

A prescription for a healthy ministry

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Lives in Bala

A pastor came to a new church with the best of intentions for serving the congregation through a strong and vibrant ministry. He was a mid-career minister with experience in serving God's people. Unfortunately, however, he had developed a history of unhealthy personal habits.

He swung between working too much and not enough. He dealt with stress by becoming isolated from the congregation. Sometimes he made space in his own life for prayer; more often he didn't. Eventually he began drinking heavily to numb the pain of his own unaddressed and mismanaged stress.

As time went on, his spouse, too, began to withdraw from the community around her. Their struggles were carefully hidden from the congregation. The pastor had tightly held secrets. No one from the congregation was allowed into his life. Even the small, faithful group that met weekly to pray with and for him was kept in the dark.

This pastor's lifestyle choices were costly to him—and his congregation

paid a price, as well. Instead of having a pastor who could be counted on to meet their needs in a trustworthy manner, the congregation suffered because of his weaknesses. Those who should have been protected by the pastor were emotionally abused. Those who seemed strong enough to stand up for themselves received little or no attention from him. Those who wondered about the hints that things were not right were rebuffed.

For many months, there was no shepherd for the flock. Eventually the pastor's ministry, marriage, and family fell apart permanently. His fall became public, and it took years for the congregation to heal.

This tragic example is but one extreme illustration of what can happen to a church and its community when a pastor neglects his or her spiritual, physical, mental, and personal health. If this pastor and congregation had taken steps to help him achieve personal health and balance in his life, this painful story might have had a very different outcome.

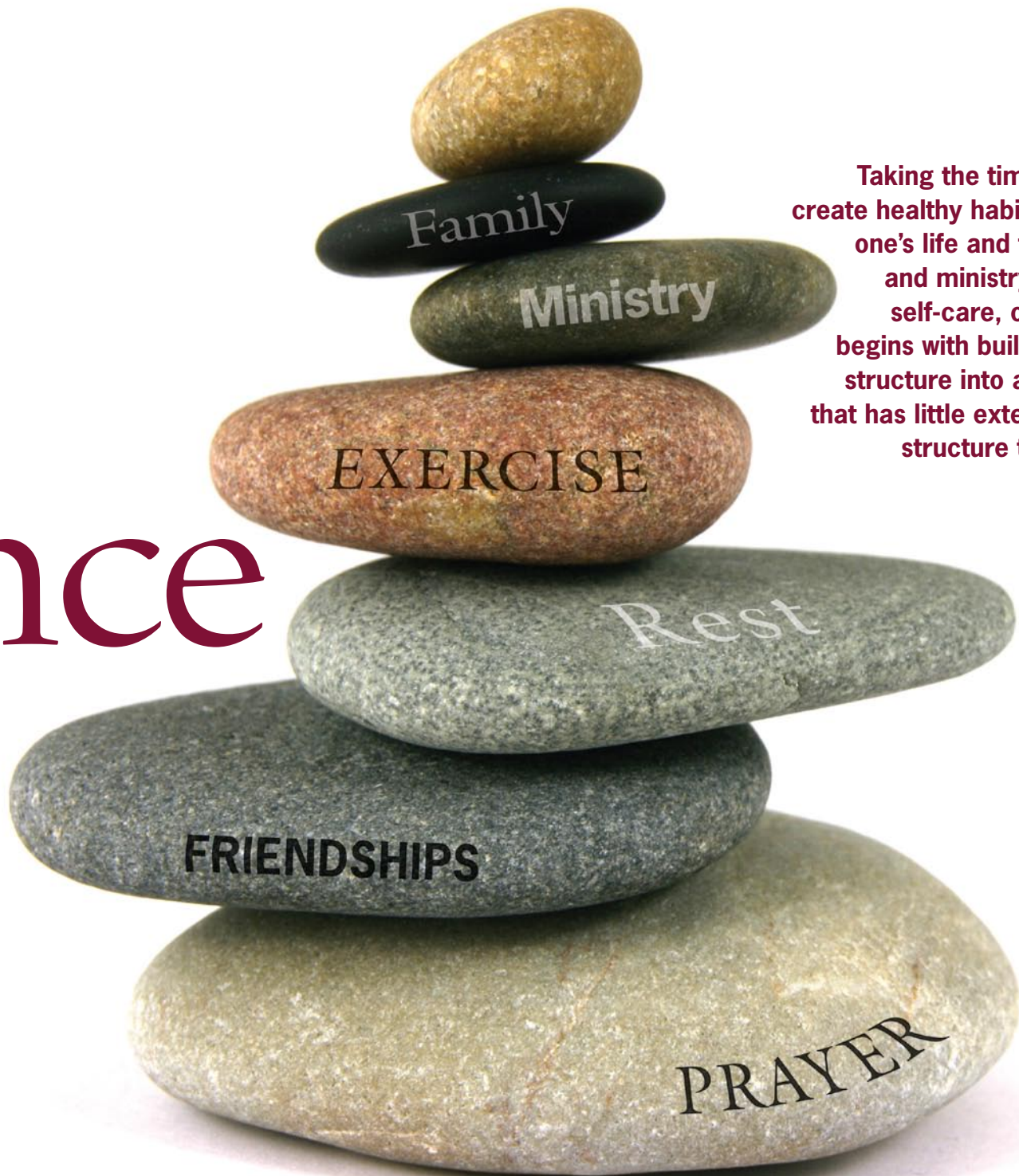
Another church was led by a kind and generous man who loved God and the congregation he was called to

