

# The Self-Care of Ministers

By M. Mahan Siler, Jr.

This is not an old, warmed over talk out of the proverbial sermon barrel. What I want to say is current with me, embarrassingly so. I hate to admit it . . . but I have never observed the Sabbath! I don't think I have understood the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath felt like something we did for God. Its legalistic misuse in New Testament times prejudiced me against a close look. Only recently I began to see, as Jesus said, "the Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath." Sabbath is for me, not primarily for God. It is a time of ceasing from doing and accumulating, a time of Being. It is one out of seven days, not just for rest, but for self care, for nurturance, for reflection. Maybe God was right, that one day a week for such a purpose is absolutely essential for a balanced life. I've never taken my needs seriously, I've never really observed the Sabbath concept. I know of few who have. Sunday for most of us is another day, perhaps the heaviest day, of labor. So Sabbath observance may be one of the most important rituals bequested to us from the Hebrew experience.

I want to think and feel with you about the Sabbath concept: Self care, taking care of yourselves, being cared for, receiving, becoming renewed physically, emotionally and spiritually. Yet, if you are like me in this regard, the idea of self-care runs counter to some deep seated norms.

1. **The cultural norm about work:** "I must be worth a lot because I do so much," or "I must be doing the gospel because I feel so exhausted."

Let's face it: we get strokes for **not** caring for ourselves. We hear: "Why, he/she works so hard, gives so much!" When have you heard? "Why, isn't it wonderful how she takes good care of herself," or "he achieves such an effective balance between self renewal and self-giving." We don't talk that way where I come from!

To walk into a room is a theological statement. So is answering the phone or standing in line or making conversation. Do we live feverishly, anxiously as if our life depended upon what we produced and achieved? That's the way of

works righteousness, the madness of our culture and our cultural religion. Or do we offer an alternative illustration, a life more graceful, one where the care of God and others has been received and digested. You can tell the difference. But let's not expect much support for self-care from our culture.

**2. Norm: Separation of Body-Emotions-Spiritual.** The toe bone may be connected to the foot bone and the foot bone connected with the ankle bone but there still persists the conceptual disconnection between the physical/emotional/spiritual.

As I will say later, adequate self-care requires a three prong approach. Some focus on one or the other. Self-care for some means adequate nutrition and exercise; others accentuate the development of healthy emotional relationships; still others turn to faith resources and spiritual disciplines.

This norm is being challenged by current wholistic thinking. We are rediscovering that people get physically sick for lack of spiritual meaning—that cynicism may be a signal of burn out, a cry for some self-care—that as Norman Cousins found, laughter with friends can make the therapeutic difference in a near fatal disease.

**3. Norm: No Ministry Models for Self-Care.** It seems to me that we have a derth of models for adequate self-care in the ministry. Do you have some? I don't. The ones that helped me image creative ministry have been persons who didn't take care of themselves very well. Some were known for their self-sacrificing, proudly "burning the candle at both ends."

I doubt if many of us are all that sacrificial. But I suspect and live with some dis-ease because we are not. It's a tough issue. Obviously, there is the place for radical self-sacrifice. But having as heroes of faith such self sacrificers may make it harder to deal with self-care. I would hope for a few models and menters who did.

When I take a closer look at Jesus, I can see how seriously he took his own needs for nurture, for withdrawal, for reflection—in short, for Sabbath. He was not burned out as he approached the cross. He did not abuse himself in ministry. Maybe he is a model of self-care yet to be fully explored and appreciated.

**4. Norm: It is more blessed to give than to receive.** This is a more personal norm that has negative power in my own life. I find it to be a barrier for adequate self-care in other ministers as well. A personal experience makes my point.

A few years ago, I was part of an intensive small group experience lasting for ten days. As you would expect, we came to know each other very well. Toward the end, someone said to me: "Mahan, I want to make an observation. You have given a lot. You've given to me. But you seem to have difficulty in receiving. I don't know what you need from me. You seem so much more comfortable in giving than receiving."

Well, I was shocked, taken back by that confrontation. I had never heard that before. I knew I had to take it seriously. Even as he said the words, I suspected he was voicing an important truth.

Later, during an informal time, I asked: "When did Jesus choose receiving over giving?" Jesus had always been presented as the magnificent giver. I couldn't recall a time when he gave priority over receiving. We got our Bibles out, began thumbing through the gospels. We came across that event which since has come to mean so much to me. Remember when Jesus was being entertained by his close friend in Bethany. A woman crashes the party and does a reckless thing. She breaks the flask of perfume, anoints Jesus' body and wipes away the perfume with her hair. We know how many cultural norms were violated in that one magnificent act of appreciation. But remember the response of the disciples. Judas especially argued that the perfume could have been sold and given away. Yet Jesus said no. I hear him saying: "This time, I need to receive and not give. What she has done is a beautiful thing to me." Self-care? Clearly, he chose receiving over giving.

One postscript to that event. A member of the group happened to be an art dealer. So months later, he gave to me a wood etching of the biblical scene, a lasting reminder of this permission to become a receiver. Obviously, this permission is an important ingredient in self-care. I still struggle with learning how to receive.

### Need for Self-Care

The norms against adequate self-care can be formidable. So we need to document its importance. Why is the press for self-care such a live, critical issue in ministry today.

“Stress” and burn out” are the current terms. Perhaps earlier we talked in terms of fatigue, disillusionment and depression.

