

Doyle Sager

A seasoned minister still passionate about ministry



As churches seek ways to provide better care for their ministers, the prevention of burnout is a big issue. Recent surveys show that those in helping professions are at a greater risk of professional burnout than in any other career. Ministers

would definitely fall into this category. The physical and emotional demands of ministry cause many to leave the profession. Avoiding burnout is good not only for the personal health of the minister, but for the congregational health of the church. Improving the care of ministers increases the longevity of their ministries. In terms of ministry health and longevity, Doyle Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri, has a story to tell. He has been in ministry 36 of his 56 years and is still excitedly pursuing God’s vision for his church and ministry. His story offers a glance at how churches and ministers can work together to maintain health and avoid burnout through formal and informal dialogue and shared vision.



Doyle Sager’s ministry began when, at age 15, he felt the call to ministry. Having become a Christian at a young age, he remembers feeling a restlessness that led him to the overwhelming belief that he was being called to vocational ministry. After making a public commitment to ministry in his small Baptist home church, he almost immediately began preaching, even before he could drive. He went on to college and seminary and then pastoral ministry. But he never forgot the support he felt from his home church and pastor.

As a senior pastor, Doyle now takes great joy in encouraging young people in his church as they struggle with their callings. His greatest joy is preparing and delivering sermons. A high point is seeing the “lightbulb” come on as the

Well-Being and Excellence in Ministry

message begins to resonate for the hearer. Having enjoyed long pastorates at the churches he's served, he also likes going through the stages of life with individuals and nurturing long-term relationships.

Ministry is not without its challenges. Doyle acknowledges that time management is always an issue for him as there is always so much to do. Although he loves the variety that every day brings, there is much to keep up with in an ever-changing world. Remaining relevant can be a challenge. Over the years, he has had to develop ways to handle the challenges without being engulfed by them. He has learned the importance of good self-care coupled with continued dialogue with the church in preventing burnout and maintaining a fresh and creative perspective.

Although Doyle has had positive experiences in the churches he has served, he recognizes the importance of being proactive in his self-care. A physical crisis a few years ago reinforced the need to care for himself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Doyle maintains balance by attempting to be physically out of the office one day a week. He also participates in a peer learning group for pastors and an ecumenical study group of pastors. The groups offer a fresh perspective and accountability invaluable to ministry. In 2005, Doyle did something many pastors cannot fathom: He took a sabbatical.

Sabbaticals are crucial for the longevity of pastors and for their emotional and spiritual renewal. Doyle recommends starting the conversation early. His process included writing and sharing a rationale on how the sabbatical would benefit both the pastor and the church. He also worked with the church and staff on the coverage of his duties while he was away from the day-to-day operations of the church.

Doyle's eight-week sabbatical had three foci: rest and renewal, education, and fellowship. The first priority was to spend the first two weeks reading and resting. His education component took place in New York City. While there, he

visited Riverside Church to observe their inner-city ministry and the evolution of their worship style. Finally, he went to Birmingham, England, for the Centennial Congress of the Baptist World Alliance. The sabbatical experience was positive for Doyle and is one he highly recommends for others in ministry.

Through the sabbatical leave as well as other formal acts of care and affirmation, Doyle has experienced the intentional efforts of the church to support their pastor. Still, the informal acts of kindness have made the biggest difference in his personal life and ministry. Encouraging notes and e-mails from church members tend to come at just the right time. He is also thankful for the friendship of laypeople who offer support and love. If the congregation is healthy, the informal acts of care will naturally flow from staff to laity and laity to staff. Although Doyle Sager can't say that he has never felt burned out, his continued passion for ministry suggests that he's learned along the way how to balance life and ministry in a positive way. At the heart of that balance are love and clear communication between church and ministers.

Doyle's story offers good insight into the value of a sabbatical for both a minister and the congregation the minister serves. The intentional plans he has made to do a better job in caring for himself and his family are also convincing. As a convener of a peer learning group, Doyle reveals the positive impact that being a part of such a group has on him and his congregation. His story demonstrates the importance of establishing clear lines of communication within a staff and a congregation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does your congregation encourage your minister(s) to take care of himself or herself? Are you doing a good job taking care of yourself as a minister?
2. Who are your pastor's models and mentors for ministry? What impact have they made and are they making on her/his ministry? How does that contribute to the unfolding story of your congregation?
3. Is your minister meeting regularly with a peer learning group? What are the positive outcomes of this investment?
4. How does your minister plan the workday and the work week?
5. What are the lines for communication within your church fellowship? How might the lines of communication be improved?
6. Does your pastor participate in an ecumenical lectionary Bible study group for the planning of the weekly sermon and worship?
7. Does your community know and respect both your congregation and your minister(s)?
8. Sabbatical plans range from a 90-day period of study once every seven years to 30 days every other year. Has your personnel committee or deacon body discussed the positive merits of a sabbatical policy for your minister(s)? How could a sabbatical policy positively affect your congregation and your minister(s)?