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Ways of Saving Time and Labor in Parish Administration

Gary C. Genzen

The parish ministry today can be a time-consuming, exhausting calling. The pastor needs to find ways to make the most effective use of time and energy. I made a study of ways of saving time and labor in the parish ministry as a part of a Doctor of Ministry project prepared in 1980. The following article provides a concise list of some ideas which may prove helpful in the administration of a contemporary parish. The ideas have been gleaned from more than a decade of experience in the parish ministry, as well as from the sources listed at the end of the article.

1. Recognize that the larger the size of the parish, the greater will likely be the size of the pastoral workload. This especially applies to the parish staffed by one pastor.

2. Recognize that earthly time is a passing gift of God. Such a recognition should help you to use your time more effectively.

3. Learn to delegate tasks. "Put ten men to work, rather than do the work of ten men" (Dwight L. Moody). Note the example of the apostles in Acts 6:2-7. They delegated their work. Note the results (v.7).

4. In the delegating process be sure to separate pastoral from "other" duties. Hospital visitation, counseling, and preaching are tasks almost exclusively for the pastor. But many other parish tasks can and should be delegated. Secretarial and janitorial tasks, for example, should be delegated to either volunteer or paid help.

5. Counseling appointments should be scheduled at times convenient to the pastor. It is generally futile to run out to someone's home at 3 a.m. to try to intervene in a marital problem situation. Whenever possible schedule counseling sessions at *your* office during the day or evening.

6. Planning the church program, sermons, music, etc. weeks, months, or even a year in advance can save the pastor time, energy, and emotional anguish.

7. Try to plan and prepare, well in advance of outside speaking engagements.

8. Strive for brevity in preaching. People no longer expect the thirty-minute sermon. A fifteen-minute message is usually sufficient.

9. Make a daily work schedule each day for the coming day. List tasks according to the priority in which they need to be accomplished.

10. Take a two-week detailed time inventory to find out how you currently use time, and to detect areas of time-waste.

11. Establish a regular office workday routine — to be interrupted only by emergencies. Maintain regular office hours.

12. Learn to say “no”! You simply cannot accept all the counseling assignments, committee assignments, speaking and social engagements that come your way. The parish pastor needs to be assertive, lest he “burn out” trying to meet all the expectations of others.

13. Set deadlines for accomplishing your work. For example, you may wish to have your sermon prepared by Wednesday or Thursday of each week.

14. Learn how to handle office interruptions. A good church secretary, or a phone answering machine, or both, can save the pastor from unwanted interruptions into his work and study schedule.

15. Work in a well-organized, neat office, with phone, typewriter, files, books, and dictating equipment within easy reach.

16. Establish an adequate and convenient set of church records for each member in the parish, and for prospects.

17. If possible, maintain your office at the church. You will have fewer interruptions, and you will likely establish more regular office hours, getting a more prompt start in the morning.

18. Make sure your church has an intra-office mailbox with slots for church officers, staff, and boards. In this way messages or mail can be more easily forwarded to individuals or groups.

19. Underline or check materials in books and periodicals for later typing, photo-copying, and filing by your secretary.

20. To make most efficient use of time it is essential to have a well-equipped office with adequate lighting, ventilation (air-conditioning), desks, chairs, files, and the necessary office machines. A photo-copy machine can be a tremendous time-saver.

21. The pastor should learn to make use of dictating equipment. Such equipment can save pastor and secretary many hours of work and time each week.

22. Make more use of the telephone. *Many* pastoral calls can be made by telephone. When a face-to-face visit is needed, call ahead to make sure the person will be at home. It will save you time and gasoline.

23. Have adequate telephone directories for the surrounding area. These directories are a time-saver when you need a particular number, product, or service.

24. Use of a telephone answering and paging service — or even of a telephone answering machine — will make sure that you save time and do not miss telephone calls. Such services and devices can also save the pastor from being disturbed at home for “routine” matters.

25. An efficient church secretary can be one of the best time- and energy-savers a pastor can have. No pastor should be without secretarial help (preferably paid secretarial help).

