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STAYING FIT FOR MINISTRY

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Pastoral ministry is hard work, and it is all too easy for pastors to burn out. In his new book Going the Distance: How to stay fit for a lifetime of ministry, Peter Brain draws on his years of ministry experience to give helpful advice to pastors so that they can finish the race. In this edited extract, Peter discusses why 'self-care' is so important.

Intentional self-care – looking after yourself sensibly – on the part of pastors is not a matter of selfish pampering; it is essential to maintaining an effective ministry over the long-term.

Why is Self-care Important?

The nature of pastoral ministry makes self-care important. My own experience convinces me of the greatness of pastoral ministry. Pastors taught me the Christian faith by their credible example and clear teaching. Nothing could be greater than to be at the forefront of God's purposes in building up his people.

This is confirmed by Scripture in many places. The apostle Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders, recorded in Acts 20:17-38, demonstrates the greatness of all ministry. He says in verse 28:

> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

These words remind us of how important every congregation is. It is a task of great importance to pastor people who are a part of God's church.

The work of a pastor is unique. Christian psychologist Dr Arch Hart has commented that "ministry is a unique vocation and if undertaken seriously the most dangerous occupation around... in choosing ministry one chooses to command an outpost of unequalled danger which threatens from without and within".

The greatness and uniqueness of the pastor's work leads us to recognize the seriousness of the work. This is felt in the tone of Acts 20. False teaching is just one of the reasons the pastor needs always to be alert and sharp. Self-care promotes that alertness.

Intentional self-care can be likened to the safety valve on the old pressure cookers, designed to stop us from blowing up (and indeed, as often happens, blowing off at others!). This is not self-indulgence; it is a wise mechanism that makes for a healthy pastor.

Personal Expectations

There are many reasons why pastors need to pay attention to self-care. Very often it is our own expectations that set us up for our greatest problems. Four observations, all from my own experience, serve to illustrate my concerns.

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In 1992, I surveyed Perth Anglican Clergy concerning various ministry matters. The results would, I'm sure, be applicable to any number of other dioceses around the Western world. I asked them to answer the question, "On average I work days, hours each week". I then compared their answers to the answers given to the question addressed to congregational leaders: "How many days or hours do you expect your Rector/minister to work?" The results were:

	PASTOR'S ACTUALS		LEADERS' EXPECTATIONS	
	Average	Range	Average	Range
Hours	60	50-85	45	37.5-54
Days	6.0	6-6.5	5.25	5-6

One pastor who noted the large discrepancy between his actual work pattern and his leaders' expectations was greatly helped to overcome the pressure that he (mistakenly) felt from his lay leaders. Such realizations may help pastors to be free to give time to the congregation, rather than to be driven by false or imagined expectations. We are very often driven people, and our own worst enemy.

For some pastors, the call to ministry is equated with always being on call. This can easily be the result of an inner drivenness (to be seen or to prove ourselves), rather than a well thought-out commitment to pastoral ministry. Of course, pastors want to be always available to people. Being available, however, is different to always being 'on call'. Never resting, or always dropping everything in response to the latest crisis or telephone call, is not

healthy. Crisis-based ministry will rarely achieve much, and will be difficult to sustain with any sense of satisfaction or joy. A pastor who is available and refreshed will be able to fulfil his or her duty more effectively than one who is worn out by crisis care, or dependant upon the crisis to set the agenda. Most crises can wait for a few hours, or even a day or two. They have been often weeks, even years, in the making! The confident and caring appointment made for tomorrow or the next evening is a loving indication of the pastor's desire to care and fulfil the pastoral responsibility. When we are so busy that we drop everything for every crisis, we find that many people from our congregation won't call us, because we appear to be so rushed and busy all the time.

The Cost for Family and Friends

Most pastors have families to care for. All pastors do well to take the time to nurture friendships. Yet we easily take for granted the loyalty of family and friends to ourselves and to (our) ministry. This means we easily presume upon this loyalty and squeeze them out, in time and in emotional energy and attention. Since this rarely happens overnight, and is a process that gradually becomes more and more habitual, we pastors must pay special attention to nurturing our families and friendships. We may not notice this process, but we can be certain that our spouses and families do. We do well to attend to their signals.

This became very clear to me when my wife, who is very committed to ministry, remarked to friends, "Life is often easier when Peter is not home". That cry from her heart pierced mine, not only because I love her and our children dearly, but also because I consider that I owe them a commitment and care that takes priority over the church. Self-care will ensure that a proper balance is in place. It prevents bad habits becoming ingrained that cause resentment, indifference or anger to grow in the pastor's family.

Our son's athletic coach drummed into him the saying, 'practice makes permanent'. Bad habits become ingrained. By contrast, self-care allows good habits to emerge and grow. Part of our humanity is to enjoy the relationships that God gives to us. Healthy self-care will make sure that time and patterns of living enable our relationships to grow.

Positive Reasons for Self-care

Self-care is therefore a way of recognizing our ministry as a good, God-given gift. According to Dr Hart, "Most ministers don't burn out because they forget they are ministers; they burn out because they forget they are people". Surely this is why God gave us the command to rest from our labour one day in seven. It is his gracious provision, because he knows our bodies and minds need regular rest. Just as he has kindly built into every 24 hours time to sleep, so he has given a weekly day of rest. By taking a day off, we are agreeing with God our heavenly father that our bodies "being fearfully and wonderfully made" require the refreshment of rest.

