

The E.A. Company of Pastors

A Pastoral Rule of Life

The Apostle Paul begs us to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. This 'Pastoral Rule' is offered to you, not as a set of regulations, but as a guide that leads away from burdensome demands toward authentic freedom in Christ. It invites you to attend to three aspects of ministry: personal disciplines, personal conduct in ministry, and mutual encouragement and accountability. Read the Rule slowly and prayerfully, in the hope that God will speak to you through it, and that you will discover renewed patterns of faithfulness. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Personal disciplines

"Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress" (1 Tim. 4:15)

The experience of Christians over the centuries shows us that personal disciplines of faith become instruments of the Holy Spirit. Disciplines open up a space in which we become aware again of God's great mercy, leading us to respond in gratitude and to recommit ourselves to lives of righteousness before God.

If we want to remain rooted in our baptismal identity, true to our ordination vows, and open to the Holy Spirit,

- we will commit ourselves to regular, daily devotional practices, alone or with others.
- we will commit ourselves to regular opportunities for growth in theological and spiritual health.

Pastors' devotions are formed around reading and meditating on Scripture, praying, and reading and reflecting on great Christian theological and spiritual literature. We all know this, but do we do it?

1. Reading Scripture

Research has shown that few pastors read the Bible devotionally on a regular basis. While we do read Scripture as we prepare to preach and teach, we often neglect listening for God's word to us personally. Apart from preparation for preaching and teaching, we read Scripture sporadically and according to no particular plan. Little wonder that our efforts do not sustain themselves.

Examine your own Bible-reading habits. How much time do you make for God to speak to you through Scripture, nourishing your faith and life? Do you long to be more faithful? We all want to say “yes,” deepening attentiveness to God’s word.

Two principles can guide you

- a) Select daily Scripture passages according to a plan, reading from both the Old and New Testaments.
 1. Members of the Company of Pastors will use the *lectio continua* method reading through books of the Old and New Testament from beginning to end in order to keep the larger themes and patterns of these books before us.
- b) Set aside a regular time and place to read and meditate on Scripture.
 1. You may shape time and place by daily and weekly rhythms.
 2. You may read and meditate by yourself, or with your spouse, your family, a friend, or a small group.
 3. You may gather regularly with a group of elders or members of a Bible study group in the congregation.

2. Daily Prayer

Pastors regularly pray in worship, in hospitals, at church luncheons, and other public settings. But we do not always have a disciplined approach to our personal prayers. Prayer easily becomes a professional duty rather than a way of life.

Examine your own practices of prayer. How often do you pray? What do you include in your prayers, and what do you neglect to mention? We all want to deepen our prayer life.

Two principles can help:

1. Select good models of prayer that help you grow in your prayer life.
 - a) Members of the Company of Pastors will practice praying the Psalms, praying through the psalter. The psalter has been Israel’s and the church’s prayer book from the beginning. Reformed Christians in particular have been shaped by praying and singing the psalms. The Psalms shape all of our praying by expanding the range of our adoration, confession, thanksgiving and intercession. They also remind us that we pray with the whole church through time and space, even when we pray by ourselves. The Company of Pastors will use the psalter found in the Book of Common Prayer for the assigned Psalms to pray each day.

- b) Pray for your congregation, elders, colleagues in ministry, the Evangelical Association, the EA National Minister, and Executive Board, the EA Mission Network, and sister churches across the globe.
2. Set aside a regular time and place to pray.
 - a) It may be as you first wake up.
 - b) It may be at the end of the day before you go to sleep.
 - c) It may include gestures that help you to make space for prayer, such as kneeling, folding your hands and bowing your head, or lifting up your hands and head.
 - d) It may be alone or with others.

Regardless of how you pray, what matters most is that you pray the prayers that the Holy Spirit prays through you for your own life, including its connection to those around you in church and world

3. Reading the historic Confessions

Most pastors have a wealth of classic theological and spiritual literature on their bookshelves, but many of us have not opened them since seminary. Pastors have copies of the various confessions that arose out of the Protestant Reformation, but too often we treat the confessions as museum pieces rather than words of wisdom that call us into prayerful meditation.

We know that we need help from the wider church if we are to grow spiritually, for we are not wise enough to make sense of Christian faith and life on our own. We need more than books on church management or new social trends, as important and helpful as they might be. We need nourishment for our minds and souls.

Examine your own reading habits. Are you regularly drawing from the treasures of the church's greatest thinkers, teachers, and guides?

Two principles may help:

1. Read the church's theological and spiritual classics regularly.
 - a) You may read the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the Reformed tradition according to a schedule reflecting on how these confessions guide our reading of Scripture and challenge us to give account of our faith today.
 - b) You may choose to read through Calvin's Institutes, or Luther's writings, or Augustine's City of God, or his Confessions etc...

