

August/September 2012

Going the Distance

How to Stay Fit for A Lifetime of Ministry

by Peter Brain (Matthias Media: 2006)

A book review by Jack De Vries

The 2012 London Olympics have come and gone. As the dust settles in London, people will remember when their eyes were glued to the 100m heat, a race won by Jamaican Usian Bolt in a stunning Olympic record time. Australians will not forget Sally Pearson winning gold in the 100m hurdles or Tom Slingsby in the men's laser. One characteristic marks every Olympic athlete: they are fit! Years of training have fitted them for an ultimate test of speed, endurance, and/or strength.

The apostle Paul desired to be fit for a lifetime of ministry. In Acts 20:24, Paul stated, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." Paul was eager to "run in such a way as to get the prize." (1 Cor. 9:24) The author of Hebrews shares a similar sentiment: "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us..." (12:1) Peter Brain, in *Going the Distance*, provides practical wisdom how anyone engaged in Christian ministry, whether lay or ordained, can stay the course. Christian ministry is not a sprint; it's a marathon, a long-term race, requiring not just

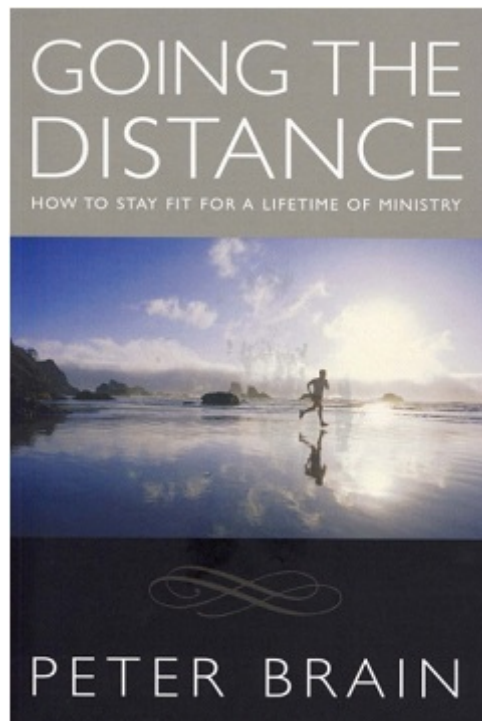
initial enthusiasm and ability, but staying power. *Going the Distance* was written to assist Christian leaders run with perseverance.

This book is comprised of seventeen chapters dealing with various issues such as burnout, stress, anger, sexual temptation, friendship, self-care, just to mention a few.

The issues are well researched and take into consideration the wisdom of respected teachers and/or psychologists such as Archibald D. Hart, Frank Minirth, Paul Meiers, H.B. London, J.I. Packer, John Stott, Eugene Peterson, and John White. But the real strength of this book is the Biblical foundations which are outlined in each section. The one chapter where we see this most is chapter 16:

Justification by faith – a truth that works. Brain takes this central Christian doctrine and demonstrates how it really assists those in ministry to go the distance. As he writes,

"Justification by faith keeps us from the need for self-justification, or the need always to be noticed or praised by others. As such it is a powerful remedy to self-delusion and despair." (250) He adds: "Faith in Christ, itself a gift from God, is the great incentive to faithful work for God. We work as pastors not to earn or prove our worth to God, ourselves or anyone else, but because we have been graciously received by the heavenly Father at



the expense of his beloved Son.” (251)
Words like this a gold for anyone engaged in Christian ministry!

In addition to being clearly rooted in Scripture, this latest addition of *Going the Distance* also has a study guide for each chapter. This study guide includes a bible study to dig deep into God’s Word, a discussion section to reflect on the various issues, and a list of suggested activities to put into practice what I might suggest is a “fitness program for ministry”. The questions really make one dig deep into God’s Word, honestly reflect, and provide helpful actions steps.

