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It's Not Optional: Why Spiritual Direction Matters

When Ministry Becomes High-Risk

The need to recover the practice of spiritual direction—once well established in the church—becomes obvious in light of the increasing challenges faced in the world of ministry, coupled with the spiritual and emotional impact those challenges have on Christian leaders. More and more men and women are losing their way as a result of the unchecked stress fostered by the overwhelming expectations—whether real or perceived—that are placed on them. The normal ministry responsibilities have been significantly compounded by the surge in programmatic and executive functions that now dominate the job description. It is becoming painfully obvious that many leaders are unable to sustain these escalating challenges in the complicated world of overseeing a ministry.

I have discovered that Christian organizations, both inside and outside of the church, are often characterized by systemic patterns that put the leader at risk. If you are approaching this book as a parachurch leader, or possibly a business executive, I am confident you will find most everything I address will apply in your context. I have worked in both organizational worlds—inside the church and alongside the church. My current work as the executive director

of *SoulFormation* puts me in contact with pastors, parachurch leaders, missionaries, and business leaders. In my opinion, we are all in the same boat, and the rocky shore is not far away!

So what do I mean by the “rocky shore”? An email landed in my inbox some time ago. The thoughts expressed by this young leader are ones that provide a backdrop to the issues faced by all Christian leaders. Here is what I read:

I believe I am in need of some soul care. I know we all struggle with different issues in ministry from time to time. I certainly do. But I think some of my issues have been piling up so much that I am at a point where I'm ready to throw in the “ministry towel.” I really don't want to continue serving unless God changes my heart. I think all the issues I'm struggling with stem from my heart condition. I don't know how to heal/fix/mend it myself. . . . My wife has been telling me that I need to find a “spiritual director.”

He ends by asking, “Can you steer me to someone who can help me sift through the mess my heart is in right now?” The driving concern reflected by this email is obvious. How do we nurture the spiritual and emotional health of leaders long before they reach this level of internal disillusionment? How do we cultivate ways of relational care that foster spiritual well-being amid the challenges of ministry, ways that result in sustainable and joyful service? Was Jesus giving us the straight truth when he said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light”? I regularly work with people who secretly feel this promise is out of reach! The overwhelming nature of their world had led them to conclude that such a hope-filled experience is unrealistic.

Before we can consider pathways to health, it is necessary to start with the truth about ministry: Leadership comes with occupational hazards. We must face the primary contributors to the at-risk nature of Christian leadership in today's world. So, let's

begin by naming the primary hazards that ministry leaders deal with on a day-to-day basis.

1. Unrealistic Responsibilities: The job of the ministering person is never finished. David Olsen and William Grosch, in an article entitled *Clergy Burnout: A Self Psychology and Systems Perspective* highlight the tendency to overwork in the ministry:

Clergy burnout is a concern of all religious denominations. Meeting the constant demands of visitation, pastoral counseling, administration, preaching, teaching, facilitating church growth, as well as being expected to be an expert in crisis intervention, leaves many clergy feeling inadequate, exhausted, frustrated, and frequently questioning their call to ministry.¹

There are simply too many important responsibilities within the leader's job description. Additionally, in most settings, these expectations are implied and rarely written down—they fall into the category marked “immeasurable.” Over time, leaders often wonder if they're making a difference in the face of all of the energy they expend. The risk of becoming disillusioned, and even embittered, runs high for the leader who rarely experiences positive feedback or encouragement.

These unrealistic responsibilities have led many leaders to a very dangerous place as the temptation to work harder consumes them while the outcome they desire remains unattainable. In so doing, they allow the world of ministry to run them over; to convince them that self-care is unnecessary. They ignore a basic principle: When ministry demands go up, the need for soul-care also increases. Leaders easily fall into a compulsive pattern of drivenness as they become enmeshed in the world of ministry and the demands it places on them.

In working with Christian leaders I often throw a question at them: “You love what you’re doing, but you simply can’t keep doing it this way . . . right?” Or, I say, “You love what you’re doing, but it’s killing you . . . right?” The response is almost always the same. I have touched the core issue: They love the ministry, but at the same time, they feel overwhelmed by the treadmill effect that begins to impact the soul.

