

## MAINTAINING PERSONAL HEALTH IN PASTORAL MINISTRY - JOHN SWEETMAN

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There are many aspects of vocational pastoral ministry that are beyond the control of pastors and therefore they cannot completely protect themselves from threats to their emotional wellbeing. But living well is the strongest defence pastors have and so they need to pursue a healthy spiritual, relational, emotional and physical lifestyle.

In this article, I will focus on six aspects of an emotionally and physically healthy life under the pressures of 21<sup>st</sup> century ministry. They all begin with “R” to make them a little more memorable. I don’t think that pastors need to get every aspect of health completely right (at least I haven’t). But they do need to be working on their personal health if they are not to succumb to the demanding pressures of vocational ministry. This article is written by a pastor and is addressed to pastors.

I have not attempted to tackle any aspects of spiritual or relational health here despite their also being foundational for the holistic health of pastors. I have chosen to focus specifically on personal health.

### **Reality**

When we become Christians, we get a completely new take on life. We are not doing our best to survive, enjoy and influence our world. We are servants of Jesus who is bringing about a complete transformation of his creation through the victory of his death and resurrection. We realise that we are not isolated individuals trying somehow to endure and maybe make our mark, but are part of a powerful movement led by our Saviour. Our main role is to follow faithfully. This is our reality.

Whenever we move away from this gospel reality, the risks of stress and burnout increase. We start to think that we are responsible for God’s work, that we have to get the job done, that we are indispensable, that our efforts will make or break our ministry. If this were true, we would have to grin and bear it, and live with the pressures and benefits of being totally responsible. But it is not reality. It is a lie that imprisons us and stops us living freely and well. It is a lie that makes us prone to either pride or anxiety. It is a lie that traps us into a

lifestyle of constant work. We're trying to do things and take credit for things that only God can do.

The main indication that we have grasped this reality is humility. When we recognise that this is God's work and we are primarily his followers, then we acknowledge that he is the Lord and we are the slaves. This is both deeply humbling and amazingly freeing.

David Horner<sup>1</sup> writes a whole section on "Cultivating Genuine Humility" in his book on 7 challenges that pastors have to overcome. He says:

Since the Lord has established that we must walk humbly in his presence, we lose his steadying hand when our pride and ego assert themselves. We have to remember that God does not suggest that we be humble. Instead, God commands us to take action and humble ourselves. Two passages in the New Testament issue this exhortation: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you at the proper time," and "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and he will exalt you" (1 Peter 5:6; James 4:10) ...

With that unequivocal exhortation to humble yourself comes a divine guarantee, a promise from the Lord, that when you humble yourself, he will exalt you. There is no need for you to compensate for the humbling treatment you receive at the hands of others by trying to exalt yourself. God has committed himself to do that on your behalf. If you humble yourself, he will exalt you.<sup>2</sup>

So constantly we turn from the temptation to think that we are rather special because we have achieved significant success or because people admire us. So too we ignore the internal accusations that we are inadequate because we feel we have failed or people are critical of us. And we hold on to the reality that this is God's work and we are his humble servants.

## **Regulation**

I'm probably stretching the "R" a bit here, but all the other Rs were so good, I had to find something. I'm talking about regulating our physical health. Research has clearly shown that our physical health significantly impacts our emotional health. Rediger writes:

Our brains-hearts-bodies are hardwired. By that I mean that (1) the body affects and functions at the direction of the mind, and (2) the mind is directly affected by the body in which it lives. Mental health tends to induce physical health and physical health tends to induce mental health.<sup>3</sup>

Obesity is a major physical and mental health problem and lack of exercise only exacerbates it. This is an area of great guilt for those living in the affluent West and pastors are no

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<sup>1</sup> David Horner, *A Practical Guide for Life and Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 117-53.

<sup>2</sup> Horner, *A Practical Guide for Life and Ministry*: 123-24.

<sup>3</sup> G. Lloyd Rediger, *Fit to be a Pastor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 64.

exception. But the Bible's strong emphasis on the body (e.g. 1 Cor. 6:19) as well as the spirit would suggest that this is a biblical issue as well as a practical one. As holistic beings, we seek health in every way.

I'm not an expert on physical health and am not strongly disciplined, but I will touch on three areas in which pastors hugely benefit from some regulation.

