CLERGY TIME MANAGEMENT
Methods are not Enough!

BY HERB MILLER

Most clergy would agree with Peter Drucker that time is the scarcest resource: Unless you manage time, nothing else can be managed.

Yet most clergy identify time as something over which they have little control. How can you manage time when two funerals appear in the middle of Bible school week? What can you do when an unexpected marriage-counseling crisis appears during your only available time to prepare Sunday night's Bible study? How can you manage your time in a profession where unexpected interruptions often provide your best opportunities for ministry?

Seven Basic Principles

Learning the standard time-management methods familiar to the business world is not enough. Firm belief in – or failure to believe in – seven basic theological-psychological principles determines whether we are willing to apply well-known time-management methods. Without these seven convictions firmly rooted in our psyche, learning effective time-management methods makes little difference. The concepts will bounce off our behavior patterns like hailstones off two-inch steel plate.

PRINCIPLE #1
God requires that we manage our time. 'Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy,' the Apostle Paul said to us (1 Corinthians 4:2). God prizes the stewardship of our time at least as much as the stewardship of our money. Time does not belong to us but to God. We are only stewards of it. Pastors who decide to manage their time as a spiritual stewardship of life can apply time-tested management techniques. Those who do not see and apply this truth will continue to let circumstances manage their lives.

PRINCIPLE #2
We will never be more effective in our ministries and our lives than our effectiveness in managing time. No matter how gifted the pastor, failure in time management spells failure in ministry.

PRINCIPLE #3
We all have the same amount of time. People who get things done have the same number of hours in each week as people who don't get things done. They simply use their hours more effectively and more efficiently.

PRINCIPLE #4
We must take charge of our time, or other people will take charge of it for us. Plenty of people stand in line to take charge of a pastor's time. If he or she neglects this responsibility, others will handle it.

PRINCIPLE #5
We have all the time we need to do God's will for our lives. Can you imagine a God who is so unfair that he gives you a job to do and then steals the time that you need to do it? When you find yourself constantly running out of time, one or the other or both of two things is happening: Either you are doing things that are not God's will for you to do with your life and gifts, or you are doing God's will in an inefficient manner. For most people, it is about 50/50.

PRINCIPLE #6
We are never powerless over time problems. We can take control of our time and life. We are not victims of time damage; we are accomplices.

PRINCIPLE #7
Our psychological makeup greatly influences our ability to manage time. Examples: (a) High-anxiety people have difficulty managing their time. The higher the anxiety level, the greater the difficulty concentrating on and living out a consistent plan, (b) Constant feelings of low-grade depression mitigate against good time management. The more depressed people are, the more they have difficulty concentrating, (c) Strong relational needs that often accompany gregarious personalities can 'eat up' time. Pastors have several responsibilities that they can only accomplish when they are alone. One of those is preparing sermons, (d) A high need for recognition can decrease time-management ability, because it can cause people to

say yes to more requests than they can accommodate, (e) Age is a factor. Pastors born after 1946 grew up in a culture that values leisure above work. They therefore tend to feel mildly guilty and uncomfortable if their lifestyle is short on leisure and long on work. Pastors born before 1946 grew up in a culture that values work above leisure. They therefore tend to feel mildly guilty and uncomfortable if their lifestyle is short on work and long on leisure. Some pastors born before 1946 become obsessive-compulsive workaholics. Some pastors born after 1946 become excessive-compulsive leisureholics. Either extreme damages time-management ability.

The way those seven principles play out in a pastor's thought systems and emotional circuits greatly influences whether he or she uses or does not use effective time-management methods.

Fourteen Proven Methods

METHOD #1: GET CLEAR ABOUT YOUR CENTRAL PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES
Good time management results from making the right decisions about the right priorities. Until we get our priorities straight, we will never get our time straight. Decide precisely what gifts God has given you that you alone can and should do in your ministry setting. The ability to separate those from the many other things that you and other people think you ought to do is the bottom-line determiner of ministerial time-use effectiveness.

All essential matters are important, but not all important matters are essential. If you are the senior pastor, one of your essentials is preaching. Another essential is hospital calls, especially to gravely ill persons. Other essentials will vary from parish to parish. List the key essentials in your particular congregation. If your time begins to fray, check your list.

You have probably drifted off of essentials into important items.

METHOD #2: PRACTICE ZERO-BASED TIME MANAGEMENT
Every minister experiences a creeping loss of time control as he or she develops new projects and programs. That accumulation usually starts in the fall and builds through the year.

