

# MAINTAINING YOUR SANITY WHILE BALANCING FAMILY, MINISTRY, WORK, AND LIFE

*I asked experienced pastoral ministers and volunteers to send me practical tips or insights that helped them stay sane and balanced in this daunting ministerial life we share? Following is their wisdom plus a sprinkling of my own. –Susan Vogt*

## **MOST CLASSIC:**

1. Don't do for others what they can better do for themselves.
2. Don't let the best be the enemy of the good.
3. Remember that those who didn't stop to help the man in distress on the highway were those rushing to church and focusing on keeping themselves pure for the sacrifice... So, don't have too many pious scruples!

*Elizabeth Davies, Wolverhampton, England*

## **MADE ME LAUGH**

Find something to laugh at every day. Thankfully, God has blessed me with a husband who tends to do silly things on a daily basis, like puts a glass that he'd been using in the spice cupboard or cheese in the pantry and crackers in the refrigerator

*Teri Burns, Grandville, MI*

## **MOST PRACTICAL**

For many years I missed my children's games, awards, special events because I was working. Well now they are all grown. To see them I have to fly because they are all out of state. Now,

- I take my days off,                      •Schedule meetings to a time I am already going to be at church
- Stay home when I am sick      •Use up ALL of my vacation time

Now I can spend more time with my husband and have more prayer time as well! But, I've lost some time. Your ministry will always be there, but your family and friends will not!

*Mary Mahar*

Listen to your spouse when he/she says things like, "Do you have to work on ministry stuff when you're home? You've already put in more hours at work than you're supposed to this week." Say, "You're right. Thank you." And then spend time with her/him.

*Diana Joice, Lexington, KY*

## **BEST QUESTIONS**

- Whose priority is this?"
- What's the worst that could happen if I postpone this?"

*Mary Ann Paulukonis, Scranton, PA*

## **MOST THOUGHT PROVOKING**

My first response is why be balanced? The best way to serve the Gospel is to be a little off tilt – most of the saints were! That said, my favorite strategy was to learn to **juggle!** For years I kept three juggling balls in my desk drawer at work for break time. I got to practice which meant leaving behind other agendas, because one cannot juggle well when distracted. I advise starting with socks before moving to dinner dishes and knives.

*Tom Rinkoski, FL*

## **MOST INSIGHTFUL**

Remember the flight attendants safety instructions: "Put your own oxygen mask on **FIRST** or you won't be able to help anyone else." Self care is **NOT selfish.**

*Lisa Jachimiec, Milwaukee, WI*

# THE BEST OF THE REST

Since I considered **prayer** a given, I especially sought additional strategies. Still, I received some creative insights about ways to pray. The rest of the tips generally fell into the following categories:

1. Pray
2. Prioritize
3. Protect your time, calendar
4. Healthy living & hobbies
5. Find a confidante
6. Develop an attitude ("I am not the Messiah")
7. Humor & laughter

## 1. PRAY

- A. How much should one pray?** – When St. Francis de Sales, a Doctor of the Church was asked “How much should one pray?” he reportedly replied: *Pray a half hour each day, unless you’re busy. If you’re busy, you should pray an hour.*
- B. Quiet time in the morning.** – Many people specifically mentioned that having a slice of quiet time with God in the morning helped them keep balanced and sane. It usually included scripture but quiet listening was essential.
- C. The “Aware Prayer”.**
  - Notice what has gone well today, and pray: Abba, thank you!
  - Notice what has not gone well today, and pray: Lord Jesus, have mercy!
  - Notice my worries about tomorrow and the future, and pray: Spirit Help!
- D. Daily structured prayer** – Vowed religious have the gift of Mass and communal prayer. For the rest of us, developing a habit of prayer can keep us going and centered even when we are tired, busy, or “not in the mood.”
- E. Pray “All Ways”** – Each of us must find our own way and place of prayer. Some meet God most personally through nature, art, music, drive time, the shower, or chance encounters with those we pass on the street, email, or who call us. Be alert and pray All Ways.

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## 2. PRIORITIZE

- A. Always minister first within the closest circle of ministry** – This means prioritize your time and ministry in the following order:
  - Your own spirit
  - Your vocation (marriage or your sacramental/path of life, followed by family)
  - Your parish/community/work place
  - Your diocese/region
  - National/political stage
  - World affairs and events
- B. Where’s the stress?** Make a triangle with your thumbs and pointer fingers. The sides represent your relationship with **God**, your relationships (**family**), and your **job/ministry**. Determine which of those sides is causing the stress and make an adjustment.
- C. Prioritize Daily** – Start each day by prioritizing the top 3-4 things and attend to those first. This helps us from majoring in the minors. You will generally have done the most important things. Of course leave room for God to break in unexpectedly and then make an exception. Miraculously, sometimes tasks that seemed urgent one day, will dissipate or resolve themselves when left on their own and a little prayer.
- D. Don’t Prioritize Daily** – Another approach is to start your work day with no particular agenda (unless you need to deal with some essential unfinished business). The top priority is then to take people where they are, not judge them, just respond to whatever their need is.

When leaving the office, leave negative stuff at the door of your office. In the meantime do something different. (Ed. Note: This approach would only work with certain types of jobs.)

- E. **Family First** – For those of us who have families, ministry often seems like a higher priority than our family. We often get an over-inflated view of our worth and the inability of those we minister to do without us. Of course there are times when we need to work over our hours or when someone stops in our office just at closing time and needs someone to talk to, but that should truly be the exception.