1. *Regulate our eating.* If we eat more than we burn off, we are going to put on weight. It's as simple as that. Because the pastoral life is fairly sedentary, pastors need to be careful about the amount and type of food they eat, especially as they get older. This is really hard to do when so much food is available. But pastors must not just ignore it or justify themselves. I weigh myself every morning and try to keep under a target weight. When I'm struggling, I often fast. This doesn't work for everyone, but I find it both frees me from my dependence/reliance on food and helps me lose some weight. It's a pity that I'm a chocoholic. I do praise God for the benefits of a good metabolism. I realise that it's much tougher for others, but there should be no excuses.
2. *Regulate our exercise.* Exercise is good for both our physical and emotional fitness. It is necessary. You really have to find a pattern of exercise that suits you. Exercise will always require effort, but the easier and more natural you make it, the more likely it is that you will maintain the pattern. Then you have to build it into your lifestyle so that it is not an option. I have a gym membership and go to the gym three times a week on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. I mainly do resistance work but also do some aerobic exercise. The other four days of the week, I walk for 30 minutes. Basically the same route every day. I wouldn't say that I love it, but it has become the way I do life. Other pastors would much prefer to play sport (I remember those days) or ride a bike. You just have to find a pattern that you can maintain and make it non-negotiable.
3. *Regulate our health checks.* As you get older, it is vital that you keep a check on your physical well-being. This means getting regular physicals and tests. Prostate cancer and breast cancer are two obvious areas where early detection makes a significant difference. If you are over 50, find a local doctor and make sure you get a full health check-up at least every 12 months.

## Rest

Everyone needs a break. God chose to rest. Exodus 20:11 says, “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” At a particularly busy time in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, Mark says, “Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he [Jesus] said to them, “Come with me by yourself to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31). Jesus knew that they all needed a break. You just can’t keep going forever. But many of us are too busy and therefore cannot get enough rest.

Eugene Peterson (1989, 17) rails against the idea of a “busy” pastor. He says:

The one piece of mail certain to go unread into my wastebasket is the letter addressed to the “busy pastor.” Not that the phrase doesn’t describe me at times, but I refuse to give my attention to someone who encourages what is worst in me. I’m not arguing the accuracy of the adjective; I am, though, contesting the way it’s used to flatter and express sympathy. “The poor man,” we say. “He’s so devoted to his flock; the work is endless, and he sacrifices himself so unstintingly.” But the word *busy* is the symptom not of commitment but of betrayal. It is not devotion but defection. The adjective *busy* set as a modifier to *pastor* should sound to our ears like *adulterous* to characterize a wife or *embezzling* to describe a banker. It is an outrageous scandal, a blasphemous affront.<sup>4</sup>

The amount and type of rest pastors need vary considerably between individuals. For example, many pastors insist on a clear day off each week in which they don’t even think about work. This is a helpful practice. I prefer a couple of days (usually Friday and Saturday) when I take it easier. I still do some work (I am writing this article early Saturday morning), but I also have plenty of breaks. Some of my colleagues are very concerned about my approach because it means that I never completely shut off from ministry, but it has worked for me over many years.

However, if you are finding that your levels of stress are growing, it may be that you are not getting enough rest and you need to do something about it. Here are a few suggestions about rest.

1. *Daily sleep.* Every time I read a new study on sleep, there seems to be a different finding. Arch Hart (Fuller Seminary) used to say that people generally need between 8 and 9 hours of sleep a night and consequently that most pastors were not getting enough sleep. This left me feeling guilty. But a recent report of a study I heard found

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). 17.

that 7 hours were enough for some people. There are challenging seasons in life (for example, when you have small children) when it's very difficult to get the sleep you need. But generally it's poor habits not life circumstances that curtail sleep. I'm an early to bed, early to rise person. Most of us need a targeted bedtime to ensure we're sleeping enough. Work hard at getting a good night's sleep. It will make a difference to your ability to cope with ministry stress. I've always wished that I lived in a siesta culture, because I love a catnap in the early afternoon. It's pretty hard to do this in most pastoral settings, but you may find it helpful.

