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# Leadership

## A Steady Rhythm

*The not-so-secret key to effective ministry and leadership.*  
by Ruth Haley Barton

At a staff meeting in a church I was serving, we were discussing how we could attract more people to join the church and increase their involvement. Someone did the math and pointed out that there were already at least five time commitments *per week* expected of those who wanted to become church members!

Outwardly I tried to be supportive of the meeting's purpose, but on the inside I was screaming, *Who would want to sign up for this?* I was already trying to combat CFS (Christian fatigue syndrome) in my own life and couldn't imagine willingly inflicting it on someone else.

How is it that life in and around the church often gets reduced to so much activity, so much busyness, such incessant expectations?

As I looked around the planning table that day, I realized one of the main reasons church life is full of so much activity and busyness: this is the way its leaders are living.

***Without adequate time for rest, we lose the ability to be fully present.—Ruth Haley Barton***

Most of us know only one speed: full steam ahead. And we have been stuck in that speed for a very long time. If we do not establish saner rhythms in our own lives—life patterns that curb our unbridled activism and calm our compulsive busyness—we will not make it over the long haul. And neither will the people we are leading!

### Work Hard, Rest Faithfully

Jesus understood how quickly our passions, even the most noble, can wear us out if we're not careful. Early in his ministry with the disciples, he began to teach them about the importance of establishing sane rhythms of work and rest.

In Mark 6, Jesus commissioned the disciples for ministry and gave them the authority to cast out demons, to preach the gospel, and to heal the sick. They went off on their first ministry excursion and returned all excited about their newfound power and influence. They crowded around Jesus to report all they had done.

But what does Jesus do? He didn't seem to have much time for their ministry reports. Immediately he instructed them "to come away with me and rest awhile." He seemed more concerned about helping them establish a rhythm that would sustain them in ministry rather than allowing them to be overly enamored by ministry success, which can lead to a compulsion to do more and more without ceasing.

When we keep pushing forward without taking adequate time for rest, our way of life may seem heroic, but there is frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we lose the ability to be fully present. Present to God and present to other people. And we lose the ability to discern what is really needed in our situation.

The result can be "sloppy desperation," a mental and spiritual state in which we're just trying to get it all done. And this prevents us from the quality of presence that delivers true insight and spiritual leadership.

Charles, a gifted physician, illustrates the point: "I discovered in medical school that if I saw a patient when I was tired or overworked, I would order a lot of tests. I was so exhausted, I couldn't tell exactly what was going on, so I got in the habit of ordering a battery of tests, hoping they would tell me what I was missing.

"But when I was rested, if I had the opportunity to get some sleep or go for a quiet walk, then when I saw the next patient, I could rely on my intuition and experience to give me an accurate reading of what was happening. When I could take the time to listen and be present with them and their illness, I was almost always right."

When we are depleted, we become overly reliant on clamoring voices outside of us for direction. We react to symptoms rather than seeking to understand and respond to underlying causes. We rely on other people's ministry models because we are too tired to listen and observe our setting and craft something uniquely suited for this place.

When we are rested, we bring steady, alert attention to our leadership and are characterized by discernment of what is truly needed in our situation. And we have the energy and creativity to carry it out.

### **Rhythms of Engagement and Retreat**

One of the most important rhythms for those of us in ministry is to establish a constant back-and-forth motion between engagement and retreat. We need regular times to engage in the battle, giving our best energy to the task. Then we need regular times when we step back to gain perspective, re-strategize, and tend our wounds—an inevitability of life in ministry.

An occupational hazard for us in Christian ministry is that it can be hard to distinguish between the times we are "on," working *for* God, and times when we can just *be with* God to replenish our own soul. Our time with Scripture can be reduced to a textbook or a tool for ministry rather than an intimate communication from God to me personally. Even prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity, or a public display of our spiritual prowess.

Times of extended retreat give us a chance to come home to God's presence and to be open with God, in utter privacy, about what is true of us. This is important for us and for those we serve.

When we repress what is real in our lives and just keep soldiering on, we get weary from holding it in and eventually it leaks out in ways that are damaging to ourselves and to others.