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### 3. **SET BOUNDARIES**

- A. **Protect Your Calendar**– Take charge of your calendar. Block out personal and family time (like anniversaries, birthdays, vacation time) before anything else goes in. This helps keep your family from only getting “left over time.” (Limiting evening meetings to no more than two a week is a good rule of thumb for parents with children at home.) There may be need to make occasional exceptions but when those come up, agree upon an alternative time for the bumped activity. Color coding your calendar according to family, ministry, and personal commitments may help you see imbalances in your life at a glance.
- B. **Leave the office at quitting time** (most of the time). Don’t take work home (most of the time). Keep your day off free (most of the time). If you’re not sure how much is “most of the time” ask your spouse or kids. Working 80 hours/week is not virtue; it’s being over-responsible. Our children won’t be attracted to a church and faith that seems to steal their parent away by constantly choosing work over them.
- C. **Honor the Sabbath, Your Marriage, Your Kids, and Yourself**
- **The Sabbath** – Some ministerial work has to be done on Sunday – because we are ministers – but limiting this when possible or substituting another “Sabbath Day” in one’s week helps us remember in whose name we toil and refreshes us to serve another day. Keeping the Sabbath is a commandment, not a suggestion.
  - **Date Night** – For married ministers/volunteers, keeping the marriage sacred by having a regular (usually weekly) couple fun time is not a bonus, it is a necessity. It’s part of active fidelity and keeping our marriage vows.
  - **Family Time** – Traditionally, Sunday, was the day many families gathered, played, and rested together. Whatever, the day (or night) promise your kids both quality and quantity time on a regular basis.
  - **ME Time** – Make regular time (weekly) for one or two ME activities – These should be refreshing activities that take you out of the realm of daily demands and let you mix with non-ministerial friends.

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### 4. **HEALTHY LIVING** (Ed. Note: These are all the usual but they bear repeating)

- A. **Exercise** – You don’t have to go to a gym, do those dreaded sit-ups, or run marathons; but some form of regular exercise gives us the energy to face our own and other’s troubles. Walking seems most popular – and it’s free.
- B. **Eat right** – You know the drill. The hard part is deciding that 2 cookies are enough, or that broccoli really is a staple.
- C. **Relaxation** – Meditation, yoga, quiet time, listening to music, or simply taking a nap.
- D. **Hobbies** – Whether it’s gardening, hiking, dancing, woodworking, a sport, reading, or sky-diving, identify your passion and give yourself permission to renew yourself by doing something you love. Your stress will lessen and likely you’ll be a nicer person to be around.
- E. **Treat Yourself** – It’s not sinful to indulge in a treat now and then (think chocolate, a spa visit, a day without technology or the opposite – a new tech gadget). Assuming that many ministers are frugal by nature (like me 😊) don’t let frugality make you a sourpuss or a scrooge.

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## 5. **FIND A CONFIDANTE**

- A. **Spiritual Director or Trusted Colleague** – Having a close confidante with whom to share ideas, frustrations, joys that won't be misinterpreted as bragging, and doubts helps keep us from feeling too self-important or too self-doubting. This person can check our biases help us know when it's time to take a break, and give us encouragement.
- B. **Meet with friends** – Many pastoral ministers say they meet regularly or informally with a supportive community of friends. These may be colleagues or they may just be wise people they respect. They share prayer, conversation, laughter, and breaking bread. It can be a place to safely let off steam or get new ideas about how to tackle problems.
- C. **Share What You Love With Your Love** – For married couples, sharing your ministerial life with your spouse can make your ministry a bonding experience. It might mean that you share a joint ministry or simply that you let each other know the joys and struggles of your work. Of course maintain appropriate confidentiality of clients or colleagues. It helps to have a supportive spouse.
- D. **Surround yourself with faith filled fellow ministers** – If you can't find any in your ministerial setting, change jobs.
- E. **Surround yourself with people who have different gifts than yours** – Look for volunteers and other staff members who can help you see things from a different perspective. Working collaboratively can be a challenge but including people with different gifts and styles makes the ministry stronger and should remind us that it is not our job to do all the work.

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## 6. **DEVELOP AN ATTITUDE**

- A. **I Am Not the Savior, Messiah, nor Super(wo)man** – I am only the messenger. God has called other messengers too, who can and should step up when I am away. Remind yourself that God is the potter, we are the clay, but God asks us to stop and take care of ourselves.
- B. **Be Nimble** – Some careers allow more flexibility than others. One spouse may have a job that doesn't allow for flexible hours. For parents, it is important to discern whether two tightly scheduled or regulated jobs are worth the stress. Sometimes it's a matter of sequencing the jobs, rotating, or learning to live on less income.
- C. **Say, "I get to..." instead of "I have to..."** – Develop this attitude of gratitude by thinking:  
FAMILY: "I get to go food shopping," instead of "I have to go food shopping."  
MINISTRY: "I get to attend Mass or lector today," instead of "I have to attend Mass/lector."  
WORK: "I get to wake up." Period! – instead of "I have to wake up."  
LIFE: "I get to babysit my grandchildren," instead of "I have to babysit my grandchildren."
- D. **Don't let one issue in your life define your whole life** – Whenever something seems to be all-important; remember that in the long run, the only all-important thing is where our relationship to God stands. Everything else is, as they say, "commentary."
- E. **Less Is More** – Simple is better. Find ways to connect with children. Ask for God's grace.

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## 7. **HUMOR & LAUGHTER**

- A. **Laugh Often** – with others. tell stories, love life, enjoy the journey!
- B. **Top That Flop** – Ministers can too easily slip into trying to show how well we're doing by talking about our successes. Mix it up by sharing your flops. It's real. It's consoling.

*Almost everyone mentioned the value of humor, laughter, and not taking ourselves too seriously. Thanks*