Time Management

So little time. So much to do. It is the plague of the multi-tasking, constant communication, high-demand age in which we live. For ministers, it is a rare day when there was not another congregant we could have been contacted, a sermon that would have been improved with a bit more study, or one more administrative detail needing attention. How do we keep up with all our duties, let alone have any personal time left over?

This is the world of ministry. Therefore, most ministers want help with time management. So, let’s start with some obvious principles and then address deeper issues.

1. Keep a “to do” list. The ministry has too many demands and too many varied tasks to remember them all without a written list. Make a list every day. Transfer incomplete items from yesterday’s to today’s list. This is the most basic principle in time management, yet many individuals ignore it.

2. Prioritize your list. Look at it and decide, “Which items must I do today, no matter what else happens?” Complete those items first.

3. Write down long term goals. A goal is not real unless you write it down. If you doubt it, just make a list of the things you intended to do in the last year, but did not. How many did you write down as specific goals you wished to achieve? The most effective individuals in any field have written long term goals which direct their efforts. Those who do not determine long-term goals to direct their work constantly suffer from the “tyranny of the urgent,” where lives are dominated by daily events. While making a daily “to do” list is the most basic principle of time management; committing long-term goals to writing is the principle that separates truly effective people from everyone else.

4. Think of time management like financial planning. Financial planners say the first thing to do is create an emergency fund. So, plan for emergency time. This approach means that every week we need to schedule a block of time we can use to work on our goals and complete our to do lists, when unexpected crises have consumed our schedules. Put it on your calendar as “catch up” or whatever you want to call it, but schedule it like any other appointment.

If you do nothing else but implement these four, simple principles, you will be in better shape than having done nothing. But if you truly want to be effective, here are some deeper considerations to help you in the task of time management.

First, start good habits at an early age. Whatever you do in your first ministry position will likely become the pattern for your life. A golf pro once told me, “Practice make permanent.” Whether it is the muscle memory of a bad golf swing or the habits of poor personal management, the more we do them, the more ingrained they become in our lives, and, consequently, the harder they are to break. Create good habits early and evaluate your adherence to them from time to time. A good place to start is with the written long term goals mentioned above. Do not let this week come to an end without writing down major accomplishments you want to achieve in your life. Is it learning another language, going to graduate school, or writing a book? There will never be a better time, or an easier time, to commit to these goals than right now! Start out right; create good habits early.

Next, recognize that procrastination will defeat any time management system. If procrastination is problem in your life, determine why. Typical roots of this problem range from simple fatigue to clinical
depression. If you find yourself delaying a task, be honest enough with yourself to determine why. If it is fatigue, then create more Sabbath in your life. Studies show that after 60-70 hours of work in a week, effectiveness declines dramatically. Time is much better spent resting now in order to be more effective later. Another reason for procrastination may be a lack of knowledge or competence, resulting in a debilitating fear of failure. If this is your reason for procrastination, find a trustworthy mentor to help you grow in ministry skills. Another root of procrastination is anxiety about uncomfortable relationships; we avoid tasks involving difficult people or difficult circumstances because we dread the emotional energy that the task will take. Remember - such tasks are never easier tomorrow than they are today. In fact, they will only become more difficult. Go toward the problem and begin working on its resolution. Avoidance only increases your anxiety. Last in our list of reasons for procrastination is situational and chronic depression. Depression, whatever its cause, makes nearly everything harder to complete. If you suspect depression is the root of your procrastination, consult with a physician or counselor immediately. Help is available.

If you find yourself looking for the perfect time management system time after time -- if multiple systems fail you -- the real problem may be procrastination, not the system you use. If you find procrastination to be a problem for you, be self aware enough to admit and address the particular cause in your situation.

Finally, remember this: you are not managing time; rather, you are managing your life. Sitting in a boring, ill-planned meeting is not a waste of time, it is a waste of an irretrievable part of your life. Time management is really about accomplishing the dreams and aspirations you have for your professional and personal life. What do you want to accomplish with your life? If you know the answer to this question, you will have a better idea what tasks need to be scheduled daily in order to accomplish these dreams.