The book begins with making a case for the importance of self-care. At the outset Brain notes that “all pastors want to be faithful. Our attitude to self-care will keep us from premature burnout, joyless survival and the unsatisfying experience of living at the edge.” (10) He refers to the “unhurried pastor,” a phrase used by Eugene Peterson. “Peterson says ‘pastors are busy because they are lazy!’ They are too lazy to work out priorities and then to put them into practice. The unhurried pastor will establish self-care patterns that will enable him or herself time to set priorities(itself essential to self-care) which will allow freshness and vitality to thrive.” (21)

Fundamental to our self-care are the two core activities of prayer and preparation for preaching. (18) Most everybody in Christian ministry would affirm this truth. Yet, one of the most frequent comments I receive from pastors and Christian leaders is failing at these two core activities. Pastors are often too busy to pray and preparation for preaching is relegated to when it can be fitted in, after all the other stuff of ministry is attended to. Yet, my experience after almost three decades of pastoral ministry is that the more I pray and

the more time I spend in sermon preparation, the staying power to attend to all the other challenges of ministry increases. Self-care begins with putting first things first – even as the early apostles attested to: the preaching of the Word and prayer. (see Acts 6:1-4)

**Self-care strategies are like All-Bran –
you eat it when you don’t need it,
so you won’t need it.**

The chapter on burnout is very informative. Not only does Brain provide well researched symptoms of burnout, but helps the reader understand that burnout can be our friend. “Burnout is an invitation for us to take stock.... Burnout symptoms, when seen as a *warning light*, can be a real friend. They become an opportunity to step back, to take remedial action and then either to implement or redouble one’s efforts in establishing patterns of self-care.” (31) “Its symptoms can be likened to a caring friend who says, ‘Its time to slow down, to regroup, to turn out for a while.’” (38)

I really liked Brain’s suggestions for reducing stress, helpful things to think about such as:

- Don’t take Monday as your day off
- Enjoy little things each day
- Build in time for friends
- Remember: God is in control
- Plan ahead

These are good things to reflect on. I could identify with Brain’s personal reflection on the need to plan ahead. Early in my ministry I began to take stock on the importance of planning ahead. I realised that my most productive time of the day was early in the morning. This is when ideas are fresh and thoughts come easily. So I always reserved mornings for Bible study and sermon preparation. Being more productive during these hours took the stress of last minute sermon preparation.

Another good chapter is the one that deals with the pastor’s family (chapter 7). It is so true what Brain writes: “Marriage and family

life are the microcosm out of which ministry can grow. Both are vital for the married pastor. To neglect this foundation would make building a ministry well nigh impossible. On the other hand, support from spouse and family provide a marvellous basis for ministry to blossom." (100)

I recall a journal entry I made in the early days of my ordained parish ministry. It went something like this: "I am very pleased that I have finally set aside time for my family: Saturday nights." If it were not for a very patient yet wise wife and partner, I don't know how I could have survived the first decade of ministry. Not long after that journal entry I realised that giving one evening a week to my marriage and family was unacceptable. As Brain writes, "Time invested family should be seen as a wise investment, a building up of marital and familial capital out of which rich dividends will accrue. Where time is not thoughtfully invested in marriage and family, real losses will result." (101) I am grateful to God that I learned those lessons early on in ministry. The dividends are still accruing today. All of this rests on the Biblical mandate: "If someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim 3:5) Brain offers a heap of ideas for strengthening marriage and family ties in the midst of ministry. I also found the section on "Regrets" very helpful, as Brain writes: "...there will always be regrets. None of us will be perfect parents, not of us will have perfect children, nor will our pastoring performance or church communities be perfect." (120) Brain then goes on to provide wise counsel to those who lives, families, and ministries have been less than perfect (see 120-121).

