

## Julia Ledford

### A minister tending the spiritual



Vocational ministry can be one of the most rewarding and fulfilling fields of work; it can also be one of the most challenging and draining. As more and more ministers and churches work together to promote each other's health, new opportunities and concepts

for care and growth develop. Sabbaticals, care groups, and pastoral internships are some of the new ways ministerial health is promoted. Veteran minister Julia Ledford, however, found some of her greatest ministerial rejuvenation through practices going back to the dawn of Christianity. By refocusing her own personal spiritual formation, she found restoration and renewed passion for her calling to a ministry of discipleship.



The Reverend Julia Ledford serves as associate pastor for Christian discipleship at Hayes-Barton Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. She has been at Hayes-Barton for over 13 years and has served in a variety of capacities within the realm of discipleship, serving first as their children's minister and eventually transitioning into

her current work with adults. Although she has been in formal ministry for over 25 years, she was passionate about discipleship even as a layperson. Her call to ministry, as she describes it, was a growing sense of call in response to the Great Commission, which commands us to make disciples. Over a period of about seven years, she felt that God was drawing her toward something; but toward what, she wasn't exactly sure. Over time she realized her calling to help with the spiritual formation of others as she recognized the need many churches have in this area. At Hayes-Barton, she has the opportunity to live out her passion to help people in their relationship with Jesus Christ, whether through

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small discipleship groups, Sunday School, spiritual counseling, or any of the other areas of ministry with which she works.

After many years in church ministry, Julia understands firsthand the joys and challenges faced by ministers and the importance of both self and congregational care. Through the years, she has developed several ministerial habits to promote both effective ministry and self-care. From her experience, she suggests churches should consider adopting a formal daily schedule that includes both administrative hours and study hours that would be known and agreed upon by the church. This would allow the church to know what the minister is doing and would assure the minister of time to study and plan without interruption.



One of Julia's greatest methods of self-care is her focus on her own spiritual life and spiritual well-being. Although she has long reaped the benefits of a daily personal quiet time, her spiritual practices were reshaped a few years ago when the *Companions in Christ* discipleship series began. As a review of the material for her church, she led a pilot group of five women in her church. The results were life-changing for her and the other women as they learned to experience Christ in ways that further enriched their spiritual development. The study offered something for which Julia had been praying for some time. Participants were challenged to shift their relationship with Christ from cognitive (knowing about Christ) to experiential (knowing Christ). What started as a new program became a transforming experience for Julia and her church, shaping her personally and vocationally. It has challenged her to be intentional about her own spiritual development, even as she encourages others in theirs. This is an area she fears many ministers overlook as they focus on their external responsibilities of service and teaching. Some may even be a little mystified by this different type of discipleship. She acknowledges that somewhere along the

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way Christians made Christianity a program and not a life. She is excited for this opportunity to reclaim the life with Christ believers were intended to live.

In addition to the importance of a minister's personal spiritual formation and self-care, the church has a responsibility to protect the health of the ministers. One of the biggest mistakes Julia believes churches make is forgetting that ministers are called by God and the church and not merely hired. The difference drastically affects the expectations of both church and minister. In her own ministry, she has been cared for in a number of ways by her church. Recently Hayes-Barton started a sabbatical program for ministers who serve over seven years. This program offers ministers an opportunity for spiritual rejuvenation.

Although the sabbatical is a new offering that she has not yet experienced, Julia has been cared for in many unofficial ways over the years. The encouragement of church members who pray, genuinely care, and offer friendship is a huge blessing. Also, the affirmation of the importance of the minister's family is an



issue in the care of the church for the minister. Having things cared for at home with family is a huge source of stability for Julia and many ministers as they seek to provide better care for their congregations. In North Carolina, the Center for Congregational Health offers additional guidance for churches in caring for their ministers. Julia has also participated in a CBF peer learning group with other Christian educators and a spiritual formation group that have offered support.

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Julia Ledford loves her work. She loves the opportunity to lead individuals and groups in spiritual formation and planning discipleship opportunities. It is her specific calling as she seeks to live out the Great Commission. Although the challenges can be great, she realizes that if both the minister and the church are self-aware, both can look forward to a long, healthy life in ministry together. As for Julia, she is still encouraged by the verse of Scripture that so encouraged her in the early days of her calling: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). As Julia seeks every opportunity to embrace that word of truth in her personal and vocational life, she finds her life and work replenished for her journey of faith.

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Julia’s story offers a great amount of understanding that the minister is not a minister first and a Christian second. The same would apply for each church member. Our first calling is to live as Christ. This story is gripping as it reminds us about the importance of our own personal spiritual formation. Julia emphasizes the value of positive habits and practices that build up our lives in Christ.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does your minister restore and renew her or his passion on the journey?
2. What are his/her habits of discipleship?
3. What habits of self-care do you encourage your minister to follow?
4. When does your minister study and plan without interruption?
5. How does your minister find the time for personal devotion and quiet?  
What do you sense are the benefits your minister receives from this time?

6. As a community of faith, is your congregation intentional about their own spiritual development as the people of God?
7. Is Christianity a program or a way of life for members of your congregation?
8. Does your minister work *for* you or *with* you as you seek to be all that God calls you to be and do all God calls you to do? What would it mean for your congregation to grow in understanding her minister(s) as called by God rather than as merely hired by the church?
9. How self-aware is your congregation?