

**TIME FOR THOUGHT:**

**The Role of Margin in Sermon Preparation**

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### THE ROLE OF MARGIN IN SERMON PREPARATION

The terms pastor and preacher are often used synonymously. This fluid term speaks to the dual role a person must step into when leading a church. As a preacher they are charged with faithfully communicating the truth of Scripture to their congregants. As a pastor they are called to serve their community by attending to their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Attending to the needs of a church and teaching the truth of Scripture must work in tandem for the person who fills this role.

Amid the busyness of life and caring for his community the pastor is expected to regularly preach with a high level of competence and insight. This expectation produces several challenges that are often exacerbated by the demands of his role as spiritual leader. Effective preaching that remains faithful to Scripture and connects to its audience often requires a high level of creativity and thought. Mustering the energy for such a regular endeavor while carrying the burden of caring for the congregation week after week is difficult to balance.

The role a pastor plays in the church is fundamental to the overall health of the organization and the spiritual wellbeing of the people connected to it. In order to properly fulfill this role of pastor and preacher a person needs to intentionally build margin into their life and ultimately build margin into their process of sermon preparation. Margin in the process of sermon preparation will positively impact the overall wellbeing of the pastor, allowing him to better serve his congregation and therefore enabling him to preach with a higher level of competence and insight.

## **Purpose and Structure of Study**

The purpose of this study is to show the correlation between margin in the life of the pastor and its positive impact on his process of sermon preparation. An additional feature of this study will bare evidence that the church ultimately benefits from the establishment of margin in their pastor's life. This feature is highlighted in the study because when a pastor builds margin into his life and sermon preparation process the positive implications of such a practice will reverberate into all areas of his life and ministry.

The structure of this study is designed in the following manner: (1) An introduction to margin; (2) the negative implications of no margin; (3) the positive implications of establishing margin; (4) the role and facilitation of margin in the life of a pastor; (5) the implications of margin in sermon preparation; and (6) application and concluding thoughts.

## **An Introduction to Margin**

Fundamental to this study is a clear statement of how the term margin is to be understood and applied. For the purpose of this study, margin will mean “the opposite of overload” or simply life balance.<sup>1</sup> Margin will be used to speak of a type of measurement whereby a person gauges the weight of the burdens they bear. The assessment of margin in the life of an individual means that they need to determine the levels of responsibility they have assumed in all areas of their life. After such an assessment is made, the individual needs to then evaluate what amount of responsibility they can manage in a healthy manner. Margin lives in the space between life balance and life overload.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004), 69. Swenson used this simple phrase to define margin. The simplicity of this phrase is helpful for this study as it accurately and simply encompasses the many nuances contained within the concept of margin.

In his work titled, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, author Richard Swenson speaks at length about this concept of margin. Swenson states that “Margin is the space between our load and limits. It is the amount allowed beyond what is needed. It is something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion, the space between breathing freely and suffocating.”<sup>2</sup> As evidenced by his discussion of this term, the word margin has a flexible level of understanding that can be employed in a variety of ways. Fundamental to assessing margin in the life of an individual is the understanding that its presence is possible in all areas of life.

It is important to understand that margin applies to all areas of life. The pastor can find himself without margin regarding his emotional health, physical health, spiritual wellbeing, finances, and relationships. Each of these fundamental areas of life are capable of being measured, though some according to different standards.

Margin is not the same for every person and therefore each person needs to assess what margin looks like for them. What one person might consider margin in their life might be an overload in the life of another. God has designed some people to bear greater burdens of responsibility than others without being overloaded. This fact is not to be a source of shame but rather it is to be recognized and appreciated. The goal of assessing margin is to discover the way God has uniquely created an individual. The purpose of such an exercise allows one to understand how they might better utilize the time and energy God has graciously provided. The

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<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Swenson, *Margin*, 69. It is important to note that much of the working concept of margin employed by this study stems from Swenson’s writing on the topic. His attention to the role that margin plays in permeating all aspects of life is fundamental to the attention that this study gives to its impact on the pastor.

proper management of one's world directly correlates to margin, and it is the responsibility of every follower of Christ to spend time in self-reflection on this topic.