2. Emotional Drain: I regularly meet leaders whose emotional gauge is on empty. It has been there for months . . . even years! The truth is that it’s very difficult to keep any emotional equilibrium in a world where one is celebrating births, mourning deaths, nurturing marriages, advising parents, confronting divorce, and counseling individuals in crisis. If you are a teaching pastor, you carry the added weight of preparing and delivering a message, sometimes multiple times on a weekend. Whether working one-to-one or speaking to a large group, leaders feel the weight of shepherding a flock where every individual is making decisions with eternal implications. It shouldn’t surprise us that most leaders feel emotionally depleted—their tank is empty and knowing how to fill it seems out of reach.

One individual expressed himself to me by saying: “I feel like I am an ATM—I am being hit up for withdrawals constantly and very few people make a deposit. . . . Very few people understand these demands and the importance of disengagement from ministry to care for my own soul.” This individual is saying what every leader must learn—the reality that emotional drain will sweep you off your feet if you don’t develop a strategy to care for your own soul. The relational demands of ministry are relentless. They just keep coming!

- I remember stepping off the stage on a Sunday morning only to be informed that a drunk driver had killed Cal, my dear friend and fellow elder. His daughter died the next day.

- I remember the deep pain I felt when a long term leader and friend left the church over the position we reached regarding the role of women in ministry.

- I remember looking at a key church leader as we sat in my driveway after a difficult meeting. I said, "I need your help and I need you now." Nothing changed.

- I remember dedicating a baby at the hospital, knowing that we were preparing for impending death, not celebrating life.

- I remember learning that one of our staff counselors was sexually involved with a client and we were in a lawsuit, one that lasted two years and cost our insurance company close to a quarter of a million dollars to settle.

- I remember conducting the funeral of a young man who loved God, but, in a moment of despair, blew his head off with a shotgun.

- I remember sitting with a married couple as the husband informed his wife that he was in an affair that subsequently blew up their marriage. There was no guilt or shame as he described his total loss of integrity.

- I remember advising fellow staff members (who were good friends) that they should resign because support for their leadership had eroded.

- I remember sitting with a friend and pastor on our team a few days before Christmas as the police chaplain informed him that his son had overdosed on heroin.

- I remember struggling with what the doctor finally categorized as "chronic fatigue" while I continued to face the weekly demands of ministry, concluding each weekend by preaching four times.

The unique nature of ministry is that you don't have time to process the emotional highs and lows before the next one lands in your life.

What do you remember? Stop and name them . . . one, two, three, four. When you begin to track them you discover something: The emotional demands continue to roll into your world unannounced. And there is never enough time to celebrate the highs, or grieve the lows, of these traumatic events. What actually requires days and weeks to process often gets only a few hours.

It goes like this: On the same day you have the indescribable joy of leading someone into the kingdom of God, you hear of an affair, a death, a conflict, a betrayal. There are no guidelines to process the emotional swings of leadership; they come unannounced, and so rapidly, that you have no time to adapt or recover. Emotional drain isn't just a part of the job . . . it's the painful part of the job that's never-ending.

3. Spiritual Neglect: In the face of the increasing responsibilities, and the resulting emotional drain, many leaders struggle to find time to care for their own spiritual health. When I asked how ministry pressures were affecting him, one colleague wrote, "When I get weary of 'spiritual work,' I'm not easily drawn to the spiritual disciplines to refresh myself . . . There doesn't seem to be emotional energy or reserve to pursue God."

Many leaders indicate that they feel a resistance toward prayer and other spiritual disciplines in the middle of their busy world, even though they know this is the pathway to health. They find themselves edging away from the places that lead to personal renewal and wholeness. As I minister to leaders I am discovering a dangerous pattern—many of them have no practices of spiritual renewal built into their lives. In their week-to-week schedule, they overlook the necessity of prayer, scripture, solitude, and Sabbath.

As contradictory as it seems, many leaders have no sacred rhythms in their own world.

I recently connected with a pastor who told me he simply could not preach one more message. He felt a profound sense of hollowness and deep disillusionment had captured his inner core. He then said, "I feel like I have tended to my professional development over the years but have failed to care for my own soul while in the ministry." The situation had reached such a high level of ambiguity that my counsel was painful but necessary: "You need to leave the ministry so you can discover God again." He resigned.

