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Learning
the art of
strategic
neglect



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Pastoral ministry in the third millennium: *Learning the art of strategic neglect*

While flying across the Atlantic a few months ago, we encountered a nasty storm. Though we had experienced many storms on airplanes before, this flight was one of the worst. We were both still and quiet, sitting next to each other during that dreary night. Holding hands, we individually talked with God.

In those moments, when the plane was dipping and shaking and our futures seemed uncertain, our thoughts were not about our work responsibilities. Later, in calmer skies, we confessed to each other what truly was weighing on our minds: our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and the salvation of our children.

Lessons from a rough ride

Invariably, our lives in ministry can, at times, feel like a nasty storm. The intensity of the job itself added to the high rates of unrealistic expectations from church memberships or even leadership does not always make for a smooth ride. Rather, it sets up pastors to burn out quickly and, often, to live with a great burden of guilt, frustration, and disillusionment.

These emotions not only are a reality for pastors but have a ripple effect

on the pastor's spouse and children. Often, many of the same expectations placed on the pastor are placed on the spouse and children. For instance, the spouses (usually wives) are asked to take on pastoral responsibilities, and the children are expected to be models of perfection by demonstrating spiritual maturity beyond their years.

Of course, pastoral ministry has both joys and challenges. While the highs of ministry can be great—leading people to Jesus, bringing hope to people without hope—the lows of ministry can be very low, often causing one to be stretched to the limit of time and resources and falling short in measurable results with both the church and one's family.

In the mid-1980s, Paul Tsongas, a United States senator from Massachusetts, found out he had cancer. At first he decided to move ahead with his reelection campaign. He had second thoughts when a friend, Arnold Zack, wrote him a note saying: "No one on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'" Tsongas gave up his campaign to spend time with his family during this difficult period.¹

We are not suggesting that pastors give up ministry. Rather, we suggest that they take a new look at putting first things first by better managing

their competing commitments and finding homeostasis in their spiritual, personal, and professional lives. "Nothing can excuse the minister for neglecting the inner circle for the larger circle outside. The spiritual welfare of his family comes first."²

Strategic neglect

In an interview in *Leadership Journal*, Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Community Church talked on the keys to simpler and more effective leadership. He mentioned the need for pastors and ministry leaders to come to grips with the notion of "strategic neglect."³ This idea speaks to the need for healthy boundaries in ministry. Ostensibly, each pastor needs to focus, simplify, and prioritize.

And with this commitment, one must ask, personally, the questions, Who do I want to become over time? What kind of husband or wife? What kind of father or mother? What kind of friend, pastor, or leader? And then ask the follow-up question, What needs to be put into my schedule so that I become this kind of person? Essentially, pastors must decide in a strategic way what things will be left out of their schedules in order to be successful spiritually, personally—in their family life—and professionally.

In a recent study on pastoral family stress in the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, a significant percentage of pastors reported difficulty with personal prayer, trouble maintaining personal connection with God, and problems making time for personal devotions. What we know, as people in ministry ourselves, is that without prayer and Bible study, it is impossible to sustain the kind of viable relationship with God necessary for any kind of effective ministry. Without this daily connection, we lose sight of being *called*, rendering what we do for the church as just a regular job.

So what must the pastor *strategically neglect* in order to develop stronger spiritual disciplines? Setting specific times to respond to emails? Spending less time with unnecessary social media? Watching less TV? Getting to bed earlier in order to wake up earlier? You are the only one who can determine what you must *strategically neglect* so that you can give the necessary time to prayer and Bible study that will enable you to be an effective spiritual leader.

In the Word

Ezra 7:10 declares, “Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.”⁴ Note the commitment Ezra made to studying Scripture, living Scripture, and teaching Scripture. Studying God’s Word is a prerequisite for knowing God. Many scholars study and teach Scripture, but it has not made a difference in their lives. Not so with Ezra. He put his heart into it. He studied Scripture, he observed Scripture, and then he taught Scripture.

Without a doubt, *strategic neglect* was operative in the life of this faithful scribe, or he would have been unable to singularly study, live, and teach Scripture. As pastors, we must learn and operationalize in our lives the model set by Ezra to be effective as leaders of the flock. The time we spend in personal devotion and studying God’s Word cannot just be for sermon preparation,

but it must be where we nurture and feed our spiritual lives to be essentially connected to the vine.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus counsels His disciples with the words, “‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’” A few verses later, in Acts 1:14, we read, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”

The Holy Spirit will inhabit us when we spend time in prayer, asking for clarity of mind and purpose to effectively represent Jesus to the world. The power of the Spirit will come down with the force of Pentecost when we make the time to commune with God through prayer. Without this focus and priority, our lives will become too cluttered to make time to pray. Ellen G. White counsels, “Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work.”⁵ As pastors, we must strategically include time for prayer and Bible study, for as we neglect those activities, they become barriers to our spending time with Jesus.

In the North American pastoral study mentioned earlier, many pastors complained about not having enough hours in the week to handle all their

responsibilities and still have enough leisure time together as a family. Thus, pastors must strategically neglect many good things in ministry that are not central to their main mission so that they can make the time to be with and nurture their families.