In ministry I have valued good friendships, men who have become like brothers to me, those who know me well and are not hesitant to ask the tough questions of me, from time

to time. Even today, although I am no longer in parish ministry, I have men who I confide in, who offer good counsel, and are always ready to be a sounding board for me. If you do not have such friendships, then pick up a copy of *Going the Distance*, and follow up on the suggestions Brain makes about friendships. I

Ministers who do not give attention to their marriages come to regret it.
- Dean Merrill

especially found the "Thoughtful Questions" on page 157 a great means of expressing, confirming and working at the mutual commitment of mentoring friends. These are the kinds of questions my mentor uses with me each month, and with much benefit in encouraging me to run my race with perseverance.

Chapters 10 and 11 are chock-a-block full of strategies for self-care! Many of the ideas in chapter 10 are gleaned from chapter ten in Luke's gospel. While Brain's discussion of Biblical principles are rooted in Luke 10, I just wonder if the Biblical record in this chapter is to be read as *prescriptive* or *descriptive*. I do not believe Luke 10 is primarily God teaching us how to be fit for a life-time of ministry (prescriptive). Hence when Brain refers to ideas such as "find hospitality" and "take action in taking time", I find these conclusions a bit forced. Having noted this, there is much we can still learn and apply from the sending out of the 72 and Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha in Luke 10. A further study of this chapter in the context of Luke 10 would enrich one's understanding of how to do ministry well.

One of Brain's ideas for self-care I found especially applicable in my own life and ministry. Prior to coming to Australia I pastored a relatively large congregation, with huge demands and challenging situations. What refreshed me in the midst of a busy ministry was my hobbies. Brain notes that "the key is that we have something else in our life that will help relax and refresh us." (168) Once a week I would either do some

woodworking or motorcycle repair and customisation. Recently I picked this up again after a hiatus of almost five years. I purchased a project motorcycle in Adelaide, riding it over 2000 km to Brisbane. Working on this project bike has done exactly what hobbies should do – it has relaxed and refreshed me.

Every pastor-church relations committee should read and study chapters 12 and 13. In these chapters Brain has a word for local church members and leaders. You might have a group of couples that as a ministering couple you meet with. You might work very closely with your session. Whatever group holds you accountable and encourages you in ministry ought to read these chapters. Heed the words of Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. **Let them do this with joy and not with groaning**, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (emphasis mine) Brain speaks about the “three A’s – affirmation, appreciation and admiration.” He notes that these “are needed by all Christians, not just between members and their pastor. A way to build up this affirmation reservoir in the church is to start with the pastor. To do so will result in a more encouraged pastor who, together with the church, will be better able to offer affirmation one to another.” (196)

I was surprised by Brain’s comment that “Australians are great ‘knockers’.” (200) In my denominational role I have not experienced that. I have been greatly encouraged in my work. But given that this is the Australian culture, “for the person who lives on the job 24 hours a day, whose parishioners and friends (and enemies) are all in the same circle, being ‘brought down to size all the time’ undermines ministry.” (200) This simply underscores the importance of church members and leaders keeping their ministers confident. This and many other suggestions



My project motorcycle – a hobby to relax and refresh with!

are worth pursuing by both church members and leaders alike. As Brain concludes: “It is in everybody’s interest to see their pastor affirmed, energetic, and balanced in their ministry.” (200)

Early on in ministry I made a personal commitment to run with perseverance the race God set before me. I know the statistics, how many pastors drop out of the ordained ministry. I have seen it among my colleagues, the ones I graduated with from seminary. *Going the Distance* is a welcome handbook on how to stay fit for a lifetime of ministry. As Brain ends his book, “Ultimately our lives are in God’s hands. However, we will have been able to complete the task assigned to us, rather than burn out by a careless approach to ministry, if we have taken the steps to take and receive care through our life.” (258) Maintaining self-care might not push us ahead of the pack like Usain Bolt, but it will help us get over the line – having gone the distance!

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About the Author:



Peter Brain has been a pastor since 1975, and has worked in Sydney, Adelaide, Perth and Armidale Anglican dioceses. He is now Bishop of Armidale Diocese. He is married to Christine and they have four adult children.