

How Does a New (5 years or less) Pastor Balance Pastoring and Having a Family?

by John Richard Walton, Jr.

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My purpose in addressing this topic is to encourage younger pastors, especially those new to the pastorate (5 years or less), to be intentional about self-care and care of their families while engaged in pastoral ministry.

I am 42 and have been married to the same woman for almost 16 years. Together, we parent three sons and one daughter ranging in age from 14 to 4. I have been in ministry for 20 years and pastoring for 14 of those years, serving at my present church for the last ten. It is my contention that pastoral ministry, though very rewarding at times, can place a considerable strain on family life. Consider these startling statistics:

- 80 percent believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- 33 percent say that being in ministry is an outright hazard to their family.
- Those in ministry are equally likely to have their marriage end in divorce as general church members.
- Clergy have the second highest divorce rate among all professions.
- 80 percent of pastors say they have insufficient time with their spouse.
- 52 percent of pastors say they and their spouses believe that being in pastoral ministry is hazardous to their family's well-being and health.
- 45.5 percent of pastors say that they've experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.¹

Why are these numbers so elevated? I suggests three reasons:

1. Sincere, well-meaning pastors can spend so much time preparing sermons, Bible studies, visiting the sick, administrating, leading retreats, preaching crusades and revivals, and serving in community leadership roles that they don't make time for personal meditation and devotion.

In their book Thriving Churches in the Twenty-First Century, church consultants Gary L. McIntosh and Daniel Reeves list ten life-giving systems they deem critical. The number one life-giving system is a good spiritual life.² Having a good personal spiritual life can avert unnecessary pain on the part of the pastor, his or her family, and the church family. Asking a large number of pastors about their private time with God, McIntosh and Reeves found that, "few of them read the Bible outside of their sermon preparation. Their own personal devotions were practically nonexistent; it had been squeezed out of their lives by their heavy workload."³ I remember my wife, Lorrie, telling me at one point, "John, you should read the Bible for you sometimes, not just when to have to prepare a sermon or a lesson." She was right. She saw what I didn't see—a pastor drying up on the inside due to a lack of personal devotional time.

By this point, things had become so painfully mechanical. Looking back, I realize that because I was not spending time in regular meditation and devotion, my calling became just a job. I began to do things not out of my joy in Christ Jesus, but out of duty. The problem with this is that when the joy isn't there and the people don't appear to appreciate your efforts, you could get mad with them. This leads to a lack of effective communication, unfair treatment of the flock, and ministry stalling, and that is just at church. When we get home and bring this frustration with us, everyone suffers. For example, serious health consequences may result as pastors ignore the warning signs of depression. Some of these warning signs include a sense of hopelessness, frequent tears, difficulty concentrating, difficulty making decisions, irritability, lowered activity levels, feeling alone, aches and pains, eating disorders, and a lack of marital attraction.⁴ The use of pornography by male pastors is also well documented.⁵ All of the above are signs that things are out of balance between one's personal spiritual disciplines, family and church work.

2. Pastors can forget that their families need them and fail to get help when they should.

During my first pastorate, I came home early one day from the church. Our second son was six months old. I washed my hands and got ready to hold him. When my wife gave him to me, he began to cry and scream. I wondered what was wrong. My wife came and got him. She saw the hurt look in my eyes; my son did not know what it felt like for his father to hold him. I resolved from that moment that I would no longer leave home in the dark and return home in the dark as I had been doing. I was in my second year of pastoring at that time.

Why do we as new pastors often feel the need to do the impossible and do so much of it? In my case, it stemmed from two things: perceived cultural expectations and unresolved issues from my childhood.

In his article entitled “Balancing Your Ministry, Renewing Your Life,”⁶ Larry Peers says that there are common myths that affect our ability as clergy to have a vital connection between our ministry and life. One such myth is, “In order to be a good minister, you have to please everyone at all costs.” Some of the origin of this myth, he says, may have to do with cultural ideas about what being a good pastor means. Additionally, “some of the origin of the myth might even come from our own life through patterns that were established in our own families, or reinforced in a variety of ways.”