As a corollary to this idea, remember that there is no system to manage more tasks than humanly possible to complete. Managing your life includes how many obligations you will accept. As a new minister in a church or community, you will likely receive many invitations to join organizations, speak at special events, and to participate in denominational service. Balance is critical! Early in your calling such opportunities provide a chance to forge new relationships, extend the influence of your congregation or ministry, and to grow personally. All these opportunities, however, present the potential trap of over commitment. The key is balance. Properly balanced attention to ministry, to long-term personal goals, to self and family, and to outside opportunities will provide the most effective and rewarding life. Choose carefully what you will do. It is more than your time; it is your life.
Time Management Action Guide

Summary:

The time management module addresses principles for organizing and using time efficiently as a minister. Clarifying that one is not managing time, but instead managing life, puts in perspective the importance for the new minister to establish goals, be intentional about scheduling, and to prioritize tasks.

Focus:

The focus here is to encourage and strengthen intentionality in organizing and living life as a minister. Through an honest look at time spent, and the life experience of the support committee members, the new minister can work toward developing work and life habits that match and support his or her life goals and values.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of Time Management.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and a handout copy given to the group members:

Assignment for the Minister Support Committee members:

Invite the committee members to be prepared to share their experience with time management systems, methods, and approaches. What ways have worked for them in the past, and currently? What kinds of systems, or approaches have they tried that have not worked? Asking for the members of the committee to prepare ahead of time the kinds of systems they have tried, used, kept and discarded may be very beneficial. The goal is to help a minister not only to become disciplined in organizing and prioritizing time, tasks, and goals, but also to find and shape a system that works best with his or her personality type.

Assignment for the New Minister

Ask the new minister to take what would be considered a regular and typical week during the past month and do a simple time audit. It is very important here to convey that this is not going to be used as a critique of his or her work habits. The purpose is to learn from personal habits and life circumstances regarding what actually happens in a week. It is recommended that the seven day period used be a Monday through Sunday period. Have the new minister do the following:

- From the past month, select a week that would be considered a typical week, beginning with a Monday and going through a Sunday.
- As best as possible, use these four blocks of time (6-12 am, 12-6 pm, 6-12 pm, and 12-6 am).
- Doing this for each of the seven days Monday – Sunday, make a list of all the activities done during these blocks of time.
• Using the following categories identify and mark what category the activities fall into:
  1. Work: all activities related to your job responsibilities.
  2. Family/Relationships: time spent in activities that are devoted to your primary personal and family relationships.
  3. Physical/Recreational: activities that include your relaxation, physical activity, yard work, television, hobbies.
  4. Worship & Personal Spiritual Growth: activities that are devoted to your personal spiritual growth that are outside of job related scripture reading and study.
  5. Rest: specifically your actual rest and sleep.

• You may choose to further identify types of activities within these categories if you choose for your own learning and interest in how your time is actually used.

• As you gain a picture of how your time is used, consider the following questions as you review these activities:
  1. What kind of balance do you observe in how your time was used?
  2. What surprises you in this composite of your week?
  3. As you remember the beginning of this week, what did you hope to accomplish that did not happen?
  4. What interrupted your plans this week that mandated an adjustment to your schedule and plans? Was this interruption related to a ministry issue, crisis, or church matter? Did you have any control over this interruption?
  5. Do you have tendencies toward repeated procrastination? Possible root causes related to procrastination include fatigue, fear of failure, fear of success, perfectionism, anxiety in relationships, depression. Are your tendencies toward procrastination connected with one of these causes more than the others? If so, which one.
  6. What has this exercise revealed to you?
  7. What aspects of time usage and management would you like to have advice and help?
  8. How might you use your support committee as a resource?

