

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 16:



Te Ope Whakāora

Lasting the Distance in Ministry

Dear Rex

With the long summer break coming soon, you've asked for tips on lasting the distance in ministry.

It's a subject I've often thought about since I started ministry in the 60s—and here (as a kind of 'testimony') are a few things I've learned that may help you last the distance and bear fruit into old age.

Putting it in a sentence, the greatest lesson I've learned is to flow with the rhythms of grace in ministry—because there are unwritten laws of ministry that, if kept, will greatly enhance the length and fruitfulness of your ministry.

But if you ignore or break them, you and your ministry may go down together long before you reach retirement. And while these unwritten laws apply specifically to paid pastors, they also apply in the broad sense to volunteers in ministry—and without volunteers, our churches would not survive.

Here then, in great brevity, are some of those principles.

The Rhythms Of Successful Time Management

The whole of life, from the rising and setting of the sun, to the way we use our waking hours for ministry, is built on rhythms.

1. There are **daily** rhythms of successful time management—and how we handle our individual days has a huge bearing on how well we do on Sundays, our big day, and how much fruit we bear through the years.

If we're crisis driven like many pastors, activity driven, or driven by the tyranny of the urgent, we'll probably bear little fruit even though we're always busy. But if we're discerning pastors, like Bill Hybels who made this discovery in the wear and tear of ministry, we'll put our most important tasks into the most productive part of our day, prioritise the important rather than the urgent, work in short focused bursts, and have a sign-off time to every day—in his case, he walks from the office at 4.00pm.

2. There are **weekly** rhythms of successful time management—just as the Creator Himself worked for six days and rested on the seventh.

Wise pastors know we do best on Sundays, and over years of Sundays, when we keep our weekly day off—turning to very different things to refresh us, re-envision us, recharge us, and put the fire for ministry 'back in our bellies.' Unwise pastors work the whole day long, well into the night, and every day of the week. So they quite quickly become like the broken rubber bands that once held bundles of old Leadership Letters together in my office. They were stretched for so long without a break, that they collapsed under the strain, spilling their contents onto the floor.

3. There are **monthly** and even **quarterly** rhythms of successful time management—so that if after several weeks of work we take a little extra time off, perhaps around a long weekend, we'll go into the following weeks with new focus, passion, and effectiveness.

4. There are **yearly** rhythms of successful time management, when we take a larger block of time out from ministry—recovering from the stresses and strains of the past year, putting our



energy and thought into other activities, and in our more inspiring moments reflecting on the way we've been doing ministry and how we might do it better in the coming year.

Walking away from ministry, and cutting all ties with it, is one of the keys to having a great year over the following 12 months. Taking our laptop and some work things with us on vacation lessens the value of the break and increases the likelihood of us breaking down before the next long vacation comes around.

When it comes to work, be it daily or yearly, it's not how busy we are or how many hours we work, but how well we work—because as Zig Ziglar says, 'Efficiency is getting the job done right. Effectiveness is getting the right job done. Excellence is getting the right job done well.'

Doing the right job well, month in and month out, is the key to successful time management!

The Rhythms Of Grace In Bible Reading And Prayer

Bible reading and prayer are the two pillars of a close and fruitful walk with God—and most of what I now know about them I've learned later in life. Here are three lessons I've learned.

1. We should experiment with different ways of doing Bible reading—till we find the one that's best for us.

I started following Jesus over 50 years ago, but it wasn't till many years later that I discovered what works best for me and helps me hear His voice most clearly. Now, all these years later, I choose the time of the day when I get the most out of Bible reading, glance at several devotional aids as a 'choke' to get me started and warm my spirit, and unhurriedly read a chapter a day through the NT—trying to read a chapter or two from the OT as well. But the NT, with its focus on Christ, is the supreme and final revelation of God (Heb 1.1-2), so I start with that.

2. We should experiment with different ways of praying—till we find the ones that work best for us.

It was also a very long time before I came into a meaningful life of prayer. Patterns great leaders recommended didn't work for me; nor did journaling or writing prayers or tying my main praying to Bible reading. I had to find my own way of doing it—which in my case is to rise early, have breakfast, pray, and do other beginning-of-the-day things like glancing at the paper. Then when all that's done, my mind is clear, my spirit warm and open, and I'm calm and most ready to read the Bible and soak it up as a sponge soaks up water.

