

What to Do About Your Sleepy Church Members

We tried something radical on Wednesday evenings at our church several years ago.

Over the course of five weeks, we had prayer meetings. This was not simply the hospital list prayer meeting; this was honest prayer. One hour of prayer, five weeks in a row.

Each week, we explored and practiced a different tradition and method of prayer. Interestingly, attendance climbed throughout the emphasis; many participants commented that it was one of the few times they had prayed deeply and thoughtfully in their life as a church member.

Along with the insights I gained about prayer, I learned something else that surprised me.

In preparing for the first session, I had encountered several sources that warned about an unexpected consequence of lengthy time devoted to prayer.

The American lifestyle promotes and encourages a frantic pace that leads inevitably to exhaustion.

The resulting sleep deprivation that is rampant in our culture makes extended prayer time difficult.

Put simply, many adults will fall asleep quickly if they stop, close their eyes and engage in deep prayer.

I warned our group that it would happen, that they should not feel guilty and that we would talk about what it meant.

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Sure enough, the first week, fully a third of those present fell asleep rather quickly.

One of our carry-outs from this emphasis was to establish the first Friday of each month as “Day Away.”

From 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., we took a mini-retreat for all those interested that was intended to provide rest, solitude and a place and time for reflection. Those who participated found it deeply rewarding.

Any minister will tell you that Sunday morning crowds are marked by weary, sleepy, exhausted faces.

While we may not have listeners like Eutychus (Acts 20), who fall out of windows, plenty of sleepers attend most Sundays.

It’s not just at church, of course. Research shows that nearly 60 percent of college students suffer from sleep deprivation.

Not long ago, I heard a speaker guarantee he could raise any college student’s GPA by a full point. His simple secret: Structure your life so you get a full night’s sleep.

One of the most exhausted and weary groups I talk with are clergy. I remember how, about three months into my new job, I realized something was very different about me.

As my wife and I talked, it was clear a great weariness and low-grade exhaustion was slowly lifting from my life.

For 30 years, I had worked as a minister in a local church, often spending 70 to 80 hours a week engaged in ministry of some form.

Even when away from the office, the cares and concerns of the congregation crowded my thoughts.

In a large congregation, there was always someone dealing with the death of a loved one, the trauma of major illness, the dysfunction of a family, economic anxiety, job stress or a dozen other issues.

Loving those people and caring about them meant that I could not divorce myself from those great needs, and the resulting shared stress created a steady drain on my energy.

I was a poor example of taking time off and observing Sabbath, and I now marvel at my ignorance.

Healthy churches recognize their ministers need time for renewal and recharging. The demanding nature of ministry, the intrusion of 24/7 availability, and the predisposition of clergy to overfunction create a perfect storm for exhaustion.

Wise congregations will insist that ministers take time off, go on vacations, will fund and encourage continuing education and will provide for periodic study leave or sabbaticals.

Healthy clergy will recognize that the church is often one of the culprits in the overfilled schedules of its people.

Having reasonable expectations about being physically present at the church is a place to start.

One minister friend is upfront with his parishioners about his time expectations of an engaged church member. He calls it the 1+1+1 model.

He asks for one hour in worship, one hour in discipleship and one hour in service each week.

Additional time is a gift and welcome but must be balanced against the demands of family, vocation and personal concerns.

Such a mindset among ministers might lead us to be more judicious about

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meetings and more focused on making the events we do have of higher quality.

It's no surprise that the Bible speaks clearly to this issue. The idea of Sabbath, a day of rest from the labor of the week, is seeing a resurgence of attention as people recognize what the Bible has been teaching us for centuries: we need to rest. I hope you find the rest and renewal God designed you to know.

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on the Center for Healthy Churches' [blog](#). It is used with permission.