

The Challenge of Sustaining Fruitful Ministry

**Being a pastor is hard work—so hard that many eventually decide to leave the
pastorate or ministry altogether. What can be done to help pastors achieve
healthier lives, and how can they—and all of us saints—find the renewal we
need to remain fruitful in ministry for a lifetime?**

Being a pastor is a tough, demanding job, one that is not always very well understood or appreciated. Pastoral work is more complex than that which transpires in the hour or so a week that many lay people see the pastor in action

— Jackson Carroll, Author, *God's Potters*

To discover what it takes to keep pastors flourishing in ministry over the long haul, Covenant seminary's Center for Ministry Leadership (CML) developed a specialized forum called the Pastors Summit (funded by a research grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.) to draw on the experiences and expertise of seasoned pastors. Through five years of Summit meetings, data analysis, and prayerful reflection, the Center for Ministry leadership identified five themes that are essential to surviving and thriving in ministry: spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and management and leadership.

Although each theme has unique characteristics, each is dependent upon the others, and all ultimately stand together. We shouldn't let the apparent simplicity of these themes fool us into thinking, "There's nothing dramatic here. Everyone needs to work on these areas." That's true—yet each theme also speaks profoundly into the unique challenges and priorities of pastors and their families.

1

Spiritual Formation

I may be a pastor, but I'm an inch deep. My life is filled with incessant activity and little prayer. 'Contemplation' is foreign in my vocabulary and non-existent in my life.

— Pastors Summit Participant

It is not unusual for pastors, when in a place of safety, to share thoughts akin to this. Psychologist Diane Langberg reminds pastors that they, like all of us disciples, are called to be lambs before they are called to be shepherds.

We can focus on following the Shepherd via spiritual formation—the ongoing process of maturing as Christians personally and interpersonally. The Bible expects all Christians—especially church leaders—to focus on their spiritual growth (John 14:23). Paul encouraged Timothy to “train yourself for godliness” and to “keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim. 4:7, 16).

Every disciple—and every pastor—must pursue a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ and nurture it regularly. The dangers of not doing so are many, yet we often ignore or circumvent the process thinking that our church responsibilities will suffice. But exchanging ministry duties for personal spiritual growth results in Christians—and even pastors—who are “an inch deep,” with little grace and love to share with others.

We help ourselves pursue spiritual growth by engaging in undivided

worship (a real challenge for pastors), maintaining spiritual disciplines, and having relationships of accountability for spiritual direction.

2

Self-Care



Most ministers don't burn out because they forget they are ministers. They burn out because they forget they are people.

— Archibald Hart, Christian Psychologist

The notion of self-care may be surprising and even sound selfish, especially for those in vocational ministry. How does our Lord's call to self-denial (Mark 8:34) square with the idea of self-care?

As Christians we are called to die to our old lives of self-centeredness and rise to new lives of holiness. If the old life included slothful or obsessive activities—such as inconsistent sleep habits, crazy work hours, poor or neurotic exercise, or an excessive diet—then self-denying self-care might include getting to bed on time, setting aside periods for Sabbath and sabbatical, responsible exercise, and a healthy diet. After all, we are limited creatures. We must ask ourselves: How is the health of our social, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual lives?

One of the most important ways we build self-care into our lives includes having safe relationships. Leadership is inherently isolating. Leaders need to share their struggles with a trusted confidant. In their book *Leadership on the Line*, authors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky suggest that “The lone warrior strategy of leadership may be heroic suicide. . . . When battling loneliness, insecurity, stress, or other pressures, the need to open up to someone can be almost overwhelming.”

These same authors provide the important distinction between a confidant and an ally. An ally is a friend or co-worker whose interests and loyalties overlap with your own. A confidant, however, allows you to “say everything that's in your heart, everything that's on your mind,” sharing freely without risk. We all need both types of relationships outside our families. ►

Every disciple—and every pastor—must pursue a deep

personal relationship with Jesus Christ and nurture it

regularly. The dangers of not doing so are many.

3



Emotional and Cultural Intelligence

Without [emotional intelligence], a person can have first-class training, an incisive mind, and an endless supply of good ideas, but he still won't be effective.

— **Mark Gerzon**, mediation conflict expert and author of *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities*

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to identify and manage our emotions proactively and to discern and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. The Pastors Summit identified several aspects of emotional intelligence needed for pastors to thrive in ministry. Scripture confirms this need for EQ skills. For example, in Ephesians 4:26, Paul tells the Ephesians to identify their feelings (“Be angry”), manage their feelings (“do not sin”), and express their feelings responsibly (“do not let the sun go down on your anger”). Those not gifted in EQ can help themselves by watching and learning from those who are.

It is vital to our ministry to understand cultural norms and nuances in order to discern between what we accept as correct in culture and what is truth as defined in Scripture.