So in my own case (although I've found many others have the same struggles), my main praying comes first and separate from Bible reading, I 'get through' to God in prayer and look forward to Bible reading a short time later—enjoying it greatly. In a word, I'm at last 'enjoying' God—as the old Shorter Catechism says I should!

Different methods of Bible reading and prayer work for different people; but whatever the method, and however busy our ministry may be, regular and unhurried Bible reading and prayer is an absolute requirement for a close walk with God and lasting fruitfulness—and no ministry responsibilities should come ahead of them.

3. We should give very high priority to memorising Scripture, so that like the Lord Jesus in His great temptations, we can accurately recall and correctly quote (or focus on) what God says to defeat the devil and his temptations—because nothing else will.

The road to this discovery was long and tortuous. Like most evangelical Christians of the later mid 20th century, I moved away from the Authorised Version of the Bible—in my case to The NIV Study Bible, because the scholars said it was based on better manuscripts, it retained some of the flow of the Authorised Version, and I loved the marvellous study notes.



But in recent years I've discovered it's all come at a cost because I could no longer recall and quote more than a few well-known verses. So I moved to The New King James Version for my devotional reading—because it retains most of the cadence of the Authorised Version and does much of my memory work for me as I read; so many of the verses I could once quote are coming back to me without doing any actual memory work.

Others may choose different routes to their memory work—which is fine; but I chose this route because one of my highest priorities now is to know and memorise Scripture so I can recall it instantly and meditate on it frequently. I want to be able to recall and quote Scripture like Jesus; say with the Psalmist, 'Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You' (Ps 119.11); and echo Wesley's, 'I want to know one thing, the way to heaven.... O give me that book: At any price give me the book of God!.... I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.'

There are rhythms of grace in both Bible reading (and it's retention) and prayer (and contemplation). To reach our potential for God, we must master both!

The Rhythms Of Grace In Preaching And Teaching

The two phases of preaching (and the teaching many volunteers do) are preparation before the event and doing it on the day.

1. There are rhythms of grace in preaching and teaching preparation.

For much of my 18 years in pastoral ministry I was on two sermons a Sunday, did postgraduate university study, and had family responsibilities—so I was forced to master the preparation challenge to fit everything in.

At first, being an expository preacher, I read the experts' comments for several hours at a set time each week—then tried to get my message outline out. But it was hard and often unproductive work, and I struggled with it!

Then I discovered that there are times in every working day when the mind is clear and the Spirit speaks with exceptional power; and they're often before we start the main grind of the day and when we take time out for our favourite exercise—for me at that time, jogging in the late afternoon. Time after time, when I was only a few minutes into the run, my mind cleared and I had far better thoughts than when I was in the study; so as soon as I was back I wrote the new thoughts down and wove them into the emerging message the next morning.

Of course, I still did preparatory reading, starting up to 10 days in advance; but the pressure to get an outline out had eased. And to make my task easier, I heard tapes of David Pawson's expository messages in advance, and glanced at Barclay's commentaries—so the two weekly messages came together much more quickly and in far better preaching shape because I'd discovered the rhythms of grace when the Spirit came with power.

2. There are rhythms of grace in giving the prepared message—or doing the teaching.

Having worked as 'smartly' as I could at getting the message out, I wanted to be in the best shape for preaching it. So apart from exceptional occasions, I went to bed early on Saturday nights; and because of the way I'm wired up, to this day I never watch a major rugby game on TV on Saturday nights when I have ministry the next day. I'll listen to it on the radio while doing other things—because there's not the same emotional involvement as watching it on TV. And I need to be in the best emotional and physical shape for preaching!

In the same way, and because of the way I'm wired up, I usually read through my sermon notes before breakfast on Sunday mornings, rarely afterwards—because eating seems to dull my uptake and bonding with the message (surprisingly, in contrast to Bible reading which I always do after breakfast).



But however we're wired up, if we monitor ourselves, we'll find there are rhythms of grace for both preparation and delivery—and the preacher or teacher who discovers these has found a ministry treasure that may double or even treble their effectiveness.

