

## ***Initiating Dialog***

Dear Miguel,

Over the last six years, our many talks on marriage, theology and the ministry have established a genuine sense of trust and respect between us. But as we have grown in our friendship, I've noticed that most of the time I'm the one saying, *Hey, let's get together*. Usually, I'm the one pushing for the time and the date to meet. Why is it that I'm the primary initiator in our relationship?

Yes, I realize scheduling *extra* meetings is a challenge for many young pastors. But the benefit of intimate dialog with other pastors, especially with mature colleagues, is vitally important for your well being, your marriage and the success of your ministry. You seem a bit reluctant to be the initiator with other pastors as well. Right now, more than you realize, you need a handful of seasoned pastors who will be as open and truthful as I have been with you.

Recently, I, too, was blessed with the wisdom of fellow pastors. After serving my present congregation for fourteen years, the church said to me, *you need a break from the ministry. You deserve it. Congratulations. You can do anything you want for three months but no ministry here at church. You need a sabbatical.*

So immediately I began to dream and plan, and soon my sabbatical wishes were coming true. My desire was to reach out and learn from pastors from across the United States and Canada. Most of the twenty that I interviewed

were seasoned colleagues serving faithfully in small, medium, large and even mega-size churches. Some were in rural churches; some in the suburbs; others in the city. They were senior pastors, youth pastors, children's pastors, executive pastors, music pastors, evangelism pastors and teaching pastors.

To each, I offered confidentiality and of each, I requested brutal honesty. As each minister responded to the same ten questions, I felt like I was looking into a mirror. As they answered, I saw my own struggles and shortcomings, my successes and victories. And as I reflected on ministry priorities that surfaced, a spiritual renewal began to occur in me! Now I stand back amazed, realizing that the benefit from these contacts has far exceeded my expectations.

For example, these pastors helped me see my need for better self-care, more particularly the need for a weekly day off—a Sabbath. Not a worship Sabbath, but a restful Sabbath; a rest from work. For several years, I have failed to recognize the benefits of a weekly break from the ministry.

In my head I knew that the weekly Sabbath has always been a godly principle, and like always, God is right. The rotting of one's soul is usually a subtle process and often undetected until it's too late. God created the Sabbath for that purpose—to prevent spiritual and physical burnout.

Like many pastors, a sacred day off each week has been illusive. Maybe it's because of my own expectations (*be good to all men, or fear of failure*), or perhaps because of the expectations I feel from others (*he's the pastor*). But like many ministers, I was guilty of working 60+ hours a week without a day of rest.

Was I out of balance? Yes! Had I fallen into the Samson syndrome? Yes!  
Is there more to life than ministry? Again, yes!

So be careful, Miguel, to seek your approval and affection primarily from God, not your ministry. Solomon said, *The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted* (Proverbs 29:25). Seeking human opinion sets us on a path of self-glory and self-destruction. Remember, friend, the ministry was never meant to glorify self. It is to glorify God.

The pastors that I interviewed also encouraged me to make family care a priority. One colleague said, *We must ask the hard questions*. And at the top of his list was, *Is my family getting the burning coals of my life, or just the ashes?* He admitted, *To see the loss because of my drivenness helped me to realize that the church had become my mistress, and that a change was needed*.

Ninety percent of the pastors I talked with said their ministry received far more attention than their family. And many pastors graded themselves a C- on how well they cared for their spouse. Most expressed a high degree of hopelessness regarding the well-being of their marriage and family.

I asked each pastor, *What two things would you do differently if you could go back ten years and start your ministry over again?* Without hesitation, they talked about really loving their families, extending more grace to others and giving more grace to themselves. One pastor said, *I must be very careful of burnout. New opportunities excite me and can get me in trouble. I've learned to say no. Guarding personal family time is a must*.

Had I not taken the time to create honest dialog with these wise colleagues, my service could have become my ministry where. They reminded me to stay sensitive to God; to stay balanced, and to make adjustments needed from time to time.

So reach out, Miguel! Take the initiative to nurture open dialog. Ask for confidentiality and brutal honesty from your colleagues and share yourself with them. I covet this for you, dear friend.

Your Brother,

Roger Ball

First Baptist Church, Tempe, Arizona

*Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.*

*Proverbs 15:22*