

CARE OF THE PASTOR'S SOUL

by

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INTRODUCTION

I will never forget the day that my spiritual director, a “refugee” from parish ministry, said to me in response to the sighs of my soul, “ Parish ministry kills spiritual life.” The realisation in that moment that I was not alone in struggling to maintain my spiritual life in the face of parish and institutional denominational demands was cold comfort at the time, but it alerted me to the fact that many ordained clergy wrestle with issues of spiritual self care.

I discovered some small time after this initial realisation, that Eugene Peterson in *The Unnecessary Pastor*, points to what he describes as a “constant danger for those of us who enter the ranks of the ordained,” because “we take on a role, a professional religious role, that gradually obliterates the life of the soul.”¹ That role is frequently “other-centered”, the “other” being the parish which expects the pastor to be on call 24/7, giving of their all, emotionally, physically and spiritually, meeting the needs of their parishioners, and being able, week by week, to produce an insightful, spirit filled sermon. This concept of ministry unfortunately tends to foster a disregard for one’s self and one’s family, and can lead to what has been described as “spiritual bankruptcy”.²

The reality is that self care of one’s soul should be an integral part of one’s ministry, something that has long been recognised, but all too often ignored by both pastors and their churches. In Matthew’s Gospel for example, we find Jesus saying to his disciples, “And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?” (Matt 16.26, NLT)

In the seventeenth century English Puritan Richard Baxter wrote:

“See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a saviour, your own hearts should

¹ Peterson Eugene and Dawn, Marva, *The Unnecessary Pastor*, p. 14

² McNeal, Reggie, *A Work of the Heart*, p. X

neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in Him and His saving benefits. Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish, while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them.”³

If this awareness of the need for self-care has been foundational in ministry why is it that so many pastors have burned out over the last few decades, or at the very least, become spiritually drained and exhausted? Why do many pastors through the motions, giving little more than ritual attention to God,⁴ their sense of vocation a distant memory. How has this been able to happen to those God has called? This essay aims at exploring some of the reasons and suggesting some “cures” for the pastor’s soul.

THE CULTURE ENSLAVED CHURCH

Firstly, pastors cannot be understood apart from the cultural context in which they find themselves. For example, in light of the fact that many churches have been organisationally emulating big business, pastors have been required to become like CEO’s or managers. Instead of being spiritual communities where people can form a relationship with God, all too often churches are more concerned with attendance charts, church–building programmes and their success in the local neighbourhood. Indeed, it has been claimed that many churches today are more secular than the culture they find themselves in, having adopted a functional style that in reality cuts them off from their spiritual heart.⁵

This does not bode well for their pastors as secondly, Eugene Peterson writes that the conditions in which pastors must acquire a spirituality for their vocation are not friendly. “Our vocations are bounded on the one side by consumer appetites, on the other hand by a marketing mind set,”⁶ he says. In trying to meet the demands of the world, ministry has too often been reduced to religious economics,⁷ and has been distorted by society’s assumptions that spiritual well being can be discovered

³ Baxter, Richard, quoted in Headley, Anthony J, *Reframing your Ministry*, p. 82-83

⁵ McNeal R, op cit, p 81; Standish G., *Becoming a Blessed Church*, p 7

⁶ Peterson, E., *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p 3

⁷ *ibid*, p. 4

outside of God.⁸ The individualism rife in western culture has led an approach to ministry that ignores or neglects the role of community, and is all too often unmindful of God. If God is relegated to the margins, then human activity is placed at the centre, and “doing” becomes the focus of a ministry based on performance just as in the corporate world. Anthony Headley observes that such distortions of the understanding of ministry and the church “keep ministers locked into a style of ministry which slowly wears them out.”⁹ Peterson comments that pastors may begin their “vocation delighting in the presence of the Lord,”¹⁰ but it’s as if there is a conspiracy to eradicate prayer, Scripture and spiritual direction from their lives.¹¹ This is because the expectations of congregations and church organisations lead to a constant busyness that allows little time for solitude and quality time for developing a relationship with God.

WHAT’S HAPPENING FOR PASTORS AS A RESULT?

In a culture that applauds and encourages continuous busyness many pastors mistakenly associate ministry with busyness. Get a group of pastors together and you will undoubtedly hear them comparing how busy they are.¹² In the conversations I have had with some of my colleagues, sixty hour weeks were common despite the denomination concerned encouraging clergy to work no more than 48 hours. Asked about their spiritual lives these same pastors admitted to taking little time for focused prayer or reading the Scriptures. They are not unusual. An international survey of twenty thousand Christians conducted in 2007 revealed that many identified “busyness and constant overload as a major distraction from God,”¹³ with 65% of pastors in the survey admitting that they rush from one task to the next in such a way that it hinders their taking time to develop their relationship with God.

