

CONNECTING WITH GOD:

Developing an Authentic and Rich
Devotional Life

by Pat Springle

Article Summary

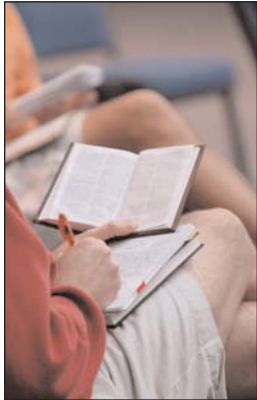
The church has a long, rich history of men and women who pursued God with all their hearts. Pat Springle shares many of the difficulties and breakthroughs a few next generation pastors have experienced in their personal devotion times.

Further Reading

[Communicating With the Postmodern Culture: Authenticity and Truth](#) by Pat Springle

[Creating a Culture of Balance: A Mandate for Next Generation Pastors](#) by Pat Springle

“When I’m in touch with God’s heart, I’m a better husband, friend, and minister,” explains Matt Evans, pastor of **Rock Bridge Community Church** in Dalton, GA (<http://www.rockbridge.cc>). “It’s



Passion for God produces discipline.

not about being legalistic. Passion for God produces discipline because I instinctively prioritize what’s most valuable to me. God invites me to know him: ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10). And when I pursue him, God reveals himself in ways I don’t expect. When I open my heart to him and his word, he speaks words of correction, direction, and affirmation.”

But others have difficulty carving out a meaningful devotional life.

One pastor complained, “I wonder if other pastors struggle with their devotional lives as much as I do. Sometimes it’s rich and real, but often it feels like I’m just going through the motions. There has to be more to it than what I’m experiencing. I’m sure God wants my times with him to be much closer and much deeper than they are right now.”

These conflicting perspectives about pastors’ devotional lives are shared by other next generation pastors—church leaders in their 30s who are growing in influence and impact. Every church leader admits that a meaningful devotional life is important, but several factors conspire to dilute it: The constant and enormous demands of leadership threaten to crowd out

time with God, and misconceptions about connecting with God dampen the flame of desire. These leaders detest legalistic demands, but they long for God to touch their hearts day in and day out.

The most meaningful relationships in our lives are celebrations of affection, not rigidly observed traditions. Les

Hughes, pastor of **Westwood Baptist Church** in Alabaster, AL (<http://www.wwbc.org>) observes, “I don’t tell my wife I’m going to spend 20 minutes with her doing one thing and then 20 minutes doing something else, and call that a ‘relationship.’ It’s much more fluid, more varied, and more about understanding and communicating our hearts than going through some arbitrary motions. In relationship with people, sometimes I’m talking, and sometimes I’m listening, and sometimes we’re just together and nobody is talking. It’s that kind of relationship I’m trying to cultivate with God.”



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Tailored to Fit

“One size definitely doesn’t fit all.” The following analysis of young leaders’ pursuits of God begins with the idea of tailoring their devotional life to fit their personality and lifestyle. It examines the role of discipline, the complexity of motivation, and the need for encouragement and accountability. Next generation pastors are deeply committed to God, and they want their ministries to flow out of a heart that is full of God’s truth, mercy, and power. They offer advice to other pastors—advice as varied as their own personalities and circumstances. Guilt may produce a strong beginning, but it’s a poor finisher. Their insights and advice are designed to kindle heartfelt love for God and obedience to him, a heart that doesn’t have time or space for guilt.

The church leaders quoted in this paper are all next generation pastors who have seen rapid growth in their churches and who have earned the respect of others in their sphere of influence.

Separate or Woven Together?

Virtually every next generation pastor interviewed has strong convictions about whether their devotional lives should be separate from their sermon preparation or woven into it—but those convictions are polarized. Troy Shaw, pastor of



Larry Osborne, Lead Pastor of **North Coast Church** in Vista, CA (<http://www.northcoastchurch.com>) and author of *The Contrarian's Guide to Knowing God*

Be careful when looking for recipes for your devotional life. Instead, find what works for you. Our relationship with God is much like marriage. Some couples try to follow prescribed formulas that promise success, their marriage is in shambles. Others break all the rules, but have a great relationship. Discover what stirs your heart toward God and prompts you to become more obedient to him.

Fact is: some of us are highly structured and love to read, so the traditional methods may work well, but the dyslexics in our church will have a hard time reading, and those who are highly relational won't get much out of lengthy solitude. I recommend trying all the traditional tools of spiritual discipline to see what works for you, keep what works and cast the rest aside.

The goal isn't to feel close to God. Jesus said, "If you love me, you'll obey my commands." Wherever people define their devotional life as a way to primarily feel close to God, I like to ask them about their obedience. Feelings can be flighty. Real love of God shows up in obedience.

I find that people feel guilty about their devotional lives for one of two reasons: They either feel bad because they aren't measuring up to some arbitrary, unreachable external standard of Bible reading and prayer, or they feel convicted because they know they aren't being obedient to God in some area of their lives. The second one is the prompting of the Spirit. The first is a dead end street.