### **The Negative Implications of No Margin**

The amount of margin that a pastor has in his life will directly impact his life, process of sermon preparation, and by extension, the health of his church. This reality means that before one can appreciate the positive implications of margin one must first understand what happens in the life of a person who does not have any in their lives. A person who lives without any margin finds their life to be grossly unbalanced. This study will show that a life without margin will have adverse effects on all areas of life, both personal and professional. No one is immune to the chaos that results from a life without margin. The unique role of a pastor makes him particularly vulnerable to such a catastrophe.

#### *The Correlation between Stress, Burnout, and Margin*

This study has already established that an overloaded life is one without margin. A marginless life manifests itself in many ways and the consequence of such a lifestyle is detrimental to the individual. To many this overloaded lifestyle invites high levels of stress which inevitably lead to complete burnout.

Stress is to be understood as, “a constraining force or influence such as a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation.”<sup>3</sup> Stress can manifest itself in many ways but ultimately it is caused by assuming too much responsibility, even if that responsibility is the result of life choices or is given to an individual by no choice of their own. A heavy amount of stress will eventually lead to burnout. A

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<sup>3</sup> “Stress,” *Merriam Webster Online*, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stress>.

regularly understood definition of burnout describes it “as a loss of enthusiasm, energy, idealism, perspective, and purpose. It can be viewed as a state of mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion brought on by continued stress.”<sup>4</sup>

Burnout is a widespread phenomenon and has been recorded as impacting professionals across different fields. While people involved in any profession are susceptible to burnout, those working in “‘helping professions’ or ‘human services,’ such as social work” are the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> The nature of pastoral work certainly falls within this category and could even be considered the most vulnerable to this problem due to the unique nature of the work.

The occupational hazards of serving as a pastor are very real. Experts recognize that “burnout is a state of mind that afflicts people who work with other people and give much more than what they get from their colleagues, friends, supervisors, and clients.”<sup>6</sup> The pastor often labors in such an environment. They are often brought into emotionally taxing situations: an unexpected death; a couple on the verge of divorce in need of counsel; or the politics of a divided church in need of spiritual renewal. The nature of the occupation attracts people who desire to serve and therefore they can easily overextend themselves due to the plethora of apparent needs in the church and community. The heart of a servant, when unchecked, will burn itself out taking care of the needs of others if they are not intentional about putting up appropriate boundaries for themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Minirth, Don Hawkins, Paul Meier, and Richard Flournoy, *How to Beat Burnout* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Winifred Albizu Melendez and Rafael M. de Guzmán, *Burnout: The New Academic Disease*, Ashe-Eric Higher Education Research Report, no. 9 (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1983), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Winifred Albizu Melendez and Rafael M. de Guzmán, *Burnout: The New Academic Disease*, 1.

*Personal Implications of a Life without Margin*

A life lived without margin takes its toll on a pastor. A lack of margin leads to stress, the stress can lead to burnout, and burnout will limit the effectiveness of a pastor or remove him from ministry altogether. As a result of the devastating downward spiral of a life and ministry lived without margin, the implications of failing to institute margin must be acknowledged. A burnt-out pastor will have a difficult time organizing and preaching a sermon with the high level of competence and insight his congregation needs.

The inevitable burnout caused by stress impacts a person mentally. Rational thinking quickly fades away and it is replaced by a sense of frustration. This frustration can reveal itself as, “anger, cynicism, negativism, or increased irritability.”<sup>7</sup> The cause of this frustration might be one of guilt over the felt responsibility for certain items. There might be guilt from the unrealistic standards a person sets upon themselves. This mental state puts a person in a fog that will linger across all dimensions of their life.

A large amount of stress can display itself through physical manifestations. A pastor who is burnt-out will experience a loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, trembling, and a lack of energy.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the physical signs of burnout, the mental, emotional, and behavioral indicators are hard to ignore. A pastor might experience anxiety, nervous breakdowns, or start drinking heavily. Health effects can include chronic pain, heart

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Minirth, Don Hawkins, Paul Meier, and Richard Flournoy, *How to Beat Burnout*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> John Davey, *Burnout: Stress in the Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), 7. See reference for a more complete list of the external manifestations of stress.

disorders, ulcers, and even cancer.<sup>9</sup> These issues might be considered personal, but the reality is that they will overflow into other areas of life.