2. *Weekly day/s off.* When I entered vocational ministry, pastors always talked about the importance of one day off each week. The justification for only one day was that most committed church members worked five days a week and then put a day into church work (usually attending two services as well as Bible studies and church ministry) leaving them with one day a week to have a break, so pastors should do the same. Now many pastors are scheduling two days a week off – often a day during the week to have a complete break from pastoring and then Saturday during which they will focus on family activities, but may also attend some church events (working bees, weddings, socials, etc.). This change has been largely driven by two trends throughout churches - a higher priority placed on time for family and a recognition that the church should not own you. Whatever your decision about weekly time off, it is vital to schedule it into your diary and stick to it. Church life can consume your whole life if you don't set clear boundaries. Many churches are now advertising the pastor's day off so that congregations can help their pastor protect this rest time.
3. *Annual holidays.* The way pastors best use their four weeks annual leave depends partly on how easily they switch off. If you can quickly turn off from the demands and pressures of vocational ministry, then any breaks will be helpful, no matter what their length. If it takes you some time to slow down and to clear your mind, then you need to plan for an extended holiday (probably at least three weeks) each year to make sure that you really get some quality rest. Some churches are also offering their pastors a few weekends off each year on top of their annual leave. This is to allow them a break from the constant pressure of services and to give them a chance to see other churches in action.
4. *Sabbaticals.* While sabbaticals are an entrenched feature of university life, they have not commonly been offered to pastors. But with the lengthening tenure of pastors in

churches, some congregations are beginning to consider providing a sabbatical for their pastors after a certain length of service (maybe 7 or 10 or 15 years). After long stints of ministry, pastors get tired. Sabbaticals provide a chance to rest and recuperate as well as to pursue neglected passions and seek new vision and direction. Long service leave could be used as a sabbatical if the church is not committed to offering this opportunity.

## **Rhythm**

It is almost impossible to live a balanced life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because life is too complicated and too pressured. Miller<sup>5</sup> argues that the idea of “balance” is flawed anyway, because balance can’t be applied to a constantly changing life and because balance reduces the sacrifice needed to live for God. I agree. Balance implies that life can be divided into segments with each demanding a certain proportion of our time. But life is holistic and cannot be easily separated into components.

Miller suggests that “rhythm” is a better theme than “balance” because it takes into account the seasons and cycles of life which require different responses and allocations of time and priority. He suggests that there are two categories of rhythms in life. One category is associated with *chronos* (measured time). These are the rhythms of life related to age and stage in life and are generally predictable. For example, a teenager will have different priorities and demands from a young parent; a student will experience life differently from a retiree. The second category is associated with *kairos* (experienced time). These are the rhythms that occur throughout life but they are unpredictable. For example, a season of extreme pressure and sacrifice can be followed by a season of rest and recuperation; a sickness season will be different from a holiday season.

I appreciate Miller’s argument. Building our lives around healthy rhythms rather than healthy balance, allows for the diversity and demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century life without losing sight of the need for a measure of intentionality in our approach to personal health. It means giving appropriate attention and energy to the areas of life that need it in the particular rhythms that we are facing at any time.

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Miller, *Your Life in Rhythm* (Oxford: Tyndale House, 2009).

One of my concerns is that pastors can become so protective of balancing their time, that pastoral ministry ends up trailing all the other priorities in life (e.g. family, rest, recreation, hobbies, sport). There are times when pastors need to work really hard and may not be able to give the time to family or recreation that they would like. This is good. Jesus modelled it for us. His family sometimes took second place to his work (Luke 8:19-21) and at times he sacrificed needed rest out of compassion for the crowds (Mark 6:31-34). But when we live with rhythm, we recognise that this cannot be our whole life.

The concept of rhythm can be applied to many different types of personal life cycle. At its most comprehensive it relates to our whole life and its rhythm of birth, growth, work, retirement, and decline. But it also equally governs the rhythm of each day with its range of energies and activities. Miller suggests three ways of living with rhythm in the kairos (unpredicted) cycles and three ways in the chronos (natural) cycles. I will briefly summarise his ideas.

1. *Release expectations* (kairos). You don't control the season that you are in, and so to live in rhythm, you must accept the limitations that different seasons will bring. If you can't do this, you will be plagued by guilt. Vacation seasons require you to stop working. High demand seasons may mean that you will need to sacrifice some family time. Illness will cut back your capacity. Releasing expectations is particularly important in the longer seasons of pain or setback or challenge. You just can't achieve what you did in the momentum seasons.
2. *Seize opportunities* (kairos). Each kairos season offers opportunities that may not be present in other seasons. A particularly prosperous and demanding season may provide the chance to increase your influence or share your resources or start new ministries. A difficult but less demanding season may mean you can focus on prayer or spend more time with family or learn to trust God. All seasons offer struggles and opportunities. If you accept the struggles and make the most of the opportunities, you will live in healthy rhythm.
3. *Anticipate what's next* (kairos). Seasons don't last forever. Things will eventually change. This can be helpful in building our hope in challenging times, but it also assists us to prepare for the future. In an exacting season, it is important to plan for a season of rest and recuperation. You can maintain your energy when you know that a

break is coming. In a more relaxed season, it may be helpful to build your resources by doing some study or building some new skills in anticipation of the next season.