serve. Toward the end of this man's career, the church hired an associate pastor who, unfortunately, brought discord and dissension to the staff. The senior pastor, whose skills were pastoral and not administrative, was not equipped to deal with a troublesome employee. His strengths simply did not match what was required in this case, and both he and the church knew that he was struggling.

As the senior pastor was trying to work through this difficult personnel issue, his wife died. Even while he grieved, he was still trying to address the conflicts within his staff. Several months after his wife's death, the pastor had a heart attack. He survived but retired soon afterward. After a long period of recovery, he eventually returned to ministry.

In this situation, too, both the pastor and the congregation suffered because of the pastor's difficulties. Although he tried to continue to meet the needs of his church and his congregation, he simply didn't have the energy or enthusiasm. Both the ministry and the people were neglected. When he recognized what was happening, his regret at his inability to serve the church well added to his

nice



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stress. Had the congregation stepped up to help their pastor confront the difficult staff situation and help him find the space to grieve the loss of his wife, in time he might have been able to resume caring for the congregation.

Is self-care selfish?

Taking the time to create healthy habits in one's life and faith and ministry, or self-care, often begins with building structure into a life that has little external structure to it. For

a pastor, self-care means taking time to develop a strong relationship with God, nurture one's marriage and children, care for one's body and keep it healthy, and honor the call to ministry by keeping the passion for service vibrant. It means attempting to follow Jesus's pattern of rest, renewal, and work. Self-care means taking time to be alone with God as well as time to be immersed in community.

Recently I participated in a discussion about self-care with a group of

pastors. I was surprised to hear that even among pastors there isn't universal agreement on the need for self-care. I was equally surprised to learn that many pastors detect disapproval from their congregations when they take steps toward self-care. Yet for churches and pastors to thrive, it is vital that pastors care for themselves in ways that lead to spiritual, relational, mental, and physical health.

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Just as importantly, congregations need to do the same, as well as explicitly support pastors' efforts toward health and balance.

It is important to note that appropriate self-care does not imply seeking a life of ease. Acknowledging and addressing the needs of one's soul frees us to be present to God and to others, to retain balance in the midst of life's competing demands, and to nurture vitality and growth. The result of self-care is greater capacity and ability to relate to others.

Making a distinction between self-care and self-indulgence (or self-neglect) will help put to rest the notion that self-care is inappropriate for Christians. Both self-indulgence and self-neglect result in a diminished desire and ability to relate to others. If we use a fuel tank as a metaphor,

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the difference immediately becomes apparent. The tank of a self-indulgent person only has in-flow. It can fill and spill, but the contents are not intentionally shared. The self-negligent person's tank only has out-flow. It may look efficient and productive, but it will not stay that way for long. Soon the tank will be empty, and once that happens there is nothing left to give to others. Self-care is a tank with both in-flow and out-flow. The contents of the tank are continually replenished and shared.

What does self-care look like?

After my discussion with the group of pastors, I became curious about how pastors develop healthy lifestyles. Since then, I have interviewed several Covenant pastors who are known to practice good self-care. I found that although there is no single pattern that defines self-care, some similarities in healthy pastors were striking.

Each pastor works between forty

and sixty hours per week, with the average being 48.7 hours. Respondents noted that they make exceptions for seasons that require them to work longer hours, but they intentionally set a normal workweek that allows them some breathing room.