Finally, young leaders today need someone in their lives to serve as a truth teller. Too often, we wait until there's a crisis to find help, but we need someone to step into our life on a regular basis to speak truth and encourage.

It's not enough to hope we'll have a close walk with God. A plan and a few good partners make that good intention a reality.

The Oasis Church in Loganville, GA (<http://www.theoasischurch.org>) remarked, "I have to keep my devotions separate from studying for my message or they'll become too academic. I've tried it both ways, and blending them makes my spiritual life dry."

But others take an opposing view. Daniel Montgomery, pastor of **Sojourn Community Church** in Louisville, KY (<http://www.sojournchurch.com>) has a holistic view: "Pastors are achievement oriented, and we work with words all the time, so I find it impossible to divorce my devotions from my ministry. They necessarily bleed over into each other. At first, I felt guilty about that, but not any more." But Daniel doesn't feel that weaving his devotions and sermon prep is a static model. He explains, "Sometimes God uses my study for a message series to grab my heart and teach me rich lessons about him, but at other times, my meditations are separate from my study for messages. Sometimes, I read devotional books that have nothing to do with a sermon series, but

quite often, God uses my times of study to convict me of how far I fall short of his best. Either way, I connect with God because he reveals himself and calls me to obedience."

The pressure of leadership sometimes necessitates unusual measures to stay fresh in ministry. Tom Hughes, Fusion Team Leader at the **Christian Assembly Foursquare Church** in Los Angeles, CA (<http://www.caeaglerock.com>) kept a hectic schedule. At one point in his ministry—prior to coming to his current church—he taught 150 times a year. He remembers, "Every time I opened the Bible, it was to get something—anything!—for my next message. I felt like I was following a pace car. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't catch up. Before long, I felt empty, but I couldn't ever stop and refuel. For me, creativity takes time, and I had trouble just finding something to say three times a week." In this situation, Tom found that keeping two separate journals helped him carve out a meaningful devotional life that was separate from the pressures of message preparation. "Work life was consuming my devotional life, and

I wasn't hearing from God about me," he remembers. "During that time, I needed help to separate my relationship with Christ from my work for him."

"No Rules, Just Right"

The advertising slogan for Outback Steakhouse fits many next generation pastors' attitude about their devotional lives. Instead of feeling constrained to fit a traditional devotional model, they recognize that they get far more out and give far more back if they recognize the impact of their personality, gifting, and life's seasons on every relationship, including their relationship with God.

Personality and Gifting

Most pastors know the importance of recognizing different personality traits in themselves and those they lead, but strangely, some still take a "cookie cutter" approach to spiritual life. Many next generation pastors, however, realize



Some next generation pastors enjoy connecting with God through nature.

that their personalities and gifting shape their devotional lives. Some are action-oriented, but others are reflective. Some enjoy extended times of solitude, but others prefer interaction. Some connect with God through nature, music, or other things that stimulate

worship, but for others, these things are annoying distractions.

Though the fundamental ingredients of Bible reading, reflection, and prayer are common in virtually every model of devotional life, they take widely varied forms. To create a meaningful devotional life, wise leaders recognize the link between personality and particular models.

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Noel Heikkinen, pastor of Riverview Church in Holt, MI (<http://www.rivchurch.com>) explains that some of the spiritual disciplines used for centuries simply don't fit his personality: "I'm such an extrovert that solitude can actually become a destructive discipline for me if I'm not careful. When I'm alone with my thoughts and pray too long, my mental process gets tied into a knot and I get stuck. I'm a verbal processor, so any time of solitude must be accompanied immediately by interaction and verbal processing."



NOEL HEIKKINEN

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Noel's perspective about his devotional life corresponds with his theology about the way God leads his people. He explains, "I'm convinced that God gives direction in community, and I'm convinced that he seldom gives it to someone apart from community." Western culture, and particularly American culture, is fiercely individualistic, and in many churches, the pastor is perceived as the channel who uniquely hears the voice of God, receives direction, and communicates it to the people. Noel reacts to such a view: "This perspective distorts our devotional lives so that we expect God to give us direction apart from the Word and input or feedback from others. If we're perceived as the sole arbiters of God's voice to our people, we get defensive if they question us. And as pastors model this individualistic approach to spiritual life and leadership, other believers follow us and claim, 'God told me' to do this or that, and they defy anyone to disagree." At the Jerusalem council, church leaders wrestled with some of the most important issues of the early church. They didn't look to one leader to tell them what God wanted them to do. Instead, God led them as they collaborated: "So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul" (Acts 15:25). Noel asserts, "That's the model of spiritual life and wisdom we need to follow."



Michael Henderson, Senior Pastor of **New Beginnings Community Church** in Matthews, NC (<http://www.nbccministries.org>)

The goal of our devotional lives-and of life itself-is to develop an intimate relationship with God. Jesus modeled a wide variety of forms of spiritual life. Sometimes he prayed all night; sometimes he prayed short prayers. Sometimes he got away from the crowd to be alone with the Father; sometimes he talked to the Father with people around. The forms aren't the answer. They are simply tools to use in order to cultivate intimacy with God. For me, the methods only make a difference if my heart is right toward him. Then I'm open to his word.