- c) You may read several significant books on a particular topic such as the Trinity, Christology, salvation and sin, science and theology, medical ethics, and ecclesiology.
 - d) The Company of Pastors will follow a schedule of assigned readings from the confessions of faith that we hold in common including but not limited to: *The Heidelberg Catechism, Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism, German Congregational Catechism, Savoy Declaration, Evangelical Catechism, the Six Principles etc.*...questions for reflection on these readings will be posted in the FB group.
2. Read slowly and deeply, differently from the way you read a newspaper or a committee report. Immerse yourself in the words, reading not only for intellectual content but also for growth in your living of the faith in prayer and action, word and deed. Reflective reading requires us to be disciplined and to set aside time and space.
- a) You may close your office door at a set time each day, turn off the phone and the computer, and read and think for an hour.
 - b) You may form or join a local group that reads in common and gathers for discussion that will broaden and deepen understanding.
 - c) You may share insights from your reading with your consistory or council.
 - d) You may make use of the online Facebook group of the Company of Pastors for sharing your thoughts and reflections on the readings.
 - e) You may keep a journal of your reflections.

4. Attend to your spiritual health

Daily rhythms of Scripture reading, prayer, and theological reading are strengthened and complemented by practices that take place on a weekly, seasonal, or annual basis. Weekly Sabbath-keeping is especially important.

1. Keeping Sabbath

- a) Pastors understand Sabbath-keeping in two senses. We know that we need regular time to rest and refresh. We also know that we need regular time to focus on God. These two concerns sometimes intersect, but they are not identical, and we should be attentive to both. The problem is that pastors are easily tempted to think that our work is so important and our presence so indispensable that we cannot make time either for ourselves or God. Do you work unreasonable hours? Do you take on too much?

The Christian tradition includes practices that offer us guidance

- *Make time for yourself.* Pastors need time to rest from their labors so that we may see and enjoy God's work in us. Reserve time to rest from your pastoral labors, enjoying family and friends, and reveling in the goodness of God's creation. You may protect time each day, or take a whole day each week to rest from labors. Pastors' Sabbath will not always take place on Sunday, for it is filled with church responsibilities. You also benefit from the longer periods of vacation and rest that are provided in your terms of call.
- *Make time for God.* Pastors need regular times during which all tasks and responsibilities are set aside so that God can speak and we can listen. Extended prayer, focused biblical and theological study, and intentional conversation are especially important ways to discipline our listening. Attending to great literature, art, and the sciences can also direct us to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge before us is breaking the cycle of endless work. Several possibilities help to ensure times of rest.

- You may set aside a twenty-four hour period each month for prayer, reading, and reflection, in addition to your daily devotions.
- You may make regular prayer retreats.
- You may ponder how the Lord's Day can truly be the Lord's Day rather than the busiest day in your week. Let your preaching and leadership of worship be characterized by the special joy to which God calls you on this day. Live more spontaneously, open to the Spirit's guiding, whether you spend time with your family, pray and read, or run errands.
- A commitment to the Lord's Day includes a commitment to participate in Lord's Day worship as regularly as possible, even when we are not leading it and even when we are on vacation or at conferences or meetings that take us away from our congregations or make going to church inconvenient.

2. Theological reflection in community

Pastors know that we benefit from each other's insights into the Faith and the practices of ministry. We know that we need people whom we can trust to encourage us and hold us accountable. Yet our experience of theological friendship is sporadic, too often restricted to occasional conferences or retreats. We then fall back into neglect of theological work and trying to do ministry on our own.

a) Participate regularly in the Company of Pastors Facebook group.

- You may write about an important question of Christian life or doctrine, presenting what you have written to a group of colleagues as a basis for discussion.
- You may listen together to a theological lecture – live or on-line – and then discuss it.
- You may exchange and discuss the sermons that all of you preached on the previous Sunday, asking each other, “Did the congregation hear the gospel in this sermon?”
- You may ask each other for guidance on admission to Baptism or the Lord’s Supper, pastoral care to those at the end of life, or other difficult pastoral questions.
- You may explore what you are doing to make new disciples.
- You may examine each other’s efforts to teach the faith to elders and other church leaders.

3. *Take study leave*

4. *Care for your body*

- a) Some form of exercise regularly
- b) Eat healthy food options

5. *Honor commitments to others.*

- a) Honor your commitments to family – spouse and children, parents and grandparents. In your service to the church, do not neglect the “little church” to which you belong by virtue of your personal relationships.

6. *Lead or facilitate times of “Family Worship” in your home*

7. *Regularly examine your call to ministry.*

- a) Every pastor faces moments of boredom in ministry, and few pastors escape moments of conflict with a congregation. We sometimes imagine that boredom or conflict means that we are supposed to leave for another place of ministry. But boredom and conflict are inevitable parts of life. When they appear, they may present an important, even if sometimes painful opportunity to reflect again on whom God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do.
- b) If you do not reexamine your call regularly you can become complacent, or discouraged by doubts about the effectiveness of your ministry. Seek out

people who can help you reflect on your call, and assist you to focus time and energy on the heart of the pastoral calling – proclaiming the gospel of Christ by interpreting it faithfully in your preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

8. *Confess sin.*

- a) Make regular confession of sin. You join with others in general prayers of confession in Lord's Day worship. In addition, you may seek out a person whom you can trust to hear your personal confession of sin. This person may be a spouse, a spiritual director, another pastor, or a trusted friend. Their responsibility is simply to witness to your confession before God and to assure you of God's forgiveness.

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom . . . And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col. 3:15-17)