

REPLENISH

Leading from a Healthy Soul

LANCE WITT



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P R E F A C E

Most days I love the church. But there are days when the church drives me crazy. After being in local ministry for thirty years, I understand why leaders walk away. I understand why they can be disillusioned and cynical. I understand why those who used to be filled with vision and passion are empty and filled with resentment and regret. I get it.

With the current opportunities and challenges facing us in ministry today, it is no small task to stay emotionally healthy and spiritually replenished.

When I was at Saddleback Church, I remember Rick Warren often talking about how the church's central issue was not growth but health. When churches are healthy, growth will be the natural byproduct.

But what doesn't get talked about as much is the importance

of the leader's health. We will never grow healthy churches with unhealthy leaders.

This book is all about the leader. It's not about your organizational structure, your missional strategies, or your ministry goals. It's about *you*.

Much of what you're going to read in these pages comes out of my own journey. My own drivenness and insecurity, combined with a church culture obsessed with vision and success, led to a long-term neglect of my own soul.

In recent years I have begun traveling the road to soul replenishment. I've begun to take to heart Paul's words:

Let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit.¹

In ministry there are many seductions that can defile our spirit and leave us spiritually unhealthy.

Getting healthy will require us to pull back the veneer. It won't happen until we're serious enough to get honest, own our stuff, and take responsibility for our soul care. We'll need to go to some of the most private corners of our soul . . . dark places where personal ambition, insecurity, fear, and brokenness reside. These and other lurking soul predators would love to devour you, those you love, and your ministry.

I've tried earnestly to be forthright about my own journey with these issues and what I am learning on the road to spiritual health.

After an introduction, this book breaks down into four sections.

- *De-Toxing Your Soul*. This opening section describes some of the soul-endangering toxins inherent in contemporary ministry.
- *Start Here . . . Start Now*. In these brief chapters you'll dis-

cover some baby steps for beginning to pay attention to your soul.

- *Sustaining a Lifetime of Health*. Here we focus on habits and practices that can build a lifetime of health. These chapters will help you learn soul care so that no matter your ministry circumstances, you can thrive spiritually and emotionally.
- *Building Healthy Teams*. This final section is about passing it on and creating a healthy leadership culture. The bridge between a healthy leader and a healthy ministry is a healthy team.

At the end of each chapter are a few questions for reflection and discussion. These could be used in conversation with a trusted friend or in discussion with your team. It's my hope that these pages will spark honest, helpful, and hopeful "soul conversations."

My greatest desire in writing this book is that it would lead you toward Jesus. May your intimacy with him transcend all of ministry's clutter and noise and busyness. And may you be reminded that your ministry is not your life . . . Jesus is.

INTRODUCTION

THE IDOLATRY OF LEADERSHIP

What's missing in the church today?" This question was posed to a well-known mega-church pastor. His one word answer was "vision," and I couldn't disagree more with his assessment.

We are obsessed with leadership and intoxicated by vision. There's more big talk, big ideas, and big dreams than ever before. Over the last twenty-five years, vision and leadership have become the topics of choice for pastors. There has been a tidal wave of conferences, books, and podcasts devoted to helping us become better leaders. In some ministry circles, CEOs and business entrepreneurs are quoted as frequently as Scripture. Enormous energy and resources have been thrown at helping us become more effective in our pursuit of vision.

There was good reason for this.

Many of us were equipped to exegete scripture and shepherd people but ill-equipped to provide organizational leadership. As churches grew and the culture changed, pastors had to learn the world of creating budgets, managing staff, casting vision,

constructing buildings, raising money, programming worship services, and managing change.

So, the inundation of leadership and church growth resources met a definite need. The focus on leadership filled a massive void, and we all have been the beneficiaries. Leadership is wonderful . . . until it morphs into an idol.

It seems we have committed the same sin as the people of Israel.¹ God used a bronze serpent to bring miraculous healing, but years later it had to be destroyed because it had been turned into an idol.² They worshiped the provision instead of the provider.

