



SOLITUDE FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Nurturing Your Interior Life With God Through Solitude

INTRODUCTION

What is your plan, amidst your busy life, for not leaving the nurturing of your interior life with God to chance?

As a church leader, you are constantly bombarded by expectations, needs, concerns, and decisions. You are like an iceberg – there is so much going on beneath the surface in you! Whether you are aware of it or not, you spend energy on your thoughts, feelings, reactions, and motivations related to people, tasks, projects, and even your own desires and needs.

How do you know what to give attention to? How aware are you of what is going on in you right now?

Our most important work as leaders is to be COLLECTED: guarding and living out of what God has called us to be and do. We must be aware of what is going on in us and aware of the various matters that require our attention, and those matters that vie for attention but don't actually need it.

Our greatest enemy is CLUTTER: over-functioning for people, drivenness for our own self-worth, savior-complex, pressures to perform, the tyranny of the urgent, the expectations others have of us. We can lose ourselves so easily in the pressures of the day-to-day.

Solitude is the only way to sustain our souls in the crucible of leadership - to cultivate a depth of presence that comes from the depths of God's love, not the breadth of our platforms or reputations.

Solitude separates me from the crowd and from my "press clippings" (what people think they know about me or even what I'm led to believe about me.)

Solitude creates space to nurture my true self as a beloved one of God.

Think about all your leadership responsibilities at work, home, and other areas. All the people who depend on you and look to you in your various positions of influence. All the decisions you need to make and the impact it will have on people...

How much solitude and stillness do YOU need in order to sustain your walk with Jesus at your level of leadership and influence?

The following is a simple template for crafting a day of solitude (or half-day) and weaving it into your ongoing leadership rhythms. It is a guide to start the regular habit of withdrawing and listening to God. During your time of solitude, you will do the following:

/// LISTEN

/// TAKE INVENTORY

/// INTEGRATE & PRIORITIZE

Feel free to adapt and modify the plan for your own use, though there are a few key components that you should not compromise:

1. Don't use this at home or at the office. Pick another location where you can "hide away."
2. As best as you can, try to be off-grid and tech-free.
3. Give yourself at least a half day. This guide is not intended to be used as a substitute or supplement for your quiet time with God.
4. If possible, try not to schedule anything for after your time. Unhurried time works best. Waiting on the Lord is easier when you don't have to get to something after.
5. Think about repeating this exercise several times (e.g., a monthly day or half-day of solitude for a semester or year). Schedule those times out and resist the temptation to postpone or cancel it (the temptation will be real!)

"It is not enough for ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow human beings, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word and to taste full of God's infinite goodness?" – Henri Nouwen

MY PLAN FOR A DAY OF SOLITUDE

Date:

Time:

Location:

/// LISTEN

1. **Settle in.** Get situated. Bible. Journal. Pen. Coffee. Water. Headphones...
2. **Stillness/silence.** Give your soul the chance to quiet down and catch up. Take a few deep breaths. Recognize that God is present with you and DESIRES to meet with you.

Try and get to 5 mins of silence and stillness. If your mind wanders, just gently bring your thoughts back to the presence of God with you.

A few short verses that you can repeat as a breath prayer as you get still before the Lord.

- Ps 36:9 "With you is the fountain of life, in your light do we see light."
- Ps 70:1 "Come to my help, O God. Lord, hurry to my rescue."
- Ps 86:11 "Unite my heart to fear your name."
- Song of Songs 7:10 "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

3. **Chew on God's Word.** Read the Word slowly and deliberately. You are not reading for completion or study as much as you are reading to hear. You can engage your regular Bible reading plan and use SOAP Journaling or another simple tool to help you reflect on God's Word.

You could also engage a prepared, self-guided retreat guide. Gail Donahue and Joan Kelly have created several self-guided retreats that are available for purchase (www.mylifeissacred.com).

4. **What is God speaking to you?** Journal a few bullet points. This is an opportune time to look through any Bible reflections that you've had over the past month. Look for any themes or threads that might be coming to you.