Every pastor noted that they pray every day. Most drew a distinction between "formal" times of prayer (two to three times per week) and an ongoing conversation with God (seven days a week).

Each pastor engages in deliberate spiritual disciplines. The disciplines practiced were varied and vast.

The amount of time pastors spent with their family and/or spouse was uniformly intentional and generous. Each pastor spoke of time with family and spouse as a high daily priority, and they guard that time against

disruption.

Almost all of those interviewed have friends (and all have good acquaintances) within their church body.

Each pastor has good friends outside the congregation, and most have "couple friends" with their spouses.

All of these healthy pastors meet with friends socially on a regular basis. Those meetings may be as frequently as twice a week or at least once a month.

Each pastor I interviewed pays attention to matters of physical health. They monitor their weight (not all are satisfied with the success of their efforts) and diet. They all exercise. The kind and amount of exercise varies.

All of the pastors have hobbies unrelated to ministry.

Foundation of self-care

Each pastor spoke to me with great passion about the necessity of keeping one's attention fixed on God. They

rely on their times of prayer and spiritual practices to keep them open to God's leading. Over and over, I heard that they were finding God trustworthy and that their faith was enlarging.

All of the pastors talked about the effect that growing trust in God was having in the conduct of their day-to-day lives. They find that as they relinquish control of the church to God, their ability to set appropriate boundaries and priorities increases. They explained that when they no longer feel compelled to be involved in every event and decision of the church, they find time and energy to nurture their marriages and families, maintain their friendships, honor the needs of their bodies, connect to the community, and maybe even engage in a hobby. In other words, they engage in the very activities that give all of life richness and restoration.

They spoke with real fervor about the ways they understand God and God's desire for their lives. This was the part of the interview that seemed to most interest the pastors. They had well-thought-out answers, yet many of them noted that they hadn't really connected their theological views with their self-care behavior. Their answers were quite beautiful:

"We are temples of the Holy Spirit, created good by God, we're to take care of the gift we are given, and revel in God's love."

"I read in Exodus 14:14, 'The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still'—literally, do nothing. From this, I realize that if I don't take care of myself, I am acting as God, usurping his place."

"Reading the great commandment and noting how Jesus took care of himself shows me how to care for myself."

"Jesus's model of ministry, and the time away he spent with God, and the Apostle Paul's example of integrating ministry and self—finding the proper balance, so that both parts become a unified whole—has become my goal."

The powerful awareness in these

pastors of God's role in daily life is the motivating factor in turning them toward self-care.

When I asked the pastors what caused them to begin their practice of self-care, almost all of them recalled a time of transition or crisis that tested them or stretched them. For some this crisis involved the congregation they were serving; for others the crisis was personal. Each pastor realized that continuing to ignore the needs of their own lives would damage them and the churches they served. Every one of them, then, looked to God's call on their lives and chose to believe that God wanted them to honor their call by acting in ways that would allow them to serve for the long haul.

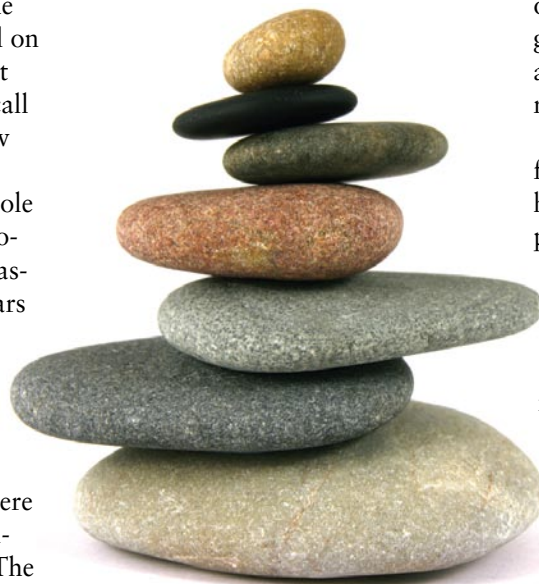
Several pastors mentioned the role that spouses, parents, seminary professor, and, especially, the senior pastors who supervised their early years in ministry played in the development of self-care habits. Again and again I heard this story: As the pastor was beginning a life of ministry, an older pastor, usually the senior pastor in the church where a new pastor was serving as associate, acted as a model of self-care. The senior pastor not only encouraged the new pastor to do the same, but also held them accountable to work a sustainable workweek and to take their days off and vacations. In this way, healthy habits were handed down from generation to generation. These senior pastors reaped a harvest of gratitude and lifelong esteem from their associates.