A lack of margin also impacts the spiritual health of a pastor. Many people walking through stressful seasons often withdraw from God. Though this withdrawal is not always intentional, it happens naturally when a pastor gets overwhelmed and busy. The quiet practice of regularly communing with God is often tossed when the time and energy of the pastor gets stretched.<sup>10</sup> During their struggles it is unfortunately natural to neglect God and attempt to push through issues under their own power. At a time when a pastor needs to be more dependent upon God, the stress created by a lack of margin will cause him to withdraw from that vital lifeline. In an occupation which demands a lot out of a person, a pastor crippled with stress is in no position to effectively lead or serve.

#### *Extended Implications of a Life without Margin*

The failure to implement margin will result in real challenges for the pastor which will resonate throughout all his realms of living. This means that not only will there be personal implications of living an overloaded life but every part of his life will feel the impact. A spirit led life brings much security. If the pastor is struggling spiritually due to living without margin it is likely that he will look for security in other places which were not designed to bear such responsibility. This reality plays an important role in shaping his perception and expectations of

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<sup>9</sup> John Davey, *Burnout: Stress in the Ministry*, 8. See reference for a more complete list of the mental, emotional, and behavioral indicators of stress. Psychosomatic and physical effects are also listed in detail.

<sup>10</sup> Diane J. Chandler, "The Impact of Pastors' Spiritual Practices on Burnout." *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 64, no. 2: (2010): 5, accessed March 8, 2019, doi:10.1177/154230501006400206. Dr. Chandler notes that the pastors she studied stated that their spiritual well-being was directly tied to their devotional time. They also noted that their busy schedules, ministry demands, multiple roles, personal identity, and support systems influenced their spiritual health.



the relationships in his life and his personal finances. Each of these items will be reflected by the influence of his ministry.<sup>11</sup>

A life without margin will always be characterized by relationship stress. Those who suffer from burnout and experience this overloaded lifestyle will begin to demonstrate negative relational behaviors. These people will begin to isolate themselves, respond to others in mechanical manners, experienced increased anger, see increased interpersonal conflicts, experience marital issues, and see their relationship with their children wavier.<sup>12</sup> Relationships are a vital source of support for many people and therefore the unrealistic expectations placed upon these connections or even the withdrawal from them is alarming. The relationships a person without margin needs the most will suffer, putting them into a downward spiral.

Margin extends beyond personal boundaries, it also extends to personal finances. A pastor must have margin in this area of his life. Those who serve in roles of spiritual leadership are not immune to financial stress. Sometimes these difficulties are invited by poor financial stewardship. Sometimes these difficulties are brought on by the characteristically low standards of compensation common in this career field. It could even be a combination of the two.

The exact reason for the issue does not matter, when the minister has no financial margin then chaos will follow. For those in this position, their lives become dominated by the stress of dodging creditors and living with the fear of the next unexpected expense that will

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<sup>11</sup> Outside of the security one finds through a relationship with Christ, it is reasonable to assume the next place most people look for security are in relationships and finances. The lack of margin in these areas of life are enough to completely overwhelm any person.

<sup>12</sup> J.F.X. Carroll and W.L. White, W.L., "Understanding Burnout: Integrating Individual and Environmental Factors within an Ecological framework," *Proceedings of the First Conference on Burnout* (Philadelphia, PA. 1981), quoted in Whiton S. Paine, "The Burnout Syndrome in Context," *In The Burnout Syndrome: Current Research, Theory, Interventions*, ed. by John W. Jones (Park Ridge, IL: London House Press, 1981), 9.

devastate their family. A spirit of tension and bitterness may arise for those who are poorly compensated by their church. The pastor might become frustrated by the difficult situation his church placed him in due to their ignorance of his needs. Regardless of the reason, a financial life without margin will hinder a pastor from best fulfilling his calling.

