

Healthy Personal Life of a Christian Leader

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The work of pastoring is considered one of the most vocationally satisfying, yet also one of the most difficult jobs in America. Many pastors around the world seem to be stressed, overwhelmed, and discouraged. On repeated surveys, the overwhelming majority of pastors report that they were undertrained and overworked. They experience significant conflict and stress with parishioners on a regular basis. Many say that ministry has had a negative impact on their families, and they would leave ministry if they had a better option. These are just a few reasons why pursuing personal health and wellbeing for the Christian leader is an essential.

Church health begins with pastoral health. As Christian leaders are in the health and wholeness business, mostly, we are called to lead with our lives. We can't be a source of healing if we aren't growing in wholeness and being healed ourselves. As John Orberg asks us to consider: *Are you living the life you are inviting others to?* This invitation begins with us, as Christian leaders, living into the fullness of abundant life as a whole person. We are created to flourish in life and relationships, living fully alive. This is the glory of God.

My father Dr. Archibald Hart has been teaching Christian Leaders for decades saying that “pastors don't get into trouble because they forget they are pastors, but because they forget they are persons”. One of the most challenging obstacles to thriving in wellbeing as a Christian leader is neglecting self-care.

Why do Christian leaders tend to take care of others so well, but not themselves? There is a tendency for leaders to be hard drivers and compartmentalize spirituality apart from the rest of life. The antidote is learning how to live a balanced life intentionally. Dallas Willard wisely taught that “transformation happens when we take care of each part of our life. You can't change 'you' without changing each part of your life. Wellbeing is a natural result. Character and behavior is expressed from the foundation of being a whole person. When the mind is right, when the heart, soul, body, relationships are right – the whole person simply steps into the way of Christ – and lives there with joy and strength. It's not a struggle. It's transformation of the {whole} self that leads into the life of blessing.”

To flourish in life and relationships, I offer these considerations for healthy Christian leaders to be continually engaged in the realms of being and the realms of life.

1. Pray

Healthy Christian leaders pursue ***a relationship with God***, seeking to understand who God is, and how to enjoy the life changing Presence of God.

They are committed to lifelong whole person spiritual formation, growing in the likeness of Christ. Contrasted with obligatory guilt producing religion, healthy Christian leaders explore developing life rhythms and practices of connecting with God and following Christ in ways that transform to 'live the unforced rhythms of grace, living lightly and freely'. (Matt 11:28 MSG)

What life giving spiritual practices and rhythms enrich your relationship with God? What is your unique spiritual temperament or ways of connecting with the trinity for spiritual intimacy and growth?

2. Thrive

Healthy Christian leaders pursue ***a relationship with self***, cultivating wellbeing in all areas of life - body, soul, mind and emotions. They seek to understand "who am I?" growing in self awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, capabilities, personality, motivations, mental and emotional health. They take self-leadership, developing effective healthy lifestyle habits and skills, regulating thoughts and emotions, nurturing joy, and taking care of the brain and body. This includes being aware of the stressors in your life and how you are coping and recovering in healthy and unhealthy ways.

Consider assessing how intentional you are in living a balanced lifestyle eating well, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep and rest. Getting regular health check ups – for all areas of your life. Are you not feeling well, or unbalanced in any area of your life? What habits or lifestyle rhythms can you change in order to improve your overall wellbeing?

3. Love

Healthy Christian leaders nurture meaningful relationship connections with others. They aim to understand, "who are you, and how can I effectively relate to you?" This includes healthy relationship skills for connection, communication and conflict resolution as well as skills for protection in order to maintain healthy boundaries.

Marriage and family can be negatively affected by ministry demands. As we grow to become more Christ like, those closest to us are our primary ministry and hopefully our lives will speak so they can 'see it'. How are the relationships with those closest to you?

Many pastors report feeling isolated and don't have someone they would consider a close friend. Who are your close friends? Are you cultivating friendships? Do you have a community of pastors or other Christian leaders that you feel connected to? Are you part of a small group where you can be authentic? Do you have the support of a inspirational role models, a spiritual director, a wise mentor or even a therapist? We need others along the journey to help support and strengthen us for optimal wellbeing.

4. Work

Healthy Christian leaders find fulfillment in pursuing balanced meaningful purpose and service to God and others. Results from the Flourishing in Ministry Project by Matt Bloom at the University of Notre Dame reveal that pastors are moderately engaged with their work, and job satisfaction was 4.35 out of 7. However, job stress and burnout, exhaustion or fatigue scores were also on a moderate level, which is one of the most detrimental factors to overall level of flourishing. Are you experiencing any of these challenges? Are you able to set healthy boundaries to balance your personal and work life? How well are you balancing a healthy personal life with work productivity?

5. Restoration

Healthy Christian leaders participate in recovery experiences. Rest and recovery activities are key to overall health, overcoming negative effects of stress and to alleviate burnout. This requires detaching and disengaging from work. As well as from the digital world, which creates other stressors of its own. You can't relax, restore and replenish when you are still thinking about work. Rest the body and the mind and emotions. The Flourishing In Ministry study found that pastors who are able to detach and relax on four or more days a week tended to have higher levels of flourishing.

Rick Warren suggests a lifestyle rhythm to divert daily, withdraw weekly, restore monthly and abandon annually. This may include doing nothing, taking naps, keeping a weekly Sabbath, taking mini half day retreats and taking a vacation. How do you relax? What is restorative and replenishing to you? What do you enjoy that refills and re-centers you?

6. Play

Healthy Christian leaders have a *restorative niche* and know how to play. This is my favorite lifestyle rhythm to talk about because of the new area of exciting research that promises profound benefits, that unfortunately, only 1 in 4 pastors report engaging in. If you didn't learn how to play as a child, or have lost the fine art of restorative play and creativity, seriously consider learning how to play. A restorative niche – or play - is something you can do well, gives you a sense of mastery, and you just do it for the sake of the pure joy of experiencing the activity itself.

Play is good. Creation was play for God. Dallas Willard reminds us that creation was an act of joy and delight in the goodness of what was done. So when we play, we seek God in what is good through play.

Play is creation of value that is not necessary, but reveals God's beauty with delight, wonder and joy. When we play, we become more creative and productive, inspiring childlike adventure, wonder and awe.

Play and a restorative niche might be a hobby or an enjoyable activity such as golf, fishing, tennis, hiking, painting, gardening, cooking or knitting. Whatever the activity of 'play', it has very positive restorative benefits to overcome detrimental effects of stress and burnout.

What do you enjoy doing as restorative play? What hobby or enjoyable play can you pick up again? What would you like to explore?

Why not start with one of these longings, and experience the life giving benefits of intentionally adding more joy and delight to your day.