Seasons and Rhythms

Traditional forms of spiritual disciplines (or at least, common perceptions of them) don't seem to adapt to changing conditions in people's lives. Habits in devotional life can be very constructive and profitable, but if they become too rigid, they fail to draw us closer to God. Jesus followed a steady rhythm of public and private, engagement

and isolation. This pattern provided rest and refreshment so he could teach with clarity and power, face opposition with a clear mind, and be ready for every opportunity and obstacle.

In a slightly different vein, author and professor Dallas Willard encourages people to align disciplines of engagement with their sins of omission, and align

disciplines of abstinence with their sins of commission. Wes Furlong, pastor of **Cape Christian Fellowship** in Cape Coral, FL (<http://www.capechristian.com>) applied this principle when he was spending too much time trying to grow his church. He relates, "I wasn't serving people outside the walls of the church enough. Compassionate ministry

became a spiritual discipline where I learned to serve people as an 'end' rather than as a 'means to an end.'"

Young pastors feel the pressure of growing churches and the demands of being a parent to young children. They realize that the opportunity

to pastor a church in the future will always be there, but if they miss their children when they're growing up, those times are gone forever. Stephen Russell, Jr., pastor of **Calvary Baptist Church** in Baltimore, MD (<http://www.calvarybaltimore.com>), has found that the rhythm of his life today is far different than it was only few years ago. As a husband and the father of small children, the demands and joys of family life early in the morning consume the time he used to spend with the Lord. He relates, "When one of my children needs me in the morning, I want to be there. For a while, I felt guilty because I was spending this time with my kids instead of following the prescribed time with God that I had done for years, but I got over it. Now I carve out time during the day to read God's word and pray. Someday, when the children are grown and gone, maybe the mornings will work again for my devotions, but not now."

Many pastors feel they and their staff shouldn't spend time with God during the day because they're "on the clock." They feel guilty when they spent time with God at the office because, they insist, the business people in the church can't do that. But some next generation pastors believe that pastoral ministry is categorically different from the business world. If staff members are getting their work done, they are free to spend time with the Lord during the day. Some leaders encourage their staff to take



As life changes many pastors must find new times and ways to meet with God.

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WES FURLONG

“short sabbaticals” of a couple of hours each week and a couple of days each month to recharge their spiritual engines.

Some next generation pastors notice that some of their friends in ministry have overreacted to legalism, so they don’t meditate, pray, read the Scriptures, or reflect on God’s truth. In the opinion of these next generation pastors, those who react so strongly against legalism and neglect their devotional lives aren’t tapping to the source of grace and strength they need for life and ministry. For them, the decline of spiritual life may be swift or slow, but unplugging from the source of life eventually will cause catastrophic effects in these young leaders, in their family lives, and in their churches.

Brian Howard, pastor of **Copperhill Community Church** in Valencia, CA (<http://www.copperhillchurch.org>) remarks, “I’ve gone to a number of church planting conferences, and I’m alarmed by all the leaders who have zero devotional life. Without drawing on God’s grace, wisdom, and strength, they don’t have any way to fight against the flesh, temptation, and pride. In my life, my greatest temptations are sin and self-reliance. I have to stay close to God and let his word sink deep into my heart. Pastor and author John Piper says, ‘Prayer is the fuel for ministry.’ Many things pull me away from God. I have to stay close to him—it’s not an option—so I have enough fuel for my life and ministry.”



Prayer is the fuel for ministry.



Many pastors enjoy using Wayne Cordeiro’s SOAP method of devotion.

The Role of Discipline

Next generation pastors reject guilt as a motivation, but discipline isn’t a dirty word to them. They simply want their devotional habits to be flexible, meaningful, and driven by their passion for God. Tyrone Barnette, pastor of **Peace Baptist Church** in Stone Mountain, GA (<http://www.peacebaptistchurch.org>) relates, “I’ve struggled with legalism, but in the past couple of years, I’ve found new passion and a lifestyle of devotion to God. All day every day, I try to live in a prayerful mindset, aware of the presence of God. To do this, I have to eliminate distractions, like television, and fill that time with reflections and prayer. I sense God is drawing me closer to him as I have become more aware of him all day. ‘Practicing his presence’ is becoming a lifestyle. As I become more sensitive to the needs around me—a worry about my family, a church member’s child struggling, a marriage in trouble, a friend with an addiction—I go to God dozens of times every day because I need his wisdom and direction. Sometimes it comes quickly, sometimes it takes weeks, but I stay with him until I feel directed and released.”

Many next generation pastors practice tried and true spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, meditation, and prayer, and most include some form of journaling to capture the insights God gives them. In the past few years, thousands of church leaders have been exposed to Wayne Cordeiro’s devotional approach, SOAP, which he

describes in his book, *The Divine Mentor*.¹ Briefly stated, Cordeiro's method can be outlined this way:

S... Scripture—After studying a longer passage, focus on a particular verse (or two) and write it in your journal.