If you are failing to feed your soul, while at the same time you are handling sacred responsibilities, the disconnect will finally become too much. The only way we can remain integrated in ministry is to follow Jesus' pattern—"listen to the Father." Those who press on in ministry, while at the same time allowing their inner life to slip into disrepair, are living a contradiction. A critical part of their personhood falls out of alignment. Sooner or later they *dis-integrate*. A leader caves in because the soul simply cannot bear the weight of ministry while neglecting those rhythms that foster intimate union with God.

4. Relational Isolation: Ministry has another occupational hazard—the tendency toward isolation. This is often the case at the very time a leader needs emotional and spiritual support from others. In surveying pastors within my denomination I discovered that fifty percent do not have someone they consider a close friend. In surveys done by other organizations that number goes as high as seventy percent.²

I recently conducted a soul-care seminar with pastors. The conversation was engaging and honest. Finally, one of the seasoned leaders in the room despondently expressed, "No man cares for my soul." His comment triggered an immediate sense of deep concern

in my heart. We made an appointment to talk and he informed me of how a church member had violated one of his children. The shameful indiscretion should have resulted in church discipline against the perpetrator, but instead led to a decision by the pastor to leave the church he loved. He had carried this pain in isolation . . . grief that had been lodged for years. Following the seminar, I found the reference he was referring to when he spoke up. He quoted Psalm 142:4: "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul" (KJV).

Leaders often experience a sense of brokenness in dramatic ways, yet the culture of ministry makes it very difficult to reveal this neediness to others. Some of the confirming statements made to me include: "My failures are not safe to share. My attempts at being the so called 'authentic, transparent leader' are always met by elders with looks of concern." Another wrote, "The challenge to be transparent and honest is one that I've struggled with. Will people allow me to be honest?"

Speaking for myself, when I "hit the wall," I was simply too ashamed to let others know the depth of my interior crisis. I had lots of close friends and ministry colleagues who loved me. Yet, in the middle of the crisis I pulled inward and tried to hold it together. I didn't know how to process the frustration and failure. I was isolated!

5. Identity Issues: Often, the at-risk nature of ministry is increased by the leader's failure to develop a strong sense of self in his or her early years. I have observed that a particularly high number of people who enter the ministry remain oblivious to unresolved issues surrounding their identity—issues that frequently are connected to their family of origin. These areas of unresolved need result in adaptive patterns (or ways of being) that are developed in an attempt to protect oneself from a world that failed to love them unconditionally. Sadly, these childhood patterns

of survival are then linked to the development of a false self (or shadow) that shapes the way the leader functions later in life.

Robert Johnson contends that these “refused and unacceptable characteristics do not go away; they only collect in the dark corners of our personality. When they have been hidden long enough, they take on a life of their own, the shadow life.”³ Furthermore, this false self is usually embedded in such a way that it becomes particularly difficult to identify, let alone address and resolve.

Robert Mulholland states, “When we live as a false self we fear that our lack of a true center for our identity will be revealed and that weakness exploited by others. One of the ways our false self tries to compensate is to find our identity in performance.”⁴ Hence, the motives driving the ministry are tainted in a way that results in the leader expending unnecessary energy to meet the expectations of others. In my own experience, I failed to see that my journey into anxiety and depression was directly linked to the ways in which I connected self-worth and identity to an unhealthy need for affirmation. Unknowingly, this faulty motivation compromised my ability to lead others in a healthy manner, especially when the going got rough. It’s easy to lose your balance when your identity is not properly grounded in God.

I had a dark corner—a room I did not know existed. It wasn’t until I transitioned into the difficult ministry I described that I was forced to face my codependent leadership pattern. I had always been able to keep people happy. Yet, I never realized why I had developed this skill to such a high level. Underneath, I was motivated by a deep need to be needed, wanted, praised, and loved. In the end, it was this twisted motivation that pushed me over the edge. Quite simply, I felt like I had “prostituted” myself . . . I gave up my emotional boundaries in an attempt to keep others happy. I discovered how high the cost can be when people-pleasing becomes addictive. In the end, my letter of resignation had to be

written. There was no other way to recover.