5. **Respond in Prayer.**

6. **If desired, spend a half hour doing some spiritual reading.** Some possibilities:
 - Devotionals - "New Morning Mercies" by Paul David Tripp
 - Short essays - "Three Mile an Hour God" by Kosuke Koyama or "In the Name of Jesus" by Henri Nouwen
 - A chapter from a book - e.g., "Abba's Child" by Brennan Manning, "Knowledge of the Holy" by A.W. Tozer, or "The Power of Praising God" by C.H. Spurgeon.
 - Poems - "To Bless the Space Between Us" by John O'Donohue

/// TAKE INVENTORY

1. **Give yourself space to gather some of the seeds that God has been sowing in your heart.** You can journal it or just thank God for it. The point is to pause before going to the next section.
2. **Explore the Iceberg.**¹ What emotions have you been carrying? Don't worry if something could be in several categories. There will inevitably be overlap and repetition. The important task is to explore what is going on beneath the surface for you. *You may need to take several passes at it to fill it out, and usually, one category is a little more difficult than the others.*
 - What are you mad about?
 - What are you sad about?
 - What are you anxious about?
 - What are you glad about?

(Use a personal journal or the Explore the Iceberg worksheet - APPENDIX A)

3. **Survey how your world is doing.** After you've spent some time reflecting on what is happening inside you, you'll now survey your areas of responsibility. The aim of this portion is for you to record all of the concerns/ideas/needs you are carrying around with you and to do a brief evaluation of what is going on in the crucial areas of your life.

You'll look at various areas according to the framework of **four lenses**:

- What is RIGHT? [celebrate]
- What is WRONG? [correct]
- What is MISSING? [add]
- What is CONFUSED? [clarify]

Again, there may be overlap and repetition. The important thing is to make sure that you take the time to survey and reflect on your world. You will reflect on these four questions for each area of responsibility in your life.

Four categories to think about as a church leader:

- PERSONAL (my daily closeness with Jesus, holiness, habits, health, friendships, etc.)
- HOME (marriage, parenting, extended family matters, finances, etc.)
- WORK (stewarding my abilities, effective teamwork, organizational matters, etc.)
- CHURCH (people, pastoral concerns, elders, opportunities, etc.)

Survey Your World	PERSONAL	HOME	WORK	CHURCH
What's RIGHT?				
What's WRONG?				
What's MISSING?				
What's CONFUSED?				

A journal page will look like this.

HOME:

What's RIGHT?

What's WRONG?

What's MISSING?

What's CONFUSED?

If you have trouble thinking about what to write down, go to the next question or category. Then, make another pass over the whole thing and continue to write down as the Lord brings them to your attention.

(Use a personal journal or the Survey Your World worksheet - APPENDIX B)

4. **Review your Iceberg and your Survey.** Consider the importance of this exercise: you have been carrying all of these concerns around with you – both consciously and subconsciously!

Observe how your emotions overlap with your areas of responsibility. You might sense an urgency around some particular bullet points. You may need to bring a concern or matter before the Lord. You might need to express hurt or sadness in prayer. You may want to thank the Lord for something going right or something you are glad about. You may need to explore something you are angry about a bit more.

5. **Resist the urge to formulate an action plan around what is wrong/missing/confused just yet.** Most likely, you'll be overwhelmed with all that needs your attention. Just hold it for now. Take comfort in the work you've just completed. You don't have to spend the mental/emotional energy to remember all of these concerns. You've written them down, and you'll be able to organize them in a little bit.

TAKE A BREAK. Is it lunchtime? Eat. If you're only doing a half-day, here's a chance to stretch your legs.

/// INTEGRATE & PRIORITIZE

It's time to integrate the seeds and prioritize just a few items into one simple list. Here's help to do so.

1. **Consider how God's presence has been with you.** If there was a Scripture that spoke to you earlier today, go back and read it again. If a reading excerpt impacted you, remember what you want to take away. Take the time to notice the moments where you sensed God's presence today.
2. **Order your reflections and concerns.** Now, you are ready to integrate the various matters and concerns into your life and leadership. The following categories are a way to bring all the various reflections together by prioritization. You won't be able to attend to everything that you've been carrying in the next month, so what will you give attention to and what will you entrust?

Don't create a separate list for each area of responsibility. *The goal is to have one set of priorities that orders your life as an integrated whole, taking into account what is most important in the various areas of responsibility you have been given.* **Remember, it's only for the next month.**

One List of Top Priorities (3-6). What are your top priorities for the next month? These priorities could come from your personal life or ministry/work life, usually a combination of both.

Proactive About. What conversations, projects, or initiatives do you need to get started? Usually, this involves a lot of communication and proactivity.

Prepare for. What projects, events, or engagements are coming that will require attention and preparation? This is a way to imagine the kind of space you will need to preserve.

Prevent. Imagine the loss of momentum, potential miscommunications, or difficulties that could arise from a lack of attention or initiative.

People to Pay Attention To. As you think about what you have to prepare for and your top priorities, who do you need to pay attention to? Make a list.