*The Negative Implications of No Margin in Sermon Preparation*

As has been argued thus far, living a life with no margin will bring chaos to the life of any individual. The pastor who functions without margin is inviting many issues upon himself, all of which will complicate his ability to minister. His preaching ministry will be impacted by this issue. No amount of training, natural ability, or study can overcome the challenges encountered by living without margin.

A healthy spiritual life is vital for the organization of a competent and insight sermon. Regular time spent communing with God through the practice of personal disciplines is important. During these moments of self-reflection, personal study, and prayer, a pastor often gains insights into the material he is working with for his sermon. Reflection upon his own condition and his need for the message is important. These periods of time help him to connect important applicational items that likely also connect to his congregation.

This process is essential for the organization of a competent and insight messages. The problem with the pastor who lives without margin is that he severely decreases his ability to effectively go through this process. An overly stressed and burnt out pastor tends to have a dying spiritual life. This problem is further exacerbated by his constrained time. He has no time or energy to commune with God or mediate upon the content of his sermon. As the condition of burnout is drawn out, the passion to dig deeper in study and preach subside.

One of the greatest casualties of living without margin is the death of creativity. Creativity is a core component of organizing an effective sermon. It takes a creative spirit to organize a message in a manner that captures the attention of the audience, moves them toward Christ, and remains faithful to Scripture.

Creativity takes time and persistence. A pastor who is living on the fringes of margin is going to have a difficult time mustering up creative energy. The associated stress that accompanies living without margin will deflate a pastor from going through the creative process of crafting an effective and insightful sermon. The impact of such a reality will eventually become obvious to his congregation. The church might notice repeated sermons closely connected in time, a lack of passion in his presentation, and a general sense of apathy toward his role as preacher.

### **The Positive Implications of Establishing Margin**

If a pastor does not have margin in his life, there is good news. The presence of burnout and the absence of margin does not have to be a life sentence. Living without margin does not mean that it cannot be found in the life of an overloaded individual. The creation of this space must be intentional. For many who deal with the struggle of taking on too much, it will take work to implement this practice. The negative impact of living without margin is detrimental to the well-being of an individual but the good news is that the creation of margin invites many positive results.

### *The Correlation between Stress, Burnout, and Margin*

As one seeks to find margin, a tangible method of recognizing it is important. In his work on the subject Swenson identifies the simple formula for margin as, “Power - Load =

Margin.”<sup>13</sup> The power of an individual is comprised of their full abilities and resources. These items include mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. Items also include tangible and intangible assets such as financial position and relational capital. The load experienced by a person is made up of the responsibilities assumed by that individual. These items can include leadership positions, financial commitments, and relational investments. Regarding this simple formula, Swenson notes that “when our load is greater than our power, we enter into negative margin status,” but “when our power is greater than our load, however, we have margin.”<sup>14</sup>

Within the fridges of margin lives stress and ultimately burnout. Ministry can be a difficult field to work. The stress experienced by those laboring in full-time ministry tends to focus around three issues: role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload.<sup>15</sup> In order for a pastor to find margin in these realms he must first understand the nature of what he is attempting to tackle. His role is certainly unique. Many of the pressures he experiences are real and arise from his role as minister but often he takes on more than he should. If he is going to find margin then he needs to systemically deal with his stress so that his load is lessened. His level of power needs to be greater than his load if he is to be successful.

As a self-assessment of stress is done, most people will realize a few things about their list of stressors. Some items invite a greater amount of stress than others. Some items can be eliminated or lessened while others are nonnegotiable. Discretion needs to be practiced as one navigates this field. Many pastors assume more responsibility than they should and therefore

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<sup>13</sup> Richard A. Swenson, *Margin*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Swenson, *Margin*, 70. The discussion of this formula for margin stems from Swenson’s conversation on the topic.

<sup>15</sup> John Davey, *Burnout*, 28-32. Davey notes that these items are characteristic of many professionals serving in similar types of caring occupations.

they invite more stress into their lives. In some areas of life and ministry a pastor needs to graciously step back. In other areas where he cannot abdicate responsibility, such as with his family, he needs to figure out the best way to manage his stress. The recognition of the way he deals with stress in his life and the implementation of coping methods is important. The successful enactment of these tools will lessen the load he carries and will therefore go a long way to finding margin.

