

Oxygen Mask Theology

The Absolute Necessity of Pastoral Self-Care



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Introduction

Coming home from Israel on a 14-hour flight. Two announcements.

- Four pilots because it was such a long flight. They have mandated rest periods for safety.
- The flight attendant speech. “In the event of an emergency put your own mask on before you help someone else.”
- Why? You can’t help someone else if you’re passed out on the floor!
- There is a great parallel to ministry: you can’t safely do your job if you’re exhausted and worn out, and you can’t help others if you’re passed out on the floor!
- Under normal circumstances you need regular rest. In extreme circumstances you need proactive self-care. Hence oxygen mask theology.

I wish I could say that pastors and church leaders are good at self-care, but we are not—at all!

- Research shows us that we are facing an unprecedented crisis in ministry.
- Pastors are leaving the ministry at alarming rates.
- Those entering the ministry are at alarmingly low rates.
- So, we need to know how to properly care for ourselves so that we can lead the church effectively.

I’m not here to tell you what you already know. You already know that you need four essential spiritual practices in your life.

- Bible reading
- Community
- Worship
- Prayer

I want to talk about three specific practices you may not be familiar with.

- Sabbath
- Renewal Days
- Sabbaticals

Sabbath

God established the principle of sabbath in creation.

- It’s older than the law, so it isn’t a legalistic formula, but rather a life principle.
- The issue isn’t as much about rest (although that’s certainly part of it) as much as it is about trust. Do you think God can provide when you don’t work seven days a week?
- Time is to sabbath as tithing is to money. Do you trust God to provide when you acknowledge Him as the source of your time and money?

A modern practice of sabbath for church leaders has this goal—a regular time to rest, refresh and reconnect.

- Rest—intentionally fill up your physical, emotional, and social reserves.
- Refresh—fill up your soul with things that bring you joy.
- Reconnect—prioritize relationships.

What does this look like in real life?

- Schedule—intentionally keep it clean.
- Indulge yourself and do things that bring you joy. Get a hobby!
- Consider exercise as a part of rest.
- Schedule time to be with your family.
- Limits distractions and intrusions. This means pretty much anything with a screen.
- Journal to remember how God refreshed you.

Practical considerations for sabbath

- Will probably have to rearrange household shores.
- Might have to work up to a full day.
- Especially challenging for young families or teens.
- Going to talk more but will have to establish the culture that you can't be reached.
- Not legalistic but proactive.

Renewal Days

What is it?

- A day for specific refreshing and renewing.
- Considered a work day, not a day off or vacation.
- Designed to get away in solitude to do things that specifically for reflection and introspection.
- Typically for pastors 1x/month and other full-time staff 1x/quarter.

What to do?

- Essentially, whatever you need to full up your spiritual, emotional, and physical buckets so you can minister more effectively.
- Read, pray, study, journal, etc.
- Exercise, sleep, fast, etc.
- Solitude, serving, time outside.

Where to do it?

- Home is usually not a good place with too many distractions.
- Cabin, library, park, trail, another church, church camp, coffee shop, etc.

Practical considerations for renewal days

- Plan a year ahead and don't delete it.
- Take the same day every month. Mine are the last Wednesday of the month.
- Culture of "do not disturb."
- Limit your accessibility!

- For me, either a long hike or a rainy day in a coffee shop is the absolute best.
- Reflect and journal.

Sabbatical

What is it?

- An extended time of rest and refreshment away from church.
- Typically for pastors it is 4-13 weeks.
- Given every 5-10 years.
- Typically, in addition to other vacation, PTO, etc.
- Some have stipulations on what do it. Others have none.
- Some give extra compensation as well.

What do to?

- Rest
- Develop a Bible reading plan.
- Keep a daily journal of what you do.
- Spiritual retreat
- Take a class.
- Visit other churches.
- Vacation and travel

Practical Considerations for sabbatical

- It is as much for you family as it is for you.
- Be intentional. Whatever you do, be intentional. Even it is doing nothing.
- Spend scheduled, intentional time with each member of your family.
- Thank your elders when you get back.

What are obstacles to pastoral self care?

Culture

- Pastoral culture
 - We are supposed to give until we give out.
 - We aren't supposed to have our own problems, struggles, or doubts.
 - We are invincible.
 - We're not taught how or why.
- Church culture
 - People won't understand it.
 - People will be jealous—must be nice!
 - May take some time to educate your people and leadership as to why you need these.
 - Work culture has changed now, and people work off campus a lot, so take advantage.
- You might just have to do some of these covertly.
- So, don't post a lot about them on social media.

New Practices

- If you've never done these, they will feel strange.
- You won't see short term benefits immediately, but you will in the long term.
- They won't go the way you plan usually.
- Start small—maybe one hour at a time.

- Experiment and see what refreshes you.

Time

- It is always tempting to use the time for something else.
- So, block it off on your calendar.
- Must think about them as proactive rather than reactive.
- Prioritize your self-care!