

Subject: Priorities + Single-Staff Pastors

Source: C.J. Mahaney's view from the cheap seats & other stuff

Ministry expectations can spread a pastor's energy thin as his duties expand in all directions. So how does a pastor serving alone prioritize his life and ministry to ensure that he is faithful to God's calling as a pastor? During a Pastors College Q&A meeting this winter, a visiting pastor asked C.J. the following question:

Question: With 18 to 20 hours of study a week, small-group training and leadership, parent-teen leadership, generational leadership, etc., for a guy like myself who is pastoring by himself, what do we do? Obviously we should preach on Sundays at the gathering, but where do we back off? And how do we gauge our family hours?

C.J. Mahaney: Your challenge will be the consistent temptation to compare yourself unfavorably to other pastors and other contexts. You hear about other churches and what they are accomplishing, and you can be tempted to think this is immediately transferable. Always look behind the immediate illustration to the history behind that church.

That is too often what we don't do. So realize that behind that other individual is a body of experience and a number of years. That church didn't begin the way you now see it. And that is no small challenge for someone who is serving by himself in pastoral ministry, but it is your challenge, and it is one that I think you can walk wisely through.

Your priorities at present sound like they are in place.

(1) First is the priority of caring for your own soul before God, cultivating affection for the Savior, and growing in your appreciation for his death on the cross for your sins.

(2) The second priority is caring for, serving, and leading your wife and children.

(3) Then we arrive at preparation for the Sunday meeting. If I were to open your planner and study your calendar, I would want to see reflected in your schedule a sufficient number of hours to prepare for the Sunday meeting. This meeting must be your priority because, until you have a team around you, this is the most effective way you can serve the entirety of the church as it exists now.

From my experience, the demands of counseling often most forcefully intrude upon your preparation for serving the church on Sunday. Identifying and training those capable of serving as small-group leaders would be, I think, your next priority. I would train them in biblical counseling so that they can help you with pastoral ministry and free you to devote more undistracted time to preaching and leading on Sunday. Given the strategic role they play, I wouldn't be simply training these small-group leaders in generalities, but developing a specialized training program for those individuals so that they can assist you in detailed counseling situations. Although you may be required in the toughest cases, finding capable small-group leaders will relieve much of the counseling burden that single-staff pastors cannot carry themselves.

And at this point there are ways I think you can specialize, depending on the makeup of your church. But you don't have to think in terms of official, formalized ministries. For example, you may consider developing a class based on a book like *Age of Opportunity* to train parents and teens for a period of time without the obligation of creating a formalized, ongoing parent-youth ministry.

That is what I would recommend for someone in your present situation. I want to address the immediate pressing needs of your church that aren't being addressed through Sunday and that can't be addressed adequately through small-group leadership. Then asking, "How can we create a way to effectively address those pressing needs temporarily, without obligating you to create an entire ministry?"

And then, primarily, you must be particularly aware — which I am sure you are — of this vulnerability to compare yourself to other churches. You must guard your heart carefully, because if you don't pay careful attention to your heart, there will be a cumulative low-grade discouragement in your soul. I am jealous that you serve the Lord with gladness in this season of the life of your church, and not postpone this joy for some future time when you are surrounded by a pastoral team. Whatever season we find ourselves in—whether a staff of 20 or a staff of one—I am jealous for all of us that we "serve the Lord with gladness" (Psalm 100:2 ESV)