Every leader has identity issues that drive the false self. The real question is whether those issues are being brought into the light. If not, they continue to gather strength underground.

For reasons stated above, and many others that could be explored, Christian leaders are truly at-risk—not only in their professions, but also in their personal spiritual journeys. Most people enter the ministry with extremely high ideals, only to find that after laboring over an extended period of time, there is an ever-widening, huge gulf between their level of expectation and the actual results.

I recently met with one pastor (we'll call him Mike) who oversees a large and, what seems to be, healthy church. My regular contact with Mike left me assured that he was on top of his world. His emotional health seemed strong, and I certainly viewed him as someone who was not in the at-risk category.

However, shortly after I made this optimistic assumption about Mike, I met with him only to find out that he'd had a dramatic meltdown the Sunday before. It was the beginning of a new year and he was preaching a series on vision. On this particular Sunday, Mike was making a point from Galatians 6:9, "Be not weary in doing good," as a way to stir the congregation to greater commitment. When these words left his mouth, he stopped short and then began to weep uncontrollably. Mike was unable to collect himself despite several attempts. The experience continued for about five minutes. Finally, some church leaders came to the pulpit to offer support so he could bring the service to a conclusion.

When we met for our time of spiritual direction, Mike indicated that he had no idea the meltdown was imminent in his life. All he

knew was that when the words “be not weary in doing good” left his mouth, a tsunami surged in his own soul. *He was weary amid the responsibilities—wary in a way that he had somehow been avoiding all along.*

Like Mike, many leaders are functioning in a manner that is simply not sustainable. Something is fundamentally wrong but remains unnoticed and unaddressed.

Systemic Issues Increase the Danger

We have looked at five occupational hazards in ministry, ones that can sabotage the leader before she or he fully realizes what has happened. If leaders are honest, many of them will say, “I simply can’t keep doing it this way!” Yet, this feeling in the leader’s soul often fails to be articulated. It begs for attention but gets none. There are many people who never address the soul-care issues necessary to secure the kind of health needed to lead well. Failing here, we fail everywhere.

All of this raises the question: Are there systemic issues infecting Christian organizations that fuel the dangerous slide toward spiritual and emotional disillusionment in the life of the leader? From my perspective, the answer to this is obvious. Leaders of Christian ministries easily lose sight of spiritual formation in favor of other attractions that are fostered within the organizational culture. Unless the systemic dysfunction is named and addressed, the leader will function in a structure that continually undermines sustainable and joyful service.

Allow me to walk you through a list of assumptions. If these statements are true, then the very culture in which Christian leaders work is at cross-purposes with the inner wholeness they so deeply need and desire. Sadly, I suspect the statements that follow are descriptive of most organizations. It’s a dangerous slide:

1. *Consumer Culture:* Leading a ministry in a consumer culture where “attractional strategies” and “measurable results” dominate the landscape makes it very difficult to prioritize and strategize the ongoing work of spiritual formation. The slow work of transformation is preempted by numerical and programmatic success. Many leaders, and the organizations in which they work, have become addicted to “bigger is better.” The need to achieve results assumes an idolatrous hold on the leader’s soul. Few people would dispute that we have made measurable success the primary goal that drives the ministry agenda.

2. *Employment and Performance:* In our consumer culture, outcomes are directly connected to an employment strategy where leaders are managed and evaluated by goals and objectives. Either directly or indirectly, leaders discover that the bottom line is performance, effectiveness, and accomplishment. Without realizing it, that mentality asks the leader to operate according to a “scorecard” that overlooks their need for soul-care. The spiritual maturity and nurture of the leader is assumed to be of crucial importance, yet nothing is put in place to cultivate and secure this as a primary outcome. The focus of the organization is squarely placed on external performance. Internal health (spiritual and emotional well-being) is rarely discussed or intentionally nurtured.

