Artists at Work: Profiles of Four Ministers

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ARTISTS AT WORK: PROFILES OF FOUR MINISTERS

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In a previous article, I argued that the role of the full-time preaching minister derives from the ministry of the Word. While the minister finds his defining center in preaching, the ministry of the Word is broad enough to include other tasks, most notably teaching, pastoral care, and administration. The apostolic ministry of the Word began with witness to the resurrection of Christ but, as converts were won, moved naturally into teaching, pastoral care, and the organization of congregations. Evangelism, teaching, pastoral care, and administration are parameters of the apostolic framework of ministry.

The minister’s role within this framework is not fixed and static, but rather is flexible and dynamic. How the minister construes his work will depend on his own gifts and the needs of a given situation. Ministry is the dynamic process of bringing the Word to bear on life situations in ways that lead to salvation.

But ministry is not simply a technician’s task of applying biblical information to situations in a linear, theory-to-practice manner. The Word is not simply identified with the words of the Bible, but includes the Christ-imaged, spirit-led person of the minister. The “apostolic deposit” is the authentic life of Jesus in the church. The minister’s work is to “guard the deposit,” that is, to maintain the authentic life of Jesus in the church through faithfulness to the written Word and to the living Christ.

The work of a minister more nearly resembles that of an artist than a technician. An artist is one who interprets life and serves the community according to the principles of a given medium. For the minister, the medium is the Word, and the work of art in process is a life which authentically images the life of Christ. All Christians are ministers, but the

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particular calling of the full-time minister is to image the life of Christ before the church in a way that equips others to interpret their own lives in the medium of the Word.

The previous article drew upon the experience of ministers. Fifteen interviews yielded over 300 pages of material, including hundreds of quotations illustrating various facets of ministerial practice. However, these quotations, taken alone or grouped by subject matter, tended to compartmentalize the work of ministry. They were interesting trees, but they did not give the impression of the whole forest.

For a more holistic view, I have written profiles of four ministers. Names and locations have been disguised to maintain confidentiality, but the descriptions are real. The profiles are intended to show how real ministers construe their apostolic task within the life of real congregations. These are four artists at work, practicing the art of ministry.

Profile #1: Mike Green

"They Know That I Preach"

Mike Green is the pulpit minister for a large congregation in a major Texas city. He is nearing the age of forty and holds a bachelor's degree in speech and communication from a Christian university. He has also completed some graduate work but does not hold a graduate degree.

Mike occupies a large, comfortable office within a complex of offices. The building of the congregation where he preaches is located off a major freeway and looms as large and imposing as the nearby banks and professional buildings. Mike is coordinator of a staff which includes two other ministers, an office manager, and two secretaries. His congregation is served by six elders.

On the day I visit Mike, he is informally dressed in slacks and pullover knit shirt. It is Friday, normally his day off, but he has spent the morning on the golf course with a prospective convert and has come into the office to finish up the week's work. As I walk into the impressive office complex, I first meet a receptionist, who calls Mike on the intercom. Mike comes out of his office and down the hall to meet me.

Mike is relaxed and friendly. Before we begin to talk, he takes me down to the kitchen where he puts on a pot of coffee. Some members of the congregation are there, and Mike engages them in animated conversation while the coffee is brewing.

When Mike was in college, he considered a career as an attorney or an architect, but several factors—an influential grandmother, a roommate,
and an opportunity to speak on a student lectureship—steered him toward a career in ministry.

Mike’s days are busy and fast paced. He described a recent one as typical. He began that day with a breakfast meeting with a new convert. When he arrived at his office around 8:30, he spent some time working on a series of sermons which he is to preach for another church. The sermon work was followed by an hour-long phone call to a member of the church who is planning the annual men’s retreat. The lunch hour was devoted to a meeting with two secretaries to clear up some office problems, and a 2:30 counseling session was followed by a few moments returning phone calls. Another counseling session at 4:30 lasted until almost 6:00, at which time Mike went to work on the Wednesday night Bible class he was to teach that night. The Wednesday night class was followed by a meeting with the elders, which lasted several hours. Mike arrived home around 11:00.

In some ways, Mike’s job resembles that of a corporate executive. In fact, one of the elders wanted to give him the title of CEO, but he refused it. He does, however, accept the position of staff coordinator. He attends Rotary meetings, has lunch meetings, breakfast meetings, committee meetings, and staff meetings. He speaks of “economic constraints” and “growth patterns.” Our conversation is frequently interrupted by phone calls.

