

Four Ministry Pillars: Overview

When out-of-town guests come to Chicago, we often take them to a pancake house named Walker Brothers. The food is so good that on the weekends you stand in line for an hour just to get in. There are 6 locations, but we usually go to one in my hometown of Glenview (see the picture below):



I grew up in Glenview and remember when the building was a florist where I bought corsages for high school dances. The building hasn't changed at all. It's always been white brick walls with pillars in front.

While driving by recently, I noticed scaffolding around the pillars. Construction workers were putting in new pedestals and installing rebar in each pillar. After 50 years of Chicago winters, the pillars needed repair to support the weight of the roof.

Pillars provide support and stability to a building by distributing the weight more evenly. In organizations, pillars are the people, procedures and processes that provide the support and stability needed to be successful. Every Christian must have 4 pillars to have a successful ministry – a life message, an audience, a platform, and some unique methodologies.*

Every Christian has a life message

God has been at work in your life since before you were born. God has used every event of your life – the good, bad, and ugly - to make you more like Christ and to prepare you for your calling.

Out of your life story flows a life message - something you've learned about God and the Christian life. This becomes the heart of your ministry – sharing your life message with others that need to hear it. For example, the life message of a divorced friend is simply, "There is life after divorce. Heal up and move forward."

Every life message has an audience

Not everyone will resonate with your life message. Typically, people who have gone through similar experiences are the individuals most willing to hear your life message. For example, those who have experienced or are experiencing divorce are the people most ready and willing to hear my friend's life message.

Every audience requires a platform

Four Ministry Pillars: Overview

Your audience will only listen to you if they believe you are credible. They must see that you not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk. To reach your audience, you must be part of an existing ministry that focuses on your life message. If one doesn't exist, then you may have to establish a new ministry. For example, my friend is part of an existing church ministry called Rebuilders that helps people rebuild and move on with their lives after a divorce.

Every platform requires unique methodologies

How will the platform you are a part of reach the audience that needs to hear your life message? Some methods will work better than others depending on the nature and needs of your audience. For example, Rebuilders uses a seminar format with small group table discussions led by trained facilitators. The ministry has developed its own curriculum to guide individuals through the process.

A good place to start is to consider your life story. Which experiences - positive or negative - have impacted you the most? What have you learned through this experience that you would like to share with others?

* I'm indebted to my friend Paul Stanley who introduced me to this concept

Four Pillars of Ministry: Life Message

An epitaph is “a brief statement commemorating or epitomizing a deceased person, often inscribed on a gravestone in memory of a loved one.” Sometimes individuals write their own epitaphs preceding their deaths. But in most cases epitaphs are written by the person’s surviving relatives.



People’s epitaphs say a lot about them. Some are humorous, like “I told you I was sick” or “Here lies an atheist; all dressed up and no place to go.”

More than a few deal with personal attributes, as in or “A caring, sharing person” or “He was filled with a zest for life that never grew old that kept him eternally young.”

Often epitaphs describe the person’s achievements, for instance “A great doctor who selflessly gave his time tending to the sick” or “He changed our lives for the better.”

Some reflect core values, such as, “Liberty, Humanity, Justice, Equality” or “Loved God, Loved Family, Loved Life, Had Fun.”

Frequently Bible verses are used as epitaphs, including “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3) or “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

But the most meaningful epitaphs reflect life lessons people have learned. For example, “It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives” or “What I spent I lost; what I possessed is left to others; what I gave away remains with me.”

A life message is a summary of the single most important truth that a person has learned and wishes to communicate to others. It reflects the essence of people’s lives – what they want others to know and what ultimately will live on after they die. For Christians, it is what God has taught them that they are meant to teach others.

The two primary sources of a life message are Bible verses and positive or negative experiences. It also might be both - a Bible verse captures the essence of a truth you learned through a life experience.

Paul provides an excellent biblical example of a life verse related to his personal experiences. As the apostle considered the events of his life, the trials and hardships he had faced, he came to one central truth. In Philippians 1:21, he wrote, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Four Pillars of Ministry: Life Message

Joshua stated his life lesson before the people of Israel as they renewed their covenant with God. As he challenged them to put God first, he declared, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15b).

God called me to this ministry on a cold, rainy day in June, 1995. I was reading through the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17 asking God to show me His calling for my life. Towards the end of the day, as I started reading John 17, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I knew that God was about to reveal something very important to me. Then I read John 17:4 where Jesus prays to His Father, "I've brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave me to do."

I suddenly realized that the Father had given His Son a task on earth that was unique to Him. Only Jesus could die for our sins and pay the price for our disobedience. Therefore, God had something unique for each of His children – including me – that we are called to do on earth. At that moment I recognized that my calling was to help other believers connect with their calling.