This task is certainly difficult to accomplish but when he can find margin, he can begin to lessen, or even reverse the adverse effects of stress and burnout. The toll of stress on a pastor is immense and therefore it is important that he work to decrease it. The odds of experiencing a crisis of health, a conflict in personal relationships, or spiritual apathy will be greatly reduced when stress reduction is taken seriously.<sup>16</sup>

### *Personal Implications of a Life with Margin*

A lack of margin can wreak havoc on a person. The nature of being overloaded for long periods of time mean that there are mental implications of this lifestyle. The removal or lessening of stress will play an important role to aid the mental wellbeing of a pastor. The intentional space created by margin allows the pastor to more rationally deal with harmful emotions that might encourage him to respond in anger, become anxious, or dwell on negativity. A person who is free of these mental concerns, or living with less of them, can sleep better. Better sleep means that mental clarity is further increased, and the pastor becomes a generally

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale." *J Psychosomatic Research* vol. 11 no. 2 (1967): 213-218, accessed March 14, 2019, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999\(67\)90010-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4). Holmes and Rahe recognized the correlation between stress and health issues in an individual. They developed a scale by which one can measure the amount of stress carried by a person. They were able to estimate, with great accuracy, the likelihood of a serious illness. This research would then indicate that the reduction of stress would positively impact health.

nicer person to be around. The positive mental implications of margin easily transfer into the physical realm.

A life where margin is intentionally created will yield positive implications for the physical health of the pastor. Such a strategy does not guarantee that a person will live a life free from health concerns, but the reduction of stress and creation of margin greatly impacts that likelihood. When a pastor moves to reduce his stress, he can immediately see the benefit. The risk of hypertension, peptic ulcer disease, coronary artery disease, and other health issues will decrease with the removal of such stressors.<sup>17</sup>

The greatest impact of margin will likely be felt in the spiritual life of the pastor. It is not uncommon for someone to neglect their spiritual health first when confronted with no margin. The intentional time and energy carved out by margin will provide the means by which a pastor can meet with God. Rather than rushing through the reading of Scripture, prayer, and meditation due to a lack of time or energy, a pastor will have the freedom to more fully embrace these activities. Clearly, margin will not increase the spiritual health of the pastor but it will provide helpful elements for such an outcome to occur.

### *Extended Implications of a Life with Margin*

When a person finds margin in one area of their life, the trickle-down effect begins to positively impacts every part of their life. The positive space created in the realm of mental, physical, and spiritual health will alter the way life is perceived. Relational interactions that were once unhealthy tend to evolve and the way money is handled reflects a change of perspective.

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Spaite and Debbie Salter Goodwin, *Time Bomb in the Church: Defusing Pastoral Burnout* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1999), 108-115. Spaite and Goodwin outline the implications of stress on a pastor. In this discussion they detail how different stressful elements of the pastor's role contribute to negative health consequences. The logical conclusion of their argument enables one to recognize that the removal or lessening of stress will promote positive health outcomes.

Relationships are hard. They take a lot of time and energy to cultivate and therefore the lack of these vital resources cause devastation. The insertion of margin in the life of a person provides them with the space needed for healthy relationships. The person living their life with margin can invest their time and energy in the lives of those around them. They have enough emotional energy to walk through challenging times with a partner without completely unraveling themselves. They have the mental clarity to give important relationships priority. They are more able to handle harsh criticism and formulate an appropriate response. Healthy relationships help achieve and maintain a healthy mental, physical, and spiritual situation. Healthy relationships are truly great for both parties.

The pursuit of money is what drives many people. They seek it for the things it can help them acquire and the perceived power and security it provides. People often make the mistake that their money serves them but often they are servants to it. People with this mindset often have no margin in their finances and it easily impacts the rest of their life. No matter the level of income a person has, it is possible to obtain margin in one's financial life. Margin in this area of life will enable a person to live an entirely different lifestyle. No longer will an unexpected expense turn into a financial emergency, they will have a financial plan in place that accounts for such needs. They will have a realistic budget in place that provides a clear plan for them to live generously and within their means. Such a lifestyle removes a great weight from a person and allows them to embrace the many benefits of margin.