However, Mike still finds his role definition in preaching. “Most of our members would have no idea of what I just told you happened on a Wednesday,” he says. “They do know that I preach on Sundays.”

Mike’s preaching is driven by a deep pastoral concern. “I think the more self-disclosing that the preaching tends to be, the more inevitable the pastoral role will be. . . . By preaching that sermon, I set myself up for pastoral concern.”

Mike’s concern is deep and genuine. He loves people. Numerous times in our conversation, he spoke of people who were “very dear friends.” He described with genuine compassion how he recently packed up eight sacks of groceries and delivered them to two needy families as he was driving home.

Mike easily overextends himself. Within two years of coming to his present congregation, he had assumed responsibility as staff coordinator and numerous other administrative hats. In addition to his administrative work, he can become overly involved in the lives and problems of others. His tendency to take on both problems and responsibilities brought him to the point of clinical depression two years ago. Since then, he has learned
to distance himself a little from too many responsibilities and excessive involvement in problems.

But Mike still maintains a rigorous schedule. He showed me his work schedule for a recent month—not just estimates, but notes on what he actually did. Working seven days, he averaged nearly eighty-four hours per week. Only fourteen of these hours were actually devoted to preparation for preaching.

Despite the demands of his schedule, Mike has come to terms with his work. He loves what he does, and his congregation loves him. He has at times doubted his call to ministry, and he still believes he could in good conscience follow some other career. But that he will is not likely. Reflecting on his work, Mike says:

You know, I look at my schedule and I look at the other guys’ schedules; I look at how many hours I work and how many hours they work; and I think, “Man, there’s got to be an easier way.” And I think, for making a living, there is... but when you come right back to it, why are you alive, and why are you living? That always draws me back. No, I really doubt that I would ever leave ministry.

Profile #2: David Grimes

“There are lots of churches in the brotherhood that wouldn’t let me in the front door.”

The Church of Christ where David Grimes is the minister sits atop a hill in an affluent area of a large Texas city. Driving up to the building, one first notices the stately tower of the Gothic chapel, which is used mostly for weddings. Next to the chapel are the church sanctuary and a suite of offices.

It took several weeks to schedule the appointment with David. His secretary of long standing handles all his appointments, and she jealously guards his time. At her insistence, I have agreed to limit the interview to one hour.

I am a few minutes early and sit down in the receptionist’s area with a cup of coffee. At exactly 9:00, David walks in. Tall and thin, he is nearing the age of seventy. He invites me into his large, well-lighted office. Books line the walls, and at one end, large windows let in the light.

David has been preaching in Churches of Christ for over fifty years. His long, interesting career has included ministry in four states. He holds a degree in clinical psychology from a prominent university and has done work towards a doctorate.
In spite of his long association with Churches of Christ, David has remained an independent thinker. A short stint at a Christian college before World War II left him disillusioned with some of the practices of Churches of Christ. He found that he did not fit in with the crowd of "preacher boys." "I was a basic rebel," he says of those early years.

David’s college career was interrupted by World War II. While stationed in a Southern state, he was asked to do the preaching for a small church. During this time he “sort of realigned [his] whole thinking.” After the war, David moved to a Western state to work for a radio station, and again the opportunity to preach came up. At that time, David made the decision to enter full-time ministry.

His penchant for independent thinking has kept David slightly out of the mainstream of Churches of Christ. Though he has been a popular speaker and has appeared at many lectureships, he is viewed by many as a “liberal.” But David insists, “No one could be any more conservative than I am.” The liberal label has come because he has refused to be a “right-wing Church of Christer.” While maintaining a Bible-centered theology, David has not been hesitant to speak out about traditional practices which he considers unbiblical.

David’s ministerial career has been characterized by long, stable relationships with local churches. He has been at his present congregation for more than twenty years.

David admits he has been a dominant force at the congregation. When the church’s elders called him, they admitted that they knew little about running the church, and they gave him a large share of power. They asked him to be the chief administrator. If anyone complains that “David’s running the church,” they give a standard reply: “He’d better. That’s what we hired him to do.”