Aside from the mores of our society and the acceptance of hyperactive lifestyles, it also needs to be acknowledged that pastors are not immune to internal pressures

⁸ Headley, op cit, p. 90

⁹ *ibid*, 91

¹⁰ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p 13

¹¹ Peterson, Eugene, *Working the Angles*, p 4

¹² It is however highly unlikely that you will hear them discussing their spiritual lives, and how much time they spend in prayer!

¹³ Barton, Ruth Haley, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, p 118, quoting from “Christian Post” e-mail newsletter, July 2007

that drive them to perform and achieve. Personal theologies can lead to an assumption that pastors should give untiringly of themselves in service to Christ. The Protestant work ethic and all that goes with it regarding conscientiousness and responsibility, can also colour the work habits of clergy. When pastors are said to feel guilty for taking time to pray because they consider it selfish or a sign of laziness, then their personal understanding of ministry has become skewed. It has been suggested that such pastors often behave as though God were the hard task master driving them mercilessly to do more and more.¹⁴ This is paradoxically accompanied by an attitude that it is the pastor who decides what is to be done and how it should be accomplished, without any reference to God's plans. Is it any wonder many pastors can be labelled as workaholics?

The result of this predisposition towards workaholism, or constant busyness, is what has been described as an "exhaustion epidemic,"¹⁵ that can ultimately lead to burn out. American studies have shown that over 70% of pastors consider leaving the ministry due to exhaustion and stress, while 90% admit to being frequently fatigued and worn out.¹⁶ Ruth Haley Barton in her book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* asserts that some pastors know that they are losing bits and pieces of their souls every day, and are scared they will go over the edge, while others are managing to "hang in" but are uncertain how long they will last.¹⁷ However, instead of taking the time to discern how God may be calling them to balance their lives, there is a tendency to create even more imbalance by living their lives according to society's expectations, filling any "down time" with numerous recreational activities.

It is easy in today's church for the pastor's priorities to become misshapen - a vocation to become a profession; for effective performance to take precedence over a godly life; for spirituality to be simply another responsibility; for exhaustion to become the norm.

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL REBALANCING

¹⁴ Headley, op cit, p 111

¹⁵ Horsfall, Tony, *Working From a Place of Rest*, p 44

¹⁶ Krejcir, Richard, *Statistics on Pastors*, p 1. To my knowledge no such study has been done in New Zealand but I'm personally aware of how often ministers complain of exhaustion.

¹⁷ Barton, op cit, p 24.

The question has to be asked how this tendency to ignore one's spiritual life has been able to infiltrate into ministry. American Presbyterian minister, Graham Standish, claims that in mainline churches "training becomes so academic and intellectual that [ministers] lose the life-giving sense of God's call that initially led them into ministry."¹⁸ He is not alone in ascribing ministry training as one of the origins of this loss of spiritual awareness and growth that then skews a pastor's way of working.¹⁹ It appears there are too many pastors preaching *about* spirituality who have not had the institutional support or encouragement to develop their own.²⁰

The reality is that self care for pastors should be "a foundational aspect of ministry".²¹ This self care needs to occur on many different levels. Self awareness and self-examination are important. Learning to acknowledge the limits of our energy and strength, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities is vital. Recognising the need for friendship and support from others is crucial. Taking time to look after ones' physical wellbeing with exercise and good food is essential. All this might seem pretty basic but it is amazing how many pastors ignore it.

On an emotional, physical and spiritual level pastors need to understand that self care is about nurturing themselves and that it is not an optional extra. Jesus demonstrated this during his ministry and is the ideal model for self care based on his frequent retreats into solitude to pray and to be replenished to continue working from a place of rest and faith.²² Jesus' words paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in Matthew 11:28-30 are significant for all pastors:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."²³

¹⁸ Standish, N. Graham, *Becoming a Blessed Church*, p 13

¹⁹ McNeal, op cit, p x; Hinson, E. Glenn, *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership*, p. 25; Whitney, Don, *The Importance of Spiritual Formation in the Training of Ministers*.

²⁰ This is an issue that warrants further investigation but is outside the scope of this assignment.

²¹ Headley, op cit, p 17

²² Once again this is an area I would like to explore but space does not allow.

²³ Matthew 11: 28-30, *The Message*

Pastors need to set boundaries around their time and activities, recognising their limits, and engaging in the rhythm of rest and work that God ordained from the time of creation. The demands of ministry make it essential for pastors to take moments of rest when they remind themselves of their call, and why they are in ministry in the first place. Without those moments of quiet reflection and rest, the busyness and tiredness which accompany it can be overwhelming. The temptation is to use “days off” to simply do more in the family or social setting, not rest, but only when the pastor learns the discipline of stopping will s/he be able to reconnect with God and be fully effective.