### **The Role and Facilitation of Margin in the Life of a Pastor**

Since margin is fundamental for the health and wellbeing of a pastor, then he must be intentional about finding it in his life. This choice means that he needs to evaluate every aspect of his being and determine if he is living a lifestyle characterized by margin. The more margin a

pastor can find, the better a pastor he will be. The better pastor a person can be, the better preacher he will become. Since the pastor-preacher relationship is so closely connected, it is important that margin be implemented in the life of a pastor. The result of such implementation will be a better ability to serve his congregation and the ability to preach with a higher level of competence and insight.

According to Swenson, emotional energy is the most important because “when we are emotionally resilient, we can confront our problems with a sense of hope and power.”<sup>18</sup> His perspective of its role in the life of an individual is a noteworthy observation. Studies show that hope and power can sustain a person through difficult times as they work in tandem to project confidence about the future.<sup>19</sup> In these studies there is a close correlation between longevity and emotional energy. The influence of hope and power in the life of a pastor is greatly important. If a pastor is going to survive the emotional rollercoaster that ministry invites, then he needs to possess a healthy emotional posture.

At the heart of burnout and a life without margin is the lack of established boundaries. A boundary is “something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent”<sup>20</sup>. This means that a person with no margin in their life has not intentionally placed limits on the amount of burden or responsibilities they are willing to manage. One cannot have margin without having boundaries.

Boundaries in life are important. A variety of situations can draw a pastor in, create an overwhelming amount of stress, burn him out, and ultimately push him into crippling

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<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Swenson, *Margin*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph T. Hallinan, “The Remarkable Power of Hope,” *Psychology Today* (May 2014): <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/kidding-ourselves/201405/the-remarkable-power-hope>.

<sup>20</sup> “Boundary,” Merriam Webster Online, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boundary>.



depression. Speaking on this issue of depression, Thomas Rainer identified seven areas which tend to move the pastor into this reality: Spiritual warfare; unrealistic expectations; criticism; workaholism; marriage and family issues; financial strains; and the temptation to compare his ministry to that of another.<sup>21</sup> All of these issues are nearly impossible to avoid in ministry but the strategic placement of boundaries enables one to limit the amount of emotional wear a pastor experiences from these areas.

Part of maintaining a healthy emotional position is learning to set up boundaries and say no. A pastor can easily overwork himself if he is not intentional about how he uses his time and energy. He needs to be honest with himself regarding the state of his emotional reserves. If he allows himself to become depleted then he will be of no help to anyone. If the pastor “rations” his emotional energy in a responsible manner he positions himself to better serve his church. The benefit of margin in this area of life allows him to be more present, both physically and mentally, to visit people, provide counsel, and handle emotionally draining people.

The advantage of these more positive interactions provides compound benefits. His congregation is better served. His intentional presence in their lives communicates love through action. When the people know that he loves them and wants the best for them they are more apt to trust him. This trust encourages them to further open many areas of their lives to him. He gets to know his congregation on a more intimate level and begins to learn more about their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. His important presence in their lives gives him the unique ability to speak truth into their lives and his connection to them makes them more likely to listen.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas S. Rainer, “When Pastors Experience Depression,” *Christian Post* (2011): <https://www.christianpost.com/news/when-pastors-experience-depression.html>.

Valuable insight into the lives of his members is gained through his regular interactions with them. He will likely notice different trends within his community and will gain a good gauge for the needs of his community. He will not use this insight to publicly shame or manipulate an individual but rather will use the awareness of their condition to shape the development of his sermons and teachings.

There are certain activities that a pastor can engage that will help him to better manage his stress and find margin. One study on the topic of burnout noted that activities such as exercise, spending time with friends and family, listening to music, cooking, and playing with a pet were all effective ways to cope with stress.<sup>22</sup> A pastor needs hobbies, interests, and social connections outside of the church because finding balance is an important part of finding margin. Being a pastor is a difficult role to assume and often certain responsibilities cannot be avoided or delegated. The practice of positively dealing with these stressors will help to ensure that a pastor maintains margin in his life and is better able to help those he is called to serve. This margin will always play a positive role in the sermon preparation process of a pastor.