All of the training and focus on leadership has been a gift, but we must *not* turn it into an idol. We don't need to abandon our discussion of leadership in the kingdom, but we do need to include questions that don't get enough airtime. What does spiritual leadership look like? What does healthy leadership look like? And, how should leadership in the church differ from leadership in the marketplace?

I say this because, in trying to fill the gap with leadership resources, inadvertently we have marginalized the soul side of leadership. The result is a crisis—one of spiritual health among pastors. Today's troubling statistics on pastors paint a bleak picture.

- 1,500 pastors leave the ministry permanently each month in America.
- 80% of pastors and 85% of their spouses feel discouraged in their roles.
- 70% of pastors do not have a close friend, confidant, or mentor.
- Over 50% of pastors are so discouraged they would leave the ministry if they could but have no other way of making a living.
- Over 50% of pastors' wives feel that their husband entering ministry was the most destructive thing to ever happen to their families.

- 30% of pastors said they had either been in an ongoing affair or had a one-time sexual encounter with a parishioner.
- 71% of pastors stated they were burned out, and they battle depression beyond fatigue on a weekly and even a daily basis.
- One out of every ten ministers will actually retire as a minister.³

We have neglected the fact that a pastor's greatest leadership tool is a healthy soul. Our concentration on skill and technique and strategy has resulted in deemphasizing the interior life. The outcome is an increasing number of men and women leading our churches who are emotionally empty and spiritually dry.

We've all witnessed the carnage of leaders who've had to leave ministry (at least for now) because of moral failure. The headlines are always about the scandalous and shocking behavior, but rarely mentioned is the back-story.

It is the story of a neglected soul and mismanaged character. Of a slow drift into relational isolation. Of being seduced by ambition. These leaders didn't intend for it to happen, but somewhere along the journey they stopped paying attention to what was going on inside of them. The shift was incremental and at times imperceptible.

Having talked to some whose ministry has come crashing down around them, I can tell you the convergence of outward success, self-deception, soul neglect, and relational isolation creates the perfect storm for disaster.

Quaker author Parker Palmer said, "A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside of himself or herself . . . lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."⁴ We have ample evidence of Palmer's insight. When leaders neglect their interior life, they run the risk of prostituting the sacred gift of leadership. And they run the risk of being destructive instead of productive.

To further complicate this issue, those of us who serve in ministry leadership aren't very good about sending up the warning flare and letting somebody know when we're in over our heads. Revealing our struggles and asking for help can feel risky. So we try to tough it out, cover it up, and keep it in. But eventually ministry and life come unraveled.

This phenomenon is not limited to a few high-profile Christian leaders. Nor is it limited to issues of moral failure. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Pastors are leaving the ministry in record numbers. Discouragement and disillusionment are epidemic among those who lead. Obsession with numerical growth has created a generation of pastors who feel like losers. And many are choosing to fire themselves rather than fight it any longer.

Many of my pastor friends and pastors you know stand up Sunday after Sunday and faithfully preach the truth. They unselfishly minister to others and do the very best they can to lead their church. But secretly, on the inside, they are coming apart.

We may be better leaders than we used to be, but the evidence seems to say we are not better pastors or husbands or Christ followers. It is no longer safe to assume that those of us who lead in the kingdom are on track spiritually.

This reality underscores a fundamental premise of this book. When it comes to the church, you can't separate leadership from the leader. You can't divorce the message from the messenger. Yet we can become quite adept at projecting an image that does not accurately reflect what's going on inside of us.

Godly leadership is *always* inside out. God always has and always will choose to smile on men and women who are healthy, holy, and humble.

I have not been able to escape a couple of verses tucked away in Exodus 28. Here Moses records in painstaking detail about the priestly garments, with intricate instructions for making the breast-piece, the ephod, the robe, the tunic, the turban, and the sash.