4. *Pace yourself* (chronos). Don't try to fit too much into a cycle whether that is a day, a week or a year. The concept of living with rhythm suggests a steady variety of activities. Not everything needs to be done immediately. Work out what needs to be done and how regularly it needs to be done and fit these things into your rhythm. God generally works more slowly than we expect, so there is generally no rush.
5. *Build rituals* (chronos). Rituals are repeated activities that create meaning and purpose for people. They provide stability among the stresses and changes of 21<sup>st</sup> century ministry. They mean that we don't have to constantly create new cycles, but have habits that we can fall back on. For example, profitable rituals could be a weekly family night and/or date night, a daily quiet time, a yearly retreat, writing thankyou notes to your leaders at Christmas time, a daily time for answering emails, or going out to dinner with friends once a month.
6. *Oscillate work and rest* (chronos). Ministry is not a steady marathon but a series of sprints and rests. We work hard and push past our limits to expand our capacity, then we rest in order to recover and renew. Try to build this rhythm into your day and week and year, while taking into account the vicissitudes of the kairos seasons.

Generally, you will know when your life is in a healthy rhythm and you are dealing well with the seasons and stages. You feel satisfied with how you're going, your stress levels are manageable, and you feel that you are doing what God wants. It doesn't mean that you will never feel overwhelmed or disappointed, but you will mainly feel a peace that you are doing the best you can in whatever seasons you are facing.

## **Recreation**

I'm defining recreation as the activities we undertake that renew and replenish us. These are the non-vocational pursuits that we look forward to and enjoy, that give us a sense of satisfaction, that release us from the pressure of ministry responsibility, that restore our joy in life.

Of course, the activities people find renewing will differ hugely with individuals. I have a number of friends who just love gardening. A day in the garden is like heaven for them, as it

was for Adam and Eve before The Fall. But I live in a post-Fall universe where gardening is full of weeds and hard work and frustration. I dread having to spend a day in the yard. It's certainly necessary but it's not recreation for me. The thought of spending more time working in the yard is one of the things that keeps me from looking forward to retirement.

Whereas I really like completing crosswords and Sudokus. In a previous life, I was a Maths teacher and the need to solve logical problems still burns deep within me. It gives me a huge amount of satisfaction (even joy) to finish the crossword and Sudoku in the newspaper on Saturday mornings. Many of you will not understand this (maybe the word "nerd" comes to mind), but solving puzzles is true recreation for me.

Recreation is different from work. Work is very good for you and hopefully you find many aspects of your ministry work very satisfying and sometimes even invigorating. When your work/rest rhythm becomes healthy, you may find that you really enjoy many aspects of your work. But work is not principally designed for your enjoyment, but for your contribution. It is giving and serving and making a kingdom difference. On the other hand, recreation is for you. You may or may not achieve anything significant, but you are recreated and renewed and refreshed.

Some pastoral leaders feel guilty about recreation. It's true that too much recreation can make us selfish and lazy. We are stewards of God's gifts and are called to be productive. But without recreation we will eventually burn out. Everyone needs a balance of giving and receiving activities to maintain health and energy.

So it's a matter of finding what lights your fire and making sure that you build this into the rhythms of your life. There will be seasons of extreme busyness when recreation time seems almost impossible. But even in these times, you need snatches of recreation. It may be 10 minutes listening to music with no interruptions, or a favourite TV show, or an hour in the garden, or a game of tennis, or a chapter of a good book, or cooking with a new recipe, or a great coffee, or a bushwalk, or a crossword, or a bike ride.

Hobbies can be very helpful here. Some of my friends are into motor bike rides. They buy large, comfortable bikes and ride large distances in groups. They love it. Others are into building things. One has designed and built one of the best B&Bs in Australia on his days off. It's not only an incredibly satisfying achievement, but has provided a regular break from the pressures of a demanding pastorate.

Please make sure that you are recreating. If not, start small, but find activities that bring you pleasure and write them into your diary.

## **Reward**

One final R on maintaining personal health is the need for reward. Now initially this may appear to be out of keeping with the call to follow Christ. Christian leaders have no need to constantly look for rewards for the sacrifices we make. Reward (be that money or power or recognition or achievement or luxuries or pleasure or experiences) is not our driving motivation. We are not serving because of what we will get, but because of what Christ has done. It is enough to know that we are faithfully pleasing our Lord.