O... Observation—Look carefully at the verse and ask the questions who, what, when, where, how, and why? Write down your answers.

A... Application—Consider how you can specifically apply the truth of the passage so it becomes real in your experience.

P... Prayer—Write out a prayer asking God to help you apply the insights to your specific relationships or circumstances in your life.

Discipline, personality, and flexibility come together in creative ways for some pastors. Shawn Lovejoy, pastor of **Mountain Lake Church** in Cumming, GA (<http://www.mountainlakechurch.org>) says that his mornings begin very early with a long walk before life's demands crowd in on him. He explains, "When I'm out there all alone with God, I feel the freedom to express my emotions and be real with him. It's a different—and valuable—exercise for me each day. When I whisper or pray quietly in my study or write in my journal, I'm tempted to pray 'pat' prayers instead of being authentic. For me, these walks are the times when I connect with God most fully. The goal isn't to check off a box that I've done my duty to have a devotional time; the goal of spiritual disciplines is to create a climate of expectation. My long walks do that for me."

In their pursuit of authenticity, these pastors recognize that their flight from legalism requires

them to find a new way to "keep score." Mark DeYmaz, pastor of **Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas** in Little Rock, AR (<http://www.mosaicchurch.net>) speaks for many of them when he says, "I no longer look at times or forms or practices as an end in themselves. I'm learning to look for genuine passion for God, the desire to connect with him and obey him, and I'm learning to look for the fruit of that connection in love, compassion for the disadvantaged, spontaneity, and thankfulness."

Clive Neil, pastor of **Bedford Central Presbyterian Church** in Brooklyn, NY (<http://www.bedfordcentral.org>) takes score-keeping a step farther: "I've learned to gage the quality of my devotion to God by the quality of my family relationships. My love, listening, compassion, understanding, and patience in my relationship with them are physical, relational manifestations of my heart toward God. If these relationships aren't doing well, I'm sure my relationship with God needs to go deeper and grow stronger."

Some see fasting as the ultimate spiritual discipline, and many pastors have tried it from time to time. Dave Nelson, pastor of **K2 The Church** in Salt Lake City, UT (<http://www.k2thechurch.com>) has found that the spiritual power he experiences in fasting is beyond his expectations, and even his comprehension: "By far the most significant thing

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John Jenkins, Senior Pastor of **First Baptist Church of Glenarden**, Landover & Upper Marlboro, Md (<http://www.fbcglenarden.org>)

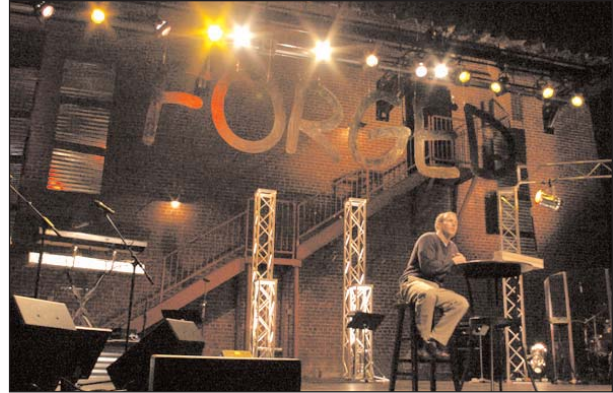
The key to our connection with God is the attitude of our hearts. If our hearts are sensitive and pliable, any of the disciplines and forms can work for us, but if our hearts are cold, we'll use the disciplines to prove our spirituality, and that's dangerous. God's word challenges and softens my heart. If I have an open mind as I read the Scriptures, God uses his truth to affirm me, correct me, and guide me. The secret to thriving spiritually is to delight in God's word. That's what I've tried to impart to the people at our church. Sometimes it's rigorous work to study the Scriptures, but sooner or later, if I stay with it, God touches my heart and I delight in his truth.

I've ever done to connect with Jesus is extended fasting, a month at a time. It's unbelievably powerful—so powerful that it's a mystery—and it affects me in every facet of my life. Fasting helps me throw off things that hinder me in the race. When I'm fasting, the temptation to waste time, like watching ESPN for hours at a time, just goes away. It's not a hard choice at all. Fasting cleanses me from the things that aren't sin, but are excess baggage that slows me down. Then I can run much farther and faster." Dave recounts his motivations for extended times of fasting: "The first time I fasted for a month was because I felt God inviting me to do it. I was just responding to his invitation. But I've also done it because I wanted to seek God for an answer to a particular need in our church." Other people who have tried fasting found the experience counterproductive because gnawing hunger distracted them from seeking God. Dave explains the turning point for him: "For the first three days, it's hard, but after that, I'm not hungry at all, and I feel incredibly alive to God."

Many next generation pastors don't feel tied to particular rituals, no matter how sacred they have seemed to other generations. They look at their personalities, seasons of life, and any other circumstances that affect their devotional lives, and they use disciplines that work for them.