The Rhythms Of Grace In Growing Our Churches

As with the previous issues, there are rhythms of grace in growing our churches—and in the average church they tend to be these.

1. There are quiet non-growth seasons when we search for a new dream—and all churches have them.

The non-growth period may come at any time in a pastor's ministry in a particular place—at the beginning, in the middle, or towards the end of their ministry so the pastor who follows inherits the downtime. But whenever the non-growth time comes, the only way out of it is to search for a new dream. Leadership Letter 15 was written to help churches find their way out of such times and start a new growth cycle.

2. There are quiet 'turnaround' seasons when, having found our new dream, we start to grow again.

The key to handling this season is to realise that the longer the church has been plateaued or declining, the more time we need to allow for the first small signs of growth to appear. If the downtime has been long and severe, the new dream may require major changes to the way we do church—with new priorities, new ministries with new leaders and teams, and new relationship building with the people in the community we're trying to reach. So the Sunday attendance gains in the first few months may be few, if any; but that's not important because the main gains come over the following years. Leaders, who know this, trust God and build expectantly for the harvest.

3. There are seasons of accelerating growth as the new dream begins to come to fruition—with increasing conversions, rising attendances, expanding ministries and great joy in the church and even the community.

This is the season when people who were far from Jesus find Him, those who once walked with Him and gave Him away return to Him, and some who're restless in other churches come to us (and while we don't encourage them to change churches, it's a fact of life in nearly all growing churches—and the larger the church the bigger the number).

How long this season of accelerating growth lasts depends in part on how well we put down our 'dream' foundations, how we negotiate the critical numbers barriers, how well we build our new ministry teams, and whether there's a change of senior pastor. But if we've done our foundational work well, and make the needed adjustments along the way, the season of accelerating growth may last for years.

But in its present form, it will end one day—and the leaders who know and plan for this save themselves a lot of heartbreak and disappointment.

4. There are seasons when we consolidate after rapid growth and find a new dream.

Nothing in its present form lasts forever—our work, our youth, our health, or even our families. All change, fade, or come to an end. So it is with the life cycle of churches, just like the churches in the Book of Revelation. They flourish, they fade, and to survive and grow again they reinvent and relaunch themselves.

So when we're reaching our dream after years of exciting growth, or momentum slows for other reasons, we search for a new dream to take us beyond our present one. Of course, to



minimise the transition from one dream to another, we should start searching for the new dream before the old one is completed. And the process, which I've outlined in several Leadership Letters (especially Letter 15) need not be long or difficult—so that the change from one dream to another is no more than a pause to evaluate, refocus, and make the often significant infrastructure changes that may be needed to carry us forward to our new dream.

But whether the pause is shorter or longer, all church dreams come to an end and need to be transcended by others. The leaders and churches that know and plan for this can keep advancing for many years—and like Willow Creek, may even advance for decades as they move from dream to dream.

Lasting The Distance In Ministry

Rex, those are a few brief comments on how to last the distance in ministry—and end it one day after a life of fruitfulness.

The key to this is to understand and flow with the rhythms of grace that are as much a part of the spiritual world as the rhythms of life in the natural world.

May God bless you as you complete another year of ministry, take time out with your family over the summer break, and dream of all you can do together in the coming year.

And may 2007 be the year when all your dreams begin to come true.

Goodbye!

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To discuss at leaders meetings

1. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being outstanding), what grade would we each give ourselves for successful time management—and what steps will we now take to use our time most profitably (write them down)?
2. On a scale of 1-10, what grade would we each give ourselves for Bible reading and prayer—and what steps will we now take to flow more with the rhythms of grace in our devotions (write the steps down)?
3. On a scale of 1-10, what grade would we each give ourselves for preaching (or teaching) preparation, and delivery preparation—and what steps will we now take to tap into the rhythms of grace so we do these better (write them down)?
4. Where do we feel our church is at in its growth cycle—and whatever the stage, what steps will we now take to ensure we grow through the decades, like Willow Creek, reaching more and more people for Jesus and bringing them into His family (write the steps down and begin acting on them immediately)?