



New Life Fellowship Pastoral Staff

Rule of Life

Our Guidelines for Being Together

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Preface for the Pastoral Staff Rule of Life

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Following Jesus Christ in today's world is highly complex and dangerous.

Parker Palmer relates the story of farmers in the Midwest who would prepare for blizzards by tying a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn as a guide to ensure they could return safely home. These blizzards came quickly and fiercely. When their full force was blowing, a farmer could not see the end of his or her hand. Many froze to death in those blizzards, disoriented by their inability to see. They wandered in circles, lost sometimes in their own backyards. If they lost their grip on the rope, it became impossible for them to find their way home. Some froze within feet of their own front door, never realizing how close they were to safety. It was crucial for the rope to be tied before winter's arrival.

Many of us have lost our way, spiritually, in the whiteout of the blizzard swirling around us. Blizzards begin when we say yes to too many things, when we are scattered, overloaded and too busy. Our ability to love God, ourselves and others can easily get lost.

When I first began to immerse myself in monastic communities years ago, I sensed their radical understanding of "a rule of life" offered an ancient, rich treasure for us at New Life. It holds, I believe, one of the essential threads of the rope to keep us safely centered on the Lord Jesus and His purposes for us —both as individuals and a community.

I consider this year a turning point in our life together as we move our leadership and membership to a rule that has the power to serve as a rope for all of us.

The purpose of a rule is to keep us faithful to our unique "charism" as a church community and unite around it. It says this is 'who we are, this is our story' and reminds us of those things God has put on our heart. It is meant to express in a few words a grounded spirituality, one that comes out of the hard-won experience of our twenty-year history. A good rule will express the roots and calling of our particular local church.

I am aware the word rule has negative connotations for many people; implying legalism, restrictions, and severity. Actually, a rule of life is a framework for freedom, not a set of rules that restrict or deny life. It provides perspective and clarity regarding the way of life to which God has called us.

The word rule comes from the Greek for “trellis.” A trellis 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, keeping God at the center of everything we do.

A rule works best when it challenges us. It can't be so easy that we are not stretched: but neither can it be so demanding that we are overwhelmed. Otherwise, it is likely to discourage us and defeat its purpose. Our rule seeks to provide boundaries while leaving plenty of room for flexibility and individuality. It functions as a kind of banister or railing to help us move forward in our journey with and for God.

Blizzards will continue to blow around us. This rule is intended to be a rope for us, keeping us focused on our inner spiritual formation journey that we might effectively accomplish our calling in Christ.

As Thomas Merton has written: “The inner, spiritual journey is far more crucial and infinitely more important than any journey to the moon . . . this is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.”

Introduction

We believe that our ministries emerge out of a call from God to separation from the world for the purpose of prayer. It is from this place of being with Jesus that we lead others out of a heart of compassion in the fulfillment of our mission as a local church. Like David, we want to shepherd God's people "with integrity of heart" and with "skillful hands" (Psalm 78:72).

Yet we recognize that leadership brings out the best and worst in us. In many ways, the crucible of pastoral ministry "introduces us to ourselves." We affirm, as Parker Palmer has written that "a leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light onto some part of the world and onto the lives of the people who dwell there . . . A good leader is intensely aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good." (Let Your Life Speak, pp. 78-9).

In such a role, we commit ourselves to the following "rule" to keep us centered in the Lord Jesus and His call for our lives. Our purpose is, as Benedict wrote 1500 years ago, that our "way of acting should be different than the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else" (Rule of Benedict 4:20-21).

Our Being (Character)

We are essentially called to seek him above all else (Psalm 27:4), that is, to be contemplatives, out of which we carry out our active ministry. At the same time, we recognize God has called us to a level of intensity to bring Jesus Christ to our city and world through serving in different roles as a pastoral staff at New Life Fellowship Church.