The "Why?" Question

The Scriptures offer a wide variety of motivations for following God and obeying his commands, and pastors are motivated to pursue God for all of these reasons, including longing, wonder, and pain. Rock Bridge's Matt Evans speaks for many of them: "I want to seek God as his dearly loved child to develop a vibrant personal relationship with him. For me, it's too easy to go to him as a resource for sermons or for power to do ministry. We live in tension between our personal passions and our pastoral responsibilities, but we can't lead people beyond where we are with God. For that reason, I have to always go deeper, but 'going deeper' often means going back to the basics of spiritual disciplines so I can experience fruitfulness and contentment." {CAPTION: Pastor Matt Evans strives to seek God as his "dearly loved child"



Pastor Matt Evans strives to seek God as his "dearly loved child."

Jesus' disciples were often amazed at his power and his teaching, but modern marvels in technology and medicine threaten to pull our sense of wonder away from God and toward human scientific accomplishments. Recently, however, several authors have written books to pique our sense of wonder in the greatness and goodness of God, including *Recapture the Wonder* by Ravi Zacharias and *Dangerous Wonder* by Mike Yaconelli. For some next generation pastors, the awesome size of the universe doesn't create as much wonder as the amazing grace of God. J. D. Greear, pastor of **Summit Church** in Durham, NC (<http://www.summitchurch.cc>), remarks, "The greatest wonder in all creation is the gospel of grace. My task every day is to center my mind on the phenomenal truth of God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and mercy. It's so easy for me to look to others for approval, but I need to live for an audience of one. The more I understand how much he loves and accepts me—and that I don't deserve it at all—the more I delight in him and live for him. Then I can see the work he has for me each day through the lens of the cross, and I learn to care for the things he cares about. Real change happens when we *experience*, not just teach, the gospel. We love because we first experienced his love, we accept others because we experienced his acceptance of us, and we forgive because we've experienced his forgiveness."

The wonder of God's grace sometimes produces surprisingly rich insights and strong convictions. Devin Hudson, pastor of **Grace Point Church** in Las Vegas, NV (<http://www.gracepointvegas.com>),

relates, “The longer I walk with God, the more convinced I am of my own depravity and my desperate need for grace. Recently, I’ve become more aware of my sinfulness, and I see the beauty of the cross more than ever. The journey for me isn’t becoming better and better, but realizing the depth of my depravity and my need for God’s unconditional love and forgiveness.” These insights have radically altered Devin’s daily pursuit of God: “My devotional life has changed with this understanding. I don’t focus as much on what I can do to be successful, but more on God’s desire to change lives in his way and on his terms through his grace. I always trusted the gospel to save people, but now I trust the gospel to transform people. I had thought after salvation, people needed to do certain things and check off boxes of discipleship, but now I realize that the power of the gospel truly transforms lives—including mine.”

Like J. D. and Devin, many pastors recognize that we never “get beyond” the gospel of grace and “move on to deeper things.” They expect to continually marvel at the message of the cross and the resurrection. Dave Nelson comments, “The wonder of Easter is that Jesus is alive. In Ephesians, Paul prayed that we’d experience Christ’s ‘incomparably great power.’ When I read that, I think: Are you kidding me? That’s true, and it’s fantastic. At this point in my life, I’ve only begun to sniff what that means. I long to taste it and really experience it. Devotionally, when I open the Scriptures today, I wonder, ‘Is it today, Lord, that you’ll show me what that means? Is it today that I’ll experience your incomparably great power? When I pray, will I experience more depth and intimacy?’ Jesus didn’t do anything on his own. What he did and said came from the Father. Christ’s death paid for my sins and his resurrection makes me alive so that I can have that kind of intimacy with the Father—so that everything I do and say will be directed by him, and I’ll experience his incomparably great power. I don’t think I’m even close to that, but I think it’s possible... and that gives me incredible hope every time I open the Bible and pray.”

Wonder, though, presents some problems—and some opportunities—for those who were taught to be theologically precise. Greg Lee, pastor of

Suncrest Christian Church in Saint John, IN (<http://www.suncrest.org>), observes, “My role as a teacher is to capture the truth and be crystal clear, but the wonder, beauty, and mystery of our relationship with God are beyond words. I’m finite; he’s infinite. As a teacher, I try to give people truth and steps to apply those truths, but wonder captures hearts and propels growth. So, both are essential. Interestingly, one of the results of wonder is a sense of conviction. The goal of my teaching and the goal of my devotions isn’t just understanding, but to connect with the God of the universe in all his majesty and beauty, which creates a fascination that grips our hearts.”