During the first fifteen years at the congregation, David’s influence was “almost absolute.” He established policies, methodology, and theology. But he never tried to take over the role of the elders. When he first arrived, David began a weekly Bible study with the elders that has continued for twenty years. The result is that he and the elders have developed a unity of purpose and policy. “That means our policies and our thinking and our philosophy are going to be one,” says David. “And from the pulpit, I reflect the feelings of the elders. . . , and I have a lot to do with the molding of that. It’s inevitable that I should if I’m the teacher of that class.”

The minister who will create such a relationship with the elders, David says, can be a tremendous force in the congregation. While David has never voted in an elders’ meeting, he admits that he is “a much more
dominant influence than any one elder." By force of personality and persuasion, David has influenced the entire congregation without a single vote.

David scoffs at the idea that the minister can remain aloof from running the church. "That's for the birds. That really isn't true." He believes the preacher is pastor, whether he likes it or not. For David, being pastor means administrating, visiting the sick, and teaching. It also means dealing pastorally with the emotional cuts and bruises which arise in a congregational system. "It's my job to keep everybody happy, keep everybody running together, and solve problems."

While maintaining a pastoral concern, David has also kept a professional distance. "In a way, I've distanced myself from people except when they need me. . . . I have sort of remained a professional so that when they really are in need, they can come to me and feel like I'm a professional. . . . You don't have a cracker-barrel acquaintance with your family doctor; you don't go fishing with him; he doesn't drop by your house for a cup of coffee. . . . He's in another category so he can help you. And so I have sort of remained in that role."

Like most ministers in Churches of Christ, David puts great emphasis on preaching. About half his work time goes into study for sermons and classes. He has worked hard to maintain his fresh and innovative approach to preaching. He has never been content merely to parrot the party line. "I keep myself current, I read current things, I keep my finger on the pulse of what society is doing, and I try to be relevant. . . . I've never been satisfied with just preaching the doctrine."

As David approaches retirement, he is gradually laying aside his power. The congregational membership has leveled off, and he believes it is time for younger leadership. The congregation has appointed younger elders, and David is consciously taking a less and less influential role. The transition is difficult, but he believes it is necessary.

David makes no apology for the dominance of his role. "The elders ought to be more supportive of the minister, in that they ought to recognize what he really can do for them and utilize what he can do, without being afraid that he's going to take over too much power." That support ought to include adequate financial support, says David, as well as the kind of backing that will allow the preacher freedom to study and think, without having to worry about his job.

In David's view, a minister should not plan to stay less than ten years at a church. The positive power of the minister's role could be put to good use, David believes, if an eldership would bring in a preacher and
say, "We want you to stay here for good and to preach what you really believe; and we want you to study with us, and let's grow spiritually."

Profile #3: James Hall

"I've got to fulfill my God-given responsibilities."

, Texas, is reached by a long causeway over the salty waters of a shallow bay. While it has a population of only a few hundred, it is distinguished by the presence of some industrial giants, drawn by the navigable waters of the Intracoastal Waterway. These sprawling plants have brought economic prosperity and a measure of ethnic diversity to what was once a sleepy fishing village.

A modest, brick building overlooking the bay is the meeting place of the local Church of Christ. Sequestered in a closet-sized office, James Hall, in his mid-thirties, toils away at his weekly sermons. Without secretary or staff, he is often the lone occupant of the building.

A native of a Southern state, James has a gentlemanly manner and a soft Southern accent. He is friendly and sincere, but retains a certain formality from his upbringing in the Old South. Still, his blue jeans and sport shirt show that, in four years, he has learned to adapt to the informality of the Texas coast.

James came into ministry somewhat later in life. He was not raised in the Church of Christ, but was converted at the age of twenty. He was actively involved in Sunday School teaching and other activities, and in 1981 he was asked to preach for a minister who was out of town. Other opportunities followed, and, with the encouragement of a few trusted friends, he decided a few years later, at the age of thirty, to enter full-time ministry.

The decision to become a minister was a real leap of faith. James had a prosperous career in business and owned a house which he intended to have paid for by the age of forty. These things he left behind to move to another state to study Bible at a Christian college.

James’s decision was, in his mind, confirmed by God's providence. "After we made that first sacrifice, everything else just worked out," he says. He still worries at times about financial security, but he has never regretted his decision. "The Lord's always taken care of it before," he says. "I have no reason to think that he's going to stop doing that now."

James loves his work. He sees his main job as preaching, but he actually enjoys teaching as much or more than preaching, "because I have a little bit more interaction with the people while I'm teaching than I do when I'm actually preaching." As much as teaching and preaching, he
enjoys personal Bible studies with individuals—actually studying with someone and seeing that person obey the gospel.