Each August, as a part of personal devotion time, do zero-based time management. List all the things you do each month. After two or three days, come back to the list and ask yourself which items are essentials. Which items could other people do, if you gave them the proper opportunity and training? Once you make these decisions, list the people to whom you could delegate these responsibilities. Then, do it.

METHOD #3: SPEND MOST OF YOUR TIME WORKING IN AREAS WHERE YOU ARE STRONG RATHER THAN TRYING TO PROP UP YOUR WEAKNESSES
Clergy perform nine functions: preaching preparation, teaching and preparation, calling, counseling, reading, church-related meetings, community-service meetings, administrative matters, and denominational work. Of these nine, most clergy do three well. What about the other six? You will have to do them, but you will do them adequately, not spectacularly. Don't spend your life feeling guilty about those six things that you can't do well. Go with the flow of your strengths. Only God is good at everything.

METHOD #4: LEARN HOW TO DELEGATE
Several kinds of hangups keep people from delegating effectively. The most common hangup is perfectionism, accompanied by the feeling that ‘Nobody can do this quite as well as I can do it.’ Another hangup is the fear of giving away power and authority. Another is the sense of security that many people find in doing detail work (when they quit doing details, they begin feeling insecure and unconsciously seek more details to do).

Good delegators convince themselves that other people can do a job well if given sufficient time, training, and authority. As the delegator gains experience, he or she learns that delegating is a ministry. When people succeed at the responsibilities delegated to them, their self-esteem increases. An effective delegator enables other people to experience the same joy, achievement, and creativity that he or she likes to experience.

METHOD #5: LEARN HOW TO SAY NO GRACIOUSLY
Because clergy have answered the call to enter a profession in which they are supposed to help people, their minds get set in a yes mode. Saying no doesn't feel right. Unfortunately, however, saying yes to enough things means you will eventually have to say no to something. Because saying no feels emotionally inappropriate, effective pastors memorize responses that they can use in those situations. Examples:

- ‘I surely would like to, but I just can't.’ Most pastors find this works best as a solo sentence. Avoid giving a long list of

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arguments for why you can't do it. People tend to assume that you have good reasons for saying no. A long explanation, no matter how valid, may sound flimsy when they compare it to the speaking invitation they are trying to get you to accept.

- ‘I am honored to be asked, but I have another commitment that requires preparation time that week. If I say yes to you, I will be letting those folks down, and I'm sure you wouldn't want me to do that. Do me a favor and let me say no.’ This response assumes that the askers are persons of great integrity. If they push you, they will have to disprove your affirmation of their character.

METHOD #6: PLAN YOUR TIME IN WEEK-LONG BLOCKS, NOT IN HOURS OR DAYS

Set up a sheet with twenty-one time blocks – morning, afternoon, and evening for each of the seven days of each week, (This does not replace the weekly calendar on which you put appointments; that's another matter.) Set aside all three blocks on one day for a day off. That leaves eighteen blocks. Assign two additional evening blocks to leisure and family. That leaves sixteen blocks. Plug in the appropriate number of blocks for sermon preparation and hospital calling. Many pastors also designate one evening block each week for visiting unchurched persons (perhaps Monday evening) and another evening for visiting members (perhaps Tuesday).

Some senior pastors in multiple-staff churches ask each staff member to share his or her planning guide with other staff members at each weekly staff meeting. This helps everyone hold each other to his or her best and ensures that staff families don't get deleted from the clergy concern list.

METHOD #7: EXPECT INTERRUPTIONS, BUT DON'T LET EVERY INTERRUPTION CONTROL YOU

Interruptions are part of every pastor's job. You must push back a deadline on an important project if something essential interrupts you. But make sure that you set priorities in ways that allow you to distinguish between essential interruptions and important interruptions. (As with football, you tackle the guy who comes through the line carrying the little brown ball. You don't tackle everybody who comes through the line.)

Some pastors find it helpful to develop a ‘hierarchy of interrupters’ – things they will allow to divert them from another function. With this procedure, items on the top of the list can interrupt items lower down, but not vice-versa. Example:

- God (this would include study, sermon preparation, and prayer life).
- Spouse (your spouse needs to know that he or she is the most important person in your life).
- Children.
- Church leaders.
- Church members.
- Non-church members.
- Denominational responsibilities.
- Civic work.

METHOD #8: USE YOUR PRIME TIME OF THE DAY FOR TASKS THAT REQUIRE YOUR BEST THINKING ABILITY

Pastors, like everyone else, have different circadian rhythms (physiological patterns that cause people to peak in energy, thinking ability, and brain function at certain times of the day). No amount of willpower changes that system. For many pastors, prime time happens in the morning hours; for others, afternoons allow the best creative thinking.