If we both accepted all the invitations we receive each year to speak or write, we would fail in the main objectives of our ministry responsibilities. While often tempted to work through our vacation, we must purposefully delay or decline certain tasks and functions to give us the needed break to be spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy enough to continue to work effectively.

Teamwork

Last August, we celebrated 30 years of marriage. To mark the occasion and create memories to keep our marriage viable, we spent five days at the beach. We enjoy beach vacations, especially where there is beautiful sand and clear blue water.

Our time at the beach was simply incredible. We relaxed, read books, ate food someone else cooked, swam, snorkeled, and went bodyboarding and kayaking; but most memorable of all was learning to sail.

The 7 commitments of a happy marriage

Connection requires commitment. Here are seven key commitments that will take your marriage to the next level:

I commit to

1. listening to my spouse without becoming defensive;
2. sharing my feelings with my spouse without blaming her or him for my feelings;
3. giving my spouse the benefit of the doubt and not jumping to conclusions;
4. acknowledging my contribution to our misunderstandings;
5. apologizing to my spouse when I have done or said something that hurt him or her;
6. forgiving my spouse even if she or he does not apologize; and
7. doing all I can to give kindness, patience, understanding, and forgiveness to my spouse.

Willie Oliver and Elaine Oliver, “And They Lived Happily Ever After,” *Vibrant Life*, Jan/Feb 2015, 24–27.

How to put first things first

- Schedule it!
- Personal devotions.
- Weekly fun date with spouse (do not discuss problems).
- One-to-one time with kids.
- Keep schedule!
- Honor your commitments to God, family, and church first.
- Strategically neglect “little rocks” (those things that get in the way of what’s most important).
- Use schedule to stay on track!
- Life happens, as such, schedules get derailed (for a moment).
- Use schedule to recalibrate and stay focused on priorities.

As soon as our sailing lesson began, we realized sailing is much more complex than it appears on the surface. While a bit stressful, it was also relaxing, challenging, and rewarding. We would need to work together as a team and be on the same side of the catamaran to experience gliding smoothly across the beautiful Caribbean waters.

God created marriage and family to give human beings a sense of community and to make them feel connected to and have a sense of responsibility for another. While the process has challenging moments, the rewards are great.

The Bible is replete with counsel to help us negotiate our family relationships for maximum joy. The more we read the Word of God individually and as a collective, the more we will be in tune with what God wants for us and our families. The truth is, it is impossible within the domain of human capacity to keep love always sheltered from injury or hurt. However, as we apply God’s Word to our family relationships, we can find the capacity to honor God in

those relationships. This can only take place, however, as we make the time to be with each other and grow together through the power of God.

Family matters

We love to spend time together. Having the privilege of working together, we have experienced all kinds of favorite things, activities, and places together. We have favorite restaurants, museums, flowers, meals, and many more. We are simply grateful that God brought us together, and we try to apply Scripture to our relationship interactions for maximum benefit. One of our favorite verses in the Bible to be mindful of as we communicate with each other is James 1:19: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

Working as closely as we do is gratifying but also challenging. So, we choose to build in fun times together and find reasons to celebrate often in order to keep making our marriage and family a desirable place to be. After spending a weekend on our feet speaking at a couples’ retreat or training pastors and church leaders, we often find a good Indian restaurant. While we try to be temperate and careful, we

simply enjoy food and find it a good reason to celebrate God and life.

Our children no longer live at home. However, every time we get a chance to be together, we make the time to celebrate being connected to each other by participating in an activity we have enjoyed: whether playing a game, eating at a favorite restaurant, visiting a museum, or going to church. This reminds us that we belong to each other and are grateful to God for His goodness to us. And when away from each other, we stay connected by keeping in touch. To be sure, we can accomplish this only by employing *strategic neglect*.

Pastoral ministry is difficult; at times it can feel as if you are thousands of feet in the air amid a terrible storm. However, once we admit that difficulty, the fact that it is difficult no longer matters as long as we remember that “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). 

1 Paul Tsongas, *Heading Home* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 160.
 2 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), 204.
 3 “The Secret of Strategic Neglect: Bill Hybels on the Keys to Simpler and More Effective Leadership,” *Leadership Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2015).
 4 Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version of the Bible.
 5 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), 70.

Major stressors for pastors

Financial concerns: meeting monthly expenses and retirement	70%
Making time for personal devotions	67%
Leisure time as a family	67%
Distress over moving	58%
Lack of real friendships—emotionally connected	57%
Poor coping mechanisms—overeating, media addiction, pornography	40%

David Sedlacek, Duane McBride, René Drumm, Alina Baltazar, Romulus Chelbegean, Gary Hopkins, Elaine Oliver, Wendy Thompson, *Seminary Training, Role Demands, Family Stressors and Strategies for Alleviation of Stressors in Pastors’ Families: A Report to the North American Division Ministerial and Family Ministries Departments in conjunction With the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2014.

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