Like many ministers in Churches of Christ, James draws his inspiration and job description from the Pastoral Epistles. "I always have to fall back on 2 Tim 4:2, which says, 'Preach the Word.' It tells us to 'preach, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.' That's my main work—preaching the Word."

Because of his strong emphasis on preaching, James makes study and preparation for sermons his number one priority. "I'm not going to pull away from that," he says. "I believe that's the right thing according to the Bible, and that's also the way I was taught."

However, James cannot avoid the work of pastoral care. In a recent week, for example, he visited a bereaved family on Monday, spent Tuesday morning with a family in surgery, and officiated at a funeral on Wednesday—all while working in study time for his Wednesday night class, his Sunday morning class, and his two Sunday sermons.

James is not hesitant about doing pastoral work. In fact, he enjoys it and is gifted at it. However, he does not regard it as his main work. He sees pastoral work as the work of the elder. "There is a tremendous difference between the role that an elder is to play and the role that a preacher is to play," he says. "I'm not an elder, and I'm not going to assume the responsibility of an elder."

Still James recognizes the inevitability of the pastoral role, at least on pragmatic grounds. "I think that I have more time on my hands to be able to go and be with people; . . . and let's face it, people themselves are going to expect that out of a preacher. . . . They expect it, and I think because I'm being supported, I need to be able to set aside time to be with people. I try to maintain very rigidly the difference between the elder and the preacher, but I still believe that people expect it, and I cannot limit my role to teaching and preaching only. You can't do that and be effective."

However, James does not want to be confused with a "denominational" pastor. "I have to do some teaching on that line because every once in a while someone will refer to me as the pastor."

But James sees his work as being quite different from that of a "pastor." He sees a pastor as one who has more authority than a preacher. "I do not ever want to exalt myself to the position of thinking that I have any type of evangelical authority to demand or command people to do as I want them to do. I'm to teach them and I'm to preach to them and try to guide them along; that's my role, but I'm very careful not to assume more authority than the Bible gives me."
It is in the area of authority that James experiences his greatest frustration. While he enjoys his work, he has not been as successful as he would like at his congregation. “I’m not satisfied with the degree I have been able to achieve my goals,” he says. James feels that a great deal of his time is taken up with detailed administrative work that could be better done by someone else. James himself keeps records, puts out the church bulletin, and orders supplies.

James is somewhat reluctant to provide leadership. He believes that responsibility belongs to the elders. “I really do not take upon myself a lot of responsibilities as far as leading the congregation, because, if I’m not careful, I can have all the responsibility, and I don’t want to do that. I really would like for our elders to be seen more. They are the leaders of the church, and they need to be in the forefront.”

However, James’s consistent frustration has been that the elders do not fulfill either a pastoral or administrative role. Theoretically, he is committed to teaching and preaching, but in practice, he finds himself put in a variety of other roles. Still he struggles hard to put in the time that is needed for his heavy load of preaching and teaching. “I’ve got to fulfill my God-given responsibilities,” he says.

Profile #4: Leroy Vaughn

“I’m the kindling wood to the backlog of indifference.”

Leroy Vaughn has preached since before he can remember. “My mother told me that when I was a child, two and three years old, I used to—every time somebody came in—drag up an applecart and climb on it and preach. I always wanted to preach. Why, I don’t know. I preached my first sermon before people when I was eight years old.”

Leroy is now fifty years old and has been preaching ever since. His twenty-seven years in full-time ministry have taken him to seven or eight churches in South and East Texas. He has been at his present post, a congregation of 250 in a small, coastal city, for about six months.

Thin and energetic, Leroy greets me at the door of his office with the personable charm of the salesman he once was. There is no problem getting Leroy to talk; his answers flow smoothly, sprinkled liberally with aphorisms and anecdotes.

“I did not move to congregations primarily as a fixture or to stay like most preachers do,” says Leroy. “My ministry has been building congregations. I’d take old congregations that were worn out and dilapidated and try to breathe some new life into them. And that’s really where my ministry has been.
“It’s like a challenge to me. (a neighboring town) is an example. They were good people, but they were set in their ways. I went there when there were only two things they hated, and it was Mexicans and prejudice, but they were good folks, you know, so I just kind of got in there and worked the whole city. I preached in every church in except the Catholic Church. I just went everywhere. In the streets, and wherever they let us teach and speak, you know; we’d teach Spanish people by fifty and seventy-five at a whack, in the homes, and I couldn’t speak a lick of Spanish, but I was determined to cross that barrier.