3. *Management Trumps Mystery:* The slide continues as the primary ministry strategy is built around thinking, planning, and action that is focused and organized around programmatic models and tactics. The leader comes to believe that “being is doing” and gives up mystery for management. As long as this approach is working—and the faulty definition of success is achievable—the leader is affirmed and continues to put his or her eggs in this basket. This can go on for years before a backlash occurs and the leader realizes he or she is on a collision course with disaster.

4. *Relational Trust Is Lost:* In a performance-oriented system, trust and deep relationships are unintentionally traded for results. We say we are in community, but the authenticity needed for such depth is often superseded by the need to succeed and look good. When this happens, leaders are no longer functioning in a place of emotional safety and transparency. They experience a “disconnect” from the very people they serve. True community has become fatally compromised in the life of the very person who leads the community. If you talk to many leaders you will find that there is a deep longing for authentic relationships but an apparent inability to establish them.

5. *Compulsive Ministry Patterns:* When the leader becomes defined by what they do (and not who they are), they often succumb to insecurity, drivenness, and faulty motivation in ministry. At this point, he or she is no longer living into their true calling and turns to patterns of pleasing and the need to succeed as a way to find the affirmation they long for. Instead of listening to the Father (as was modeled for us by Jesus), they listen to myriad other voices that feed their identity and ministry direction.

6. *God Is Gone and Pressure Is On:* When spiritual formation is no longer at the center—when mystery gives way to management—leaders lose the art of spiritual discernment. They resort to business models of decision-making. We seek to find answers to problems through data, analysis, our own wisdom, and self-effort rather than prayer and dependency on God. In the end, the ministry becomes a man-made system that is overly dependent on one person to keep it going—the person in charge. At this point, the at-risk nature of the work begins to bear down on the leader and the outcome takes them to places they never anticipated.

If you work under the assumptions stated above, a time will come when ministry no longer holds the luster it once had. Sooner or later, many people in ministry begin to feel resistance toward that which originally was their calling and an exciting vision. *The systemic issue is clear: The culture in which Christian leaders serve is prone to steer them toward the pursuit of career dreams and ministry ideals for the wrong reasons.* To avert the associated dangers, something needs to be in place long before this misdirection sets in. The leader is in need of a spiritual guide who will lovingly help them process their union with Christ amid the dangers that ministry exerts on the soul.

The Need for Spiritual Direction

In her book, *Learning to Lead from Your Spiritual Center*, Patricia Brown succinctly points out why leaders need to become aware of the spiritual issues in their own lives before seeking to help others:

The failure of leaders to deal with their own souls, their inner life, is deeply troubling not only for themselves but also for other persons in the misery they cause. The destructive consequences from leaders who fail to work out of a deep sense of their inner self are staggering. . . . Leaders have a particular responsibility to know what is going on inside their souls.⁵

Most Christian leaders make the faulty assumption that they can pastor or shepherd themselves. They believe that since all the members of their community look to them for spiritual leadership, they must also be qualified to effectively tend their own souls. Assuming this autonomous pathway is always dangerous.

It is important to note that the very people we lead reinforce the distortions found in the leader's thinking. They encourage the leader to function as an isolated hero who has no specialized need for soul care.

We must realize that the "professional" ministry leader is no different from other professionals (such as lawyers or physicians) when it comes to receiving what they give. We would never expect a doctor to diagnose and treat his or her own disease, or an attorney to represent themselves in their personal litigation. It is standard practice that those who work with people are expected to place themselves under the guidance of others when it comes to personal issues triggered by their professional work. Yet, most Christian leaders naïvely assume that they can "doctor" themselves without the help of others.

It is also tempting for leaders to think that the structures of the church or Christian organization will somehow provide the spiritual and emotional support they need. Such an assumption places the leader at risk. It is highly unlikely that the spiritual enrichment and accountability needed to sustain the leader will come solely from within. Yet, most leaders never think to seek out a spiritual director or counselor who will listen to their deepest questions, ministry disappointments, or emotional pain.