My life message is based on John 17:4. "God has work for you to do that only you can do. As you complete your work you bring glory to God on earth." That's it. That truth is the basis of my ministry. It's what I want you – and every Christian - to know and apply to your life personally.

Take some time to write a draft copy of your life lesson. Don't worry if it's word perfect and spot on. Pray and ask God to clarify it in your mind and He will answer your request. Then live out that life message in your daily life.

Four Ministry Pillars: Audience

Businesses spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours trying to identify their “target audience.” Every business has a product or service to sell. Sales will increase if they correctly identify the audience most likely to make a purchase. If they misidentify it, they’ll waste time, money, and opportunities.

In business the audience is the customer most likely to buy your product or service. But in ministry the audience is the “customer” you have a deep desire to impact for Christ. The product or service you offer is your spiritual gift(s). Correctly identifying your audience will have three beneficial outcomes. Each one relates to the individuals involved in your ministry.



First, serving the right audience benefits the people served. You serve with greater enthusiasm and effectiveness when you serve an audience near and dear to your heart. Its’ needs are met; its’ problems are solved; and its’ impact makes the world a better place.

Next, serving the right audience benefits you. Your ministry is more fruitful and fulfilling when you minister to an audience you care about deeply. You “want” to serve rather than “have” to serve; and your impact is more widespread and powerful.

Finally, serving the right audience benefits God. As the audience is served, and your ministry becomes more effective, God receives the glory. Moreover, the Kingdom of God advances.

Who is your Audience? It may be a group of people you care deeply about. This typically includes groups of people based on age, gender, life experiences, marital status, or level of spiritual maturity.

Or your Audience could be a social issue that you want to work on to make things better in the world. Typically the social issues relate to social institutions. Examples include basic needs, business, the church, family, government, health care, legal system, military, and schools.

Your Audience is the group of people or social issue that most relates to your Life Message. Look over the Audiences mentioned above. Which one ...

- Most needs to hear your Life Message?
- Do you resonate with the most?
- Do you most want to have an impact on?
- Has God tended to give you the most opportunity to minister to?
- Would you want your efforts to become your personal legacy?

Four Ministry Pillars: Audience

My message is “God has work for you to do that only you can do. As you complete your work you bring glory to God on earth.” Who needs to hear this message? It’s primarily people in 3 stages of transition: 1) People in their 20s just starting out; 2) People around 40 looking at midlife adjustments; and 3) People who are 55 and older considering what to do after retirement. Knowing my audience allows me to focus my life message on those individuals who most need to hear it.

What about you. First, finalize your life message statement. Then identify the people who most need to hear that message. That’s your Audience.

Four Ministry Pillars: Platform

At a campaign event, the candidate speaks to a group of people while standing on a stage. Typically, the candidate gives a “stump speech” – the same message presented to multiple audiences in various locations.



This analogy helps explain the Four Pillars of Ministry:

- You are the candidate – chosen by God to represent Him in the world.
- The spectators correspond to your Audience – the people who most need to hear what you have to say.
- Your stump speech is your Life Message - the single most important truth you've learned and wish to communicate to others.
- The campaign event represents the opportunities God gives you to share your Life Message with others.
- The stage symbolizes your Platform – why your Audience believes you are someone worth listening to.

My Life Message is based on John 17:4. “God has work for you to do that only you can do. As you complete your work you bring glory to God on earth.” My Audience is people in three stages of transition: 1) Christians in their 20s just staring out; 2) Believers around 40 who are making midlife adjustments; and 3) Christ-followers who are 55 and older considering what to do after retirement.

A Platform is whatever gives you credibility with your Audience so they will listen and respond to your Life Message. Your Platform will be based on at least three factors: your life experiences, ministry involvement, and specialized credentials.

LIFE EXPERIENCES

You gain credibility when you personally share the life experiences of your Audience. For example, if your Life Message involves divorce, your Audience will listen to you more closely if you yourself have gone through a divorce. At the very least, your Audience must recognize that you knowledgeable about the topic and care deeply about the people in that situation.

MINISTRY INVOLVEMENT

You will increase your credibility if you serve in a ministry related to your Life Message. For most believers, their Platform will be an existing church ministry related to their Life Message. For example, if your Life Message relates to teenagers, your Platform most likely will be the junior or senior high ministry at your church.

Four Ministry Pillars: Platform

A single church cannot possibly have ministries that address every Life Message. Consequently, some believers will serve in a Christian organization outside their local church. For example, if your Life Message relates to adequate housing, you may choose to serve in a parachurch ministry like Habitat for Humanity.

