

Self-Care: A Diagnostic Checklist for Ministry Leaders

As you prepare for a new year, I encourage you to focus some time on this question: *Am I doing the things that will sustain and increase the health of my soul over the long haul?*

This is a critical question for ministry leaders, whether paid or volunteer. If we are not healthy people, our ministries will not be healthy or enduring. Paul tells the young pastor Timothy, “Keep a close watch on *yourself* and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16 ESV, emphasis added). Notice the close connection between how we are doing and the quality of our influence.

Ministry leadership is a calling that will wear you down unless you develop habits that nourish and protect your soul. Here is a checklist for your well-being as a ministry leader. **Rate yourself on a 1 to 5 scale for each of these practices** (1 means “consistently neglected” and 5 means “consistently practiced”).

1. Daily devotional reading of Scripture. Personally reading and reflecting on Scripture is the practice that most strongly correlates with growth as a disciple, based on studies conducted by Lifeway Research and the Willow Creek Association. Ministry leaders must be disciples who are growing. We cannot substitute Bible reading done in the course of ministry tasks (studying, preaching, teaching, counseling, etc.) for our personal practice of listening to what God is saying to us in Scripture, meditating on it, and acting on it.

2. Daily personal prayer. As with Scripture reading, we are often called upon to pray as ministry leaders. Those prayers are important, but they primarily nourish those to whom we minister. Your daily personal prayers exalt the Lord and minister to your own soul through worship, confession, and petition. The form (silent, spoken, written) is not important. The important thing is our *private* focus on and expression to the Father (Matthew 6:6).

3. Sufficient rest. Under the heading of “rest” I include adequate sleep, weekly time off from responsibilities, regular recreation that renews you, and full use of your vacation time. Here’s a dirty little secret: Exhaustion is often a source of pride for ministry leaders. And another dirty little secret: Churches often applaud prideful, exhausted workaholics! Yes, there are intense times in ministry that will exhaust you, but this cannot be sustained week in and week out without doing you harm.

4. Regular physical activity. You do not have to be a marathon runner. What you need is some kind of moderate physical activity, 30-40 minutes per session, four to five times per week. As a human being created in the image of God, you are an integrated soul. The physical and spiritual are inseparably linked. Taking care of your body matters to your soul and to your ministry.

5. Attention to key relationships. Think spouse, children, close friends, and key co-workers. Are they getting quality from you or just the leftovers after you service all the “squeaky wheels” in your

life? What are your goals for each key relationship? Is your present level of attention likely to accomplish the goals? Relationships flourish with intentionality. Don't expect it to just happen.

6. Preventive health practices. This is somewhat related to your age and past health issues, so figure out where you are and what is needed at your stage of life. For instance, I'm 53. Each year I have a physical from my family physician, including comprehensive bloodwork. Twice a year I have a check-up with the dentist. Every two years I see the optometrist, audiologist, and dermatologist for check-ups. I get a flu shot whenever my wife tells me to. I am on the appropriate colonoscopy schedule for a guy my age with my family history. None of this I enjoy; all of it helps me get the most out of this (increasingly sagging) body God has given me. Do not neglect the easy stuff that has great longevity value. (FYI, through our Minister Care fund BBA can help if the out-of-pocket costs are daunting.)

7. Learning. This includes formal education, a personal reading plan, conferences or seminars you may attend, and coaching you receive from experienced ministry leaders. The important thing is to continue learning and growing throughout your life. Stagnant pools breed unhealthy things! Make sure you are a ministry leader who continues to increase in knowledge and skills.

8. Mentoring. One of the ways a ministry leader's soul stays healthy is by investing in the growth of another person. We so easily get preoccupied with the administrative and "large group" aspects of our ministries that it is easy to neglect one-on-one discipleship. Make sure there is at least one person into whom you are pouring your life. This will sharpen you and keep you grounded.

9. Generosity. As a ministry leader, I assume you are a tither. If not, there are some strongholds you need to first deal with where money is concerned. Beyond tithing, it is healthy to build generosity into your basic pattern of living. The desire to be a generous giver begins in the heart as a work of the Spirit, but it must make it down to the level of your household budget if it is going to become dynamic in your life. Prayerfully pick a cause to support and start where you can. Build it into your budget. Maybe add a little extra to that budget line so when new generosity opportunities arise, you are ready. One of the marks of a healthy soul is an increasing practice of giving. Plan for it.

10. Accountability. Everyone needs to report to someone. It sharpens our decision making and proactivity. It opens us up to wise counsel and necessary rebukes. You may have formal accountability mechanisms as a ministry leader (I have these through the association's teams and board structure). If not, then implement some. For instance, form a Pastor's Advisory Council to whom you report. Be accountable to a trusted mentor. Make sure you are required to give an account of your soul and your ministry leadership to someone. Take the reporting requirement very seriously. It is good for you.

These ten are not an exhaustive list of healthy habits, but they are a good start. Be brutally honest in your ratings. Have someone who knows you well review your scores and give you feedback. **Take note of any habits rated at 3 or below.** Develop a plan that will help you grow in those habits. Repeat this process at least annually, adding to the list other habits you want to strengthen.

Bottom line: Self-care will bring a double blessing into your life, growing both your soul and your influence as a ministry leader. Don't neglect it!