26. Try to answer correspondence in a prompt fashion. When possible, dictate answers to letters soon after they arrive.

27. Utilize form letters (such as letters to visitors) which can be individually typed by the church secretary. The letters look personal, but save you time.

28. Try to keep your letters to one page in length. Efficient business correspondence is best kept brief.

29. Carry a good camera. It can be used to copy chalkboard notes at lectures or even to photograph pages of books.

30. Save your sermon manuscripts for further use. There is no reason why a fine sermon cannot be updated and used again at some future time and place.

31. Funeral sermons can often be revised and used on more than one occasion.

32. When doing pastoral visitations, attempt, when possible, to schedule all visits in the same section of town.

33. Schedule difficult tasks, study, sermon preparation, etc. for those times of the day when you feel your best and can thus work with most efficiency. For *many*, but not all people, the early morning hours are the best hours for work.

34. Starting the work day earlier can help you accomplish more work, and perhaps have more free time. Any number of

famous pastors have begun their work day between 5 and 7 a.m. Note also the Biblical examples of those who rose early and accomplished much: Abraham (Gen. 19:27), Jacob (Gen. 28:18), Moses (Exodus 34:4), and Jesus Himself (Mark 1:35).

35. Strive to keep a neat desk, office, and files. Misplaced items rob one of time.

36. If you purchase a home, try not to live too far from church and office. Much time can be wasted in commuting.

37. When waiting for people to arrive for church meetings, try to be working at other tasks. If they do not appear, you will at least have accomplished something.

38. A mediocre custodian or church secretary, who needs constant guidance, is a time-waster. Try to hire competent employees.

39. When a well-meaning parishioner suggests a visit to a possible prospective member, it is often helpful to indicate that you will not have time to visit that person for a number of weeks, but would appreciate it if the parishioner would make the visit for you.

40. Use a good daily pocket calendar and desk calendar to organize your time.

41. Use spare minutes (waiting in doctors' and dentists' offices, etc.) to read books and articles.

42. Light reading can be accomplished during the lunch hour. Meetings can also sometimes be held over lunch.

43. You can listen to continuing education tapes as you travel in the car. Dictation can also be done while driving, but it may not make for safe driving.

44. Greet as many people as possible before and after weekly worship. Good pastoral work can often be accomplished during these time periods.

45. Be punctual for all meetings and appointments. For all meetings try to arrange set starting and ending points. This is particularly important in the case of counseling sessions. Such sessions should rarely exceed sixty minutes.

46. Refer to others those people who require more counseling time than your schedule will permit.

47. Learn to save time by taking time off. Take one or two days off each week, periodic mini-vacations, and an annual vacation two, three, or four weeks in duration. You cannot work efficiently

if you are always working. Plan coffee-breaks during your work day, and try to get some exercise (jogging, walking, biking, etc.) each day. A brief nap can also provide some refreshment for more productive work.

48. Attempt to schedule several church meetings on the same evening.

49. Return all but emergency telephone calls at a stated time period in the late morning and late afternoon. Making all your telephone calls at once will protect your work day from disturbance. It will also aid you in accomplishing your telephone calls in less time. People are less likely to drag out a conversation before the lunch or dinner hour.

50. Take time each day at the beginning of the day, to *plan* your day's work. Find the task of first priority and, if possible, work at that task until it is completed. Then move on to the next project in order of the priority you have established.

51. Authorize your secretary to sign all but your most important or sensitive correspondence. Your secretary can also be authorized to write some of your less important correspondence. Simply be certain she is aware of the general thoughts you wish to communicate.

The committed, contemporary pastor will want to make each day, each moment, count for his Lord, his flock of parishioners, his family, and himself. By following the suggestions outlined above, the pastor can save time and energy, yet perform his work more effectively and efficiently.

Suggested Reading

Leslie B. Flynn, *How to Save Time in the Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966).

James N. McCutcheon, *The Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978).

Augustus W. Dowdy, Jr., *Phone Power* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1975).

Edgar Walz, *Church Business Methods* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970).

Speed B. Leas, *Time Management: A Working Guide for Church Leaders* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1978).

Ted Engstrom and R. Alec MacKenzie, *Managing Your Time* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

R. Alec Mackenzie, *The Time Trap* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1975).

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