

Mark Rotramel: A ‘front row seat’ to life transformation

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Mark Rotramel has been pastor of [First Baptist Church in El Paso](#) since August 2017. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

- Part-time music minister at Chapel Hill Baptist Church, Odessa
- Music and youth minister at First Baptist Halfway and First Baptist Bangs
- Youth minister at First Baptist Edinburg and Taylor Memorial in Hobbs, N.M.
- Assistant pastor at First Baptist Edinburg
- Senior pastor at First Baptist Edinburg and Crestwood Baptist in Lumberton

Where did you grow up?

Odessa, Texas

How did you come to faith in Christ?

Because my father was a pastor, I grew up hearing the facts of the gospel. When I was 13 years old, while attending youth camp at Alto Frio Baptist

Encampment, the gospel message became real to me. I recognized I needed Jesus in a personal way, that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection was for me. I made a profession of faith and committed myself to Jesus during one of the evening worship services.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

- Bachelor of Arts with a major in Bible from Wayland Baptist University, 1987
- Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991
- Doctor of Ministry from George W. Truett Theological Seminary, 2009.

Ministry life

Why do you feel called into ministry?

Ministry was not something I envisioned as a teenager. My father was a pastor, and I was sure that ministry would not be for me. In many ways, I was the “poster child” of a poorly functioning pastor's kid. I made many bad choices that set my life on a path of destruction.

During a particularly dark time, God used a young lady—who later became my wife—to draw me back to church and to people who followed Jesus. A few weeks after we married, I was studying my Bible at the breakfast table of our apartment when God definitively called me to the gospel ministry.

The call was clear. Through the years, God has reaffirmed the call many times. I consider it an honor of the highest order to be a minister of the gospel and to work with God's people.

What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

As a minister, I get a “front row seat” to see life transformation in individuals. Seeing people embrace Christ as Savior is such a blessing. I love watching the transformation that occurs over time as individuals grow deeper in their faith and come to understand and appropriate the love of Jesus. I suppose this comes from the personal experiences I still enjoy as Jesus takes me deeper into his love and life. As I observe others as they come to the point of conversion and life transformation, I am reminded of the timelessness of the gospel and Jesus’ offer of life.

What one aspect of ministry gives you the greatest joy?

I love teaching and watching people as they discover truths from God’s word. When “the lights come on” for people as the Holy Spirit takes the written or spoken word and makes it real and applicable in their lives gives me great joy.

How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

When I began serving as a minister 35 years ago, I viewed ministry as a job that focused on an institution—the church). Through the years, God has taught me that my calling as a minister is focused on people and—more specifically—on helping people connect to the love and the life of Jesus Christ. As a minister, my calling moves me to invest in people and help to equip them for the life only available in Jesus Christ.

How do you expect ministry to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

I believe the essence of ministry will remain unchanged over the next 10 to 20 years. That is, ministry will always be about investing in people and

equipping them for the life only Jesus can give.

The *methods* of ministry will change dramatically, I suspect. As the rate of change in our society continues to accelerate, churches and ministers will be forced to adapt in ways we cannot even imagine at this point.

Furthermore, as society moves further into a post-Christian status, Christians must find fresh ways to connect with people who reject the organized church. Ministry, properly practiced, will need to be the bridge that makes that connection.

If you could launch any new ministry—individually, through your congregation or through another organization—what would it be? Why?

Care for caregivers is a ministry desperately needed. Specifically, I am referring to those who are providing care for people suffering from various forms of dementia. This has been a rising issue for several years. So often we see the decline of an individual, and that person's spouse or family member is thrust into the role of providing round-the-clock care. The physical and spiritual needs of the caregiver often go unaddressed by churches.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your ministry.

First, I believe cross-cultural ministry along the Texas/Mexico border continues to provide a significant challenge to First Baptist El Paso and other churches in our area. The immigration issues we face every day provide opportunities to minister to the "whole person" physically, spiritually, emotionally and legally. Resources are limited, and strategies must be evaluated regularly and developed strategically.