GREG LEE

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The motivations of longing and wonder, however, are sometimes eclipsed by painful circumstances that drive people to the throne of grace. In many cases, the stresses of being a young leader grappling with difficult issues in a growing church produces tremendous stress, and in other cases, personal problems compound the professional stresses. Scott Ridout, pastor of **Sun Valley Community Church** in Gilbert, AZ (<http://www.sunvalleycc.com>), relates, “My devotional life has been propelled by desperate needs. I experience stress in different parts of my body. In my 20s, it was my stomach; in my 30s, it was my neck; and now in my 40s, I’ve experienced vertigo. A few years ago, the room seemed to be spinning constantly out of control. I couldn’t stand up, and I couldn’t sleep unless I was sitting up.” Scott’s church was growing rapidly, but he was falling apart. When he couldn’t explain away the symptoms any longer, he realized that his physical symptoms were the result of spiritual problems: “I was depending on myself to accomplish great things for God, and the stress was shattering my life. I only

occasionally loved God and walked with him—the rest of the time it was all about me.” Scott saw his health problems as God’s clear invitation to come to him. He remembers, “About a year ago, I went back to the basics. I started reading the gospels slowly and expectantly, and I began journaling. These aren’t revolutionary disciplines, but they were revolutionary to me. This process helped uncover all the things I was worried about, anxious about, and angry about. Now, reading the Scriptures, prayer, and journaling are my daily routine. It’s not a magic formula, but these disciplines have me on a steady path of pursuing God and learning to trust him. Gradually, the physical symptoms of stress have subsided, and I now experience more peace and joy than I ever imagined.”

Some next generation pastors planted the churches where they serve, and the very nature of planting churches creates enormous stress. The hours required for a church to get off the ground and the reality of tight finances causes marital

and physiological strains. Some crater under the pressure, but many recognize their need to depend on God more than ever.

Whether they are founding pastors or succession pastors, many next generation pastors believe that the weight of their

responsibilities sharpens their sense of desperation for God to work in and through them. Jeff Little, pastor of **Milestone Church** in Keller, TX (<http://www.milestonechurch.com>), recalls that in the garden before Jesus’ arrest, his disciples couldn’t pray even for an hour when their friend needed them most, but

after the ascension, the weight of responsibility fell on their shoulders, and they were suddenly “devoted to prayer.” Jeff recalls, “I remember starting our church and getting on my face before God asking him to open our neighbors’ hearts. The responsibility of starting a church made me

realize that I couldn’t produce spiritual fruit. Only God could do that.”

Authenticity with God about the needs in their lives is essential, but some find that they need to share their struggles in appropriate ways with their congregations. Not long ago, Mark DeYmaz experienced intense struggles in several different areas of his life and ministry, and he plunged into a time of confusion and darkness. He and his wife supported each other and chose to obey God even though they didn’t feel his presence. Mark decided to tell his church about some of the struggles so they could pray more intelligently. He communicated his vision for the church’s multiethnic ministry and he talked about the resistance to that ministry that he had experienced from some in the church as well as from (what he sensed) were forces of darkness in spiritual realms. He also talked about the grief he and his wife felt from the deaths of two family members. In addition, Mark gave a brief description of a couple of the struggles he faced in the ministry. He told them, “Here’s part of what we face, but I can’t tell you more than that. We need your prayers. We’re the ‘tip of the spear,’ but we feel quite vulnerable.” The people in his church had no idea Mark and his wife shouldered such heavy burdens, and when they understood, they were very supportive. After that day, he recalls walking into a meeting where people were praying for him. He relates, “It meant more than you can imagine knowing people were praying for us with such intensity and love. The church prays for us very differently now.” Soon the darkness lifted, and they experienced many specific answers to prayer. The authenticity of Mark’s devotional life overflowed into richer, deeper relationships in the church and direct evidence of the Spirit’s work.

Gratitude provides a lot of staying power in young leaders’ connection with God. If they focus too much on mistakes in the past, current stresses, and opportunities for the future, they fail to relax and thank God for all he has done for them, in them, and through them. Harry White, pastor of **Watts Chapel Missionary Baptist Church** in Raleigh, NC (<http://www.wattschapel.org>), says that his richest times with God have come when

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF STARTING A CHURCH MADE ME REALIZE THAT I COULDN’T PRODUCE SPIRITUAL FRUIT. ONLY GOD COULD DO THAT.



JEFF LITTLE

GRATITUDE IS A SPRINGBOARD TO HONESTY AND HOPE.

he expressed gratitude to him. The sense of connection during those times helped him be more honest with God during difficult moments in his life. For Harry and other next generation pastors, thankfulness rivets their attention on God's goodness and strength and enables them to see current problems in a more hopeful light. Gratitude, then, is a springboard to honesty and hope.

Encouragement and Accountability

Almost universally, next generation pastors ask mentors and friends to hold them accountable in their devotional lives. They recognize their propensity to drift spiritually, and they've seen enough wreckage in the lives of other pastors to scare them. They take the initiative to find someone to ask them hard questions on a regular basis. Les Hughes comments, "If I don't have someone holding me accountable for my devotional life, it's easy for me to let it slide or use it only as sermon prep. The people in our church count on me to communicate God's heart to them, and if I'm not fresh in my walk with God, I can't do that."

The support system, though, may be more effective if it includes people outside the church and the denomination. Scott Wilson formed a network of leaders and counselors to encourage him, but they aren't connected to his church in any way. He explains, "I wanted men who didn't have mixed motives to care for me and to make sure I supported their particular ministry. These men give me honest, direct input with no strings attached."

