is laying the foundation. My wife and I built our first home in 2007. The project took seven months from time paper work was filed with the city until we received the keys to move in. After the paper work was approved (nearly six weeks in), we broke ground. Three months later, the foundation was finished. It seemed like it took forever, but every aspect of the foundation laying had to be perfect or the house’s integrity would suffer.

Laying a theological foundation for your church, ministry, or organization can be a lengthy and difficult task, but the reality is that you want your foundation to be firmly and accurately laid. Your desire is to glorify God with your ministry, and God is most glorified when we faithfully work from the foundation he has laid in Christ Jesus revealed in the Scripture. This assumes that you know the Scriptures well and have a proper way of understanding them.

- What is the theological foundation from which we build?

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<sup>1</sup> A good resource for developing a compelling vision based upon God’s mission is *Visioneering* by Andy Stanley

- What is the primary biblical imperative (and surrounding indicative/s) for your church/ministry/organization?
- Are their multiple imperatives and indicatives? Where are they found in the Scripture?
- Is there a single passage of Scripture that encompasses the main starting point for your church/ministry/organization?
- How can you connect the contours of Scripture to outline the foundation in two to three paragraphs?

### 3. PHILOSOPHY = FRAMEWORK

Once the foundation for our home was laid, it seemed like overnight we went from a slab of concrete to define home as the framework was raised up. Because theology determines philosophy, this aspect of home building can move more quickly. You are taking what you have discovered in Scripture as your foundation and teasing out specific why's and what's for your church/ministry/organization.

Your framework will be a grid through which you run decisions on what you do and do not do and how you evaluate opportunities and the success of current methods.

#### ***Load-Bearing Walls***

The important thing to remember about load-bearing walls is that these walls really define the home's shape because they are unchangeable and immovable unless you want the home to crumble. There is a lot of freedom in Scripture for how the church and ministries can function, but that does not mean that there is complete freedom.

- What are the non-negotiable, prescribed truths of Scripture that set the boundaries for your church/ministry/organization?

#### ***Interior Walls***

These walls define what you are about and what you are not about. Scripture allows for contextualization to a point (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

- What biblical imperatives and indicatives does your church/ministry/organization need to explicitly articulate because they are overlooked?
- What biblical imperatives and indicatives does your church/ministry/organization practice faithfully (almost without thinking)?
- What biblical imperatives and indicatives does the culture and context of your church ignore or fight against? These you will want to make more explicit.
- What biblical imperatives and indicatives are paralleled within your culture and context but need to be connected? (These too you will want to make more explicit.)

#### 4. METHODOLOGY = FURNITURE

Furniture should complement and enhance the function of a room. Likewise, your methods (the how to's) should be based on your theology and philosophy and should fit within the boundaries set by them. Remember, furniture is only functional for so long before it wears out and either needs to be replaced or reupholstered. The reality is that having a solid foundation and a clearly defined framework allows you to be creative and not limited to how you go about doing ministry. When you can stay focused, moving along the right trajectory and able to evaluate your methods based upon your philosophy of ministry, you are free to try different methods without getting too attached. However, if you find yourself trying to remodel a room because you love the couch, you are veering off trajectory.

- Based on your theology and philosophy, what are the methods that you will use to see the vision fulfilled?
- Does your current furniture fit in the new rooms? Do you have a toilet in the living room or a bed in the bathroom?
- How does your philosophy of ministry look organizationally?

- Do you have the right positions in your organization?
- How does each ministry/program fit within the philosophy?