

Voices: Intellectual self-care in the ministry

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NOTE: This is the third article in a six-part series.

In addressing intellectual self-care here, the objective is not to give a full treatment of mental and intellectual issues, or psychological or counseling advice, but is to look at some pertinent issues surrounding intellectual self-care.

Understand yourself

When I think about intellectual well-being, understanding yourself is one piece of the puzzle. Certainly, we keep Christ as the focus rather than our self. We also certainly don't want to limit what God can do in and through us, but we benefit from understanding ourselves.

Here are some aspects of our selves.

- **Personality type.** How do you tend to relate to self, others and your world? You can gain these insights through any of several common measures, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Birkman Assessment and the DISC Profile.
- **Learning style.** Do you learn and process information best by hearing it, seeing it or physically moving while learning or thinking? Knowing your learning style can help you set up your learning or problem-solving environment for success using optimal strategies.
- **Strengths.** The Gallup Strengths-Finder assessment provides a report on your strengths and how your strengths interact with the strengths of

others.

- **Spiritual gifts.** What has God gifted you to do by the work of his Holy Spirit?
- **Talents, abilities and passions.** What are you good at and passionate about?

Study and learning

Proverbs extols the value of wisdom and understanding and encourages you and me to search after it diligently.

Here are some suggestions.

- **Study in your field and continue to learn.** Understand your context and calling, and study well in order to carry out your responsibility. We may need to focus more on emerging information than on our predecessors due to the increased diversity and rapidly changing nature of today's context.
- **Be a faithful student of God's word.** In today's ministry context, one temptation is to depart from the Scriptures as the primary subject of preaching and teaching. Do not do this. The Bible must be our authoritative guide for faith, life and church.

Another tendency can be to assume the Bible does not give us counsel on doing church and ministry, trading biblical insight for worldly philosophies and business strategies. All truth is God's truth, but keep the Bible foundational and central.

- **Pursue continuing education in related areas.** When you discover knowledge or can get training in an area that will augment your ability to do what God has called you to do, I recommend getting it.

- **Study something for enrichment.** What would you like to learn that is not part of your ministry work? What is of interest to you—art, carpentry, music, cooking, finance, history or something else?

- **Have a broad base of curiosity and interest.** As ministers, we serve a wide variety of people with myriad interests, occupations and backgrounds. It is easy enough to listen to someone talk about something they like or do for a living, but having and expressing your own interest in the same, and having some level of knowledge about it is helpful.

Mental breaks and diversion

If you are in a particularly busy season, you may need mental breaks to clear your head. You may need diversion in order to bring your sharpest attention and best creativity to your work and maintain your own well-being.

Understand issues of focus and distraction, diversion, breaks and peak work time for yourself.

Although I would not suggest the following as a long-term approach, here is a strategy for times when the workload is extremely high.

When I was working on my doctorate, I would devote blocks of time to different courses or to class work and church work alternately. Switching topics every couple of hours served as a mental break without sacrificing work time. Please use caution here. I believe my dissertation actually took longer than it needed to because of my lack of breaks.

Personal issues

Do you have issues with addiction, anger, defensiveness, personal or professional insecurity, or any other thought-life tendency that is unbiblical

and counterproductive?

As an example, consider the issue of insecurity. Personal and professional insecurity issues will cause you to be defensive, keep you from learning from others, and cause you to make your work about you instead of Jesus. All of this is destructive.

Get help. Pray for healing. Work with Jesus to find your grounding, identity and security in him, so you can be gracious, humble, confident, consistent and loving with yourself and others.

In a similar vein, identify and think through the problems caused by any personal issues you have. Then, formulate an action plan for dealing with them, and get help as needed.

Questions for reflection

1. How well do you understand yourself? What help could you get in gaining a better understanding, and who could help you do this?
2. How well do you understand how your makeup affects your approach to and effectiveness in ministry? Again, what help could you get for improving your understanding?
3. As we looked at study and learning, which issue(s) stood out to you as needing work? Of which do you feel you have a good grasp?
4. How tired or refreshed do you feel mentally, and how might you use appropriate breaks and diversion to take care of yourself? Where might you find good ideas for how to do this?
5. What personal issues do you need to deal with? What is your plan for addressing these, and when will you start?

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