Second, the cultural shifts of our times challenge us. The multinational and

urban population of the greater El Paso area includes a large percentage of people under the age of 30. Baptist work in this area must be more diverse than simply Spanish-speaking or English-speaking churches. We must find ways to connect with people from various countries, perspectives and religious views.

Third, church health continues to be a challenge across our state. Having served in almost every geographic region of Texas, I am confident one of the big challenges for many of our churches is survival. Revitalization and re-planting of churches has become an important point of ministry by the Baptist General Convention of Texas because so many of our churches are struggling for survival.

What do you wish more laypeople knew about ministry or, specifically, your ministry?

You may never know how much your kindness and the love you show to your pastor and his family means to him.

About Baptists

What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

Spiritual Formation. An issue each generation must address is that of spiritual vitality. The nature of church work is that we often move toward maintenance of the “machine” instead of promoting freshness in the spiritual lives of our people. We must always teach people to walk with Christ in daily fellowship and avoid the trap of endorsing “folk religion” and “bumper sticker theology.”

Evangelism. In a post-Christian world that seems to be running away from organized church, we must be students of the culture around us while

simultaneously being dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide us toward effective evangelism.

Perception. I believe 21st-century American society perceives most Baptists as out-of-touch and irrelevant. We must counter that perception.

About Mark

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

My dad, H. Gene Rotramel, taught me so many things as a minister. I was blessed to work with him on the same church staff for over five years. His wisdom as a leader and pastor prepared me for my role as a senior pastor.

Gary Manning, one of my professors at Wayland Baptist University, provided direction to me in the field of spiritual formation. He taught me so many things about being a loving pastor and my role as an equipper/discipler.

Ron Cook was the director of the doctor of ministry program at Truett Seminary during my time there as a student and taught me how to be a lifelong learner and practitioner of leadership. His influence in my life came after I had been in ministry almost 24 years. God used him to take me to an entirely different level in my life as a pastor/leader.

What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?

People will forgive you for preaching a bad sermon, but they rarely forgive you for not loving them.

What is the impact of ministry on your family?

My family has been on the receiving end of great love from some of God's most incredible people. Life can be difficult for a pastor's family. God regularly put great and gracious people into our lives. Those people enhanced our lives and our experiences as a family. I count it a blessing that my entire family has had the opportunity to know the love that comes from participating in a community of faith.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

My dad often said, "A call to preach is a call to buy books."

God has instilled in me a love for reading that makes it impossible for me to go to great lengths here. One of my favorite authors is M. Craig Barnes because of the way he puts together scripture and real-life challenges. Roger Olson was one of my professors and is my favorite theologian because of his incredible intellect and the thorough way in which he processes scripture, faith and practice. N.T. Wright challenges me to think theologically, too. David Garland and Ben Witherington III are a couple of my favorites in Biblical studies.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

My favorite passage of scripture is Matthew 9:36-10:5. "Jesus saw the crowds..." provides the task many ministers skip over in the rush to do ministry. In seeing people in their needy condition, Jesus' compassion moved him to send out disciples. I'm grateful Jesus saw me in my need, and I am challenged by his example to see people as he does and respond to the need like he did.

Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus?

Why?

Moses. He's noteworthy to me because he was a reluctant leader. Also, he was honest with God, but he was teachable. God took a flawed man who was reluctant to assume the role God had for him and made him one of the greatest leaders of history. And, the key to it all, I believe, was his heart for God and God's people.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.

I love cooking.

If you could get one "do over" in ministry, what would it be, and why?

If I had one "do over," I would slow down and celebrate more. In ministry, it is so easy to move quickly from one assignment or task to the next without taking time to pause, reflect and enjoy the work of God around you. I have learned there is joy in the pause. Stop and reflect. Usually, that has a rejuvenating effect and often leads to worship.

How has your wife contributed to your ministry?

God used Teresa to save my life during some truly dark times. God used her to draw me back to Jesus. When God called me to ministry, she was immediately supportive and has been since that day. God equipped her to be an incredible pastor's wife. I regularly tell people at First Baptist El Paso, "You will tolerate me, but you are going to love her!" She is an exceptional ministry partner.