

## **EVANGELISTS: MINISTERS OF BLESSING**

### **Words that Changed the Order!**

**By Everett Graffeo**

This is a refresher course for me, as I look anew at the questions that moved me along my path as an evangelist at the outset of my journey fourteen years ago.

In many ways teaching about the ministry of the evangelist is much safer than being an evangelist. Being an evangelist is to be involved in the lives of persons. There are times when I feel like a fraud as a Minister of Blessing. Who am I that I would dare claim to be a Minister of Blessing for the Designer, Creator, and Life Sustainer of the Universe? I feel completely, totally unworthy.

But as one who believes deeply in the ministry and who is personally and totally committed to the position that evangelists are Ministers of Blessing, I also want to say that no one is worthy of being an evangelist and doing what we are asked to be and do.

But we must continue to claim this as our ministry and the reason for our existence because what is happening in this God-human relationship is being done through us, not by us. As soon as we are able to step out of our own way, when we realize blessing does not depend on us, we can relax. That's when we become Ministers of Blessing, instruments of God's blessing.

As Jan Kraybill translates the notes on the page into music on the organ, she knows she is not the source of the notes, only the medium to express them. In our blessing ministry, with practice, experience, and giftedness, we can become more qualified, more skilled, finer tuned in our interpretive role, always remembering that God is the source of blessing. We are a channel of God's blessing. As the Dave Heinze song says, "We are channels of God's grace."

In regard to the sacramental act of blessing, some might want to relegate it to an experience based on what I call the seashell theory. When we put our ear to a seashell, we magically hear the rush and roar of the

waves. We know, however, that what we are listening to is not the waves crashing on a beach but the rushing blood inside our own heads. The seashell theory of blessing suggests there is no receiving from God, but rather an invention of our minds. The evangelist hears nothing, but mistakenly believes he does. Those who pursue this theory would say that the idea of blessing is but the sound of our own yearnings echoing through our minds.

As evangelists, we stand on a position of faith that says, yes, we do not understand the whole process of sacramental blessing between God, the evangelist and the recipients of blessing. Also, we know that listening to the “still, small voice” of the Spirit and discerning God’s intentions is a most-difficult task and full of traps and pitfalls because of human frailties.

Yet, we believe the sounds of faith are not hallucinatory echoes. They are genuine expressions of God’s unique call to persons of faith. In the sacrament of blessing, it is just two people, or a family, or a congregation responding to the invitation of God to meet under the divine presence of the Spirit to listen with open hearts and minds. In this experience, we join with all faithful souls—past, present, and future—and become participants in the ancient story of faith.

## **My Personal Experience and Perspective**

Much of what we do in our gatherings is to develop a common vocabulary so that we are able to communicate. We need more than words, however. We must have a common understanding of the meaning of these words, developed in the context of our culture, our language, and our community. Often it is not just a new definition that is needed, but a reframed way of thinking and looking that ultimately moves us to adopt this new definition.

After ordination to the office of evangelist, I went on a journey of several months, visiting evangelists I knew, including many friends. I had participated in their calls, as well as their ordinations. I was looking for an answer to the question, what do evangelists do? I returned with a variety of answers, but I discovered along the way that I still was dissatisfied.

I realized that a more-basic question needed to be answered: Who was I as an evangelist? I lived that question for months. I loved the search.

Though the answer escaped me, I felt that I was in the hands of God. I knew it would take time, and I needed to be patient. Without an “aha” moment, I gradually grew into the answer. In the evangelists I met, I found my own voice of who I was. Poet May Sarton wrote a poem, *Now I Become Myself*, that spoke to me, phrasing in simple terms my life and life experience:

**Now I become myself.  
It's taken time,  
many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces.**

In 1994–95, a small group of evangelists believed that change was possible in the ministry of evangelists, and in the two years Paul Booth served as presiding evangelist he established the bedrock foundation of belief that “We are Ministers of Blessing.” This focus had its scriptural foundation in the Doctrine and Covenants, and it touched the very heart of the New Testament gospel in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Personally, each morning as I woke it was like a new adventure. I was excited for the day, the possibilities of new understandings of who evangelists were to be, and that in discovering that identity I would find my own. My current understanding was under siege, and fresh experiences brought insight daily. Piece by piece, a portrait was being drawn of what an evangelist looks like.

I went to the writings of past presiding evangelists to gain historical perspective. It was helpful, but not inspiring. It all seemed a bit musty and outdated. It was when I began to read the most recent writings of Paul Booth that I was moved deeply. In a newsletter to the order, dated March 1994, he wrote:

**The Saints need to be blessed. Each of us needs blessing also. I am convinced that the Order of Evangelists can awaken the Saints to new and deeper experience of the God-human relationship. Our vision needs new depth and expansion. Our ministry needs empowerment.**

He continues to say in that same article:

**We move among the Saints with full assurance that we are called to share in unique blessing and aggressively pursue situations needing healing and reconciliation.**

“Evangelists are Ministers of Blessing.”

These words changed the Order of Evangelists. This idea touched me at the core of my being. I was a Minister of Blessing. It was the key to unlock the doors and windows of my life and the ministry of all evangelists. It was a seed planted in my heart, and when it took root in my consciousness it opened the ground to new possibilities. Evangelists had been under a rock of historical tradition and limiting institutional expectations. The new plant began to flower, and from this fundamental seed of an idea came the images that expressed how evangelists might see themselves as Ministers of Blessing.

The mission-vision statement became the guiding compass for the changes taking place. It held me to the task at a time when so many voices called for attention. It became a declaration and commitment that had a most-profound effect on where we were going. A term proposed by Evangelist Velma Ruch carried the full weight of its meaning. She called it a “*Charter of Being*.” It set out the basic premise of how evangelists were Ministers of Blessing.