But on retreat there is time and space to attend to what is real in our own lives—to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed tears, sit with our questions, feel our anger, attend to our loneliness—and allow God to be with us in those places.

These are not times for problem solving, because not everything can be fixed or solved. On retreat we rest ourselves in God and wait on him to do what is needed, and we return to the battle with fresh energy and keener insight.

### **Silence and Word**

"In the multitude of words there is much transgression" the Scriptures say. This is a truth that can drive us ministry folks to despair given the incessant flow of words we feel compelled to issue from our mouths, pens, and computers. Those of us who deal in words are at great risk of misusing them and even sinning with our words due to the sheer volume of them!

I don't know about you, but sometimes I can literally feel it—deep in my bones—that if I do not shut my mouth for awhile, I will get myself in trouble because my words will be completely disconnected from the reality of God in my own life. Silence is the only cure for this desperate situation.

"Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In silence our speech patterns are refined because silence fosters a self-awareness that enables us to choose more truly the words that we say.

Rather than speech that issues from our subconscious needs to impress, to put others in their place, to compete, control, and manipulate, to put a good spin on things, we are able to notice our inner dynamics and make choices that are more grounded in love, trust, and God-given wisdom.

The Psalmist says, "When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your bed and be silent. Offer right sacrifices (in other words, stay faithful to your spiritual practices) and put your trust in the Lord."

At times the most heroic thing you, as leader, can do is to remain in that private place with God for as long as it takes to consciously trust yourself to God rather than to everything else you could be doing in the moment.

### **Stillness and Action**

Practicing rhythms of silence and words, stillness and action, helps us learn to wait on God—which doesn't come easily for those of us accustomed to busily trying to make things happen. It takes energy to be restrained, to wait for the work of God in our lives and in the situations we face.

But the more I am called upon to use words, the more distressing things are, the more active leadership that is required of me—the more silence I need.

It is an embarrassing little secret, common among leaders, and we need to be more honest about it: buried deep in the psyche of many leaders is a Superman mentality—that somehow we are not like other human beings, and we can function beyond normal human limitations and save the world. Or at least our little corner of the world. This is a myth that we indulge to our own peril.

Sabbath keeping is the primary discipline that helps us live within the limits of our humanity and to honor God as our Creator. It is the key to a life lived in sync with the rhythms that God himself built into our world. Yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live.

Sabbath keeping honors the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment, and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake.

It begins with the willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and then to take steps to begin to live more graciously within the order of things.

And the first order of things is that we are creatures and God is the creator. God is the only one who is infinite; I, on the other hand, must learn to live within the physical limits of time and space and the human limits of strength and energy.

There are limits to my relational, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities as well. I am not God. God is the only one who can be all things to all people. God is the only one who can be two places at once. God is the one who never sleeps. I am not.

This is pretty basic stuff, but many of us live as though we don't know it.

Sabbath keeping may be the most challenging rhythm for leaders to establish because Sunday, in most churches, has become a day of Christian busyness—perhaps the busiest! And, of course, the busiest person on that day is the pastor!

This just means that pastors need to set aside another day for their Sabbath. Or they might consider ordering their church's life so that everyone learns how to practice Sabbath. It could begin with worship, but then everyone goes home and rests and delights for the rest of the day because there are no other church activities. In that way, the pastor's commitment to Sabbath becomes a blessing for everyone.

Sabbath keeping is a way of ordering one's whole life to honor the rhythm of things—work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship, and delighting in God and his good gifts. And the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make Sabbath possible.

There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our human existence. We are physical and spiritual beings in a world of time and space. A peace descends upon us when we accept what is real rather than always pushing beyond our limits. By being gracious, accepting, and gentle with ourselves at least once a week, we're enabled to be gracious, accepting, and gentle with others.

There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God and resting into God. This eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our striving.

Sabbath keeping helps us to live within our limits because on the Sabbath, in so many different ways, we allow ourselves to be the creature in the presence of our Creator. We touch something more real than what we are able produce on our own. We touch our very being in God.

Surely that is what the people around us need most.

For details about spiritual retreats for pastors led by Ruth Barton, visit [www.nationalpastorsconvention.com](http://www.nationalpastorsconvention.com)

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