Freely under his grace, we determine to model the qualities of leadership laid out by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3 – above reproach, self-controlled, respectable, able to teach, hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome, free from the love of money, managing our families well. "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:5). Whether single or married, we minister out of our marital status; if married, our marriage covenant takes precedence over the work of New Life Fellowship.

We function, as defined by Presbyterian policy, as "teaching elders," while our Board of Elders serve as "ruling elders". As a result, we seek to model the kind of life Christ desires for his people to his flock. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of God of which the Spirit has made you overseers . . ." (Acts 20:28a).

We consider the vocation of pastor to be a high calling and a trust given by God. As Gregory of Nazianzus taught around 370 AD: "The responsibility of pastoral office is great indeed, and no one ought to enter who has not deeply examined motive and ability, who has not struggled against call in the face of godly demands of office and the frailty of mere humanity."

Our aim, as a pastoral team, is to be a vital organism with a contented spirit. While we live in the world surrounded by unceasing needs, we desire to serve God out of a “joyful, non-anxious spirit” in a way that is peaceful and harmonious with others – not agitated, hectic or confused. We do not claim to be perfect, by any means; we acknowledge difficult times in living out our “rule of life”, but our commitment is to honesty and openness, asking for help when needed and living in brokenness and contriteness of heart (Psalm 51:17).

At the same time, we want to understand who we are and who we are not, our limits and our potentials. The pastoral call involves leading out of the unique material God has given us. We desire all staff members at NLF to function in roles that are congruent with their authentic selves and families.

As shepherds, leaders, and servants of this particular flock, we must regularly ask ourselves: Which of my limits are part of my God-given nature that I need to receive as a gift? Are there limits before me that God is asking me to break through because they come out of character flaws or my “false self”?

These limits and potentials are one of the means God uses to speak to us and to reveal the particular role we are able to take in service to him at New Life. This discernment from the Holy Spirit comes, we believe, from wise counsel, self-confrontation, and those in authority over us.

Our Doing (Activity)

Using their God-given talents, our members work and serve as volunteers out of a sense of passion and mission. We too work and serve out of a sense of passion and mission; nevertheless, we function in a dual relationship with the NLF Board and congregation as “employees”. In fact, we have at least three roles in the community of NLF: we are family members, leaders in this church family and employees. These roles carry challenges in how we relate to one another and to NLF.

Each year, we are set apart by the Board of Elders to serve the body at New Life Fellowship in a unique way. Whether full or half-time, we are given a salary in order to fulfill this special calling free from the constraints of secular employment. The body as a whole supports us financially so that we can devote ourselves to serving the body – praying, pastoring, and equipping the saints to do ministry (Ephesians 4:11). This is our privilege and our joy.

Each person called and invited to be on staff at New Life is valued as a gift from God. We long to see each staff member growing and thriving in their respective roles.

At the same time, the elder board is responsible for the stewardship of the churches’ resources in our dynamic, changing environment. Our call from God to pastoral leadership may last our entire lives regardless of our employment at NLF. Yet we recognize the fit of what NLF needs and desires may change over time. Thus, our status as employees is subject to the direction God is taking the church, her resources, and our leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, we are each subject to periodic reviews regarding our job description, status and contract.

Specific Rule of Life

The following “Rule of Life” expresses our conscious guidelines to keep God at the center of everything we do – to seek the “love of Christ” above all else. In a culture that does not respect God’s rhythms for life, we seek to live out a balance of prayer, rest, work, and community.

This “rule” provides guidelines for the kind of leadership we aim to embody, as well as a foundation for the relational culture we want to build and function within.

Prayer

1. **Scripture** – Our lives are built on the Word of God. It is our food and primary means of revelation from him. We spend time each day in Scripture, seeking God’s face, dwelling in his presence and praying out of his Word.
2. **Silence and Solitude** – Along with building silence and solitude into our daily routines, we spend at least one full day a month in silence with God.
3. **Daily Office** – Nothing is to be preferred to the work of God (Rule of St. Benedict). We pause to be with God two to three times a day to remember him, spending time in communion with him, preferably with Scripture, silence, meditation and prayer.
4. **Study** – We are consistently growing and taking steps to keep learning about Jesus, as well as our unique values (emotional health, contemplative spirituality, reconciliation) and our particular area of calling in Christ.