Roy Oswald, a senior consultant with the Alban Institute, has extensive experience in working with pastors. In his book, *Clergy Self-Care*, he emphasizes this sad reality: "The majority of clergy I work with have no one who relates to them in this special way, no one who pays particular attention to them and their spiritual journey and with whom they regularly review their spiritual path."⁶ He also says, "If I were to choose one discipline to undergird all others, it would be meeting regularly with a spiritual director."⁷

This lone ranger approach to the spiritual journey has not always been the case. In the history of the church, pastors were

encouraged to have a spiritual companion. Eugene Peterson, whose writings offer much wisdom to ministry leaders, states:

For a long time in the church's life, people expected that the pastor, one entrusted to give personal and detailed guidance to people journeying and growing in the way of faith, would be provided with an equivalent guidance. Having a spiritual director, whether called by that name or not, was assumed in the job description.⁸

In his own journey toward spiritual direction, Peterson says, "I also knew that in other [Christian] traditions it was unthinkable for persons who had any kind of leadership responsibilities in the life of prayer to proceed without a spiritual director."⁹ He goes on to lament that in the ministry today, we rarely find a pastor who has a spiritual director. Many Christian leaders are even suspicious of the concept since such a discipline is foreign to their religious tradition.

To counter this dangerous pattern, a serious attempt must be made to introduce (or re-introduce) Christian leaders to the need and value of spiritual direction. In recent years, many have discovered the value of this ministry and are quick to affirm the awakening. More and more leaders are realizing there is great value in having a spiritual director or soul friend who will help them discover God's fingerprints in the middle of life's complexities. The beginning stages of this rediscovery offer a ray of hope that this practice will spread into the mainstream of Christian leadership.

As I look back on the day when the words, "I have totally and completely lost my way," came from my lips in the psychiatrist's office, I am able to see the beginning of God's good work in my life. In the middle of my pain was his call to discover an ancient discipline—one that I wish had been in place years before.

A Spiritual Direction Story

Jeff Wiesinger – A Pastor

I am the pastor of a church of 150 people in Anchorage, Alaska. It was six years ago that I had reached a place of despair. I was carrying out ministry responsibilities out of willful duty, knowing that the things I said and did were true, but enjoying none of the personal experience of God that I spoke of so often. After months of pleading, my wife, now in tears, was begging me to call our denominational office. My pride finally succumbed to her tears and I made the call. Through district leadership, I was connected with an individual who would function as my spiritual director. This began a six-year relationship that has been a steadily refining journey.

Frequently our dialogues were questions of core motivations, of what really drove me in life and in ministry. It became apparent that wrestling with my inner life was going to be necessary and this would lead to discovering my area of greatest struggle. The process allowed God to “help” me understand the condition of my own heart, but I was determined to keep final authority in both who I was and what I was going to do about it. When asked by my director if I believed in Step One of the Twelve Steps: “My life was unmanageable, and was I powerless to change it,” I was immediate in my response. “No, I can do this!” I was a helpless perfectionist.

Early on in life, after a series of continuing losses, I concluded that no one was ultimately trustworthy with the condition of my heart. Even after my conversion as a teenager, while I was immensely grateful for God’s forgiveness, I lived every day as if my salvation depended on me. Life, especially ministry, became an

exhausting journey of doing what everyone on the outside thought was best, but all the while sinking deeper into the abyss. And now I was finally crashing, arriving at the place where God might reach me. I began to take time to listen, to journal, to open my heart and mind to what he wanted to say to me.

As I processed things with my director, he offered open-ended questions revealing God's heart for me—not the pastor, but the one whom Christ loved. Several breakthroughs came over the years, but I still look back wistfully and realize that my tendency was to allow each moment of Spirit-directed revelation become a new insight by which I could finally live life the “right” way.

A circumstantially difficult nine-month season of ministry brought me once again to a place of soul weariness. I reentered a season of deep discouragement, even as my director continued to gently nudge me into places of solitude, asking me to readdress truths God had spoken to me about where my identity truly lay.

During a walk at a retreat center, I cried out to heaven, “I can't do this anymore.” What descended upon me in that moment was the deepest awareness of my sin I had ever known. I was sinful to the core, and there was nothing I could do to change that. All this in a manner of seconds, and yet immediately, the overwhelming flood of his grace washed over me, and I reflected: *So this is what the peace that passes all understanding feels like.* Years of spiritual direction, gentle questions, fierce challenges, and loving support had led me to the place where I could receive the truth of sin's dark depths—and grace's greater depth.