A few believers will find that neither the church nor existing Christian organizations address the topic of their Life Message. These people may start a new ministry related to their Life Message. For example, I started Designed to Serve to help believers understand and live out God's unique calling for their life.

SPECIALIZED CREDENTIALS

Depending on the nature and scope of your Life Message, you may need specialized credentials for your Platform. For example, if your Life Message involves medicine, you probably will need to be a doctor, nurse or other health professional. If the scope of your ministry is larger than your local community, you most likely will need to have a more public Platform as a speaker or author.

Knowing your Life Message is vital. Identifying your Audience is essential. But establishing your Platform is critical. You must have credibility with your Audience for them to listen and respond to your Life Message.

What is your Life Message? Who is your Audience? What is your Platform?

Four Ministry Pillars: Unique Methods

I decided to give my son a check for his birthday. I licked the envelope shut, addressed it, and suddenly remembered I hadn't put the check inside before sealing the envelope. So I carefully opened the card, inserted the check, and tried to lick it shut. Unfortunately, the glue wouldn't stick anymore, so I used another method to seal it - WOOD glue.

I don't know why I used WOOD glue. It just seemed like a good idea at the time. When my son opened the card, the wood glue worked so well that he practically destroyed the envelope, card, and check. My family had a good laugh as I told the story.



Obviously, I used the wrong method to accomplish my purpose. A better choice would've been to use Elmer's glue or Scotch tape. Using wood glue was a complete disaster. If only my method had matched my purpose!

This story illustrates the importance of using the right methods to effectively deliver your LIFE MESSAGE to your AUDIENCE based on your PLATFORM. Some methods won't work, while others will work, but only to some extent. What you want to use are methods UNIQUE to the LIFE MESSAGE, AUDIENCE, and PLATFORM.

Because there are an unlimited number of LIFE MESSAGES, AUDIENCES, and PLATFORMS, it's impossible for me to list specific methods for you to employ. The best I can do is to describe various categories of methods and allow you to customize your approach.

COMMUNICATION METHODS

Verbal: It may be that the most effective way to communicate your LIFE MESSAGE is to tell people verbally. It could be over coffee or a meal; by telephone; through intentional conversations; or some other opportunities.

Written: Perhaps your LIFE MESSAGE is best presented in writing. You might send out letters, emails or newsletters; start a blog; use Facebook or Twitter; develop curriculum; submit articles for publication; write a book; or other possibilities.

COMMUNICATION VENUES

One to one: Talking to another person individually may be the most effective way to communicate your LIFE MESSAGE.

Four Ministry Pillars: Unique Methods

Small group: Your LIFE MESSAGE might best be shared in a small group where it can be discussed thoroughly.

Large group: A large group may be the most fitting place to present your LIFE MESSAGE, like a class, seminar, or retreat.

Through media: The technological explosion offers many opportunities to disseminate your LIFE MESSAGE – CDs or DVDs; Skype; podcasts; internet radio; or other media options.

COMMUNICATION LOCATIONS

Where is the best place to communicate your MESSAGE - home; community; work; church; churches; Christian organization; or the world?

Chances are very good that within each category above you'll use several communication vehicles. Additionally, the list above is not exhaustive, but representative of the possibilities. The main idea is to select the methods that are most appropriate for YOUR MESSAGE. Which ones best fits your LIFE MESSAGE?

Four Pillars of Ministry: Process

Putting together a jigsaw puzzle can be an enjoyable experience, but it's hard work. It requires observation, as well as the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The process is a character builder that tests the limits of your patience and perseverance.

You soon discover that it's better to do the border first and then work from the outside in. Ultimately, it'll be gratifying when you put in the last piece in place.



A jigsaw puzzle is an analogy for the process of constructing your own Four Pillars of Ministry. Since there are many pieces to the puzzle it can be a tedious task that can be frustrating and time-consuming.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, start on the outside and work towards the middle. Use a trial and error strategy with the various pieces. In the beginning the puzzle's image will be unclear, but in time the overall picture will emerge.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Life Message

Begin by reflecting on the ministry experiences, opportunities, and Scripture verses that God has given you.

Ask yourself, "Which ones impacted me the most?"

"What basic lesson did I learn from these items?"

"What is the single most important lesson I learned that I want to share with others?"

Now write a one or two sentence summary of this lesson as your LIFE MESSAGE.

Remember: the key to good writing is - review, review, review!

My LIFE MESSAGE is based on a verse that's important to me - John 17:4. I developed a paraphrase of this verse as my LIFE MESSAGE: "God has work for you to do that only you can do. As you complete your work you bring glory to God on earth."