Rest

5. **Sabbath** – Each week, we set aside a 24-hour period to keep the Sabbath to the Lord, structuring our time around the following four characteristics of biblical Sabbaths – Stop, Rest, Delight and Contemplate. We also take at least an additional half day off a week to do the “work” of life and limit our work at NLF. We trust God to build his church and respect Sabbath-keeping as an essential formation discipline in our lives.
6. **Simplicity** – We model percentage giving (using the tithe as a minimal guideline) in giving to God’s work here at NLF. We manage our material resources in a manner that honors God and avoids the traps and enticements of Western culture (e.g. bad debt, gambling, etc.) as we live out the basic principles of our Good Sense Course (i.e. giving, saving, budgeting, balancing a spending plan, and planning).
7. **Play and Recreation** – We have a life outside of New Life Fellowship for balance and health. We recognize the seasons and rhythms of leadership and the church year and plan compensatory breaks accordingly. We build healthy “fun” into our discipleship and take vacations each year to allow the soil of our lives to be replenished and receive fresh “nutrients” from God as we take mini-sabbaticals along the four principles of stopping, resting, delighting and contemplating.

Work

8. **Service and Mission** – Another critical issue for healthy service is having clear and realistic expectations. It is vital that we maintain an open discussion about

expectations and allow for ongoing modifications as we adapt to the challenges of our rapidly changing environment. Together with our supervisors and the elder board, we regularly update our job descriptions and goals in order to meet these challenges. Then, in everything we do as pastoral leaders, we can continue to point others to Christ. In this way, “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

9. Care for the Physical Body – We understand the stewardship of our physical bodies is also part of our discipleship and modeling. We seek to regularly care for our physical temples through healthy eating habits, consistent exercise, and sufficient amounts of sleep, respecting our God-given limits.

Relationships

10. Emotional Health – We are committed to a spiritual formation model that embraces our whole person, including the emotional component of who we are as image bearers of God. We embrace the skills and behaviors that put feet on our theology to love well (1 Corinthians 13). In all our relationships we seek to speak clearly, directly, respectfully and honestly. We aim to incarnate like Christ and listen well. We avoid making assumptions without checking them out. We negotiate our differences and clarify expectations in all our relationships. And like Christ, we seek to be present with ourselves and others, especially in the presence of anxiety, whether it be our own or that of others.
11. Family – We believe in the equal value of God’s call to both singleness and marriage. We affirm with Scripture the gift of singleness for leadership (1 Corinthians 7:25-40). Both Jesus and Paul were single. At the same time, we understand the limits and great potentials of the marriage covenant for our work and our personal choices. We desire high-quality marriages, out of which we are able to minister to others. If we are married, our spouses make their own choices and have their own needs and desires apart from us. We affirm this. Our expectation is for honesty and transparency regarding our marriages and family life with those whom God has placed in authority over us.
12. Community (Companions for Your Journey) – Our roles as family members, leaders of our church family and employees carry with them a unique challenge. This complex relationship requires grace, maturity, wisdom and discernment. We encourage all staff members to be in relationships with mature people outside NLF; these relationships might be with a spiritual director, a mentor, a counselor or a mature friend, depending on each person’s unique needs and season in God.

My prayer and exhortation for the leadership of New Life Fellowship is that of St. Benedict as he introduced his Rule: “Do not at once fly in dismay from the way of salvation, the beginning of which cannot but be narrow. But as we advance in the religious life and faith, we shall run the way of God’s commandments with expanded hearts and unspeakable sweetness of love.” (Rule of Benedict, Prologue).

– Pastor Pete



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