

The Changing Church: *The Need for Pastors to Manage Their Weekly Schedules*

In his article “Autopsy of a Burned Out Pastor,” Thom Rainer identified 13 lessons learned from pastors who wore themselves out in ministry, many of them leaving the ministry altogether. Five of the 13 lessons relate to the failure to manage time effectively and prioritize important things. Burned out pastors...

- Would not say no to requests for their time because of people-pleasing tendencies.
- Did not prioritize physical exercise in their schedules.
- Did not protect personal Bible and prayer time in their schedules.
- Did not prioritize their own families in their schedules.
- Rarely took a day off.

<http://thomrainer.com/2014/06/23/autopsy-burned-pastor-13-lessons>)

Pastors have always needed to manage their time well. That’s not new. The change that we are experiencing in the church is due to technological and lifestyle changes in the broader culture. *Pastors are now constantly reachable*. They are interrupted a lot more. An endless stream of decisions and responses is demanded of them via high-tech devices. Increasingly, pastoral work is fragmented, harried, and inefficient. Work and home life have no clear boundaries. It’s a smart-phone-social-media maelstrom in the ministry.

As a church member, you may be thinking, “Welcome to my world!” Time fragmentation is certainly not limited to the ministry vocation. But consider this: Much of the most important work a pastor does requires extended, uninterrupted time to pull off. Fresh and powerful preaching requires it. The ministry of prayer requires it. Giving thoughtful spiritual direction to individuals requires it. Thinking through vision, strategy, and effective processes requires it. Bottom line: *You cannot be an effective and healthy pastor for very long without taking charge of your time*. That means pastors need a plan and churches need to support it.

I propose this two-part plan for mitigating burnout and setting healthy boundaries: 1) Pastors should be proactive in setting their basic weekly schedules and in communicating it to their congregations; 2) church members should understand the need for their pastor to manage his time and should adjust their mindsets and expectations to support him in this. The long-term benefit is a more focused, effective, and healthy pastor who is much less susceptible to burnout. That in turn will lead to a healthier church.

Pastors, for your part in mitigating burnout and setting healthy boundaries I urge you to:

- Determine your personal, family, and ministry priorities that should be reflected in your basic weekly schedule. Long-term, what are the most important things you should be doing each and every week?

- Translate those priorities into a weekly schedule template that protects them.
- Go public with your weekly schedule template. Share it with your congregation. Explain the elements of it, why they are important, and why you have set the schedule the way you have. Do the hard work of communicating with your church about this.
- Don't over-fill your weekly schedule template. Build in space and flexible time so that you can deal with matters that come up. The template is supposed to serve your life and ministry, not be another burden.
- Though you cannot always be immediately *available* to church members, make sure you are consistently *accessible* and that church members know the best ways to communicate with you. Be as prompt as possible in your replies given your other commitments.

Church members, for your part in helping the pastor set healthy boundaries I urge you to:

- Appreciate the nature of your pastor's work and what it takes for him to do the most important things well. Encourage him to set time priorities that are healthy for him and the church over the long haul. Be his advocate in this.
- Change your personal expectations regarding the pastor from one of constant *availability* to one of reasonable *accessibility*. *Availability* means I think of my pastor as a store clerk who's there ready to wait on me at my convenience. *Accessibility* means I think of my pastor as a leader with great responsibilities with whom I can communicate through various means. I understand he is often not immediately available to me, but he is always accessible and I can trust him to respond in a reasonable amount of time given his other responsibilities.

As an example I have enclosed my own weekly schedule template at the end of this article. It is not a detailed schedule; it is a template around which I build my week and protect my priorities. Most pastors' templates will look different than mine. For example, pastors will need to be more specific about protecting their sermon preparation time. Also, I'm an empty-nester; pastors with children at home will need to determine how that impacts their weekly schedule template. So use my template as an example, but fashion yours in a way that protects the most important things you need to do on a weekly basis in order to be healthy and productive over the long-haul.

And church members, support your pastor in this! It's good for him and it's good for the church.

Robby Partain
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Weekly Schedule Template

Sunday: Church Commitments in BBA

Monday – Thursday: Typical Office Day Schedule

5:30am – 6:45am: Personal Bible Study and Prayer Time

7:00am – 8:00am: Exercise

9:00am – 5:00pm: Office Hours*

Evening – Available for Church Commitments in BBA as Needed

*"Office hours" does not necessarily mean you will find me at my desk at any given time. I'm always glad to meet with unscheduled office guests when I can, but I can't guarantee availability. I may be in a meeting, on a phone call, or out of the office for a meeting, sermon study, or some other purpose. So that your time isn't wasted, it is always better to make an appointment.

Friday: "Sabbath" - The day Susan and I unplug as much as possible. Only on *extremely rare* occasions or in *emergency* situations will I make other commitments on this day.

Saturday: Chores, family commitments, social commitments, misc. ministry commitments

Note: Though I may not be immediately *available* at any given moment, I am always *accessible* via cell phone and email. Cell phone voice messages, text messages, and emails will be returned as soon as possible given other time commitments, usually within a day. Voice messages left on the BBA office phone will be returned as soon as possible. Office phone messages left after office hours on Thursday will be returned the following Monday (or Tuesday if there is a Monday holiday), so for a more prompt reply it is best to use my cell phone or email.