The concept of having a day away from ministry as a sabbatical is grounded in Scripture and is the linchpin of a life lived in the rhythms established by God, but for many pastors there is a fear that keeping a true Sabbath day will be seen as a sign of laziness. Regrettably it is true that some parishioners may show little appreciation or understanding for the pastor’s need to renew their own vision and energy even though lip service is paid to the need for time-out and retreats for ministers. Unfortunately while many denominational organisations allow for continuing ministry formation through study leave or attendance at conferences and workshops, the notion of not only allowing, but *expecting* ministers to take regular Sabbaths where they pause to rest and hear from God, is somehow contrary to the performance expectations of today’s church. Regardless, pastors should be encouraged to build Sabbath taking into their work patterns for as Peterson reminds us: “I can’t be busy and pray at the same time...In order to pray I have to be paying more attention to God than to what people are saying to me; to God than my clamouring ego.”²⁴ The need for rest, solitude and Sabbath are therefore integral to a balanced ministry.

So too is a healthy spirituality. Exhausted ministers can find themselves reshaping their beliefs and questioning their call, and it is essential that they find a way to pursue a relationship with God that is for personal reasons, not professional ones. Figures quoted in Krejcir’s paper *Statistics on Pastors* show that in American surveys conducted in the mid-2000’s only 38% read the Bible for their own devotions – the rest only studied the Bible when they were preparing a sermon! A low 26% of all

²⁴ Peterson, E., *The Contemplative Pastor*, p 20

those surveyed said they regularly undertook personal devotions and felt they were being fed spiritually.²⁵

Spiritual formation admittedly can take time and discipline but giving attention to their inner life can only mean a more effective ministry for pastors. Given that the majority of pastors do not have someone who helps them pay attention to their spiritual life (unless their denomination insists on it²⁶), there is a need for them to be encouraged to find a person who can accompany them on their journey and keep them accountable to God and their calling. While there appears to be some resistance among Protestant pastors to attend spiritual direction,²⁷ those researching clergy burnout emphasize the importance of meeting regularly with a spiritual director.²⁸ Eugene Peterson goes so far as to declare, “It is not merely nice for pastors to have a spiritual director; it is indispensable.”²⁹

Ministry can be a very lonely place, and as Margaret Guenther points out in her book *Holy Listening*, none of us can spiritually make the journey on our own.³⁰ Fostering one’s own spiritual life is absolutely necessary if you are supposedly responsible for helping others to grow in Christ and just as the pastor walks alongside his/her parishioners, so the pastor benefits from having another walk alongside them as they develop and maintain a quality relationship with God.

The main goal of any spiritual direction is to give deliberate attention to the experience of God in one’s life, but a certain willingness to be open to exploring this is a definite prerequisite. There is a level of vulnerability required in spiritual direction; a readiness to give honest attention to what is happening to our relationship with God underneath our ordinary busyness. For many pastors this is quite threatening, especially if the pastor’s personal identity is associated with appearing to be fully in control, and the expert on all things spiritual. Unfortunately

²⁵ Krejcir, op cit, pps 1-2. Less than half the ministers I interviewed for this project consciously and deliberately pursued spiritual disciplines such as devotional reading, set times for prayer, or journaling.

²⁶ A number of denominations have made supervision a requirement for ministers but spiritual direction is generally still optional.

²⁷ Wilkinson, Jane, *Resistance in Pastors to Spiritual Direction*, p 4

²⁸ Lehr, Fred, *Clergy Burnout*, p 85; Oswald, Ray M., *Clergy Self-care*, p 102; Wilkinson, quoting Howard Rice, p 4

²⁹ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p 167

³⁰ Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening*, p. 9

as Peterson points out, “the image aspects of being a pastor, the parts that have to do with meeting people’s expectations, can be faked easily. We can impersonate being a pastor without being a pastor.”³¹

If this is true, and I fear it is, the need for an authentic spiritual life is absolutely fundamental to the care of the pastor’s soul, and their ministry. Practice of spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, personal prayer, taking a Sabbath to be silent and still with God, journaling and even fasting, can therefore be greatly enhanced by being underpinned by regular spiritual direction.

This opportunity to share with another praying person about the disciplines practised, and the experience of God within, has considerable benefits for the pastor’s soul. An increasing awareness and dependence on God, a renewed belief in God’s love, a new found discernment about what God is saying – all can lead to a freedom from the angst and busyness of ministry, and to a new way of being a pastor.

CONCLUSION

If we turn to the Gospels it is clear that Jesus never advocated the suffocating, exhausting expectations placed on pastors today. Jesus never endorsed self-neglect or what almost amounts to self abuse. Instead he called his disciples aside, away from the demands of their ministry:

“ The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” (Mark 6:30-31)

The church needs its pastors. But it has to recognise that the pastors also have needs. Too many pastors enter their first parish enthusiastic and excited about the ministry that lies ahead, committed to serving God and his people – and yet find their own spirituality is at risk. What a blessing to them it would be if churches committed themselves to ensuring the well being of their pastors’ souls through education on spiritual growth, and making spiritual direction a self–care requirement.

³¹ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p 9

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