Possibilities. What is the potential fruit that could come from this month's focus and work? What are some projects in process that could take more time than anticipated? If you give your attention in the right way, what is the good future that you envision?

What does the Church Need? As a pastor or leader, think about what God wants to do in the church in the coming month. What vision and/or communication do they need? What kind of shepherding? Is there something that needs to be addressed? Clarified? Celebrated? Does the church just need some rest?

What do Those I Lead Need? Think of direct reports or dependents: What direction, guidance, or encouragement do they need? What kind of communication do they need? How can I continue the development and growth of my leaders? What presence is required?

Prayer Priorities. What are the top prayer items for me this month? The ones that will make it on every prayer list I pray this month?

3. **Review and reflect.** Look back over your list. Does it cover the spectrum of your area of responsibilities? If it's skewed towards particular areas, is that a reflection of what next month will bring or an unhealthy priority of work > personal/home? For example, at the beginning of the ministry year or in a season of transition, you might have to prioritize ministry initiatives in the next month. If you're in summer or about to enter a month where vacation or important family moments are coming, your priorities should skew towards family.
4. **Surrender your list.** Go for a prayer walk to pray your priorities back to the Lord. You don't have to have the list in hand; you can just mentally hold it. Ask for God's direction, blessing, and editing wherever He desires it.
5. **Schedule your next day of solitude.**
6. **Thank the Lord for meeting with you.** Don't just abruptly end. Pack up slowly. Ask for the grace to obey what He has said and the humility to continue to listen.
7. **Share your list.** For accountability, but also for confirmation, share your list with your spouse (if applicable), a co-leader, and/or an admin assistant. It's a great way to get on the same page, receive any added insight, and also model the importance of time away to listen to God and to order your inner world of desires, fears, and thoughts. You can also share with your teams and congregation – not necessarily the details of your list, but that you have one that came from time away with God.
8. **You can refer back to your list every so often over the next month.** You could print it out and put it on your desk, and you could use it to pray for the people you lead.

(Use a personal journal or the Integrated Priorities for One Month worksheet - APPENDIX C)

CONCLUSION

We are standing with you as you practice the solitude and stillness that you need in order to sustain your walk with Jesus at your level of leadership and influence. Nurturing your interior life with God to better serve people at home, work, and other areas is a wise investment of time. Be intentional and plan for it!

We'd love to hear your feedback on this experience of solitude - mlee@times12.org! If you'll drop us a line before your next day of solitude, we'd love to be praying ahead for your time with God.

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APPENDIX A - Explore the Iceberg

Explore the Iceberg.¹ What emotions have you been carrying? Don't worry if something could be in several categories. There will inevitably be overlap and repetition. The important task is to explore what is going on beneath the surface for you. You may need to take several passes at it to fill it out, and usually, one category is a little more difficult than the others.

What are you mad about?

What are you sad about?

What are you anxious about?

What are you glad about?

¹ Scazzero, P. and G (2023), *Emotionally Healthy Relationships*, 77-92 (Explore the Iceberg). Grand Rapids, MI: Harper Christian Resources.

APPENDIX B - Survey Your World

Survey your areas of responsibility. Survey and briefly evaluate what is going on in the crucial areas of your life using four lenses and four categories. The four lenses are: What's RIGHT? (celebrate), What's WRONG? (correct), What's MISSING? (add), and What's CONFUSED? (clarify). Explore these under four categories: PERSONAL (my closeness with Jesus, personal holiness, habits, health, friendships, etc.), HOME (marriage, parenting, extended family matters, finances, etc.), WORK (stewarding my abilities, effective teamwork, organizational matters, etc.), and CHURCH (people, pastoral concerns, elders, opportunities, etc.). Jot brief phrases in the spaces below.

Survey Your World	PERSONAL	HOME	WORK	CHURCH
What's RIGHT?				
What's WRONG?				
What's MISSING?				
What's CONFUSED?				

APPENDIX C - Integrated Priorities for One Month

It's time to integrate and prioritize just a few items into one clear list. Don't create a separate list for each area of responsibility. The goal is to **have one set of priorities that orders your life as an integrated whole, taking into account what is most important in the various areas of responsibility you have been given. Remember, it's only for the next month.** What are your top priorities for the next month? These priorities can come from your personal or ministry/work life, usually an integrated combination of both.

My One List of Top Priorities for the Next Month is:

Be Proactive About:

Prepare for:

Prevent:

People to Pay Attention To:

Possibilities:

What Does the Church Need This Month?

What Do Those I Lead Need?

Top Prayer Items: