

THE EMOTIONALLY
HEALTHY CHURCH
planter



PETE SCAZZERO

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The Emotionally Healthy Church Planter
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ISBN: 978-1-60725-036-4

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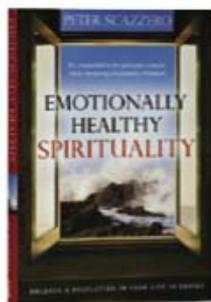


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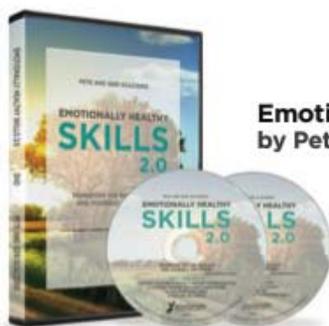
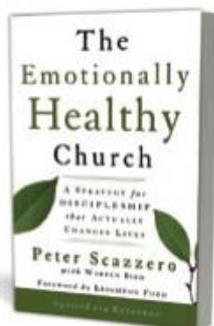
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SECTION I: The Beginning

Introduction

Planting a church, by its very nature, is all consuming.

Casting vision, gathering a core group, connecting new people, building community, clarifying the vision and values, developing leaders, raising money, preparing messages, delegating key tasks, establishing financial procedures, resolving conflicts, and setting priorities are just a few of the seemingly infinite tasks before a church planter.

Is it possible, then, to plant a vibrant, missional church without losing your soul? Is it possible to be an emotionally healthy church planter and “be successful”?

The answer is yes. But remember, it is easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than for a well-intentioned church planter to remain emotionally healthy. As Jesus said: “With [human beings] this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

When I began [New Life Fellowship Church](#) in 1987, a church planting authority informed me that if I didn’t gather two hundred people within two years, I probably never would. That pressure, along with a lack of a core group, a scarcity of funds, the desperate needs of the people in our community, and my inexperience, nearly completed the recipe for a personal, marital and church planting disaster.

I have directly planted two churches: New Life Fellowship Church (founded twenty-six years ago) and [Iglesia Nueva Vida](#). New Life has, in turn, planted four additional churches—two intentionally and two others involuntarily.

I have learned very little from my successes, but I have learned a great deal from my failures. This book is not meant to address the myriad of issues that need to be learned to establish a church. It does address, however, the foundational issue of spiritual formation—the interior life of the church planter—and its long-term impact on the church. Beyond your strategy, programs, location, budget, launch team size, or facility, this one axiom always proves itself true: As goes the interior life of the church planter, so goes the church.

I will unpack this theme in the chapters that follow, but let me begin by telling you my story of emotionally unhealthy church planting and how God mercifully saved my life, my marriage, and our church.

Chapter 1: The Emotionally Unhealthy Church Planter

I grew up in an Italian American family in a suburb of New Jersey, only one mile from the skyscrapers of Manhattan. I went away to college in 1974, got involved in a Bible study on campus, and became a follower of Jesus Christ during my sophomore year. That experience launched me into a spiritual journey that would include, over the next six years, the Catholic charismatic movement; a bilingual Spanish-English, inner-city, mainline Protestant church; an African-American congregation; Pentecostalism; and evangelicalism.

After teaching high-school English for one year, I joined the staff of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational ministry that facilitates Christian groups on university and college campuses. I worked for three years at Rutgers University and other New Jersey colleges. Then I went off to pursue graduate studies at Princeton Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

During my college years, I met and became good friends with the young woman who would later become my wife. In 1984 Geri and I were married, and we entered a whirlwind—not even realizing at first that the winds were anything but normal. At the five-month mark of married life, I graduated from seminary; the next day Geri and I moved to Costa Rica. For one year we studied Spanish in preparation for returning to New York City and working with a Spanish-speaking population. Geri left Costa Rica and returned to her parents' home when she was eight months pregnant. I returned from Costa Rica two nights before our first baby was born.

One month later the three of us moved to Queens, New York. I spent a year serving as an assistant pastor in an all-Spanish immigrant church and teaching in a Spanish seminary. These experiences gave Geri and I opportunities to perfect our Spanish and discern God's will for our future. That year also initiated us into the world of two million illegal immigrants from around the globe, a common component of large cities like New York. We became friends with people who had fled death squads in El Salvador, drug cartels in Columbia, civil war in Nicaragua, and implacable poverty in Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

The Church Begins

Then, in September of 1987, we started New Life Fellowship Church in a working-class, multiethnic, primarily immigrant section of Queens. (Of the 2.4 million residents of Queens, more than two-thirds are foreign-born. The Corona-Elmhurst neighborhood surrounding our current church location includes people from 123 nations.) Our first worship service began with forty-five people.

God moved powerfully in those early years. After little more than a year we had grown to 160 people. By the end of the third year, I began a Spanish congregation. By the end of the sixth year, there were 400 people in the English congregation, plus another 250 people in our Spanish congregation. A large percentage of both congregations had become Christians through New Life.

My parachurch days with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship taught me practical ministry skills such as how to lead a Bible study, how to share the gospel, and how to answer the questions non-Christians commonly ask. My seminary education gave me much-needed intellectual tools—an understanding of Greek, Hebrew, church history, systematic theology, hermeneutics, and more.

Unfortunately, neither background prepared me for planting a church—especially in a place as uniquely diverse as Queens. I was immediately thrust into a crash course of understanding what Paul meant when he said that the gospel comes “not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4).

During those early years of New Life, God taught me a great deal about praying and fasting, healing the sick, the reality of demons, spiritual warfare, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and hearing God’s voice. And whatever I learned, I taught the congregation.

People were becoming Christians. The poor were being served in new, creative ways. We were developing leaders, multiplying small groups, feeding the homeless, and planting new churches. But all was not well beneath the surface, especially on the leadership level.

We always seemed to have too much to do and too little time to do it. While the church was an exciting place to be, it was not a joy to be in leadership—especially for my wife, Geri, and me. There was a high

turnover rate among our church's staff and leaders, something we initially attributed to spiritual warfare and the intensity of New York City. A nationally known church consultant told me, "People get wounded in battle—that is to be expected. The key is to find another person to drive the tank." I was also assured that we were experiencing the natural growing pains and fallout of any large corporation or business.

But we weren't a business; we were a church family. Geri and I knew that something was missing. Our hearts were shrinking. Church leadership felt like a heavy burden. We were gaining the whole world for God while at the same time losing our souls (Mark 8:35–36).

The incessant demands of planting a church slowly turned my joy into a duty. After work, I had little energy left over to parent our children or to enjoy Geri. Even when I was physically present with my family, such as at a soccer game for one of our daughters, my mind was usually focused on something related to the church. I had even less energy to enjoy a "life" outside of my work.

The sober reality is that I made too little time during those early years for the joys of parenting and marriage. I was too preoccupied with the persistent demands of pastoring. (How well I now know that I will never get those years back.)

Something was deeply wrong. I secretly dreamed of retirement, and I was only in my mid-thirties! The foundation of my own personal character and development could not sustain the church we were building. It was a shaky foundation, waiting to collapse. But despite ongoing spiritual checkups—and finding no immorality, no withheld forgiveness, no coveting, et cetera—I could not pinpoint the source of my lack of joy.

I remember wondering: "Am I supposed to be miserable and pressured so that other people can experience joy in God?" It sure felt that way.

Weeks turned into months. Months turned into years. With all the responsibilities she alone carried for our four small children, Geri felt like a single parent during this time. She was tired of high-pressure, urban living. She was weary of the stress that I brought home from church. She wanted more of a marriage—a true partnership. She wanted more of a family life. She wanted a life in general.

The Spanish Split

The bottom began to fall out in 1994 when our Spanish congregation experienced a split and relationships that I had thought were rock solid disintegrated. God was beginning to get my attention and seemed to be pushing me deeper and deeper into a pit at each turn. I approached the bottom of that pit kicking and screaming. I thought I was tasting hell, and it turns out I was. Little did I know it at the time, but the true bottom was still two years away.

The event God initially used to get me into the pit was a betrayal by one of the assistant pastors of the Spanish-language congregation. For months I heard rumors that he was dissatisfied and wanted to leave New Life Fellowship to start a new church, taking most of the people with him.

“That’s impossible,” I said to myself. “He’s like a brother to me.” After all, we had known each other for ten years. Eventually I asked him about the rumors, and he categorically denied them: “Pedro, nunca” (Never, Pete), he said.

I will never forget my shock on the day I went to the afternoon Spanish service and two hundred people were missing. Only fifty people were there. Everyone else had gone to start another church.

Over the next several weeks, what seemed like a tidal wave swept over the remaining members of our congregation. They received phone calls exhorting them to leave the “house of Saul” (my church) and go over to the “house of David” (the new, exciting thing God was doing through the assistant pastor). People I had led to Christ, disciplined, and pastored for years were gone. I would never see many of them again.

When the split occurred, I did not defend myself. I accepted all the blame for the destruction. Even though I felt as if I had let myself be violated, I tried to follow Jesus’ model of being like a lamb going to the slaughter (Isa. 53:7). “Just take it, Pete. Jesus would,” I repeatedly said to myself.

In hindsight, much of the failure was mine. When we talked in private over two years later, the assistant pastor told me, “You made promises to disciple me, but your words meant nothing. You did not deserve to lead those people.” His complaint was legitimate. I had been overextended: I was pastoring two growing congregations at the same time (one in English and one in Spanish), and I was too busy “getting the job done” and putting

out fires. I lacked the time to fulfill my promise to give him friendship and training.

However, getting to that realization took time. Immediately after the split I was full of conflicting and unresolved emotions. I was angry and felt betrayed, but I also had love, like a brother, for my betrayer. Like the psalmist, I experienced the deep hurt from someone “with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship” (Psalm 55:14). The problem was that I had not previously believed such a betrayal was possible in the church.

Perhaps more importantly, I was also mesmerized by my assistant pastor’s gifts and abilities. The Spanish congregation admired his dynamic leadership qualities. Did it really matter that he was not broken and contrite of heart (Psalm 51:17)? Did it really matter that his character was lacking in certain areas? I know the answer now: Yes.

The main problem was that I lacked both the courage and maturity to confront him. My so-called godly, lamblike response had less to do with imitating Jesus and much more to do with the unresolved issues and emotional baggage I was carrying from my past.

My taste of hell went deeper following the congregational split. Suddenly I found myself living a double life. The outward Pete sought to reassure the discouraged people who remained at New Life. “Isn’t it amazing how God uses our sins to expand His kingdom? Now we have two churches instead of one!” I proclaimed. “Now more people can come into a personal relationship with Jesus. If any of you want to go over to that new church, may God’s blessings be upon you,” I said, not meaning a single word of it.

I was deeply wounded and angry, and those feelings gave way to hate. I was full of rage, and I couldn’t get rid of it. When I was alone in my car, just the thought of what had happened would trigger a burst of anger and a knot in my stomach. Within seconds, curse words would follow, flying almost involuntarily from my mouth: “He is an @#&% and he is full of \$*#%!,” I’d scream.

The Journey Inward Begins

After some time, I finally acknowledged my desperation. “Becoming a pastor is the worst decision I’ve ever made,” I told God in prayer.

Eventually, a good pastor friend referred me to a Christian counselor. Geri and I made an appointment and went. It was now March of 1994.

I felt totally humiliated. I felt like a child walking into the principal's office. "Counseling is for messed-up people," I complained to God (stating something I no longer believe). "This is not for me. I'm not screwed up!" Everything inside of me wanted to run.

After our initial two-day meeting, the counselor made three observations: I was consumed with the church; Geri was depressed and lonely; and our marriage lacked intimacy.

We weren't sure what true marital intimacy was, so I bought Geri a book on marriage. "I'll let her figure it out," I thought. Then I returned to working on growing the church.

I thought all my problems stemmed from the stress and complexity of living in New York City. I blamed Queens, the demands of church planting, Geri, our four small children, spiritual warfare, other leaders, a lack of prayer covering, even our car (it had been broken into seven times in three months). I was certain I had identified the root issues, but I hadn't. The root issues were inside of me. Unfortunately I couldn't—or wouldn't—admit that yet.

The next two years were marked by a slow descent into an abyss. It felt like an infinite black hole was threatening to swallow me. I cried out to God for help, to change me, but I felt as if God was closing heaven to my cries rather than answering them.

Things then went from bad to worse. I continued preaching weekly and serving as the senior pastor, but my confidence to lead effectively had been thoroughly shaken by the split in the Spanish congregation. I hired additional staff and asked them to lead, which they did. In my eyes, I had failed miserably. I felt certain that the new staff I hired could do a better job than I could, and so I let them begin rebuilding the church. Not surprisingly, soon the church no longer felt in line with the original vision we'd had when we planted it.

It was difficult for me to be honest in how I presented the situation to others. I had a terrible habit of embellishing or editing the truth lest people get upset. (God calls that lying; I renamed it good vision-casting.) It was a

struggle for me to be honest with myself about my feelings, especially those feelings that did not fit into my Christian grid, such as anger, bitterness, and sadness.

Progress was slow and hard. I was raising questions and experiencing feelings that were considered off-limits in most of the Christian circles I had been a part of for the previous twenty years. I wrestled with whether I was departing from the faith.

I attended leadership conferences to learn about spiritual warfare and how to reach an entire city for God. I went to “refreshing meetings” at other churches. I attended an out-of-state prophetic conference (where I received a number of encouraging personal prophecies). I intensified the early-morning prayer meetings at New Life. I studied the history of revivals. I sought counsel from numerous, nationally known church leaders. If there was a way to soak in more of God, I wanted to find it.

I thought I was making progress personally. Perhaps it wasn’t visible externally yet, but I felt sure something was happening. For Geri, however, things were as they had always been throughout our marriage—miserable.

Geri Quits

In early January of 1996 Geri told me she was quitting the church.¹ I finally hit rock bottom. I notified our elders of my dilemma, and they agreed that we should attend a one-week, intensive retreat with professional counseling to see if Geri and I could sort things out.

A few weeks later, Geri and I went away to a Christian counseling center. We spent five full days with two counselors. My hope was that this retreat would allow us to step out of our crisis, fix Geri, and provide a quick end to our pain. What I did not anticipate was that we would have a life-transforming experience with God.

For me, it began in the strangest way. At about 2:00 early one morning, Geri woke me, stood up on the bed and, with a few choice words, let me have it. For the first time, she told me the brutally honest truth about how she felt about our marriage, the church, and me.

Somehow Geri’s explosion, while also very painful, was a liberating experience for both of us. Why? She had stripped off the heavy spiritual

vener of “being good” that had kept her from looking directly at the truth about our marriage and lives. Neither of us had ever sensed a permission to feel like this before. We felt safe enough in this little, short-term Christian community to speak our hidden feelings to one another. I listened. She listened.

We discovered a sad reality: we had only allowed Jesus to superficially penetrate into the depth of our persons—even though we had been Christians for almost twenty years.

Born Again, Again

An experience that initially felt like death proved to be the beginning of an amazing journey that revolutionized my life, my marriage, my family, and ultimately the church. For the first time, Geri and I constructed a genogram of our families. We discovered the lingering power of the families we were born into. In particular, we realized that our relationship reflected many of the same qualities found in our parents’ marriages.²

Paul taught that once a person comes to faith in Christ, “the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17 nasb). I had never imagined that influential sin patterns, passed on from generation to generation in my family, were still operating in my life. I had glossed over the idea that I was still being shaped by a home I had left long ago.

Examining my heart revealed a mixed set of motivations. Part of my passion was for God’s glory. Other parts of me were driven by a complex set of motives that I did not yet have the tools or the time to sort out. Geri and I began to look beneath the surface of our lives and into entirely new arenas.

My spiritual foundation was finally being revealed for what it was: wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:10–15). I had limped along for so many years that the limp now seemed normal.

I can now see that Geri’s courageous step on that cold, January evening saved me. God intervened dramatically through Geri when she declared, “I quit!” It is probably the most loving and brave act of service that she has ever done for me. Her taking a stand forced me to seek professional help and resolve my vocational crisis.

Unconsciously, I had hoped our getting counseling would straighten Geri out so I could get on with my life and the church. Little did I know what was really ahead!

Jesus said, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). God forced me to take a long, painful look at the truth about myself. It was demoralizing to finally admit it, but I realized that the intensity of my engagement in spiritual disciplines had not automatically worked spiritual maturity into my life. Given my extensive background in prayer and the Bible, it was quite shocking for me to realize that whole layers of my life existed that God had not yet touched.

Why? I had ignored the emotional components of discipleship in my spiritual formation. They had not been addressed in seminary, my church life, or any part of my leadership training during the previous twenty years. I finally admitted I was an emotional infant leading a church, trying to raise up mothers and fathers of the faith when I was only a spiritual child myself.

Once I realized that I had overlooked the emotional components of seeking after God, it was as if I had been born again, again. This epiphany has led to the best years of my life as a human being, husband, father, follower of Jesus, and leader in God’s church. It has restored the joy of pastoring for me.

We call that journey “emotionally healthy spirituality,” the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: The Missing Link

The spiritual discipleship approaches of the churches that had shaped my faith had not possessed the language, theology, or training to help me integrate emotional health with my spiritual formation. The spiritual foundation upon which I had built my life (and from which I had tried to teach others) was cracked. It didn’t matter how many books I read, or how many seminars I attended. It also didn’t matter how many years passed—whether it was seventeen or another thirty. I would remain a spiritual infant until my unhealthy emotional life was exposed and transformed through Jesus Christ.

This revolutionary paradigm was now clear to me: Emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

When I finally discovered this link between emotional health and spiritual maturity, a Copernican revolution began for me—and it was frightening. I felt as if I was betraying the mentors who had shaped me spiritually. The ship had left the shore. I did not know where it was going, but I did know there was no going back.

Like a baby beginning to crawl, I began using emotional muscles I hadn't known existed and exploring internal territory that had, hitherto, remained untouched.

The Iceberg

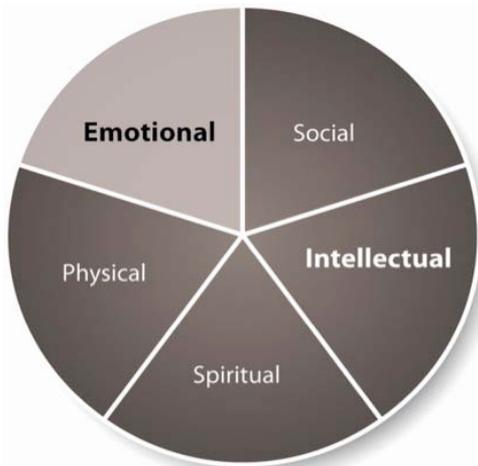
The challenges and stresses of church planting introduce us to ourselves. It makes us face the harshest realities in our lives, the monsters within, our shadows, and our self-will that resists God's will. It is essential that we understand the dynamics at play within us, or we will inevitably project them outward into the churches and people we lead.

Most of us, in our more honest moments, will admit that there are deep and untapped layers beneath the self we present to others on a day-to-day basis. As the following image shows, only about ten percent of an iceberg is visible to the eye. This ten percent represents the visible changes that others can see us make when we accept Christ. We are nicer people; we're more respectful. We attend church and regularly participate in church events. We "clean up our lives" somewhat—from alcohol, drugs, foul language, illicit behavior, and beyond. We begin to pray and share Christ with others.



But the roots of who we—the parts we don’t readily show the world, or even look at ourselves—continue to exist unaffected and unmoved below the surface. Contemporary spiritual models address some of that submerged ninety percent of our emotional icebergs. The problem is that a large portion still remains untouched by Jesus Christ until there is a serious engagement with what I call “emotionally healthy spirituality.”

God made us, as people, in His image. (See Genesis 1:27.) That image includes physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions. Take a look at the following illustration.



Ignoring any aspect of who we are as men and women made in God’s image, always results in destructive consequences—in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. If you meet someone who is

mentally challenged or physically disabled, his or her lack of mental or physical development is readily apparent. An autistic child in a crowded playground standing alone for hours without interacting with other children stands out. Emotional underdevelopment, however, is not so obvious when we first meet people. It is only over time, as we become more involved with them, that such deficits become apparent.

Emotional Health and Contemplative Spirituality

A person can grow emotionally healthy without Christ. In fact, I can think of a number of non-Christian people who are more loving, balanced, and civil than many church members I know. At the same time, a person can be deeply committed to contemplative spirituality, even to the point of taking a monastic vow, and remain emotionally unaware and socially maladjusted.

How can this be? Few Christians committed to contemplative spirituality also explore the inner workings of their emotional health. At the same time, few people committed to emotional health also develop their contemplative spirituality. Both are powerful, life-changing emphases when engaged in separately. But together they offer nothing short of a spiritual revolution, transforming the hidden places deep beneath the surface.

Defining Emotional Health and Contemplative Spirituality

Emotional health is concerned with such things as:

- naming, recognizing, and managing our own feelings
- identifying and having active compassion for others
- initiating and maintaining close and meaningful relationships
- breaking free from self-destructive patterns
- being aware of how our past impacts our present
- developing the capacity to clearly express our thoughts and feelings
- respecting and loving others without having to change them
- clearly, directly, and respectfully asking for what we need, want, or prefer
- accurately assessing our own strengths, limits, and weaknesses, and freely sharing them with others
- developing the capacity to maturely resolve conflicts

- distinguishing and appropriately expressing our sexuality and sensuality
- grieving well

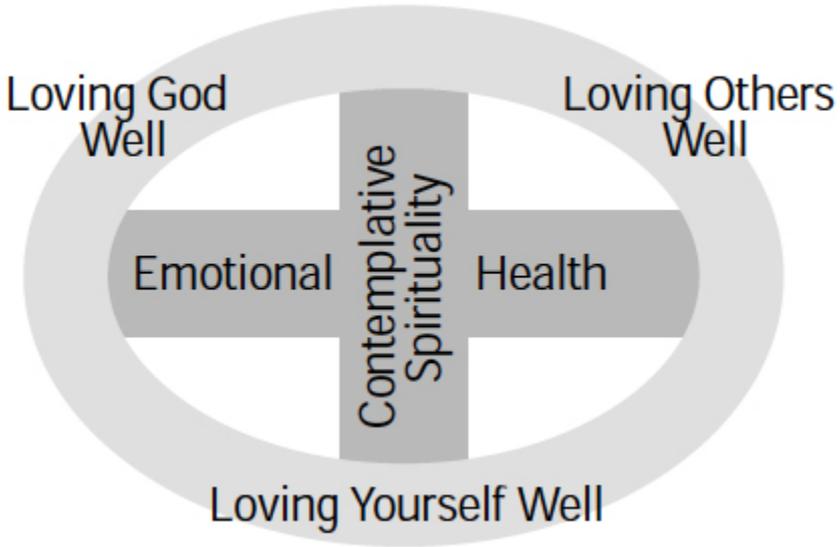
Contemplative spirituality, on the other hand, focuses on classic practices and concerns such as:

- awakening and surrendering to God's love in every situation
- positioning ourselves to hear God and remember His presence in all we do
- communing with God, allowing Him to fully dwell in the depth of our being
- practicing silence, solitude, and a life of unceasing prayer
- attentively resting in the presence of God
- understanding that the goal of life is a loving union with Jesus
- finding the true essence of who we are in God
- loving others out of a life of love for God
- developing a rhythm of life that enables us to remember God
- adapting and using historic practices of spirituality that are applicable today
- living in a committed community that passionately loves Jesus

The integration of emotional health and contemplative spirituality addresses what I believe to be the missing piece in many churches today. Together they unleash the Holy Spirit's power to transform us into the image of Christ.

Joining the Two Together

Contemplation and emotional health are different, and yet they also overlap. Both are necessary for loving God, loving ourselves, and loving others. This is illustrated in the diagram³ below.



The greatest commandments, Jesus said, are to love God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–40).

Brother Lawrence called contemplation “the pure loving gaze that finds God everywhere.” Francis de Sale described it as “the mind’s loving, unmixed, permanent attention to the things of God.” Awareness of, and responding to, the love of God should be at the heart of our lives. We are first and foremost called to remain in Jesus, for apart from him we cannot bear any fruit (John 15:1–5).

At the same time, contemplation does not only affect our relationship with God. Ultimately, it also has implications for the way we see and treat people and the way we look at ourselves. Our relationship with God and our relationship with others are two sides of the same coin. If our contemplation or “loving union with God” does not result in love for other people, then it is, as 1 John 4:7–21 says so eloquently, a lie and not true.

Emotional health, on the other hand, concerns itself primarily with loving others well. It connects us to our interiors, making it possible to see and treat each individual as created in the image of God, and not just as an object to use or take advantage of. For this reason, self-awareness, being in tune to what is going on inside of us, is indispensable to emotional

health and loving well. Furthermore, the extent to which we love ourselves is the extent to which we will be able to love others.

At the same time, emotional health is not only about ourselves and our relationships. It also impacts our image of God, our ability to hear God's voice, and our discernment of His will.

A commitment to both emotional health and contemplative spirituality has the force to actually slow us down, anchor us in God's love, and break us free from illusions.

The integration of these two missing components powerfully transformed my interior life. Over time they also became part of the DNA of New Life, permeating every area of our church life: sermons, leadership development, equipping classes, mentoring, board meetings, Sunday worship, small groups, and more. The fruit has been breathtaking.

In the next four chapters we will examine emotionally healthy spirituality within the context of church planting—namely, your interior life. We will unpack what it means to pay attention to four distinct but related areas:

- your interior life with God,
- your interior life with yourself,
- your interior life and your marriage, and
- your interior life and your leadership.

Let's begin by looking at what it means for you as a church planter to tend to your interior life with God.

SECTION II: Your Interior Life

Chapter 3: Your Interior Life with God

The greatest gift you can give your church plant is to take the time to cultivate depth in your relationship with Jesus.

Church planting can be like an addiction—only it is not an addiction to drugs or alcohol, but to activity and doing.

Our bodies cannot seem to physiologically get off the adrenaline rush in order to slow down. We battle to make the best use of every spare minute we have. We fear how things might fall apart if we slow down or stop, so we just keep going. We end our days exhausted from the endless demands being placed on us. We know we need to rest and recharge, but who has time for that when the church plant is hanging by a thread? Soon even our “free time” becomes filled with demands as we try to squeeze more “doing” into an already overburdened life.

A Loving Union

Jesus illustrates the nature of a relationship with him by using the image of a vine and its branches: “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). As one scholar has noted, “This is probably the last saying of Jesus we will come to fully accept.”

How many things have you already done today without any thought of Jesus?

Jesus doesn't say you cannot do things without him. You can plant your church without Jesus. You can employ strategies and insights from well-respected leadership and church planting gurus. Your church can grow in number, and even plant other churches. Good things can happen—even miracles. Demons can be cast out, and prophetic words can be given.

Hear, however, what Jesus is saying. Apart from him, you will produce nothing of his life and kingdom in the long term. In other words, unless your work emerges and flows out of a deepening relationship and loving union with Jesus, it is nothing. The church plant will produce no lasting fruit.

I like the ancient phrase “loving union” as a synonym for “remaining in Him.” I know I am not in loving union with Jesus, for example, when I am imposing my will on situations and circumstances, when I am grasping for things to happen, when I have little grace or love for others, when I stop listening, when I am anxious and my body tenses up, when I am self-absorbed, judgmental, or fearful, when I am rushing, or when I have too much to do in too little time.

Eugene Peterson says it well: “Busyness is the enemy of spirituality. It is essentially laziness...It is filling our time with our own actions instead of paying attention to God’s action. It is taking charge.”⁴

Finding Your “Desert”

Like Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, each of us must somehow fashion a “desert” in the midst of our lives in order to cultivate our personal relationship with Jesus. When we skim in our relationship with God, no program or discipline can substitute for the superficiality and self-will that inevitably follow.

Cultivating an intentional life with our Lord Jesus requires planned, focused time—for silence, prayer, meditation on Scripture, and reading other rich devotional writings. An endless supply of distractions and voices call us away from sitting at the feet of Jesus. Intentional silence and solitude are our only hope for seeing through the illusions of our world, and providing leadership to those around us. It is a delusion to think that we can lead people on a journey that we have not traveled ourselves.

If our life *with* God is not sufficient to sustain our work for God, we will find our souls and our roles disconnected. Our role as pastor and spiritual leader will become an image we project, while our soul will become withered and empty. Our sense of worth and validation will gradually shift from trusting God’s love for us in Christ to measuring our worth through the size and notoriety of our church. Then the joy in our life with Christ will slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, disappear.

Balancing Activity and Contemplation

In every generation Christians have written on striking a balance between being like both Mary and Martha, the challenge of balancing both the contemplative and the active components of our life. Consider the following passage:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her"
(Luke 10:38–42).

Mary and Martha represent two approaches to the Christian life. Martha is actively serving Jesus, but she is also missing Jesus. She is busy in the “doing” of life. Her duties have become disconnected from her love for Jesus.

However, Martha’s problem goes beyond her busyness. Her life is off center and divided. I suspect that if Martha were to sit at the feet of Jesus, she would still be distracted by everything on her mind. Her inner person is scattered, irritable, and anxious. One of the surest signs that her life is out of order is that she even tells Jesus what to do!

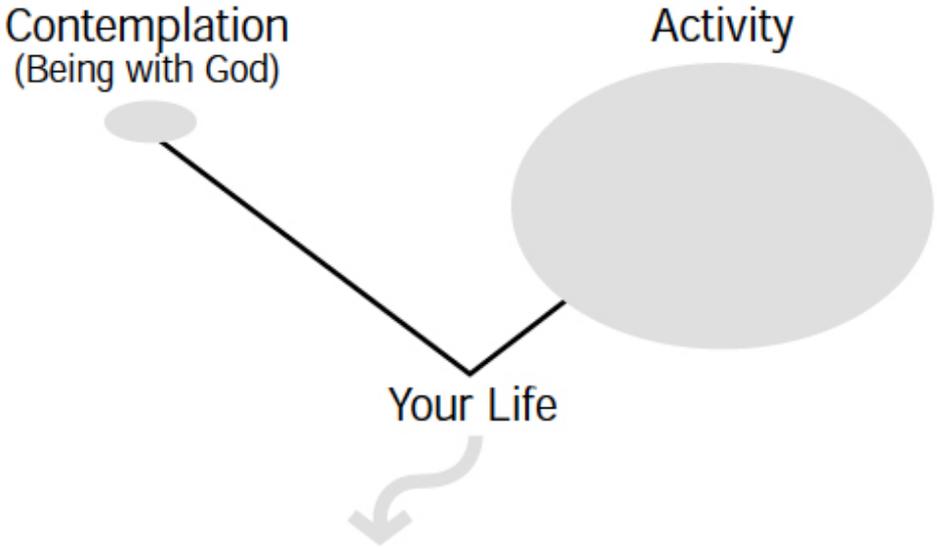
Mary, on the other hand, is sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to him. She is “being” with Jesus, enjoying intimacy with him and loving him. She is attentive, open, quiet, and taking pleasure in his presence. She is engaged in the contemplative life.

Mary is not trying to master God. Her life has one center of gravity, Jesus. I suspect that if Mary were to help with the many household chores consuming Martha, she would not be worried or upset. Why? Her inner person is slowed down enough to focus on Jesus and to center her life on him.

When I became a Christian I fell in love with Jesus. I cherished time alone with him, reading the Bible, and praying. Yet almost immediately, the activity circle of my life (i.e., the “doing”) fell out of balance with the contemplative circle of my life (i.e., “being” with Jesus). Church leaders had taught me early on about the importance of quiet time and devotions to nurture my personal relationship with Christ, but not enough. The message of activism swirling around me drowned out any emphasis on

contemplation. I soon found myself struggling with a desire for more time with God.

Take a look at the following illustration:

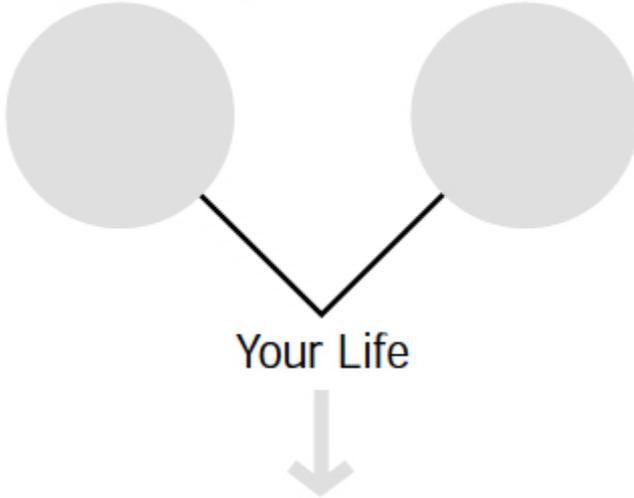


The twisted arrow below “Your Life” illustrates the result of an imbalance between your focus on contemplation and activity. An active life in the world for God can only properly flow from a life with God.

Take a look at this new illustration:

Contemplation
(Being with God)

Activity



Your Life

When you gain the ability to successfully integrate activity with contemplation, the arrow of your life will have a beauty, harmony, and clarity that makes the “doing” of life straightforward and joyful.

Of course, God has made each of us different. He has a unique combination of activity and contemplation for each of us. The question is how much time *you* need to be alone with God so that Christ’s life can flow out of your life. God has crafted each of our personalities, temperaments, life situations, passions, and callings in a unique way. As a result, each person’s combination of activity and contemplation will be different.

The Discovery of an Ancient Treasure: The Daily Office⁵

I wish I had been exposed to the spiritual discipline of the [Daily Office](#) before I began church planting in 1987. It offers a rhythm powerful enough to anchor us in the face of whatever catastrophic storms our church plant may blow into our lives. It is an invitation to continually stop and to surrender to God in trust.

The term *Daily Office* (also called *fixed-hour prayer*, *Divine Office*, or *liturgy of the hours*) differs from what is often labeled as quiet time or devotions. When I listen carefully to how most people describe their devotional life, the emphasis tends to be on “getting filled up for the day” or petitioning God for the needs of others. However, the root of the Daily

Office is not grounded in turning to God to get something, but in simply seeking to be with Him.

The word *office* comes from the Latin word *opus* (work). For the early church, the Daily Office was always the “work of God.” Nothing was to interfere with that priority.

I first observed and experienced the Daily Office during a one-week visit with Trappist monks in Massachusetts. The basic structure of Trappist life includes four elements—prayer, work, study, and rest. Yet it was the intentional arranging of their lives around the prayers of the Daily Office that most moved me. This was their means to remaining aware of God’s presence while they worked, and it enabled them to maintain a healthy balance in their lives. But (as I was surprised to discover) even they sometimes struggled with the balance of being like both Mary and Martha—activity and contemplation.

During my time with the monks we met seven times a day, remembering God through the reading and singing of the Scriptures (especially the Psalms) and prayer.

We chanted so many Psalms (they sing all one hundred and fifty each week), read so much Scripture, and spent so much time in silence, that by day three of my first week I felt like I had been transported into another world.

After my time with the monks I was sure of one thing: The rhythm of pausing for the Daily Office helped unlock the secret to paying attention to God and being carried in His presence throughout the day. And it did so in a way that was unlike anything I had experienced up to that point.

My time with the Trappists inspired me to spend time during the next two years visiting a variety of Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox monastic communities to experience many variations of the Daily Office. I also read church history—a lot of it—trying to understand how this discipline might apply to school teachers, police officers, lawyers, social workers, students, financial advisors, and stay-at-home moms seeking to follow Jesus in a place like New York.

But above all else, I was trying to figure out how the Daily Office might apply to me—a husband and father of four daughters with a full-time job

as the pastor of a very active church that placed enormous demands on my time.

David made a practice of praying seven times a day (Psalm 119:164). Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan. 6:10). Devout Jews in Jesus' time prayed two to three times a day. Jesus himself probably followed the Jewish custom of praying at set times during the day. And after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples continued to pray at certain hours of the day (Acts 3:1; 10:1–9). Around the year ad 525, St. Benedict structured these prayer times around eight Daily Offices.

All of these people realized that intentionally stopping to be with God is the key to creating a continual and easy familiarity with God's presence during the rest of the day. It is the rhythm of stopping that makes the "practice of the presence of God" (to use Brother Lawrence's phrase) a real possibility.

The great power in setting apart small units of time for morning, midday, and evening prayer infuses the rest of my day's activities with a deep sense of the sacred—of God. All the time is His.

The Central Elements of the Daily Office

God has built each of us differently. What works for one person will not necessarily work for another. Geri and I approach our Daily Offices very differently. I prefer more structure. I enjoy written prayers, pray the psalms often, and love the rhythm of three to four Offices per day.

Geri enjoys great flexibility in how she spends her time with God. She utilizes a variety of tools, books, and methods in her Daily Office. For example, it is not uncommon for her to go outside and breathe in the presence of God in creation.

You choose the length of time for your Offices. Remember, the key is the regular remembrance of God, not the length of time spent. Your pausing to be with God can last anywhere from two minutes to twenty minutes to forty-five minutes. It is up to you. Also, don't be overly concerned with the number of Offices you do each day. It is more important that you commune in an unhurried fashion with God.

There are a number of available resources that you may wish to utilize as you begin. The free [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality app](#) has two weeks

of Daily Offices, and can be downloaded from iTunes. I have also written an eight-week introduction to the practice ([*The Daily Office: Begin the Journey*](#)) that is available through the Willow Creek Association.

However, regardless of which tools or approach you ultimately choose, I believe that four key elements need to be found in any Office: stopping, centering, silence, and Scripture.

Stopping: This is the essence of a Daily Office. We are to stop our activity and pause to be with the Living God. This takes faith in God’s sovereignty over all things. Central to the challenge of stopping at midday, for example, is trusting that God is on the throne. He rules. I don’t. During each Office I give up control and trust God to run His world without me.

Centering: Scripture commands us to “be still before the lord and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7). We are called to move into God’s presence and rest there. That alone is no small feat. For this reason I often spend two to twenty minutes centering myself so that I can let go of my tensions, distractions, and sensations and rest in the love of God.

When you find your mind wandering, let your breathing bring you back. As you breathe in, ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit. As you breathe out, exhale all that is sinful, false, and not of Him.

A second tool I use when my mind wanders is praying the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” If nothing else happens during a Daily Office, it should call us to mindfulness—inviting us to pay attention to what our short earthly lives are all about.

Silence: Dallas Willard has called silence and solitude the two most radical disciplines of the Christian life. Solitude is the practice of being absent from people and things to attend to God. Silence is the practice of quieting every inner and outer voice to attend to God. Henri Nouwen wrote, “without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.”⁶

Scripture: The book of Psalms is the foundation of almost any Daily Office resource you will find today. The prayers of the Psalter cover the entire gamut of our life experience—from anger to rage to trust to praise. It is not surprising then that Psalms has served as the prayer book of the church through the centuries. There are many other rich spiritual practices you can integrate into your Daily Office: *lectio divina* (meditation on

Scripture), centering prayer, reading through the Bible in a year, or reading from devotional classics, to name a few.

A good rule to follow when dealing with tools and techniques is this: If it helps you, do it. If it doesn't help you, then don't do it—that includes the Daily Office! If reading the Psalms helps you, then great. Do it. If reading the Psalms has become routine and dead for you, then try something else. Be attentive in your heart to what God is doing inside of you. Learn from others. But most importantly, let God be your guide.

Keep the purpose of the Daily Office in mind—to remember God and commune with Him throughout the day. We are constantly tempted to think God will love us more if we pray more. But grace reminds us that there is nothing we can do or not do that will cause God to love us any more than He does right now.

Remember, your first work is not church planting or pastoring. Your first work is to be in a relationship of loving union with Jesus so that you might be *in God for the world*.

This work of nurturing your interior life with God leads to the broader issue of how you care for yourself and experience delight. This leads us to the subject of the next chapter—your interior life with yourself.

Chapter 4: Your Interior Life with Yourself

The most difficult person for you to lead in your church plant will always be you.

Paul said, “you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1 nlt). The key question to ask yourself is: “Do I really want people to live the way I am living?” Most pastors answers no, especially church planters.

The endless needs that routinely hurtle toward us often leave us exhausted and numb. Who has the time to enjoy Jesus, our spouse, our children, or even life itself, given all that church planting demands of us? Who has time for delighting in fun or hobbies? We hope to find the time and space we need to replenish our souls after the storm of getting the church off the ground passes.

But the storm rarely passes. And the result is that the church plant eventually does violence to our souls.

Self-Care Versus Selfishness

Jesus modeled healthy self-care for us. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, he rested and enjoyed what others gave him before he went to the cross (John 12:1–8). How many of us could allow someone to spend a year’s worth of wages on us? Many of us don’t see ourselves as that valuable.

For years I carried resentments that arose out of overfunctioning⁷ as a leader. I was “doing” beyond what God had asked me to do. I did for others what they could and should have been doing for themselves. I did the work of three people. Remember: an unrelenting sense of duty can destroy our relationship with Jesus—the only true source of long-term life and joy.

If you live unfaithfully to yourself, as Parker Palmer argues so eloquently, you will cause others great damage.⁸ Being true to ourselves and engaging in self care allows us to love others well. It is not selfish to take care of yourself, it is the very opposite.

If we are going to take time to care for ourselves, we will sometimes have to say no to those around us—and mean it. For years I did not give myself the gift of silence—not unless I had first taken care of those around me. It didn’t matter if my soul was parched or my spirit was depleted. I believed that because I was the pastor, I had to be strong. Moreover, for years I did not give myself the gift of creating margins in my life to listen to how I was feeling, and observe how it was impacting others.

It was inhuman. Inevitably I became resentful. Jesus’ yoke felt hard and heavy, not easy and light as he promised it would be (Matt. 11:30).

The critical issue for managing your interior life with yourself requires making space for delight. This leads to two central spiritual formation practices, both of which I believe are critical to anchoring ourselves in delight: Sabbath-Keeping and the “Rule of Life.”

Delight and Sabbath-Keeping⁹

The discipline of keeping the [Sabbath](#) is grounded in accepting God’s invitation to stop, rest, delight, and contemplate Him for a twenty-four-hour period each week. Most modern cultures know nothing of setting aside a whole day to rest and delight in God. Like many, I always

considered it an optional extra, not something absolutely essential to my discipleship.

Jesus reminds us that we were not made for the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath was made to be a gift from God to us (Mark 2:27). I love Sabbath, and I am confident that the more you taste it from the inside, the more you too will love this gift from God. Geri and I often remark to one another: “How did we ever do leadership without keeping the Sabbath? No wonder pastoring a church seemed so violent to our souls!”

For me, keeping the Sabbath means stopping from 6:00 p.m. on Friday to 6:00 p.m. on Saturday—even if my sermon is not finished—as if it ever is. I avoid the computer, e-mails, and church-related work. I spend part of the day on Friday doing other unpaid work, such as cleaning the house, repairing the car, cleaning, laundry, and paying bills.

Make no mistake about it: keeping the Sabbath is both radical and extremely difficult because it cuts to the core of our spirituality, the core of our convictions, the core of our faith, and the core of our lifestyles.

The Sabbath was a hallmark of the Jewish way of life for thirty-five hundred years. This one act, perhaps more than any other, kept them from giving in to the pressures of the powerful cultures that have sought to assimilate them. God intends that it serve the same purpose for us.

Eugene Peterson points out that even though the Sabbath has been one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life, we cannot do without it. “Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God and how God forms us...I don’t see any way out of it: if we are going to live appropriately in the creation we must keep the Sabbath.”¹⁰

The Four Principles of Biblical Sabbath-Keeping

There are four foundational qualities that have served me well in distinguishing a “day off” from a biblical Sabbath. I commend them to you as you develop a biblical framework for Sabbath that fits your particular life situation, temperament, calling, and personality.

- 1. Stop:** Sabbath is first and foremost a day of stopping. In fact, “to stop” is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word for Sabbath. Most of us can’t stop until we are finished doing whatever it is we think we need to do. We feel compelled to complete our projects, finish

answering our e-mails, return all our phone messages, finish balancing our checkbook, or clean the house. There is always one more goal to be reached.

On the Sabbath we embrace our limits. We stop during the Sabbath because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. Ultimately we will die with countless unfinished projects and goals. That's okay. God is taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us trying to run things. We can trust He will take care of our church plant if we stop to receive the gift of Sabbath.

- 2. Rest:** Once we have stopped, the Sabbath calls us to rest. God rested after His work. We are to do the same—every seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3). How do we rest from work? The answer is simple: by doing whatever delights and replenishes us.

For example, my work relates to my vocation as pastor of New Life Fellowship Church, along with writing and speaking. For this reason, Sunday is not my Sabbath. During my Sabbath I purposely engage in activities that get my mind off of work. I may take a nap, work out, go for a long walk, read a novel, watch a good movie, or go out for dinner. I make sure to avoid church e-mail and my cell phone—and anything or anyone that might make me even think about the church!

For me to enjoy Sabbath rest, however, requires that I have another time during the week to do the tasks of life that consume my energy or fill me with worry. For example, planning my week, paying bills, balancing our checkbook, cleaning the house, fighting traffic and crowds to shop, and doing loads of laundry, are all types of work I need to do on a different day of the week. I usually do this on Friday during the day.

Most of us will have to choose a day other than Saturday or Sunday for our Sabbath. The apostle Paul writes that the day you choose is not important (Rom. 14:5–7). What is important is that you select a weekly, twenty-four-hour time period. And once you've chosen that time, protect it!

- 3. Delight:** A third component of biblical Sabbath-keeping revolves around delighting in what we have been given. This is the *most important* characteristic of the Sabbath. God, after finishing His work of creation, saw that “it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). God delighted over His creation. The Hebrew phrase for this passage communicates a sense of joy, completion, wonder, and play.

During Sabbath, we are called to enjoy and delight in creation and its gifts. We are to slow down and savor our food, smelling and tasting its riches. We are to take the time to see the beauty of a tree, a leaf, a flower, or the sky—each created with great care by our God. He has given most of us the ability to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, so that we might feast with our senses on the miraculous bounties of life.

Every Sabbath also serves as a taste of the glorious eternal party of music, food, and beauty that awaits us in heaven when we see God face to face (Rev. 22:4). Our short earthly lives are put in perspective when we look forward to entering an eternal Sabbath feast in God's perfect presence.

- 4. Contemplate:** The final quality of a biblical Sabbath is, of course, the contemplation of God. The Sabbath is meant to be “holy to the Lord” (Exod. 31:15). Pondering the love of God should remain the central focus of our Sabbaths. For this reason, whenever possible, Sundays remain the ideal time for Sabbath-keeping for most people.

As with the other properties of Sabbath-keeping, contemplation requires that we prepare in advance. Is it any wonder that the Jewish people traditionally had a Day of Preparation for the Sabbath? What will it mean for you to prepare for Sabbath? What concerns or tasks do you need to resolve so that you can have an uncluttered Sabbath?

There is no one right way to practice Sabbath-keeping that will work for every person. It is vitally important that you remain mindful of your unique life situation as you work these four principles of Sabbath-keeping into your life. Experiment. Make a plan. You may want to begin with a twelve-hour Sabbath. Follow it for one to two months. Then make appropriate adjustments.

If you are bi-vocational or have small children, you will have to set limits and be creative. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Beware of legalism and perfectionism around the Sabbath. The whole purpose of it is to receive grace! And remember, we don't have to keep the Sabbath; we get to keep the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Few of us would give ourselves a “no obligation day” very often. Keeping the Sabbath is like having a heavy snow day every week. You have the gift of a day to do whatever you want. You don't have any obligations, pressures, or responsibilities. You have permission to

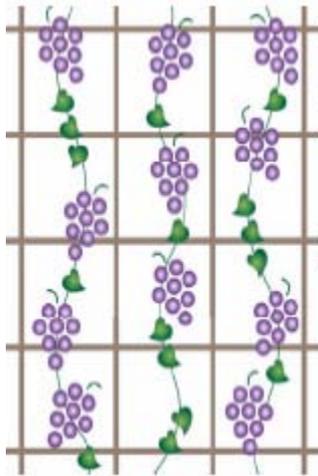
play, be with friends, take a nap, or read a good book. Think about it: God gives you over seven weeks (fifty-two days in all) of “snow days” every year!

Take the next step. Begin to restructure your day off according to the four principles noted in this section, thus transforming it into “a sabbath to the Lord your God” (Exod. 20:10).

Delight and Developing a “Rule of Life”

A second way to nourish your interior life and cultivate delight revolves around the development of a personal “[Rule of Life](#).”

Please don’t be intimidated by the word *rule*. The word comes from the Greek for “trellis.” A trellis (pictured below) is a tool that enables a grapevine to get off the ground and grow upward, becoming more fruitful and productive. In the same way, a Rule of Life is a trellis that helps us abide in Christ and become more fruitful spiritually.¹¹



Very simply, a Rule of Life is an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. It provides guidelines to help us continually remember God as the source of our lives. It includes our unique combination of spiritual practices that provide structure and direction for us to intentionally pay attention and remember God at all times.

Striving against the strong currents of church planting without the anchor of a thoughtful, flexible, intentional Rule of Life is almost impossible. Eventually we will find ourselves distracted and adrift spiritually.

The development of a personal Rule of Life on a biannual or annual basis is indispensable. It is a way of stepping back and reexamining your life and rhythms. The following is a sample of my Rule of Life, one that supports my commitment to lead out of a place of receiving and giving the love of God.



What follows is an exercise I use when leading conferences for pastors and leaders. It helps them to develop a more conscious, intentional rhythm for following Jesus. I encourage you to take time in the coming weeks to be alone with God and prayerfully craft your own Rule of Life, using the following guidelines.

Exercise: Crafting Your Personal Rule of Life

Step 1: Write down everything that nurtures your spirit and fills you with delight (e.g., people, places, activities). Normally, when we think of spiritual activities, we limit ourselves to things such as prayer, going to church, worship, and Bible reading. Don't censor yourself. Your list may include gardening, walking the dog, being in nature, talking with close

friends, cooking, painting, or any number of other possibilities. List them all.

Step 2: Write down the activities you need to avoid, those that prevent you from remaining anchored in Christ. Think of things that impact your spirit negatively—such as violent movies, hurrying, going beyond your limits, et cetera.

Step 3: What are the “have to’s” in this season of your life that impact your rhythms? For example, caring for aging parents, having a special needs child, a demanding season at work, health issues.

Step 4: Now fill in the Rule of Life Worksheet. (See Appendix B.)

Step 5: Take a step back and consider the following questions:

- What do you think will be your biggest challenge?
- What is the one thing you must do right now?
- What is one “stretch goal” you may want to consider?

Remember:

1. Listen to your heart’s desires when discerning your Rule. God often speaks to us through them.
2. Make sure your Rule includes some joy, play, and fun.
3. Take baby steps. Don’t make your Rule impossible to follow.
4. Sometime you will have trouble keeping your Rule of Life. That’s okay. Recognize that you’re human and try again. It takes experimentation to discern what unique form your Rule should take.
5. Figure out how much structure you need—a lot or a little. Debra Farrington, in her book *Living Faith Day by Day*, writes:

Over the years I’ve also struggled with the amount of structure to build into a rule. People I respect deeply have detailed rules with set times for prayer, established types of prayer, and so on. They tell me that if they don’t get up at 6:30 each morning and take a half hour of prayer time that they will never get to it during the day. But that doesn’t work for me. It makes my spiritual life into something to add to my to-do list, and it becomes a chore and not a blessing. Over the years I have found that my rule for prayer needs to be more open-ended. I am committed to praying daily, but how and when I do that varies from day-to-day.

6. Remember, the goal is for you to receive the love of God and to offer His love to those around you. He is ultimately our source of all delight.

This leads us to the third ingredient for being an emotionally healthy church planter—your interior life and your marriage.

Chapter 5: Your Interior Life and Your Marriage

Geri argues that she can assess the health of a church in less than five minutes. She only has to ask the senior leader's spouse one question: "How are you?"

Geri prefers to only speak at leadership conferences that include spouses, because it is often difficult to get the full truth from just the pastor/leader.

As Goes the Leader's Marriage, so Goes the Church

Few people are willing to admit it, but the marriages of many pastors and church leaders are in a sad state. Their spousal relationships are strained, unfulfilling, and joyless. Even though many church planter assessments may give some insight into the strength of your marriage, this is not enough. For a marriage to flourish before and after church planting, you and your spouse will have to go much deeper.

Unfortunately, even the best leadership and denominational conferences, seminaries, and schools do not teach us how to have marriages that taste and point to heaven. We mistakenly assume that a great marriage will happen naturally if we are working for God.

The apostle Paul understood the principle that as goes the leader's marriage, so goes the church. He made a healthy marriage an indispensable requirement for leadership in the church saying, "He must manage his own family well...(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)" (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Paul understood that we minister out of who we are. If we are not building a healthy organism in our own homes, then we're not going to be able to build a healthy church family either. If we cannot practice "Clean Fighting"¹² in our marriages, then disagreements and conflicts will not be handled well in the church families we lead. The goal is not that our marriages be perfect, but rather that they be characterized by intent, integrity, and priority of investment.

The Vow

Scripture teaches that if you are married, your first vocation is your spouse and any children God has given you. This covenant takes priority—even over your church ministry.

Men and women who take final vows to join a monastery do so only after a discernment period (lasting five to seven years) of being an observer, postulant, novice, and making temporary, or simple, vows. At the end of the process, they change their name, divest themselves of all their possessions, commit to celibacy for Christ, and join their community until they die. Every earthly decision they make from that point forward is then informed by that monastic vow.

In the same way, once you exchange vows with your spouse before God, everything changes. That one promise, or vow, must now take precedence over all else. It must inform every decision you make for the rest of your life. It is the reason you cannot work seventy or eighty hours a week. If you are married, you cannot live as if you are single. It is that simple. Mike Mason captures it well:

The problem with most troubled marriages is that both partners are trying to accomplish far too many things in the world, and in the process, like Martha in Luke 10:42, they neglect the “one thing needful.” Next to the love of God, the one thing by far the most important in the life of all married people is their marriage...For marriage involves nothing more than a lifelong commitment to love just one person—to do, whatever else one does, a good, thorough job of loving one person.¹³

Making Visible the Invisible

Along with the vow, God gives us a second way in which to understand our marriages. Paul writes: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31–32).

Paul refers to the “one flesh” union of a husband and wife as a foreshadowing of Christ’s union with his bride, the church. Think about that. It is a profound mystery indeed!

Our marriages are meant to be of such high quality that they proclaim and reflect the union of Christ and the church. They are meant to give the people in our congregations a glimpse of their eternal destiny—union and communion with Jesus, our eternal bridegroom. When we make a marriage vow, we commit ourselves (especially as Christian leaders) to offering the world a visible signpost of what marriage to Jesus is meant to be. In other words, our marriages are the loudest sermon we preach.

For this reason, investing time, energy, and money into your marriage is one of the greatest gifts you can give your church plant. Only seven percent of marriages in the United States have been classified as “exceptional.”¹⁴ It is God’s will that you be in that percentage. It won’t happen without a regular, intentional plan and vision.¹⁵

Limits

This biblical view of marriage has enormous implications for our discernment of God’s will, our priorities, and our limits. Geri and I made a commitment in early 1996 to invest in our marriage as the highest priority of our lives after Christ. For example, before I begin writing a book, Geri and I talk about it since she will inevitably be impacted. If she says, “This is not a good time for such a commitment,” then I hold off.

I love and feel God’s calling to New Life Fellowship Church. I have been here for over twenty-five years. Yet if Geri were to sense that God is calling her to leave New York City, I would receive that as part of God’s call for me as well. Additionally, I have made the commitment to Geri that if the church were ever to negatively interfere with our marital vow and family again, I would resign. Why? My vow is to her and not to New Life Fellowship Church.

When you seek to discern God’s will regarding an opportunity for expansion in your church plant, consider the amount of time the new initiative will demand of you, as well as the amount of margin in your life that will disappear as a result. I suggest that you ask yourself the following two questions as a key part of the discernment process: What does my spouse think? How will this impact my marriage? When we as church planters do not prayerfully ask ourselves these questions, our marriages, families, and churches suffer in ways that God never intended.

Skills

To have a great marriage requires, not only a robust theological vision, but also the right set of skills. We learn many skills to be competent in our careers and at school. We don't learn, however, the skills necessary for growing into an emotionally mature spouse who loves well. This is especially critical for church planters and pastors.

Towards this end, my wife and I have developed [*Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0*](#). The skills found in this curriculum are applicable for use in all kinds of settings and relationships—friendships, parenting, workplace, and singles, but they are especially important for married couples.

The following is a description of our simplest skill: Stop Mind Reading.

Stop Mind Reading

The ninth commandment reads: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16). Stop Mind Reading enables me to check out whether what I'm thinking or feeling about someone is true. It enables me to clarify potential misunderstandings. This very simple, but powerful, tool eliminates an untold number of conflicts in relationships.

Every time I make an assumption about someone who has hurt or disappointed me without confirming it, I believe a lie about that person in my head. Because I have not checked out my assumption, it is very possible that what I believe is not true. It is also likely that I will (intentionally or unintentionally) pass that false assumption around to others.

When we leave reality for a mental creation of our own making (assumptions), we create a counterfeit world. In doing so we wreck relationships by creating endless confusion and conflict. The Bible has much to say about not taking on the role of judge to others (e.g., Matt. 7:1–5).

Key Principle: Never assume you know what a person is thinking or feeling.

The following is how you stop mind reading:

1. Ask for permission to read his/her mind.

2. Say, “I think you think...is that correct?” or “Can I check out an assumption with you?”
3. Give the person an opportunity to respond.

There are eight Emotionally Healthy Skills in all—from Clean Fighting, to Incarnational Listening, to Clarify Expectations. To see a sample of one of these skills, [click here](#). For more information, or to purchase the *Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0* curriculum, [click here](#).

This now leads us to our final key element for emotionally healthy church planting—your interior life and your leadership.

Chapter 6: Your Interior Life and Your Leadership

Over the years, pastors have asked me, “How do you apply emotionally healthy spirituality to leading a complex organization—hiring and firing, strategic planning, budgets, elder boards, and general staff management?” For years I responded, “I have no idea. I guess it’s not my calling to figure that question out.”

For years our church board, in their annual review of my role, asked how I enjoyed my position as senior pastor. “I love preaching, teaching, casting vision, and discipling people,” I’d reply. “But God just *did not* give me the gift of administration or equip me to run an organization. I find those tasks frustrating.”

Skimming¹⁶

For many years I avoided making personnel decisions, managing staff and key volunteers, writing job descriptions, taking time to plan for meetings, or following through on project details. And when I did do these things, I did them reluctantly. I saw things that clearly needed to be done, but I wanted someone else to do them.

Because I had too many things to do and attend to (sermons, pastoral issues, leadership training events, crises among staff and congregants), I rushed and skimmed my way through certain areas of my leadership responsibilities. For example:

- I sometimes avoided meetings that I knew would be hard or stressful.
- I adjusted the truth when it was uncomfortable to be completely honest.

- I avoided performance evaluation discussions when someone was doing a poor job.
- I didn't ask difficult questions or speak up, even when something was clearly wrong.
- I didn't give myself the time I needed before meetings to be clear on my goals and agenda, or to be thoughtful and prayerful.
- I didn't give myself the time to remain centered and follow through on my commitments.
- I didn't take the time to examine and process the painful indicators that things might not be going as well as I hoped or imagined.

This climaxed in 2007 when I acknowledged we had hit a wall. We had grown large, but it was obvious we were not integrating emotional health and contemplative spirituality into the executive running of the church. We were stuck.

Finding My Integrity

A number of other events finally converged to break my twenty-year leadership gridlock.

First, I reached a point of utter frustration. The inner workings of our staff were not reflecting the message I was preaching. I could no longer preach a way of life that our church leadership was not living.

Around this time, Geri also spoke up: "Pete, I think the issue is courage, your courage. I'm not blaming you. It's hard to make the kind of changes needed. All I know is that you are in the position to do it, but you are not enforcing our values of emotionally healthy spirituality with the staff to the necessary degree. You're angry and resentful. We have a great church but..."

She paused and then dropped the bombshell, "I think this is about you. You may not have what it takes to do what needs to be done. Maybe your time is up and someone else needs to step in and lead."

I was exposed. While her words hurt, I knew there was truth in them. I was too afraid of being misunderstood, losing friendships, having people leave the church, or halting our momentum. I spent the next day alone with God and my journal. It was a painful day.

Yes, I wanted someone else to come in and “get the house in order,” to do the dirty work of hiring, firing, redirecting, and leading the church through the painful changes before us. I saw what needed to be done. There were necessary changes that had to be made in our church. A few key people were not serving in roles that best utilized their talents. Others weren’t doing their jobs well. Complicating matters further, I was in dual relationships with some of our paid staff: I was their close friend, their employer, their spiritual authority, and their pastor. (See Appendix A for a fuller explanation of dual relationships and their complexity in churches.)

I preferred doing the easy things like preaching and teaching, but by avoiding my more difficult leadership responsibilities, I put my integrity at stake. The impact on the church had become visible. Geri’s words were impossible to ignore. It was time for me to stop trying to lead from a distance, to stop just casting vision, and to take steps to implement my values on every level of our church. God had my attention.

I finally admitted the truth to myself: the greatest deterrent preventing New Life Fellowship Church from becoming what God meant her to be was me, not any other person or factor. The issues were inside me, not in our staff or the larger church. This realization caused me to take another painful look at unexplored areas of my iceberg.

Slowing Down Again

Soon afterwards, I formally incorporated the responsibilities of executive pastor into my job. I was determined to learn how to perform this role—at least for a season. I cancelled speaking engagements outside of New Life, said no to a potential book contract, and signed up for a round of intensive counseling to sort through my own “beneath the iceberg” blockages—everything that was getting in the way of my being an effective leader. I even preached less, and deliberately established a teaching team at our church.

While I am not, by any means, a gifted executive pastor, by putting me in that role, God was able to address issues within my character that He needed to transform for the church to go forward.

Over the next two years I learned some key skills. Many did not come easily. It was difficult for me to slow down and think carefully “before the Lord,” to summon the courage to have difficult conversations, and to follow through on my commitments. I began to apply the principles

explored in *Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0* with the leadership of New Life (especially Clarify Expectations and Climb the Ladder of Integrity).

I also learned that being misunderstood and having a few people leave the church is less important than losing my integrity. And even though it was often very painful, I learned to seek the truth regardless of where it led me.

I soon realized that I didn't like going from meeting to meeting without an awareness of God. I needed a few minutes of time for transitions between meetings and began to take them.

I began to say no to new commitments so that I could properly follow through on what I was already doing.

I moved our pastoral staff to a more intentional Rule of Life—a document took six-months of discussion to create.

Additionally, I made a habit of beginning some meetings with a short time of silence. This helped me to be still before God and to lead from a centered place in Jesus.

Next Steps

There are no shortcuts to (or substitutes for) becoming an emotionally and spiritually healthy church planter. You will need to do the hard work of paying close attention to your interior life with God, yourself, your marriage, and your leadership. You may need to make some big changes in your priorities. You probably need to slow down and do less.

Depending on your particular needs at this time, you may want to seek out a wise mentor, a spiritual director, or a counselor. I still benefit from relationships with all three. They give me perspective when I hit walls and find myself at key turning points that require discernment.¹⁷

This is, I believe, the great spiritual warfare that wages around our churches. If we don't watch over our interior lives with Jesus, then the level of transformation both in our people and community will be minimal. It won't matter what we preach, how clever we are, or what programs we initiate.