We are ordained to be Ministers of Blessing, responsive to the reconciling and redeeming influence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of persons, serving in multiple ministries according to the unique gifts and callings of each evangelist as spiritual companion, apostolic witness, teacher-learner, and pastoral presence.

This mission-vision statement was translated into eight other languages, based on the countries where evangelists were located in 1995. This statement has helped keep the decision-making in context by providing focus and direction. The statement was not created in a vacuum. It is relevant to the needs and hopes of most evangelists and the reality and obstacles of daily living.

The presiding evangelist presides over the order but does not control, judge, or determine for each evangelist what his ministry will be. In practical terms in the field, no one really supervises the evangelists. Rather, it is a

ministry guided by and responsive to the Spirit of God. No one is going around telling evangelists what to do. This is why evangelists must never abuse their role by becoming haughty, self-centered, self-serving, or self-aggrandizing. To become a “maverick” minister is to cut oneself off from the source of ministry in Christ and the people with whom we serve. As we implement the vision, it gives each evangelist a premise to make decisions in the absence of rules or direct supervision. As Ministers of Blessing:

- Our authority is centered on Christ as the source of blessing.
- Our witness is an expression of the presence of the Holy in all persons.
- We are free of administrative position in the hierarchy of the church.
- We are spiritual leaders concerned with the care and nurturing of souls and the development of persons’ religious experience with God.
- We are called to share in the unique ministry of blessing and to pursue aggressively situations needing healing and reconciliation.
- We are co-authors with God in the ministry of Christ, which blesses persons, families, and communities.
- We are not bound by institutional structures. Paul Booth wrote in the March 1994 *Evangelists Newsletter*: “There is a sense in which the ministry of evangelists takes on a universal quality in that we deal with issues of humankind’s deepest longing for communion with God and for a feeling of place and rich communion in human community.”
- We are evangelists, though some still want us to be or act as patriarchs. John Cobb Jr. wrote in *Theology Today*, January 1995, page 553: “...the theme of patriarchy can be juxtaposed to the theme of justice. It may be that the tension between these themes was little noticed in past epochs. But today it forces itself on our attention. While patriarchy calls for the continued subordination of women, justice calls for a society and church in which women share power equally with men. In short, the Christ-event cuts in the direction of justice for women. Progressive Christians find Christ calling us to work for justice for women, not for the maintenance of patriarchy.” And in 1839, Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. stated to the Quorum of

Twelve Apostles that he considered the name patriarch and evangelist as interchangeable.

- We are trusted and cherished ministers in the church, which according to Frederick M. Smith in *The Priesthood Journal* of January 1940) “...necessitates an exemplary life that will enable one to draw close to the divine source of inspiration.” Persons holding the office of evangelist are called to the highest moral and ethical standards of conduct.

- We will be *learners*; we will be *witnesses*; we will be *presence*; we will be *companions*. These images became the four cornerstones of our ministry. These nouns needed some help to give meaning to what kind of learner, witness, presence, and companion evangelists were to be. Thus, were added the qualifiers of teacher, apostolic, pastoral, and spiritual. These terms were discussed widely among members of the order and then were formalized in the mission-vision statement as images of how evangelists would be blessing ministers. There is no hierarchy of importance in the images. We might see ourselves as being stronger, more comfortable, more gifted, or more needed in one or two of these images, so we should not think of one as more important than another.

- We will be a *blessing* that engages our spirit, our body, our mind, and our heart in the ministry of Jesus, who came not to condemn but to bless the world. The water that gives life to the roots of these images is God’s love, which is expressed in a *passion to bless*.

- We will be a *spiritual companion* to carry the spirit of love for all persons. Being a spiritual companion also changed the focus in the sacrament of blessing from the objective, magical, crystal-ball-non-relational perception of blessing to one of friendship, intimacy, and long-term relationship before and after the sacramental experience. As Ministers of Blessing, we enter into a partnership with others as spiritual companions.

- We will be a *pastoral presence* to embody the life of Jesus in the midst of the world. It honored the ministry expressed by many evangelists as one of the few ways still open to them to serve. As the result of no longer serving in administrative roles, many evangelists were left outside the communication and ministerial loop and were a forgotten element of the ministerial team. The exception was that evangelists were asked to pray a lot. Being the presence of Jesus in the midst of the people not only was to

bless the lives of individuals, but families and the congregation. It is a way to extend the sacrament of blessing to families and the community of the congregation.

- We will be an *apostolic witness*, giving evangelists the opportunity to extend the ministry of blessing in outreaching witness to the community and beyond. Evangelists are called by apostles, often ordained by apostles and extend the apostolic blessing to the world. The witness is seen best in the life of the evangelist, whose words and deeds are congruent with the life and words of Jesus.

The current and past presiding evangelists have embraced, guided, and continued to refine what it means to be a Minister of Blessing. Two changes that will be discussed in subsequent sessions are the change of the modifier “teach” in the image of *Teacher-Learner* to a *Teaching-Learner*, bringing it into line with the other three images. The other change is to add a fifth image that will involve evangelists in justice issues.

The mission-vision statement reads “...serving in multiple ministries according to the unique gifts and callings of each evangelist as:

- **Spiritual companion**
- **Apostolic witness**
- **Teaching learner**
- **Pastoral presence**
- **Living sanctuary**

We affirm that God is a God of blessing, and that all peoples seek and need to be aware of God’s grace that is blessing. We continually are blessed by the grace of God, and now we have been called to be an instrument of God’s blessing in human form on earth.

Evangelists are Ministers of Blessing.