### **The Implications of Margin in Sermon Preparation**

The many positive implications of margin in the life of the pastor will directly contribute to his ability to better communicate the truth of Scripture through preaching. The elements of creativity, audience engagement, and the spiritual health of the pastor greatly help him to preach with a higher level of competence and insight.

One of the most notable places where this will show up is in the presentation of the sermon. Effective contemporary preachers utilize much creativity in the way they organize and

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<sup>22</sup> Petra S. Williams, M. Karen Mueller, Holly C Carroll, Mark W Cornwall, Linda M Denney, and Lorie M Kroneberger. "Patterns of Academic Burnout, Emotional Distress, and Coping in Physical Therapy Students," *International Journal of Health, Wellness & Society* 8, no. 3 (2018), 9.

present their material. The sermons given by effective communicators “are careful, deliberate arrangements of propositions, illustrations and applications on a verbal canvas.”<sup>23</sup> The organization of a sermon is as much science as it is an art. Extensive training in theology, Bible exposition, rhetoric, and homiletics is always helpful but expertise in these fields does not guarantee the success of a sermon. All the training in the world cannot compensate for creativity and time spent with the material, a requirement that can only be effectively found through margin.

Creativity in preaching is a necessary component that cannot be discounted. Many preachers believe that people should naturally get excited by the teaching of Scripture alone, the reality is, many simply are not. Such a response is natural when considering modern culture. The preacher competes with all forms of entertainment and distractions. Modern entertainment knows how to capture attention and engage people. Many people in the church might be in attendance for the wrong reasons and are simply present out of a sense of obligation. The proper utilization of creativity and adherence to orthodox theology will allow a pastor to arrange his material in an engaging manner that remains faithful to the Biblical text.

Creativity is hard work and it takes much time. For the pastor who is over-extended, constantly pressed for time, and in burnout mode, he will struggle with such an endeavor. Commenting on this dynamic of creativity, the authors of *The Craft of Creativity* noted that “if we have a general tendency to avoid engaging in work when we are uncertain that we will make progress, and the creative process inherently raises uncertainties about whether we will make

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<sup>23</sup> David Daniels, “Preaching So People Will Listen: An analysis of Design Principles for Effective Communication” (DMin diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 172. In his research Daniels analyzed the preaching of Chuck Swindoll, Rick Warren, and Tony Evans. Each of these preachers are considered effective and powerful communicators by modern audiences. The conclusion of his research indicated that each pastor utilized an appropriate combination of rhythm, contrast, balance, proportion, and unity. The perfection of such balance requires much time and creativity.

progress, then we have a general tendency to avoid the creative process.”<sup>24</sup> A pastor with low emotional reserves will not have the energy to wrestle with the text for an extended amount of time. The inability to engage in the work of wrestling with a text will limit his ability to help the audience engage with the truth it communicates. A pastor who lives a life characterized by margin will have the emotional reserves and time to engage in such an endeavor.

An important element of creativity is time. It is through time an idea can incubate and fresh realizations are made. Most pastors are equipped with the ability to dissect a passage. They can create outlines of books, do word studies, and figure out important background information that pertains to a text. Most can do this work in a short amount of time due to their academic training and familiarity with the text. What takes much time is creativity and this is something that cannot be forced or even trained. Margin provides the space in the life of a pastor to work on his messages over an extended amount of time. The pastor living with margin creates a long-term preaching schedule and is always making some level of progress on each message. The depth and amount of progress made will depend upon when he plans to give the sermon. This incubation stage gives a pastor the needed time with a passage and it allows him to progressively mull over it. This process will not only reveal new details missed but it will also provide him an important level of clarity about the passage and its need for the congregation. During this stage the pastor gets a sense of the rhythm, contrast, balance, proportion, and unity required for his message. Margin allows him to get creative!

