

Weary pastors stave off stress by scheduling 'personal Sabbaths'

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By Matt Kennedy

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DALLAS (ABP)—Consummate counselor, powerful preacher, lasting leader—these are descriptions often used to characterize a respected pastor. Avid fisherman and beach bum are not.

But Bruce Prindle, pastor of First Baptist Church in Midlothian, values fishing and lying in a folding chair next to the waves just as much as his more traditional pastoral duties.

By taking long vacations and enjoying a relaxing Sabbath, Prindle tries to escape the stress of dealing with building projects, multiple services and budgets. He believes his counseling, preaching and leading abilities are diminished when he fails to take proper rest.

Prindle is not alone. Many other pastors echo his commitment to avoid "burnout"—the emotional state of approximately 100,000 pastors, according to Alan Klaas of Mission Growth Ministries.

Studies show that if pastors don't effectively manage their stress levels, it leads to devastating results. According to a 1998 Focus on the Family study, 1,500 pastors leave their assignments each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within local congregations.

Mike Wilson, associate professor of pastoral ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said pastoral burnout stems from a pastor's inability to identify how much he can handle. He said the process leading up to actual burnout usually is gradual.

Joel Gregory, professor of preaching at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, said the repetition of delivering the same sermon for multiple services could lead to greater stress.

Gregory said burnout often results from a condition he called "repetitive stress syndrome," which he defines as the anxiety of knowing that Sunday is coming. Feeding the pastor's need for creativity through art, music, travel and reading fiction are ways to combat that syndrome, Gregory noted.

In a 1991 survey of pastors by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 80 percent of pastors said their pastoral ministry affected their families negatively, and 70 percent of pastors said they do not have someone they consider a close friend. Prindle said he's lucky to have such a close support system of friends and family to help him when he's experiencing too much stress.

"For the past 20 years, I've met regularly with mentors to seek advice," Prindle said. "I am also lucky to have a staff that I can trust, because I make a point to never hire anybody that I know I can't get along with."

He also makes an effort to develop friendships outside of the church in order to relate to people as a person, not just as a pastor.

In the last 28 years, Steve Stroope, pastor of Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, has guided the church from an average attendance of 57 people who met in an abandoned bait shop to more than 10,000 across 7 locations, including a service at Dawson State Jail.

Stroope is a likely candidate for burnout after managing such rapid growth, but he said he is enjoying his work more than ever.

“Through the use of delegation, teaching teams and video simulcasts, I am able to specialize in the tasks that I do best,” Stroope said. “I’m working smarter, not harder.”

The teaching team concept of rotating sermons given by selected staff members gives Stroope the chance to preach 26 weekends out of the year.

“Teaching teams alleviate a lot of my stress, and they give the church an opportunity to hear from a number of different voices,” Stroope said.

Video simulcasts give Lake Pointe the flexibility to broadcast a sermon from one or more designated preachers to all of Lake Pointe’s locations at once.

Delegation and technology are helpful tools to avoid stress, Stroope said, but the key to avoiding burnout is to preserve a restful personal Sabbath. He believes a lot of ministers forget the importance of taking set time off from their regular duties to relax. Ministers should incorporate that time as a “holy habit” to fill their “emotional tank,” he said.

The importance of rest was not always so clear to Stroope. Two decades ago, he was struggling to find the answer to a question that had plagued him: “How am I going to keep up this pace?”

He was leading a church of about 550 members at a single location, was trying to do almost everything himself, and was having trouble saying “no.” Then the answer finally came to him.

"I realized that there is only so much time in the day, and that it was time to get my priorities straight," Stroope said. "I found out that taking a personal Sabbath was a non-negotiable, because I was not sustaining the needs of my congregation by giving them a tired minister."

Stroope's personal Sabbaths usually consist of time spent with family and friends at barbecues, reading the Bible or other books, or in long walks with his wife after supper.

"I still run up against stress problems all the time," Stroope said. "But now it's just a matter of recognizing what I'm doing and realizing when I need to slow down."

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