Tyrone Barnette and a group of other pastors in his community meet weekly for breakfast at one of their homes. They realize that unless they stay strong in grace and grow in wisdom, the ministry can become a mistress and they'll become dry. They ask each other hard questions, not just about their spiritual disciplines, but about the quality of their connection with God. They call their tight-knit group "The Cave of Abdullum" (after the site in 1 Samuel 22:1-2 where David hid with his family and followers) and they invite

young pastors to join them from time to time to model authenticity and accountability for them.

An often-overlooked potential accountability partner sleeps beside next generation pastors. Brian Walton, pastor of **Calvary Christian Church** in Winchester, KY (<http://www.calvarychristian.net>), asked his wife to hold him accountable and support him in his devotional life. He comments, "Some of the greatest moments of my spiritual life are in devotions with my wife. I resisted that for years, but I've found that it's the richest communication and accountability I can imagine. It was a revolutionary decision, but it has brought us together and given us a single heart about our family and about our ministry. I highly recommend it."



BRIAN WALTON

SOME OF THE
GREATEST
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WITH MY WIFE.

A Few Suggestions

The pastors interviewed for this paper offer suggestions for connecting with God that are as varied as their personalities and experiences. Overall, their advice is: Try something. If it works, keep doing it. If it's stale or unworkable, try something else. But by all means, find a way to make your devotional life rich and rewarding.

Here are some of their suggestions:

- *No matter what form your devotional life takes, avoid legalism. It will rob you of the joy of your relationship with God.*
- *Be both intentional and flexible. Find what works for you. Don't be afraid to alter your devotional style and schedule to fit the season of your family life and ministry.*
- *If you're easily distracted by emails, schedules, and lists of things to do, keep your laptop turned off until you finish your time with God each day. And don't go to Starbucks to be alone with*

God because church members come in and interrupt.

- When people don't have exceptional responsibilities (like having little children at home), encourage them to invest more time in soaking up the Scriptures.
- For younger people who are just learning how to have a meaningful devotional life, more structure is necessary and helpful. Encourage them to use a 1-year Bible.
- We can learn the value of time with God by either revelation or tribulation. Choose revelation.
- If your life is hectic, soak up time with God when you're away on vacation with your family. And don't schedule every minute of every day you're gone. Find some relaxed, unhurried time for God to speak to you. When you're relaxed, you'll get great ideas about message series and wisdom about particular issues at the church. We need to slow down so we can listen to God.
- To keep your brain from getting cluttered with too many things you have to do, make lists to get the thoughts on paper. Then you won't be overwhelmed trying to remember all the people and things to do.
- Have realistic expectations about your devotional life. Some of us think something is wrong if we don't touch Christ's garment and hear his voice seven days a week, but that kind of intimacy isn't reasonable in any relationship. Be comfortable with three pretty good times and several maintenance devotionals each week.
- Find a balance between wanting to progress in holiness but not taking yourself too seriously.
- Put some margin in your daily and weekly schedule so you can relax. If you're too stressed, you won't be

present with your family or with God, and ministry will suck the life out of you.

- Go off for a few days with a group of men every year—with no demands or expectations. Just relax and have fun together drinking beer, grilling steaks, mountain biking, and camping. Don't force anything. Great conversations about God will happen spontaneously.
- Like Jethro told Moses, delegate responsibility so you can devote yourself to the things only you can do.
- Learn to "waste time with God." Don't demand to get something out of your devotional life, but just be present with God. It's amazing what happens when we're relaxed in his presence.
- Recognize the tension between your personal life and your ministry. Resolve excess stress, and accept the rest as normal so you don't resent it.
- To give your entire church a sense of direction and unity in your devotions, study and meditate on a book of Scripture each month. This makes God's truth a topic of conversation throughout the church community, and it inspires everybody to stay in the word each day. It creates a culture of reflection.
- Consider having all the groups in your church study the scriptures and answer questions from the sermon series.
- Measure the quality of your relationship with God by your obedience.
- Ask God to make himself real to you and speak to you. You do not have because you do not ask.

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Accountability partners or mentors are invaluable resources for many pastors.

- *In every staff meeting, ask people what they're hearing God say to them. This conversation raises the expectation of God speaking to them.*
- *Encourage worship-based prayer with your staff.*
- *As a staff team, fast once a month.*
- *Find somebody to be a partner or mentor. Make your hopes and expectations very clear, and let the person say "no." If that person doesn't work out, keep looking until you find somebody.*
- *As pastors, our true success isn't in our administrative skills, leadership abilities, or church growth strategies, but from the spiritual power we get from our relationship with Christ. Don't shortchange it.*
- *Longtime pastor Charles Stanley often says, "Everything flows from a relationship with Jesus Christ." Because ministry is tangible and immediate, we are tempted to let it become central in our lives, but that inevitably leads to trouble. Guard your heart.*
- *Have devotions with your spouse. It can be humiliating, but it can become incredibly rich. If we want to be the spiritual leaders of our homes, it starts with our devotions with our spouse and kids.*
- *In your devotional life (and every other*

aspect of life), follow John Maxwell's advice: "Don't make a lot of decisions. Make a few decisions and manage them daily." Choose to make your devotional life a priority, and manage it every day.