In their section on Baptist Polity, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya state, “Once ordained and called to pastor a particular church, ministers generally are granted considerable autonomy in conducting the affairs of the church.”⁷ Recently, a judge came to visit our church. After the worship, we talked. At one point he said, “The next time I come, I would like to meet the pastor.” When I informed him that I was the pastor, he was shocked and slightly embarrassed. Although pastors are younger and younger these days, there is still the expectation that a pastor be an older person, and in most cases, an older man. Too often, new preachers attempt to make up for the fact that they are not older, by doing more work in an effort to show that they are competent. There is also the expectation that the pastor will grow up with the church. In his Los Angeles Times obituary, the late churchman Dr. Floyd Massey Jr. was quoted as saying, “The long pastorate is the natural outgrowth of the father-figure rooted in Africa and the Bible. The lack of the male presence in many homes added to the expectation that the minister be a father to the fatherless.”⁸ This is still the case in many congregations.

The second part of Larry Peers’s comment relates to the experiences in a pastor’s childhood. We have all had some hard times in life. Gardner Taylor seems to agree when he says, “Everyone experiences them, though some people seem not to. I think though, that people who do not have these struggles miss something.”⁹ Pastors need to know that whatever traumatic experiences they have had, if unaddressed, will resurface in some form. I speak from personal experience. Until this year, there were things I thought I had overcome, but had not. There was pain I was suppressing, but it was closer to the surface than I imagined. With the help of a spiritual director and my wife, I was able to release a lot of what was paralyzing my life and ministry.

As pastors, we have to have someone to talk to sometimes. I obtained a spiritual director. One day during an appointment, he suggested that my wife accompany me to the next session. She did and at one point, it dawned on her that although I had been meeting with my director for some time, I had not told him about one of the most painful experiences I’d endured. She told him. The tears flowed. Unconsciously, I had been using so much energy to suppress these unpleasant memories that I didn’t realize how close they were to the surface.

I found that when I was trying to control all of the elements of my life, even though I never admitted it, I was unhappy personally and professionally. I implore new pastors to seek God for someone to talk to other than your spouse about your personal struggles and church heartaches. If children are involved, the dangers may be multiplied. I have found it beneficial to keep my home life separate from the affairs of the church.

3. The church does not belong to the pastor, nor to the congregation; it belongs to God.

The former statement is true, but hard for new pastors to accept and remember. Some years ago, a new pastor was being installed in a well-established church. His pastor charged him with these words, “You are not the pastor, yet; you will become the pastor.” After the service, the new pastor went downstairs with his younger buddies. He was livid that his pastor would say this. To his friends he said, “I’m the pastor. I don’t know what he was talking about.” Within two years the young pastor was voted out by this church. The moral of the story is simple: If you are a first-time pastor with a young family, you should do your job but not overextend yourself and neglect those you love, because until considerable time passes, you’re not the pastor anyway.

In this world of instant gratification, this can be hard to swallow, but it is worthy of consideration. It takes a while to become the pastor; it does not happen overnight. When the church “calls” a pastor in my tradition, it is usually because they like his or her preaching. However, God has to open the peoples’ hearts to receive new leadership. In the meantime, as a young pastor trying to balance work and family, be intentional about your private time with God; without it, a pastor will dry out spiritually. Second, accept that as the pastor, you need pastoral care; without it, you will not be able to help yourself or your family. Then, as soon as possible upon beginning as pastor, be sure to take time to listen to the members of the church, specifically those persons who were founding members or who have deep family ties in the church. Taking the time to listen says that you realize that you don’t know everything and builds the type of leadership capital it will take to lead the church into glorious new beginnings. Finally, never forget that the Church belongs to God, so do not spend time trying to do what only God can do.

Notes

1. London, H.B. Jr., “Pastors at Greater Risk” in Wayne Cordeiro, Leading on Empty. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009. pp. 32–33.
2. McIntosh, Gary L., and Daniel Reeves. Thriving Churches in the Twenty-First Century. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006. p. 51.
3. Ibid.
4. Cordeiro, pp. 60–64.

5. Sundby, Mark, and Susan Nienaber, “The Pastor and Pornography.” The Alban Weekly, No. 367 (August 11, 2011).
6. Peers, Larry. “Balancing Your Ministry, Renewing Your Life.” The Alban Weekly, No. 159 (August 6, 2007).
7. Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African American Experience. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990. p .42.
8. “Rev. Floyd Massey, Jr., 88; Longtime pastor, leader in Baptist Organizations.” The Los Angeles Times, November 3, 2003.
9. An interview with Gardner C. Taylor, “Preaching When Parched.” The Leadership Journal, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2011), 46–49.