But twice Moses moves beyond the externals and trappings of ministry to speak of the character and honor of the role.

Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron to give him dignity and honor.⁵

Make tunics, sashes and caps for Aaron's sons to give them dignity and honor.⁶

In our generation, respect and dignity certainly do not come from tunics and ephods. Nor, in my opinion, do they come from great leadership technique. In fact, I believe it is dangerous to equip church leaders with vision and leadership technique without equipping them to be spiritually healthy. True spiritual dignity comes from a healthy soul and a life marked by spiritual power and the presence of Christ.

With everything that is in me, I believe Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. And I believe the church is his plan for accomplishing his purposes on earth. It is breathtaking to ponder the possibility that the Great Commission could be completed in our generation. We have unprecedented opportunity, technology, cooperation, and resources. Never before has the church been so poised for global impact.

However, the Great Commission will not be fulfilled by human ingenuity or innovative thinking alone. This God-sized task will only be completed by Spirit-filled, spiritually healthy churches. And these churches will not be spiritually healthy unless their leaders are spiritually healthy.

It's time we went back to the basics. It's time to swing the pendulum back toward the soul and toward spiritual health.

I frequently talk to people in Christian leadership who, in moments of honest reflection, long for a different kind of ministry. Even a different kind of life. They are fatigued, emotionally drained, and struggling. They wonder, "Isn't there a better way?"

Thirty years in the trenches of local church ministry has often left me wondering the same thing. If you knew me well, you'd

know I do not write these pages as the expert on soul care. In fact, many of the things I'll talk about were completely unknown to me until the last few years. I write out of my own brokenness and struggle. It is a constant battle to pursue spiritual health. So many seductive distractions surround me. But I am grateful for the path on which God has me.

I want to get to the finish line still in love with Jesus, still in love with the church, still in love with being a pastor. With my head held high, with my dignity and honor still intact, I want to look back over my shoulder and say it was worth it.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How should leadership in the church look different than leadership in the marketplace?
2. When you read troubling statistics about pastors, what is your response?
3. Parker Palmer said we have to pay attention to what's going on inside us, "lest the act of leadership do more harm than good." What are some ways in which leadership could do more harm than good?
4. How is your ministry doing at helping your leaders be spiritually healthy? What could you do better?

HOLE IN MY SOUL

We all have a front-stage life and a back-stage life. Front stage is the public world of ministry. It's where we're noticed, where the spotlight is on us, where people applaud and affirm us. On the front stage everything is orderly and neatly in its place. It's where we cast vision, inspire others, and lead with skill. Front stage is all about *doing*.

But we also have a back-stage life, and the two are connected. If we neglect the back stage, eventually the front stage will fall apart. While the front stage is the public world of leadership, the back stage is the private world of the leader. The back stage is private, always dark, and usually messy. The audience isn't allowed there. Back stage has no spotlight and no glory. What happens back stage facilitates and empowers what takes place on the front stage. Back stage is all about "being."

As ministry leaders, we know how to have front-stage conversations. We talk freely about attendance and strategy and services and vision and volunteers and staff. But where is the conversation about our back-stage life? Who is talking to you about you?

Back-stage conversations don't come naturally to most of us. As leaders in the kingdom we may feel a subtle pressure to have it all together. Talking honestly about the messiness of our private, interior world feels risky. It's safer to limit the conversation to the front stage. Or we may be so focused on the vision that our back stage isn't even on our radar.

When the Wesleyan bands (small groups) got together, the first thing they asked each other was a back-stage question: "How is it with your soul?" I don't know if in forty years of following Jesus anyone has ever asked me that question.

For most of my ministry I neglected my back-stage life, the care of my soul. After all, front stage is where the action is. But I am learning that the key to the Christian life is found back stage, and the only way to be healthy is to pay attention to it.

This is exactly what Jesus taught—that the Christian life is inside out, that the private informs the public. He taught that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. He taught that the root (back stage) determines the fruit (front stage).