The larger the church, the more pastors need to select a place as well as a time for study and sermon preparation. Many pastors have a room somewhere besides their church office where they go for study. The secretary screens contacts during those hours by saying, "The pastor is in her time of study and prayer. She will be available at 11:00 a.m." Productivity radically increases if you can concentrate for a block of time in a protected location.

METHOD #9: SET DEADLINES IN YOUR MIND AND ON PAPER FOR ACCOMPLISHING PARTICULAR MAJOR TASKS

Many effective pastors say that every time they decide to do something, they ‘when it.’ In other words, they say, ‘When am I going to have it done?’ Creative juices flow best when you work against deadlines (for some people, that is the only time they flow).

METHOD #10: LEARN HOW TO USE WAITING OR IDLE MOMENTS FOR READING OR TAPE LISTENING

Automobile travel is one such opportunity. Audiotapes can transform dead time into continuing education.

METHOD #11: IF YOU HAVE A SECRETARY, LEARN HOW TO USE A DICTATING MACHINE

Dictate (in addition to letters) filing or project assignments to your secretary and memos to staff. This can save countless hours of conversations with a secretary – a procedure that eats up time for two people, not just one.

METHOD #12: DON'T TRY TO REMEMBER ANYTHING

Most people are under the illusion that they can remember what someone tells them and what they promise people they will do. That assumption is only partially accurate. Memory systems are quite fallible, and clergy credibility eventually gets damaged when information about hospitalized parishioners and promises to put something in the newsletter fall through the cracks of a busy week. The following four-point system allows a pastor to handle countless details without having to remember anything:

- Carry a small notebook in your pocket or purse. If you decide to take care of something next week, don't rely on your ability to remember it. Write it on a page in your notebook. (Don't make lists. Put a new item on each page.)
- When you arrive at the office each morning, tear out the notes and stack them in action stacks on your desktop – phone calls to make, letters to dictate, etc. Between interruptions, try to complete these action stacks by the end of that day.
- Empty one of your desk drawers and designate it your "crisis drawer." Put in this drawer items that you cannot do this week because you are waiting for someone to call or write with the information you need. Every Monday morning, open the crisis drawer and look at each sheet of paper. Some matters have now become genuine crises. You must telephone someone and get the information this week, before it is too late. Other items can wait another week or more, so you put them back in the drawer.
- Set up a monthly calendar file (some people call this a tickler file). Whatever you call it, get twelve file folders. Label them with the twelve months of the year and put them in a nearby file cabinet.

Those four methods work together in a synergistic way that releases you from the pressure of having to remember everything. If you plan to do something, write it down and put it into the flow of this four-point system. Work on the phone calling and action stacks on your desk daily, so they do not accumulate. Open the crisis drawer weekly. Open the calendar file monthly. The result: You will develop a reputation as a dependable, capable person who gets things done.

METHOD #13: HANDLE YOUR MAIL ONLY ONCE

Some pastors open their mail, glance at it, and lay it on the desk. They come back the next day and look at it again, trying to decide what to do with it. Some people look at their mail four or five times. What a horrendous waste of time!

Take one of four actions with every piece of mail.

- Read it and throw it away.
- File it, or dictate instructions that ask your secretary to file it for you.
- Take action on it immediately, or put it in one of the action stacks on your desk-phone calls, letters to write, etc.
- Put it in the 'take action tomorrow' stack on your desk (some mail is complicated and you need to think about it overnight before responding). By tomorrow, you will know what to do with the item – dictate a letter, file it, put it in the crisis drawer or calendar file, etc.

METHOD #14: BE CONCERNED ABOUT EVERYTHING IN THE CHURCH, BUT AVOID THE COMPULSIVE TENDENCY TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYTHING IN THE CHURCH

Concern for people and projects means you are a Christian. Taking responsibility for everything in the church means you are playing God.

Assume responsibility for what belongs to you. Give responsibility for other things to other people. Otherwise, you are breaking one of the Ten Commandments. You are stealing.

After you have completed your horizontal delegation to other people, a few items will remain that neither you nor other people can handle. Delegate these to God. This skill produces mental balance. Pastors who don't learn vertical delegation will have a driven, ineffectual ministry, and some of them will suffer an emotional breakdown.

How can pastors find the time to effectively accomplish their ministry? They can't. Time is never lost, only poorly used. If pastors see themselves as stewards of a precious gift and build on that conviction with effective habits, effective ministry results.

First, decide on your life and ministry priorities. Second, decide to use your time to accomplish those priorities, instead of the dozens of other important matters that clamor for control of your clock. Function from this life-management perspective, rather than a perspective of trying to use time more efficiently, and you find the time about which other people only dream.

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