The pastor should never discount the role of sabbaticals on the process of creativity. The time away from his role in the church can give him a valuable opportunity to strategize his

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew A. Cronin and Jeffrey Loewenstein, *The Craft of Creativity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2018), 189.

sermon schedule and embrace the challenge of a difficult text or study. These intentional breaks that churches often grant pastors are meant to allow them to pull back from their responsibilities for a period of time, recharge, and move forward into a fresh season of ministry. Taking advantage of the time provided by a sabbatical can positively impact his creativity in sermon development and presentation.

People sacrifice time each Sunday listening to sermons and they want to know the relevance of the message. Most appreciate the theology taught and the presentation of the Biblical material but “so what” is the natural human question to such teachings. There needs to be application in effective sermons. People need to know what God expects them to do with the information he has preserved for them in Scripture. The pastor must wrestle with this tension as he prepares his sermons and strives to remain faithful to Scripture.

Margin in the life of the pastor enables him to appreciate the relevance of the sermon for the audience. Since he is careful not to overload his life, he has the emotional energy and time to regularly connect with his congregation. Through the many visits he makes, counseling sessions he conducts, and coffees he shares with them, he gains insight into the lives of those he serves. He can better understand the background of his people and adjust the way he presents his message to a format that best meets their needs. If the people do not perceive the relevance for the message or understand the intended application of it, then the impact of the sermon will be greatly diminished. Margin in the life of the pastor provides him the space to become a keen observer of the people and their needs.

This type of relationship also provides benefits that indirectly correlate to sermon effectiveness. When the people of the church know that their pastor genuinely loves and cares for

them then they are more inclined to lean in when he speaks. This level of trust grants him a level of authority in their life that ultimately increases the effectiveness of his messages.

Margin introduces another important component of relevance and application in sermon preparation. The space created by this lifestyle tends to have a positive impact on the spiritual life of the pastor. The ability to slow down, commune with God, and reflect upon one's inner self is extremely impactful. Growing spiritually requires a deep understanding of oneself. If the pastor is unable to take this journey himself then the likelihood of being able to lead it in the lives of his congregation are slim.<sup>25</sup>

As the pastor himself grows spiritually, his ability to preach with a higher level of competence and insight will also grow. Through his relationship with God, the spirit is likely to reveal things to him in the text that he might have otherwise missed. The pastor who is serious about his own spiritual health will attempt to practice and live what he preaches. Over the course of time as he works on a sermon, his own experiences with the relevance and application of the text will shape his preparation process. His sensitivity to the text will shape his own life, a reality that is not often missed by his congregation. When the people know that he is living the same message that he gives them, they are more likely to buy into the message also.

### **Application and Concluding Thoughts**

Margin in the process of sermon preparation will positively impact the overall wellbeing of the pastor, allowing him to better serve his congregation and therefore enabling him to preach with a higher level of competence and insight. This study made this argument by

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<sup>25</sup> David G. Benner, *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 94-108. Benner speaks about the context in which soul care is offered. Part of this process involves the knowing of oneself, knowledge of Jesus, and personal struggle. The transformative process takes much time and energy, therefore it requires a person to have margin in order to properly embrace it.

establishing an understanding of what margin is, discussing the positive and negative implications of margin, communicating the role and facilitation of margin in the life of a pastor, and discussing the implications of margin in the sermon preparation process. Margin makes a pastor better at his calling and it ultimately makes him a better preacher.

As a pastor pursues this ideal it is important to remember that the institution of margin is not a passive activity. In modern culture margin does not naturally exist and is often not upheld as a cultural value. The pastor who can find margin in his own life will serve as a leader for those around him who also need margin. The forward movement of this trend can have a multitude of positive results.

Margin does not guarantee that a pastor's sermons will improve and better connect with his audience. The correlation between margin and sermon impact is simply a principle. There will be some seasons of ministry that margin is nearly impossible to find yet the competency and insight of the message does not suffer. There might be seasons of ministry where margin is found in abundance yet the sermons do not connect with the audience. Spiritual life change is an act of God and sometimes he graciously allows the pastor to be used as tool to impact those around him. Margin is the tool of the pastor to better increase his ability to be used by God. May all pastors pursue margin in their lives as they seek to lead people to Christ.

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