Every time I am tempted to cut back on the time, energy, or money it requires to care for my interior life, I remember this insightful remark from an old Hasidic rabbi on his deathbed:

When I was young, I set out to change the world. When I grew older, I perceived that this was too ambitious so I set out to change my state. This, too, I realized as I grew older was too ambitious, so I set out to change my town. When I realized I could not even do this, I tried to change my family. Now as an old man, I know that I should have started by changing myself. If I had started with myself, maybe then I would have succeeded in changing my family, the town, or even the state—and who knows, maybe even the world!¹⁸

I pray you will also remember the rabbi's wise words. For as goes the interior life of the church planter, so goes the church.



Please visit Emotionally Healthy Spirituality at <http://www.emotionallyhealthy.org> for further information and additional resources.

SECTION III: Additional Information & Resources

Appendix A: Dual Relationships

By Geri Scazzero and Pete Scazzero¹⁹

When we go to see a doctor, lawyer, or therapist, the roles are clear. They are providing a service. We are paying them for that service. There are certain boundaries around the relationship that protect the service provider as well as the client. And when those boundaries are crossed, the original purpose of the relationship is compromised. The definition of roles and boundaries is much more challenging in a church, especially a church plant.

When we started our church, it included several young families. To combat the loneliness and lack of connection that plagues large urban centers like New York, we all moved into the same neighborhood in order to be intentional about forming a community. In fact, we not only lived in the same neighborhood, we lived in houses that were attached to one another.

We had many fun and meaningful experiences together in those early years as God began to birth something new and exciting. We sought to spend our free time together, raise our kids together, and share goals together. This meant a lot of togetherness—a *lot* of togetherness.

We owned a “railroad apartment,” which means the rooms were consecutive from the front to the back of the house. In other words, there were no separate hallways; you had to go through one room to get to the next one. As a result, our bedroom also served as the hallway into the backyard, and hosting church cookouts required that people parade through our bedroom to get to the backyard. Geri found this particularly unnerving, but she put up with it for the sake of community.

As a community, however, we were crippled by three major factors. The first was that we didn’t know how to respect each other’s differences. Eight years later, when we moved, we felt at fault for wanting to leave our small apartment for a single-family home in a different neighborhood.

Our second major problem was our belief that intimate friendships not only could, but should always be with people in our church. Churches do provide a lovely context for close friendships, but that is very different

than the faulty belief that a healthy church community always equals close friendships. As communities, churches serve many purposes. We have a common mission, common values, and a common time and style of worship—to name a few. For some, the church community will be a primary source of close friendships. For others it will not be, and that is okay.

Because of our faulty belief that church community equaled intimate friendships, we became close friends with the same people we employed, mentored, counseled, and led spiritually. Pete was the senior pastor and spiritual leader of our church. At times, he was also the supervisor and boss of more than one of our friends. In addition, Geri was often a team leader and mentor for these same friends.

Problems arose when we needed to separate our informal friendships from these other more formal roles. Inevitably, the friendship—for us or for our friends—was negatively impacted. Relationships were strained and hurt feelings often followed.

We are much more aware of the fragility and danger of dual relationships now, especially for someone holding a significant leadership role within a church setting. In a dual relationship, you are both an employer and a friend, or both a pastor and friend, to the same person. Dual relationships aren't automatically wrong or inappropriate, though sometimes they can be, but they are always complex and require great maturity on the part of both people in order to navigate them well.

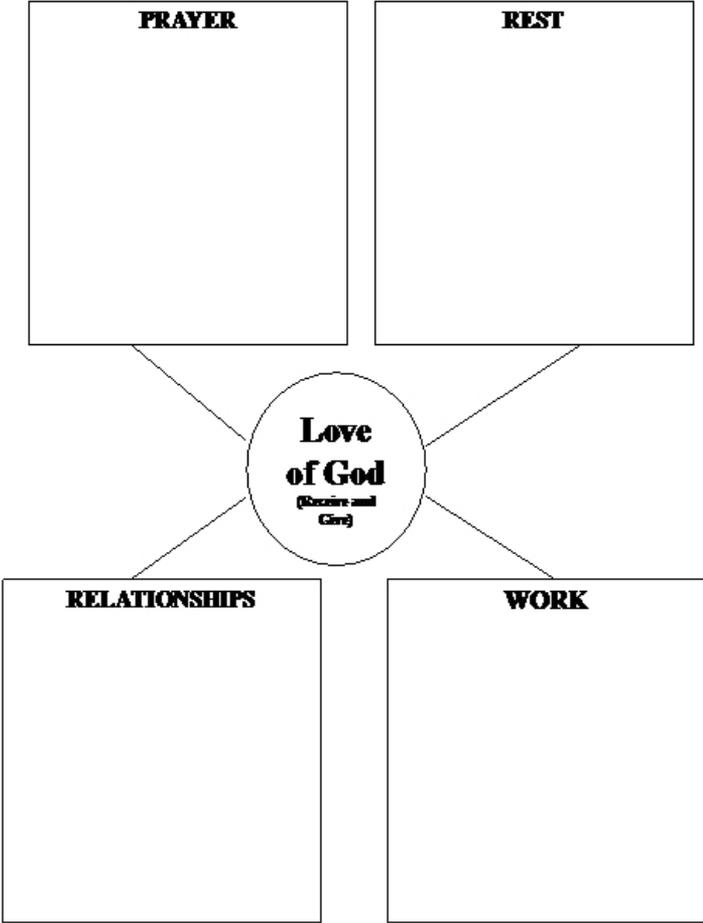
Our *third* major problem was believing that we could live in a healthy, close, Christian community without learning key emotionally healthy skills such as listening maturely, speaking honestly, and resolving conflict. Not having these skills only amplified the complexity of our dual relationships and made them more difficult to navigate. We did not have the tools to properly deal with marital conflicts that spilled over into other contexts, outbursts of anger or frustration in awkward settings, unspoken resentments, or differing expectations.

There are certain dual relationships that should be avoided, if possible. Pastoring and mentoring involve spiritual authority and are teacher/advisor relationships. Being someone's employer or supervisor also carries with it a level of authority and power. Friendship is quite different. Expectations and demands are minimal. I don't work for you. You don't work for me.

We enjoy each other's company freely. Power and authority are distributed equally and evenly. The boundaries are also different. Friendship is for true peers, and is less appropriate in a pastoring, teaching, or advising relationship.

However, regardless of the nature of the dual relationship, it is not to be entered into lightly. In order for it to work, both participants must be able to talk about it openly. The dangers and shifts in power need to be clearly discussed. The risks need to be acknowledged. Strong boundaries must be established. This requires that both participants be emotionally and spiritually mature.

Appendix B: Rule of Life Worksheet



Notes

Chapter 1: The Emotionally Unhealthy Church Planter

1. See Geri Scazzero with Peter Scazzero, *I Quit!: Stop Pretending Everything is Fine and Change Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). This book will be re-released in January of 2013 as *The Emotionally Healthy Woman* along with a small group DVD curriculum. Go to www.emotionallyhealthy.org to order copy.
2. See Session 3 in *Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0* to learn how to construct a genogram for three to four generations of your family of origin. You can also receive video instruction on creating a genogram as part of the [Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0 app](#), which is available for download on iTunes.

Chapter 2: Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: The Missing Link

3. I am thankful to Jay Feld for the initial diagram which was then expanded into its present form.

Chapter 3: Your Interior Life with God

4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 237.
5. The material in this section is adapted from my book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.
6. Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 69.

Chapter 4: Your Interior Life with Yourself

7. Chapter 5 (“Quit Overfunctioning”) of *I Quit!* contains a full explanation of this concept. (This book will be re-released in January of 2013 as *The Emotionally Healthy Woman*.)
8. Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
9. The material in this section is adapted from my book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.
10. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 116–117.
11. Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedict’s Toolbox: The Nuts and Bolts of Everyday Benedictine Living* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), 5.

Chapter 5: Your Interior Life and Your Marriage

12. Clean Fighting is the emotionally healthy way to resolve conflicts. To learn more about this skill, please refer to Session 7 of the [*Emotionally Healthy Skills 2.0*](#) curriculum.
13. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage: Meditations on the Miracle* (Portland: Multnomah Publishers, 2005), 111–112.
14. Gregory Popcak, *The Exceptional Seven Percent: The Nine Secrets of the Worlds Happiest Couples* (New York: Citadel Press, 2002).
15. To download a sermon series that explores a biblical theology of marriage, visit the [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality store](#) or [click here](#).

Chapter 6: Your Interior Life and Your Leadership

16. Many of the insights from this chapter are found in a *Leadership Journal* article I wrote called "[Skimming](#)."
17. Read *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* Chapter 6 ("Journey Through the Wall: Letting Go of Power and Control") to learn more about what it means to journey through the wall.
18. Ronald W. Richardson, *Family Ties That Bind: A Self-Help Guide to Change through Family of Origin Therapy* (Bellingham: SelfCounsel press, 1984), 35.

Appendix A: Dual Relationships

19. The contents of this section are adapted from Chapter 7 ("Quit Faulty Thinking") of *I Quit!* This book will be re-released in January of 2013 as *The Emotionally Healthy Woman*.