Audience

Now move towards the puzzle's center and the pieces adjacent to it. These pieces represent your AUDIENCE.

Ask yourself, "Which group of people or social institution most needs to hear this message?"

Chances are that you already sense an affinity with your AUDIENCE.

Four Pillars of Ministry: Process

My AUDIENCE includes believers in 3 stages of transition: 1) People in their 20s just starting out; 2) People around 40 looking at midlife adjustments; and 3) People who are 55 and older considering what to do after retirement.

Platform

Continue to move towards the puzzle's center by clarifying your PLATFORM.

Ask yourself, "What PLATFORM gives me the most credibility with my audience?"
"How can I increase the credibility of my PLATFORM with my audience?"

My PLATFORM is a 501(c)(3) Christian charitable nonprofit – Designed to Serve. Conducting ministry through a parachurch organization provides both visibility and credibility with believers. I also have a doctorate and ministry experience in teaching my LIFE MESSAGE in North America, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. I hope to increase my credibility by publishing a book on my LIFE MESSAGE.

Unique Methods

Continue to move towards the puzzle's center by identifying your UNIQUE METHODS.

Ask yourself, "What are the UNIQUE METHODS – the best suited ones - to reach my audience?"
"Where is the ideal place to communicate with my audience?"

My UNIQUE METHODS are: website; blog; assessments; booklets; books; music; workshops; seminars; and retreat. The ideal place for me to conduct ministry is in local churches.

Finally, the center piece - the core of your ministry - is Jesus Christ. This is where the puzzle analogy breaks down because the Lord is the first and most important piece in this process. The Lord will guide and direct you, not only in developing your document, but in implementing it.

Four Pillars of Ministry: Next Steps

An investment company has an advertising campaign called “Follow the Green Line.” In one commercial Bob is walking on a green line unfolding before him on the sidewalk. He says hello to Pete who asks, “What’s this?” Bob explains that he’s following an adviser’s plan to fund his kid’s college education.

Pete is intrigued and says, “Maybe I should follow it, too.” Bob explains, “No. It doesn’t work that way. You see, this is my own personalized plan. You got to get one that’s right for you.”



The same principle applies as you develop and implement your Four Pillars of Ministry. The Four Pillars are personalized to you. You can’t follow someone else’s plan, and they can’t follow yours. You must develop a unique plan that reflects who you are and the ministry assignment God has given you.

Like the commercial, the first step is to talk to an adviser. Fortunately, your Adviser is the God of the universe who knows everything about you and sees your life from beginning to end. So throughout the entire process, ask God for His wisdom to develop the plan and His power to carry it out.

Since each set of Pillars is different, it’s impossible to provide the specifics of your plan. Truthfully, under God’s guidance, that’s your job. But listed below is a list of four concrete next steps to take in developing and implementing your plan.

Finalize it

Go back to the first Pillar - your Life Message. What is the single most important lesson God has taught you throughout your life? The fog-cutter question is, “If I could tell others just one thing about life, what would I want them to know?” Your Life Message must be an accurate reflection of who you are at the core.

It’s important that until you have your Life Message down word perfect that you don’t go any further. The other three Pillars flow from this first one.

Then systematically go through the other pillars in this exact order using the guiding questions:

- Audience: Who needs to hear this message?
- Platform: What gives you credibility - and will increase it - with your audience?
- Unique Methods: What are the best ways and places to communicate your message?

Write it

Four Pillars of Ministry: Next Steps

Once you've finalized the plan, write it down on a single sheet of paper. It's both encouraging and empowering to seeing it all together. Seeing the plan in its entirety verifies the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Research it

Now it's time to research the plan; that is, learn all you can about each element of your plan. Become an expert on your life message. Find out about your audience. Learn about the platform you envision. Study up on the components of your unique methods. Knowledge is power, and the more you know, the more effective your ministry will be.

Share it

Once your plan is finished, share it with others. In fact, share your life message everywhere you go with anyone who will listen. You never know who will resonate with the plan and want to help you make it a reality. The biblical model of ministry is to do it in community. Don't implement your plan as the Lone Ranger. Be sure to have at least one other person alongside you as you launch your ministry.

Live it

Finally, live out your Four Pillars in daily life. Implement it. Put it into practice. DO IT! Secure the resources you need to make it happen. What do you need? Money? Office space? A network of relationships? Visibility? The appropriate ministry at church? Whatever you need, God will provide. But He expects you to take the first step.

There are exciting adventures awaiting you. Think of the lives you will impact for Christ. Imagine the thrill of being used of God in a mighty cause. Most importantly, dream of the day you'll stand before God and hear him say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." May God bless you as you seek to do His will.