- *Don't schedule any meetings before 8:00 any morning. Your time with God is more important than anything else.*
- *Have your devotions in the passages you'll preach in a sermon series in a month or two. This will give you time to let the truth soak into your heart so you'll preach with clarity and conviction.*
- *Young leaders should read long sections of Scripture to get the broad context of God's word. Older, more seasoned leaders can focus their time on shorter passages. If young leaders study only a verse or two, they often come away with odd interpretations and applications.*
- *We can't eliminate all distractions, but we can become aware of the ones that recur too often and get us off track. Do something about those.*
- *Read a book of the Bible over and over for a month. Familiarity with a text helps people connect concepts and see individual ideas in light of the larger themes of Scripture.*
- *Consider using some of the tools the mystics used, such as Lectio Divina. The four movements are lectio (reading the passages slowly and carefully), meditatio (trusting the Spirit to illuminate the passage as you reflect on it), oratio (responding to God's prompting through the passage), and contemplatio (wordless reflection on God who has revealed himself to you).*

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The church has a long, rich history of men and women who pursued God with all their hearts. From the church fathers to the leaders of the spiritual movement today, these people provide

WE SIMPLY MUST MAKE SEEKING GOD THE CENTRAL DRIVE OF OUR LIVES.

an example for us to emulate. Brian Howard reflects, “We stand on the shoulders of great men who pursued God with all their hearts. They made the Scriptures and prayer central to their lives and

their ministries. Who are we to do anything less? The consequences of not making God central are

too great—self-reliance, sin, destroying our families, stress, and lost opportunities in ministry. We simply must make seeking God the central drive of our lives.”

Devotional resources suggested by next generation pastors:

Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster

Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard

Too Busy Not to Pray, Bill Hybels

Fresh Encounters: Experiencing Transformation through United Worship-Based Prayer, Daniel Henderson

The Contrarian’s Guide to Knowing God, Larry Osborne

Shaped by the Word, Robert Mulholland

Recapture the Wonder, Ravi Zacharias

Dangerous Wonder, Mike Yaconelli

ENDNOTES

¹ Bethany House, 2007.



PAT SPRINGLE

Patrick Springle is the president of Baxter Press in Friendswood, TX. He served on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ for 18 years, 11 as the Texas state director. He was Senior Vice President of Rapha for three years before starting his publishing business.



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* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

RESOURCES FROM LEADERSHIP NETWORK



NEXT GENERATION CONCEPT PAPERS

CREATING A CULTURE OF BALANCE: A MANDATE FOR NEXT GENERATION PASTORS

This concept paper exposes many of the stresses and struggles that next generation pastors-senior pastors in their 20s and 30s who are growing in influence and impact-are dealing with, and opens conversations to creating a balance between the demands of a busy schedule, a growing congregation and maintaining spiritual vitality.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE POSTMODERN CULTURE: AUTHENTICITY AND TRUTH

"Wow is out; real is in." Next Generation pastors have observed a significant shift in the culture. Pastor Toby Slough observes, "If we'll invest the time and effort we used to spend in 'Wow!' and put those resources into authenticity, people will come in droves, and they'll respond to even the most demanding truths in the Scriptures."



PODCASTS

LEADERSHIP LONELINESS: HOW PASTORS DEAL WITH TIMES THEY FEEL ALL ALONE

Loneliness is a painful and familiar emotion that many pastors experience. Dr. Sam Chand's unique position as a consultant to pastors has allowed him to have several authentic conversations about lonely times leaders have gone through and how they have dealt with those feelings. He explains where different types of loneliness can come from, what leaders should expect, and healthy coping mechanisms that can alleviate some of the loneliness they feel.

LENGTH: 23:57

GROWING AS A LEADER BY INCREASING YOUR PAIN THRESHOLD: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM CHAND

All leaders experience pain, but healthy leaders find appropriate ways to increase their pain threshold. Doing so helps them grow as a leader to new levels, enabling them to take their churches and ministries to new levels as well. Failure to deal with their pain leads to a "leadership leprosy" in which they, like someone with leprosy, do harm to themselves or those around them because of their inability to deal with pain. Author and pastoral consultant Sam Chand (<http://www.samchand.com>) offers many practical ideas in this fast-moving podcast.

BALANCING MINISTRY DEMANDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN JENKINS

Walk through a week with next generation pastor, John Jenkins as he discusses the importance of finding balance amidst the many stresses and demands of ministry. By establishing boundaries and setting priorities after an eye opening life crisis John has found a healthy balance in his ministry as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Glenarden.

LEADERSHIP NETWORK ADVANCE E-NEWSLETTER

Leadership Network Advance is an indispensable, twice-monthly, free email newsletter featuring the best in innovative church strategies. You'll gain insights from the ministry pioneers who are setting the standard for tomorrow's church. Each issue will also point you to resources, tools and events that will help you build a more effective ministry. For sign up information: http://leadnet.org/epubs_signup.asp

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