Clearly God wants us to work creatively. It is part of what it means to be made in his image, but to do so we need to rest regularly. Failure to rest regularly means our work becomes drudgery and an end in itself. Inefficiency sets in, as the law of diminishing returns takes over. On the other hand, a proper balance of work and refreshment, of work, family and friends, can ensure that our work is seen as a way of serving others. Then these attendant difficulties can be kept in focus.

Far from being a reason for self-indulgent laziness or an incentive for pastoral hypochondriacs, self-care is really a way of ensuring that we will remain effective in the great work God has given us to do. The phrases I hate hearing the most from parishioners are, "I didn't want to bother you, you are always so busy" or "you always look so tired".

Self-care helps me engage in the art of being an "unhurried pastor". This phrase has nothing to do with laziness, but everything to do with availability and freshness for the task. Self-care will help us practice this art. Often pastors are busy because they are lazy! They are too lazy to work out priorities and then to put them into practice. The unhurried pastor will establish self-care patterns that will enable him or herself time to set priorities (itself essential to self-care) which will allow freshness and vitality to thrive.

In building self-care principles and patterns into our lifestyle, we are offering other people, especially fellow Christians, a healthy pattern for Christian discipleship. Certainly this will be so for the pastor's family. If the pastor can never stop still long enough to enjoy friendships and relationships, it will come as no surprise if his or her family cannot or will not do the same, especially toward the pastor. On the other hand, a balanced pastoral life will model the importance of service and hard work, while affirming the place for rest and the nurture of family and friendships.

MOST CRISES CAN WAIT FOR A FEW HOURS, OR EVEN A DAY OR TWO.

Self-care means that we will build into our lives patterns that demonstrate our reliance upon God. Passages from 2 Corinthians demonstrate a resolute commitment to the hard work of ministry and an equal resolve to rely upon God (11:28-31; 4:7-18). Reliance upon God will be especially important to pastors who are feeling lonely. The practised pattern of daily dependence will always deliver to us the comfort and strength that we require. Where this practised pattern has been neglected, the going will surely be tougher. This is not to say that God will not come through for us, but it is

to affirm that we will have cheated ourselves of the care we could otherwise have experienced.

Self-care maintains a close relationship with God, and provides a pattern by which that primary relationship is nurtured.

An Important Distinction

Is self-care at odds with our Lord's clear gospel call for self -denial? Our Lord's words "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23) are clear and uncompromising.

Hard work and consistent sacrifice is required by virtue of us being Christians – it cannot be otherwise if we are to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Yet being human, we need rest, refreshment and encouragement. No-one can prescribe for another in this area, yet some observations can be made that may help pastors live creatively with this tension. As with other issues of discipleship, the ability to talk about the tension, and to find that others are seeking to work through it, can be as profitable as it is reassuring.

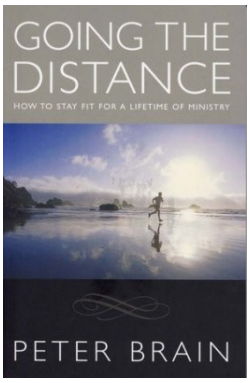
Three popular statements encapsulate the issue for us. Each of these have been very powerful summary statements in my own desire to follow Christ generally and specifically as a pastor:

- 'Only one life that will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last'.
- 'We are saved to serve'.
- 'Jesus is to be Lord of all or not at all".

My own feeling is that each of these pithy statements are an accurate expression of Scripture. They stir our hearts and minds to self-examination, challenging our level of commitment, and under God can evoke a new obedience and stimulate perseverance. Yet with this, my own conviction remains that devoted service and obedience not only will flow out of a base of thoughtful self-care, but will be fuelled by it. For example, the saying 'Lord of all or not at all', will involve the pastor (indeed every Christian) in subjecting to Christ not only their work in ministry, but also their bodies, minds and spirit, that make the work possible.

Pastors will need to be vigilant and intentional in carving out time and establishing strategies of care, since a dozen good things will conspire to keep them as intentions only. Denominational and local church leaders can help local church pastors greatly, by giving them permission and encouragement to pursue healthy patterns of care. There is little doubt that everyone benefits when this happens.

Intentional self-care that takes up the opportunities and disciplines offered by the very nature of pastoral ministry, will enable the pastor to keep fresh and thus remain at his or her work. Built into the task are means for self-care. Prayer, preparation from God's word and time spent with those people whom God calls into his church, can all contribute to the pastor's health. God's grace in calling us, using us to bring others, providing us with a day of rest and going before us to work in others, all help pastors face their task with confidence. Self-denial does not mean denying our humanity expressed in a need for rest, friendship, strength, wisdom and support. Rather, it involves a willingness to deny self-interest. Expressed positively, this will mean accepting the means and provision for care that God so graciously puts in our way as pastors.

The reason for self-care is not so that pastors can become indulgent hypochondriacs, always concerned about their own welfare, or even to avoid the twin ravages of growing older and the fatigue of hard work and pastoral concern. All Christians are meant to be workers. We are saved to serve and work. Pastors have work to do, work that is vital. The assassinated former Archbishop of Uganda said, "He who is forever watching the wind will never sow". Self-care must never be a cover for selfishness, or a cowardly holding back in the interests of self-protection. However, like the mother of the fourth-century apologist Origen, who acted wisely to hide her son's trousers in order to keep him from a premature and unnecessary martyrdom, pastors will understand the wisdom of self-care. Its wisdom is to ensure, as far as humanly possible, a wise and orderly work that conserves a pastor's ministry, rather than a costly burnout.

Going the Distance is available from Amazon.