— Pastors Summit Participant

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the ability to understand, acknowledge, and appreciate current contextual forces as well as the cultural background of oneself and others. Most of us draw on our limited CQ just to engage our neighbors in conversation or to share a movie with teenagers. Building our CQ involves becoming more aware of regional, ethnic, socio-economic, and generational differences. Our childhood often defines our expectations on how “things ought to be.” When another’s way of life or way of doing church is different, we first must withhold judgment. Only then can we appreciate the differences and humbly evaluate them. To work on CQ, try going out with friends to an ethnic restaurant, watching a foreign film, or worshipping at a culturally different church. Increasing CQ is vital for the health of the church and spread of the gospel in our increasingly multi-cultural environment. We see a good example of the application of this principle in Acts 11:1–4 as the disciples begin to learn that the gospel is for everyone, not just the Jews: “Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’ But Peter began and explained it to them.”

4



Marriage and Family

The most effective way to develop a healthy church is for me to be healthy and maintain the health of my marriage.

— Pastors Summit Participant

Maintaining happy, healthy marriage and family relationships is important in any walk of life. We’ve already noted the importance of safe relationships within which we can open our hearts without fear of rejection. For many, the one confidant we have is our spouse. God has designed marriage to be a partnership, so it is right that spouses fulfill this strategic role. However, spouses often end up as the only ones with whom we open up. This burden can add enormous stress to the family. Part of the healthy function of the body of Christ is to provide intimate friendships and mentors for ourselves and our family members.

It can be freeing for everyone to realize that part of the pastor’s job is to take care of his relationships with his wife and children and to do so confidently, not sheepishly. Jesus taught that the world will know that we are his disciples by the love we demonstrate toward one another (John 13:35). This love should be visible in the home before anywhere else.

5



Leadership and Management

Few laity give much weight to the pastor’s administrative tasks.

— **Jackson Carroll**, Author, *God’s Potters*

The responsibilities of leadership and management are integral to the pastoral task of congregational oversight but are rarely discussed in seminary training. In general, leadership is about *seeking adaptive and constructive change*, while management *provides order and consistency to organizations*. Most ministry leaders are surprised by how much leadership and management responsibilities are part of their work. They often learn how to do these things on the job—not always very effectively. Pastors Summit research reveals that for people to thrive in ministry, they need to accept that leadership, management, and administration are essential parts of ministry.

I never thought about my calling as a leader until I was already in the pastorate.
— Pastors Summit Participant

Another aspect of leadership sustainability requires trusting God with challenging expectations from others. Pastors tend to be people pleasers. At the same time, the most significant leadership challenges pastors face are the expectations of people in their congregations.

What can help ministry leaders handle in a healthy way all the demands and expectations placed upon them? Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

- **Stay close to the Lord through prayer.**
- **Remember that God is in control.**
- **Seek the help and advice of other church leaders.**
- **Seek to understand everyone's interests and fears.**

The Bible consistently teaches that when God's leaders—or any of his people—are in difficult circumstances, the first thing they must do is turn to the Lord. When David found himself facing hardships, his immediate response was to “strengthen himself in the Lord his God” (1 Sam. 30:6). Jesus himself, under stress as he awaited arrest and crucifixion, retired to Gethsemane to seek comfort and strength from his Father (Matt. 26:36–46 and parallels). If you've ever wondered how to pray more specifically for your pastor and the other leaders in your church, the five themes we have looked at here are places where they need our support to remain fruitful in ministry for a lifetime. Although the Summit research focused on pastors, the same conclusions apply to all believers. We, too, need to pursue growth in these five areas in our lives for the lifetime of fruitful work to which the Lord has called us.

DR. ROBERT W. BURNS AND DR. TASHA CHAPMAN

Dr. Bob Burns is the former director of Covenant Seminary's Center for Ministry Leadership; he now serves as senior associate pastor and head of staff at Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Tasha Chapman is dean of academic services and adjunct professor of educational ministries at Covenant Seminary. This article is adapted from a booklet based on the first chapter of a forthcoming book about the findings of the Pastor's Summit (see sidebar).

"...Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power."

—Ephesians 3:7



The findings from the Pastors Summit will be examined more fully in Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving, co-authored by Drs. Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, scheduled for release in spring 2013. Look for more information soon.

The intent of sharing these findings is to aid in furthering the health of the church and its leaders. We pray that the Lord will use this information so that:

- **Pastoral couples will enjoy a measurable increase in healthy, sustainable ministry practices over a lifetime of ministry.**
- **Churches will increasingly help ministry leaders and their families maintain these practices by providing time, resources (including finances), and accountability.**

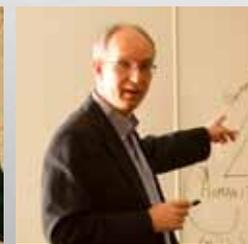
These goals will be accomplished as pastors, spouses, church leaders, and students preparing for ministry come to appreciate the powerful, long-term benefits of attending to the five themes of pastoral sustainability.



Dr. Robert W. Burns



Dr. Tasha Chapman



Dr. Donald Guthrie