• It is recommended that you have a copy of your time audit that identifies the activities and their types for the support committee members when you meet. You will also want to be prepared to share a summary of what you have gleaned from this and how this support committee can be a resource for you.

Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)

Phase 1
Ask the new minister to present his or her time audit and share the insights this exercise has surfaced. Some questions to consider for further discussion include:

• With what do you need the most help in managing and organizing your time and responsibilities?
• How closely does this week you evaluated represent a typical balance for you with your work, relationships, personal activities and rest? If it is not typical, what is typical in the distribution of your activities?
• How well will your typical work and life habits in which you are currently involved support your values and enable you to achieve your life and work goals?
• What do you need from us, and how can we best support you with your needs and challenges in the area of time management?

Phase 2
As is appropriate have the support committee members share from their own experiences about the tools, methods, habits, and approaches that they have found to be useful. This is intended as a means to show that various approaches can be used and that no single approach is the best or only method to use. This can also reflect the importance of developing good habits, and finding tools and approaches that blend with an individual’s personality type.

Additional Comments
Be aware of the strengths and needs that the new minister has related to work habits, and time management. Be sensitive to the openness and awareness that the new minister has of his or her personal habits, strengths, and challenges. Depending on the identified needs, additional follow up or check in periods later in the process may be useful.
Member Support Committee Assignment

In preparation for the next meeting with the new minister be prepared to share your experience with time management systems, methods, and approaches. By coming prepared to share the kinds of systems you have tried, used, kept and discarded may be very beneficial for the new minister. The goal is to help him or her not only to become disciplined in organizing and prioritizing time, tasks, and goals, but also to find and shape a system that works best with his or her personality type.

What ways have worked for you in the past, and currently?

What kinds of systems, or approaches have you tried that have not worked?
New Minister Assignment

You are to take what would be considered a regular and typical week during the past month and do a simple time audit. This is not going to be used as a critique of your work habits. The purpose is to learn from personal habits and life circumstances regarding what actually happens in a week. It is recommended that you use a seven day period running from Monday through Sunday. Use the following guide to prepare your time audit:

- From the past month, select a week that would be considered a typical week, beginning with a Monday and going through a Sunday.
- As best as possible, use these four blocks of time (6-12 am, 12-6 pm, 6-12 pm, and 12-6 am).
- Doing this for each of the seven days Monday – Sunday, make a list of all the activities done during these blocks of time.
- Using the following categories identify and mark what category the activities fall into:
  1. Work: all activities related to your job responsibilities.
  2. Family/Relationships: time spent in activities that are devoted to your primary personal and family relationships.
  3. Physical/Recreational: activities that include your relaxation, physical activity, yard work, television, hobbies.
  4. Worship & Personal Spiritual Growth: activities that are devoted to your personal spiritual growth that are outside of job related scripture reading and study.
  5. Rest: specifically your actual rest and sleep.

- You may choose to further identify types of activities within these categories if you choose for your own learning and interest in how your time is actually used.
- As you gain a picture of how your time is used, consider the following questions as you review these activities:
  1. What kind of balance do you observe in how your time was used?
  2. What surprises you in this composite of your week?
  3. As you remember the beginning of this week, what did you hope to accomplish that did not happen?
  4. What interrupted your plans this week that mandated an adjustment to your schedule and plans? Was this interruption related to a ministry issue, crisis, or church matter? Did you have any control over this interruption?
  5. Do you have tendencies toward repeated procrastination? Possible root causes related to procrastination include fatigue, fear of failure, fear of success, perfectionism, anxiety in relationships, depression. Are your tendencies toward procrastination connected with one of these causes more than the others? If so, which one.
  6. What has this exercise revealed to you?
  7. What aspects of time usage and management would you like to have advice and help?
  8. How might you use your support committee as a resource?

It is recommended that you have a copy of your time audit that identifies the activities and their types for the support committee members when you meet. You will also want to be prepared to share a summary of what you have gleaned from this and how this support committee can be a resource for you.