Picture a large barrel. Lots of stresses go into the barrel—e.g., poor eating habits, trouble with children, over-extension, strained friendship, lack of exercise, family changes, stressful work climate, lack of meaning in life, loss of parent, etc. Understand that some stress is essential. Challenge is needed to keep us going and obviously some sources of stress are controllable, some are not. **But the barrel has a threshold**—you and I have a threshold. Some of us can tolerate more stress than others. But we have a limit; more surfaces than we can contain. There comes a time when self-care becomes an absolute necessity.

It becomes important self-knowledge to recognize when you have exceeded your threshold. Over stress and burn out is not easily perceived by a person. Others will usually recognize it first. Here are some clues that signal the overflow of your normal threshold level: (from Roy Oswald, Alban Institute)

1. **Perception decreases.** You begin to feel overloaded, over-stimulated. You narrow your perception for self-protection.
2. **Options diminish.** You feel less creative. Harder to think of the usual multiple options in a decision making situation.
3. **Regress to infantile behavior.** As a way to cope, you turn to old familiar patterns. Some withdraw, others may whine, still others enjoy a “temper tantrum.”
4. **Stay locked into destructive relations.** You may find it harder to say “no,” to dis-invest from toxic relationships. Taking on more work may be easier than clarifying your priorities and saying “no.”
5. **Fatigue/depression.** Burn out especially comes from the overuse of listening and caring capacities. You are depleted physically, emotionally and spiritually. You have given until you are “give out.” If unattended, the fatigue and depression will deepen into despair and cynicism.

Know that depression may also be grief, a feeling of loss, a letting go of the familiar, predictable parts of our lives.

6. **Physical Distress and Illness.** Usually, our body signals our own stress. A headache for some, tightness in the shoulder muscles for others, diarrhea for a few and a host of other physical symptoms that vary from person to person. But our bodies have their own wisdom. They speak, sending out ample warnings of our over stress. If we refuse to respond, then the dis-ease invariably settles in as disease somewhere in the body.

### **Sabbath Experiences of Self-Renewal**

Now think with me about your style of self-renewal. Assuming some felt permission for self-care that exceeds the norms of resistance and assuming our acknowledged need, how do you go about receiving the nurturance you need? Where can you lean, letting in resources from beyond yourself? Where are you out of your role, in a receptive, even dependent posture?

These are hard places for most ministers to find. I'll list some out of my awareness.

1. **Peer Support Group.** In my experience, for a support group to be effective, it must have a clear leader—a leader who is competent and sensitive, a leader who can assure a climate of protection and safety needed for others to explore their needs and pain. To share and alternate leadership usually prohibits the group from reaching the depth needed for solid nurturance. It must be safe politically, emotionally and spiritually for a minister to de-role and become primarily a receiver.
2. **Family.** Our families can provide some nurturance. Hopefully, it's a place where we can de-role. But the family is also a place of more giving. Especially with more and more spouses working, no longer can the minister come home from a day of giving and expect a lot of nurturing. Your spouse may need that as much. So the family, only with some intentional planning, can be such a place of self-care. But it's not one automatically.
3. **Therapy/pastoral counseling.** Increasingly ministers are choosing the option, often subsidized, of receiving therapy or pastoral counseling. It may be more growth oriented than problem centered. But a relationship is established where the minister is not in role and giving but out of role and receiving. The focus is clearly on his or her needs.

4. **Continuing Education Events.** Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of continuing education experiences is the by-product of self-care. The best part is—you are not in charge. Your posture is clearly receiving; the climate is creative and stimulating; the fellowship is supportive. Continuing education, if effective for you, will be a sabbath event—a time of being more than doing, a time of reflection, renewal and worship, a time when you are out of role, letting in resources from beyond you. The problem with continuing education being a primary source of self-care is the infrequency of such events. It can clearly not meet our sustained need for Sabbath.
5. **Retreat.** A sabbath resource, not typically practiced among Southern Baptists, is the spiritual retreat. Monasteries and retreat/conference centers provide a place, a spiritual director if requested, and sometimes a small group of fellow ministers whose purpose is personal and spiritual renewal.
6. **Spiritual Friend.** Currently I sense a revival of the traditional concept of spiritual director. This differs from counseling or therapy. The relationship with such a spiritual friend focuses on the barriers to and sources for appropriating more fully the love and justice of God. It, too, allows a minister to be in a dependent, receiving posture.
7. **Regular Spiritual Discipline.** One way to raise our threshold for stress is to deepen our capacity to handle stress. Some effective disciplines include the following:
  - a. **Kataphatic praying**—where the intention is to empty one's mind, to slow down the mental activity, to become centered and still, prepared to listen to God.
  - b. **Apophatic praying**—where the intention is to focus on a thought or scripture, to conceptualize and contemplate as offering to God.
  - c. **Journal writing**—a way of recording the inner flow of one's life, including dreams, day dreams, inner dialogues, aspirations, feelings. It too is a way of slowing down, centering, listening to the inner conscious and unconscious, and seeking the Kingdom of God within us.
  - d. **Worship.** Focus on God as source of Life, the object of our self offering and surrender.
8. **Regular Rigorous Exercise.** Part of its value is that you are doing something for yourself, something out of role, non-judgmental, non-productive, and centering.

You may add other components of a Sabbath experience, ways you might experience a depth of caring intended

in the phrase: “The Sabbath is made for man . . .” But the common denominator of such events is the experience of a different kind of time, a time for Being, not Doing. I’m coming to believe that God, the Creator, wasn’t kidding—that such a balance between Being and Doing, Sabbath and Service is **essential for living**. What do you think?

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy!”