“I left without accomplishing what I went there to accomplish in terms of getting a Spanish work established, but when the next preacher came, they brought it up and wanted to do it. So—it never would have happened—somebody has to become the kindling wood to the backlog of indifference.”

That is Leroy Vaughn’s approach to ministry. He goes to churches—often the churches nobody else wants—with a specific goal in mind and focuses his energies on that goal. He believes Churches of Christ are not growing because they have no focus. “As a preacher of the gospel, it’s my place to put focus into those people’s eyes.” He sees himself like the prophet Ezekiel: “It’s my place to make those dry bones rise up and get something in them.”

What is the appropriate focus for the local church? “It’s the evangelization of the world. I believe that the church must see that its only purpose for functioning is to evangelize the world.” Leroy tries to maintain this focus in his preaching, but at the same time he is aware of the needs and weaknesses of the people.

I think it’s my place as a preacher to keep them encouraged: to let them know that it matters not how bad it gets, the Lord said, “I’m always with you.” My goal is not to baptize a hundred or two hundred, but to baptize one more. If I try to tell you you got to save this city, you’re frustrated; but if I say to you, “Will you take one person this year, and will you work and pray and do everything for that one person to bring that person to Jesus, will you do that?” Well, I believe most everybody will say, “Sure, I can do it for one.”

Leroy sees himself in the path of the apostles. “I see them as men who wanted the world to know that Jesus died for their lost souls. That, to me, is the preaching of the gospel.” Like the apostles, Leroy sees his work as temporary and strategic. He wants to stay in a given place only as long as he is needed—or until he is obliged to leave. In more than one instance, Leroy has been asked to leave or has given up in frustration. Like the
apostles, he has suffered his share of persecutions. "The backlog of indifference" does not always ignite.

But Leroy is undaunted by these reverses. "I never have gone to a congregation with the primary interest in myself. I went there primarily because I felt like I had something for the church that I wanted to give the church." What Leroy has given is a sense of focus and an emphasis on evangelism.

Leroy sees his work as primarily preaching and personal evangelism. He devotes about 70% of his time to the former, 25% to the latter. The remaining 5% goes for miscellaneous pastoral duties—"your funerals, your hospitals, your average-type things that normally I just do." Still Leroy does not forget the needs of the people. "I have a day in which I just go out and visit people. I may visit fifteen; I may visit one. I just try to use every way I can to touch people's lives."

As Leroy has tried to bring focus to the churches he serves, so he has gradually clarified the focus of his own ministry. In the beginning, he did whatever the church wanted him to do—"which was everything." An incident with one of his children shocked him out of this fragmented approach to ministry. He realized he could not do everything. Gradually, he has given up counseling and administration to devote his energies to preaching and evangelism. But this change of focus has not isolated Leroy. "I'm trying to focus my attention to people in a different light, and the power is in the Word. The power is in that book. And that's why I want that Word to flow first in my life."

While Leroy does not think of himself as a "professional" minister, he does see himself in a special position in the church. He does not mind being called pastor. "I think there's a sense in which I am pastor. I think I've earned that with a few years and gray hair and a few bumps I've taken." But Leroy has a definite understanding of the role of a pastor. "It's a fellow with a message that he's got to share with others." While other church members may present a sermon from time to time, Leroy's calling is distinctive. "I think mine is different. Through some means, he has chosen me to preach the gospel. I finally said, 'O.K. God, what do you really want me to do?' And he said, 'Go preach.'"

Leroy has no doubt about his message. "Somehow or other, in my heart, the message has always been there. It's something you want to say." Like most ministers, Leroy has doubted his calling at times, but after twenty-seven years, he has no regrets. "I guess I have the same problem that a lot of other preachers have said they have; that is, am I really fulfilling what God wants me to do? And I've concluded, yes, I am.
There's no doubt in my mind what God wants me to do. I am proud to be a preacher of the Word. I really am."

CONCLUSION

These profiles illustrate the thesis of my previous article: The role of the minister is flexible within a framework determined by the Word. They indicate something of the range of possibilities for ministry within the apostolic framework of the Word. These four ministers have carved out rather different roles for themselves, but they share an accountability to the Word and a commitment to service. They are artists at work, interpreting the Word within their community of believers.