

The Intentionality of Balance

Balance. It is probably the broadest and most critical concept we can embrace as we address our wellness and self-care. The fact is, balance can be applied to virtually every area of our lives. Lack of balance has been shown to be a consistent contributor to burnout. As pastors, finding consistent balance is illusive given the tremendous demands you face. Being able to make “balance” a conscious lifestyle choice is often even more difficult.



The data surrounding clergy and balance is indisputable. Research confirms that pastors put in long hours (routinely well in excess of 40 hours per week) and that a lack of balance takes a heavy toll on clergy physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially, and relationally, including on their marriage and family life. One pastor noted, “it’s not the things in ministry that kill you, it’s the things you don’t get done. Every night you leave you know that there’s another twelve people you should call, another three books you should read, another eight people that you need to visit in the hospital.”¹

I like to picture my life as a bicycle wheel, with the spokes of the wheel representing different aspect of my existence or different things that make me healthy and whole (e.g., physical health, rest, relational health, marriage and family life, etc.). If one spoke of the wheel is broken, under-developed, weakened or under-functioning, the integrity and function of the wheel is subsequently jeopardized. Similarly, when one area of my life is “broken” or weakened or under-functioning, my life is out of balance and out-of-round.

So how do we address this BEFORE the wheel of our lives no longer turn effectively?

First, we need to be self-aware about what causes us to become unbalanced – and recognize when we are entering dangerous territory relative to maintaining the balance we so desire. We might ask ourselves:

- “What are my unique ‘tells’ or ‘warning signs’ that signal to me that I am beginning to drift from a healthy life balance? What signs does my body give me physically? Emotionally? Relationally? Spiritually?”
- “How might my shadow motivations (e.g., my over-desire to achieve/succeed/please/etc.) be contributing to my lack of balance. What might be triggering these inner motivations and how can I identify them early in the process of becoming unbalanced?”
- “Are my tasks misaligned with my strengths and weaknesses? Do my activities find an Ignatian balance between things that provide ‘consolation’ and tasks that bring ‘desolation’?”

Next, we might ask a few questions to self-assess or “check-in” psychologically to see if we are sliding out of balance. “Am I increasingly defining myself based on ‘what I do’ as opposed to ‘who’ or ‘whose I am’?” “Am I so focused on serving others that I don’t have the capacity or energy to consistently take care of myself?”

We may also want to consider whether we are saying “no” frequently enough. “No” recognizes that we have inherent constraints – and that we are mere servants, not God. “No” is a muscle that needs to be developed and strengthened. “No” recognizes that as good stewards, even blessings and gifts need to be managed.

Finally, we need to recognize that balance does not happen by itself. We need to be intentional in seeking it and make balance on ongoing commitment that is reflected in our daily choices and priorities. A good first step is to identify what is important to you? What constitutes a healthy balance in the important areas of your life? Make sure you consider every aspect of your life – including the need for rest and renewal, time to invest in relationships and hobbies, etc. Writing it down helps to clarify your thoughts and also provides an ongoing reminder of your desire and commitment. You may even consider developing a personalized “Rule of Life” that supports your intentional commitment to finding and maintaining balance on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis.

Once you have your commitments identified, one last question remains. “Does my life allow me enough margin or time to balance these items that are important to me?” While the answer and action steps from that question will vary for each of us, it is important to make sure we have sufficient “margin” in our lives to provide perspective and to react or respond to new demands and issues as they arise without losing the balance we so earnestly long for. One visual to consider is a standard 8-1/2” by 11” piece of paper with one-inch margins – like this document. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the total space is comprised of the outer margins – or empty space.² Smaller margins immediately begin to create stress for the reader. Do we create sufficient margin in our lives to prevent undue stress on ourselves or on those around us?

Balance is difficult to find, and it is often even more difficult to keep once we find it. But an intentional commitment to balance is essential for ongoing wellness and self-care. As author Sue Magrath notes, “Self-care is about the nourishment of every aspect of self. It is simply, at its core, about balance.”³

Reflection Questions:

- How would you characterize the balance or imbalance in your life presently? What areas of your life are most consistently difficult or challenging from a balance perspective?
- What “early warning signs” or “tells” signify to you that you are in danger of losing a healthy balance? Where do you most struggle in saying “no”?
- Where could you be more intentional in your approach or commitment to developing and maintaining balance in your life? What would the benefits be? What support would be helpful to you as you make a greater, specific, intentional commitment to better balance in your life?

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as “The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health” through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

Notes

¹Unnamed pastor quoted in Meek, K. R., McMinn, M., Brower, C., Burnett, T., McRay, B., Ramey, M., Swanson, D., & Villa, D. (2003). Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31(4), 342.

²Linhart, T. (2017). *The Self-Aware Leader: Discovering Your Blind Spots to Reach Your Ministry Potential*. InterVarsity Press. 145.

³Magrath, S. (2019). *My Burden is Light: A Primer for Clergy Wellness*. Cascade Books. 4.

Image from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2020/09/30/work-life-balance-is-no-longer-just-a-company-issue/>.

Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about maintaining a healthy balance in your life, I recommend the following resources:

- *Practicing Balance: How Congregations Can Support Harmony in Work and Life* (Alban Institute) by David Edman Gray.
- *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers* (Judson Press) by Kirk Byron Jones.
- *My Burden is Light: A Primer for Clergy Wellness* (Cascade Books) by Sue Magrath.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including finding and maintaining balance. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in joining a pastoral self-care cohort or in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your ability to set and manage expectations or to strengthen other leadership and management skills, please contact Chris Clark of Northern Elm Mentoring Group (email to ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.