These chapters are dedicated to helping us pay attention to our back-stage life and begin to take steps toward an ordered and healthy soul.

A good place to start is acknowledging that many of us in leadership feel like we have a hole in our soul. Ministry drains us, sucks the life out of us, and the result is we are running on empty.

We get up to speak and deep down we know we're teaching about a life we aren't living. When ministry needs present themselves, we find ourselves not caring like we used to. Out of obligation and "doing my job," we go through the motions but our heart isn't really in it.

We have this gnawing feeling in our gut that something is missing. This isn't how it was supposed to be. We find ourselves with less joy and more frustration; less compassion and more cynicism. Some days we dream of getting out. And, if the truth were

known, we're not hiding it as well as we think. Those closest to us are beginning to see it.

Imagine that your soul is like a bucket. I have learned there are two forces at work that will put holes in your bucket and drain out the life.

First, there are *external forces*. The seduction of leadership, the grind of ministry, the brokenness of our culture, and the pace of twenty-first-century life create an environment in which it's very challenging to stay healthy at the soul level. If not managed well, these factors can poke a hole in our bucket and leave us feeling empty.

As Ruth Barton writes in *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*,

It is possible to gain the world of ministry success and lose your own soul in the midst of it all.¹ . . . These days (and maybe every day) there is a real tension between what the human soul needs in order to be truly well and what life in leadership encourages and even requires.²

It's scary to realize that the path to external success and internal emptiness can be the same road.

Furthermore, there are *internal forces* at work. Part of the problem is we're poking holes in our bucket from the inside as a result of insecurities, broken places, and compulsions.

Again, not all of the dangers to my soul are external pressures. Beyond the drain of contemporary ministry, all of us have a shadow side to our leadership. Insecurities, broken places, and secret sin can leave us empty.

In the excellent work *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, Sam Rima talks about internal brokenness that led to an unhealthy soul.

I slowly began to realize that paradoxically the personality traits and inner drives that brought me success as a leader were also what had ultimately caused desperation.³

That's why it's so important to learn the art of soul care. For some of us, simply acknowledging we have a soul that needs to be cared for is the first step. Most days as a pastor I didn't give much thought to the fact that I had a soul. Your soul is the invisible, eternal part of you. It's the real you. If you lose part of your body or have an organ transplant, it doesn't change your soul. Your hair may turn gray (or, as in my case, turn loose), you may get wrinkles or put on twenty pounds, but you are still you.

Our soul is far and away the most valuable possession we have. Just as you need to tend to your body to be physically healthy, you must tend to your soul if you want to be spiritually healthy.

There is hope. Despite the challenges of leadership in our generation, it is possible to have a healthy soul and a dynamic, impacting ministry. I would like to suggest a three-part strategy this book will guide you through.

- *Realize.* This is about taking the time to reflect and be honest about the issues that are a threat to your soul. Part of the process will be to discover, identify, and name the things putting holes in your bucket.
- *Repair.* Once you've identified the holes, you can start to take steps to repair them. The section of this book called "Start Here . . . Start Now" is intended to help you start taking some steps toward a more healthier soul.
- *Refill.* Once you've been forthright about what's threatening your soul and have begun to patch the holes, you can begin to focus on refilling your bucket. This is about learning to fill your soul and lead from a healthy place. You'll discover some habits that can sustain a lifetime of spiritual health. By the way, this has everything to do with your ministry effectiveness. As Mother Teresa said, "To keep a lamp burning, we have to put oil in it."

Henri Nouwen painted a picture of leaders with a healthy soul:

The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?⁴

That's the kind of leader I want to be.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How well does your team engage in back-stage conversations? How well do you personally engage in back-stage conversations?
2. Who in your life has been helpful with your back stage? How has that relationship been helpful?
3. If someone asked you today, "How is it with your soul," what would you say?
4. What in ministry most pokes holes in your bucket and drains your soul? What steps could you take to keep this from happening?