Challenges to self-care

It is important to note that pastors who have a reputation for good self-care still experience difficulties in their journey toward health. Yet their challenges can be instructive. Each pastor spoke of an effort and struggle to maintain a balanced life. The greatest difficulty arises when tragedy (loss of a loved one or serious illness) strikes the pastor or the pastor's family. As one pastor said, "When the burden is

unbearable, it is hard to care for self."

Like laypeople, pastors wrestle with learning to set priorities. This is especially true when there are many good things to be done, and when the congregation's expectations are high. Pastors, like the rest of us, have their own personal weaknesses. All of us know the struggle of admitting our failures and working with God to mend them. In my interviews, pastors often referred to the challenge of knowing what to do when



their natural abilities don't match the skills required by a given situation or church.

Unique to pastors are the twin challenges of identifying the boundary between church life and personal life, and figuring out what restorative time away from church looks like. Dealing with these challenges in positive ways often leads a pastor to better self-care and to a deeper reliance on his or her community.

One external difficulty that pastors face is finding a trusted person to whom they can be accountable. The church world is so small that protecting one's privacy is a serious concern. Many pastors have found that it is necessary to go outside their denomination in order to feel secure with an accountability partner. We are blessed in the Covenant to have a growing

group of spiritual directors who have been trained in soul care and discretion and who are available to pastors. Spiritual directors can also make referrals outside the denomination when appropriate.

What role does the church play?

The role of church leadership as supporters of pastoral health is becoming a focus of attention in the Covenant. The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program is solid evidence of this priority, as is the freedom many churches grant pastors to attend Midwinter and Annual Meetings, and to take a regular sabbatical.

Implicit support is an important factor in this equation. When a church has reasonable expectations, the pastor can read that as permission to have a balanced life. One pastor mentioned to me the value of the church's being "for" him, of being on his side. In such relationships, nobody objects if the pastor takes a vacation or a day off, and the pastor has the freedom to determine an appropriate structure for his or her sabbatical.

No pastors objected to this kind of support, of course, but each one mentioned that explicit support is important too. These pastors noted that the only time they were explicitly supported in their personal care was during an illness (either their own or that of a family member). When tragedy strikes, it is important for churches to lavish care on the pastor and the pastor's family. Grief takes time to heal, and the pastors who reported an experience of open support were deeply grateful.

Every pastor I interviewed indicated that they would welcome the church's open interest in their personal lives. As one put it, "There needs to be a built-in check and balance on power."

Several pastors mentioned that they are coaching their churches to put more formal structures in place to support their maintenance of healthy

habits. As pastors described their hopes for an accountability structure, they did not envision an adversarial arrangement or an authoritarian mandate but rather an open and friendly acknowledgment of the church's interest in the pastor's own well-being and spiritual health. Several of the pastors I interviewed mentioned how much they like to have a member of the congregation ask them in a friendly way about their prayer life or spiritual practices.

One pastor talked about the value of announcing his intention toward self-care during the call process. He put the topic openly on the table from the very beginning, allowing his priorities and boundaries to be known and honored. This is certainly the easiest way for everyone involved to get started being intentional about giving pastors open permission to take good care of their own lives.

How does pastoral self-care benefit a congregation?

One pastor I interviewed said that self-care makes “every difference in the world” for a congregation. The church benefits in that it is led by a pastor who is being regularly renewed, and the congregation can be encouraged to “live the blessed life and so become a blessing to others.”

When a pastor is intentional in his or her own life, he or she can stand before the congregation without hypocrisy, and the pastoral role is demystified—no one in the congregation can believe that the pastor is somehow superhuman and “above” the struggles faced by ordinary people.

The congregation is allowed to see the pastor's struggles and faith.

A number of pastors commented that when their own lives are balanced they are more available to the

congregation, and the whole system in the church operates with increased safety.

Self-care allows pastors to care for the people of the church better because they aren't running on empty.

A pastor who practices good self-care gives the congregation a role model for taking care of themselves, and such role models are in short supply in our world.

These benefits are worth the cost. We are all in this Christian life together. When one part of our family suffers, we all suffer. When pastors are healthy, the health of the whole church increases. My hope is that as pastors adopt good self-care practices with the support of their congregations, those practices will be contagious to the congregations as well. ■