There is a challenging little story that Jesus told (Luke 17:7-10) about a slave who worked all day in the fields, but still expected further work, not rest, when he returned home. Jesus' conclusion was, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" As slaves, we serve because this is our calling. There is no expectation of reward.

But this cannot be the whole story, because both in the gospels and epistles there is still a strong emphasis on reward for service. Much of this reward will come at the return of Christ. Jesus often mentioned the reward that faithful servants will receive. For example, in teaching his disciples, Jesus explained that they should rejoice in persecution because "great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6:23). Similarly, Paul challenged the Corinthian leaders to teach faithfully because "the Day" would bring to light the quality of their work, and rewards would be distributed accordingly (1 Cor. 3:12-14). In his last letter, Paul reflected on his own faithful service and concluded, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). The hope of a future reward from Jesus is meant to keep us going when service becomes demanding and difficult.

But should we expect any reward now? Here is Jesus' response to Peter's claim to have left everything to follow him.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mother, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

In encouraging the Corinthians to be generous in their giving to the distressed Christians in Jerusalem, Paul describes what God does for those who generously plant seed (= give money).

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. (2 Cor. 9:10-11)

It appears that both Jesus and Paul are emphasising that our blessing (reward) for sacrificial service isn't confined to the future but at least partly occurs in the present. Of course, much of this reward will be in spiritual blessing (e.g. fruit of the Holy Spirit) in our lives, but the point is that we don't have to wait until heaven for the reward to start.

So what does all this mean for the personal health of a pastor?

First, we need to keep an eye on the reward to come. If this was important for Jesus (Heb. 12:2) and Paul, it certainly is vital for us in the stresses and demands and disappointments of pastoral ministry. You will be rewarded and it would seem that the more costly and humble the service, the greater the reward. It's easy to lose hope when there are no obvious immediate results from all our effort and sacrifices. Lack of hope has a deeply detrimental impact on our personal health. So the reality of personal future blessing from Jesus needs to pervade our thinking.

To be honest, I'm not exactly sure how to do this. It's easier when we are surrounded by suffering and are in deep pain ourselves. At these times, the reality of our future reward shines much brighter. But in the humdrum of our relatively comfortable Western lives and materialistic thinking, it's easy to lose sight of the wonder of what God will do for us. Soaking in Scripture certainly helps us get God's viewpoint as does taking time to retreat to gain perspective. Perhaps it is just a matter of taking some regular time to focus on the future and what it will hold; to anticipate our reward.

Second, we need to build reward into the rhythm of our lives. Last week, I helped build a ramp and set of stairs in our two-tiered back yard. It took three days of hard labour. But the satisfaction I feel as I gloat daily over "my" achievement is immense. It is my reward for all my work and makes it worthwhile.

Pastors do get little rewards. For example, we receive words of encouragement. We are involved as people come to Jesus and become real disciples. We see ministries grow under our leadership. But because of our understanding of grace (it's God's work not ours), our

commitment to humility and servanthood, our focus on what lies ahead, and the fact that our work is never really finished anyway, we easily gloss over these rewards. We don't value them or celebrate them. We don't savour God's blessing. Consequently, pastoral ministry begins to feel like one continual, demanding ordeal. Now that's a recipe for burnout.

So we need to find ways to value and savour the rewards, the blessings from God here and now that are a small foretaste of what is to come. Maybe you could keep a record of the words of encouragement you receive and read through them each month. Maybe you need to plan a church party each year to celebrate what has been achieved. One church annually asks their people to reflect on what God has done in their lives and communities over the previous 12 months and publishes their reflections in a book of thanks for their church anniversary. Now there is a reward that the whole church can enjoy.

## **Conclusion**

The pressures of ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be overwhelming for pastors if they do not intentionally build healthy safeguards into their personal lives. These safeguards include reality (being pervaded by and living in the truth of the gospel), regulation (establishing healthy physical disciplines), rest (getting enough time away from the pressures), rhythm (working with rhythmic cycles that take into account your stage of life and that allow for both sacrifice and recuperation), recreation (building renewing activities into your program) and reward (taking time to enjoy the rewards that God offers and promises).

The safeguards discussed in this article do not necessarily guarantee flourishing in vocational ministry, but neglect of them will significantly decrease the chances of survival in pastoral ministry.