

What we're assuming: Reformed evangelical theology and a commitment to the lordship of Christ

Practical tools and tips can be taken up and discarded as needed. Theological truth, however, can't be chopped and changed. As noted above, teaching and training others presupposes certain basic truths and commitments. In the material that follows, our Reformed, Protestant, evangelical convictions will no doubt become apparent. This was the theological soil in which the MTS idea grew, and from which it gains much of its character. We do not recognize the authority of a pope or of any institutional church. We are not charismatic or Pentecostal. We reject any kind of theological liberalism. We have no formal connection to any particular Christian denomination, but those involved with MTS are aligned with mainline Protestant denominations, independent evangelical churches, or other evangelical ministries in universities and elsewhere.

The doctrinal basis subscribed to by the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) is one good summary of the theological commitments of the Ministry Training Strategy. Here it is:

We believe in:

1. the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead
2. the sovereignty of God in creation, revelation, redemption and final judgement
3. the divine inspiration and entire trustworthiness of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct
4. the universal sinfulness and guilt of all men since the fall, rendering them subject to God's wrath and condemnation
5. redemption from the guilt, penalty, dominion and pollution of sin, solely through the sacrificial death (as our representative and substitute) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God

6. the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and his ascension to the right hand of God the Father
7. the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration
8. the justification of the sinner by the grace of God through faith alone
9. the indwelling and work of the Holy Spirit in the believer
10. the one holy universal Church which is the body of Christ and to which all true believers belong
11. the expectation of the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These theological commitments are a boundary marker for the ideas set out in this handbook. There are certain types of ministry that we reject or question on biblical grounds. While we respect the ministry of elders in the church, we reject the idea that such elders carry the sacramental authority of a Roman Catholic priest. And while we embrace the idea that every member of the church is a minister, we also recognize that gifts relating to Word ministry have a particular priority in building the body of Christ, and that those who are appointed to exercise them have a particular authority. But whether such elders are called ‘elders’, ‘pastors’, ‘vicars’, ‘priests’, ‘rectors’, ‘leaders’ or some other denominationally determined term is a matter of almost complete indifference to us. In the same way, although we use the label ‘Ministry Training Strategy’ and terms like ‘apprentice’, ‘coach’ and ‘trainer’ to encapsulate a definite training methodology, other ministries may decide to adopt their own local variations of these terms.

What we are not doing

Let’s at this point clear some potential misconceptions by stating upfront what we are *not* doing. Firstly, as committed as we are to the notion of ministry apprenticeship, we are not advocating a prescriptive strategy that will automatically result in good gospel ministers. James

specifically warns against people who strategize in this way:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (Jas 4:13-15)

Even though MTS doesn't exist for financial profit, James's warning is still clear and relevant: we don't know every detail of God's plan to establish the lordship of his son, and it would be foolish to pretend that we do. Strategic planning for gospel ministry is not even listed as a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 12, or in any of the other New Testament passages concerned with God's equipping of his people!

This is why everything that follows comes with the overriding qualification that God chooses to work in whichever way he pleases. God is only bound by his promises: promises that have now been fulfilled in Christ and are applied to his children by the Holy Spirit. It follows that he doesn't bind himself to any particular human scheme or strategy. So, some of God's ministers were prepared for further ministry by being thrown into a cistern (Jer 38). Others had the risen Lord Jesus appear to them in a flash of light on a road to Damascus (Acts 9). Still others were impelled into gospel preaching when they sadly concluded that their minister couldn't preach the gospel to save his life—or the lives of his congregation. And some enter paid gospel work by more conventional means.

While we acknowledge all of this, our view is that considering and experiencing the ministry of the Word—even well before enrolling in a theological college—is a worthy and important thing to do. We think that the approach we are presenting here makes good sense. It's grounded on important biblical principles of ministry. Under God, we believe this is a *good* strategy—a strategy

that can and should be adapted to particular workplaces, educational institutions, churches, towns, cities and countries in line with what ministry trainers believe to be most useful for their trainees. We believe that since God's Word, the Bible, causes his church to grow, God will use ministry apprenticeships that focus on training people in Word ministry to advance his kingdom.

Secondly, we are not advocating pragmatism. Even though you will find a lot of suggestions and practical tips in this guide, the Ministry Training Strategy is not fundamentally a strategy of pragmatics. Anything of a pragmatic nature has to be assessed and reassessed theologically. Even then, some of the recommended tools are just as capable of being used by enemies of the gospel as well as its servants. A daily 'To Do' list, ordered according to priority, is a tool that can be used equally as well by Satan, Santa or a budding John Stott. To some extent, of course, the reverse is true as well, so where pragmatic wisdom serves a gospel purpose, we try to suggest ways to plunder it. We are not shy about pragmatics, but we recognize that at times it is better to drop a tool and pick up a new one for gospel reasons.

Finally, we are not just approaching this as an intellectual strategy for maximizing gospel ministry outcomes (or whatever language the latest church growth guru might like to employ). We are passionate about the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are seeking to love him with all our heart, soul and strength. We are passionate about spreading his gospel throughout the world. We are passionate about seeing more workers trained for God's harvest field. Revelation 7 describes "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" standing before the throne of our Lord Jesus (v. 9). Everyone in that multitude will stand there because someone, in the kindness of God, bothered to share the gospel with them. They will stand there because, as a result of God's prompting, someone longed for them to be saved from hell, prayed to their heavenly Father that he would bring this to pass, and (as God's fellow workers) planned and acted accordingly.

At heart, the ministry of the Word is not about strategies, pragmatics and goal-setting; it is derived first and foremost from a “humble and contrite” spirit who trembles at God’s Word (Isa 66:2b).

A warning about the risks

Paul recognized that persecution is an unavoidable part of the Christian life. This is a truth that ministry trainees should never forget. Remember Paul’s words, written close to his own martyrdom:

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

(2 Tim 3:12-13)

Jesus also warned of the road ahead:

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

Although Word ministry is the way God grows his people, and although we believe that people ought to be trained in how to do it better, the result of good training will be increased suffering and possibly death, and the glory of this Word ministry may only be revealed in eternity. Those who are seeking to train others or be trained themselves should take this warning to heart.

An encouragement about the possibilities

Here is a statement from the Reformer Martin Luther that could easily serve as a motto for the mission we are involved in together: