



SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

# DIAGNOSING YOUR *Heart* CONDITION

***A Leadership  
Forum probes the  
vital signs of  
spiritual fitness.***

**I**f you ask most pastors how they're doing spiritually, they tend to say, "I wish I had the time to devote to spiritual formation" or "Well, I ought to be doing more in that area." They tend to emphasize their shortcomings.

One church leader put it more directly: "Being a pastor is hazardous to your spiritual health. The very call to which we're so deeply committed can also become a saboteur of spiritual life."

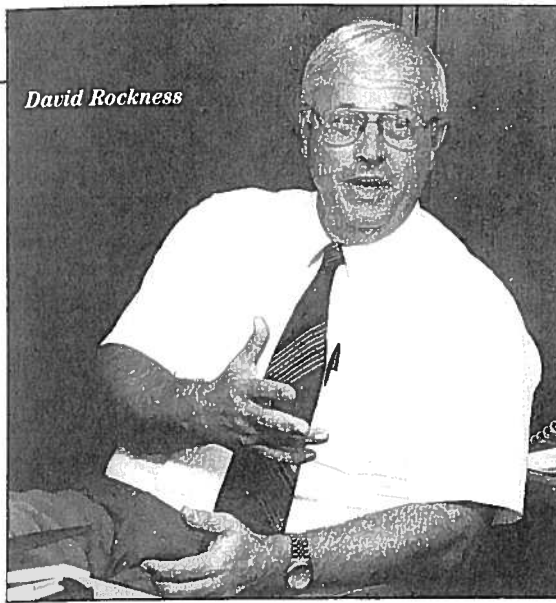
How can we accurately assess our spiritual vital signs? How can we stay spiritually fit? For help with these questions, LEADERSHIP gathered four leaders who know the hazards but also have addressed the need to nourish their souls.

— Henry Blackaby directs the office of Prayer and Spiritual Awakening at the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta. He has pastored in the inner city districts of San Francisco as well as the rural outposts of northern Canada. His recent books include *Experiencing God and Fresh Encounter*.

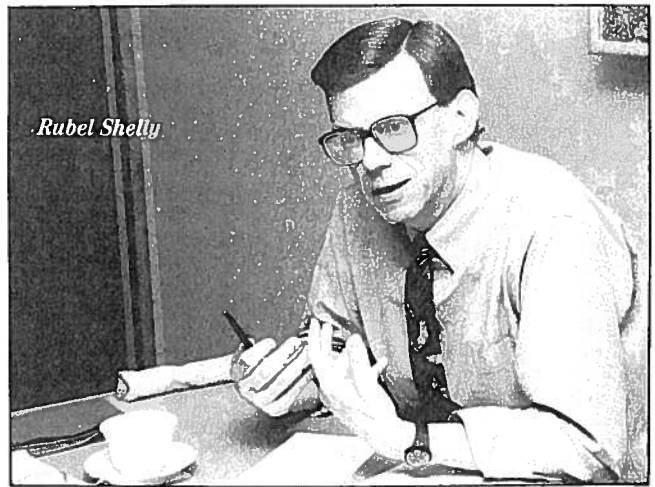
— David Rockness has been pastor of Lake Wales Presbyterian Church (Associate Reformed Presbyterian) in Lake Wales, Florida since 1972. Prior to that he served a church in Grand Haven, Michigan. He was born to missionary parents 1,000 miles deep in the interior of China.

— Danny Morris is director of developing ministries with The Upper Room, a discipleship wing of the United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. He is also executive director of The Academy for Spiritual Formation, a two-year program he developed for both lay and clergy to nurture the inner life. Morris has authored *Yearning to Know God's Will and A Life That Really Matters*.

— Rubel Shelly ministers at Woodmont Hills Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee. He has taught ethics in the school of medicine at Vanderbilt Univer-



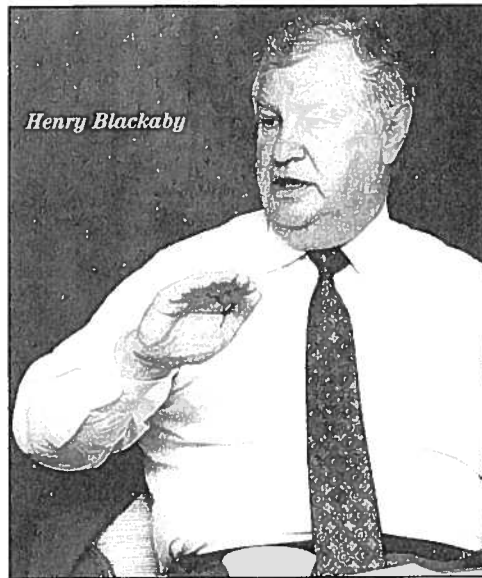
*David Rockness*



*Rubel Shelly*



*Danny Morris*



*Henry Blackaby*

sity, and he serves as co-editor of *Wineskins*, a magazine devoted to reform and renewal in the Churches of Christ.

In the sweltering humidity of summer in Atlanta, LEADERSHIP editors Marshall Shelley and Dave Goetz met with these veterans of faith and ministry to discuss how the heat of ministry affects the pastor's heart.

**Leadership:** Many pastors feel they're not doing enough spiritually. Is this persistent guilt justified?

**Danny Morris:** Most of us need to feel some guilt about our level of spirituality. Facing that guilt, looking it squarely in the eye and determining what's causing it, is a sign of maturity.

**Rubel Shelly:** Guilt used to be my primary measuring rod. I grew up in legalism — the guiltier I felt the more spiritual I considered myself. Now I've shifted my focus away from how I feel to the One in

whom I've placed my faith.

So I'm not satisfied with my spiritual life, but I'm secure in my relationship with the Lord. I won't love the Lord the way I want to — with a perfect heart — until his appearing. Then he'll make that possible.

I don't want to give guilt a bad name; there's a place for it. But neurotic guilt drives us to legalism: "I'll be spiritual if I spend this much time in prayer and read this many chapters of the Bible in any 24-hour period. . . ."

**Leadership:** Is it ever appropriate to feel good about your spirituality? Or is that impossible — like boasting about your humility?

**Henry Blackaby:** The love of Christ compelled Paul, not guilt. God draws us by love rather than law. I'm a long way from where I'm going to be, but it's okay to feel good about where I've come from

and where I'm headed.

**David Rockness:** Jesus said to Peter, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." What qualifies us for ministry is our love for Christ, not our perfection. I will always have a measure of guilt, but God is still going to use me.

**Morris:** For me, guilt was the necessary first step. Guilt hit me square in the chest when I was pastoring.

A Sunday school teacher told me about his concern for his class of young adults. One morning while preparing to teach his class, he was reflecting on how empty both he and they seemed. He told me he leaned forward, put his head on the desk, and prayed: "Lord, show me how to challenge these young people so they can have a life that matters."

Then a thought came to him. He sat up and wrote it down. Then another thought. And another. Page after page, he continued to write with incredible inspiration; the Presence within that room was so great, goose bumps came to his arms. He actually

turned around at one point to see if someone was standing behind him.

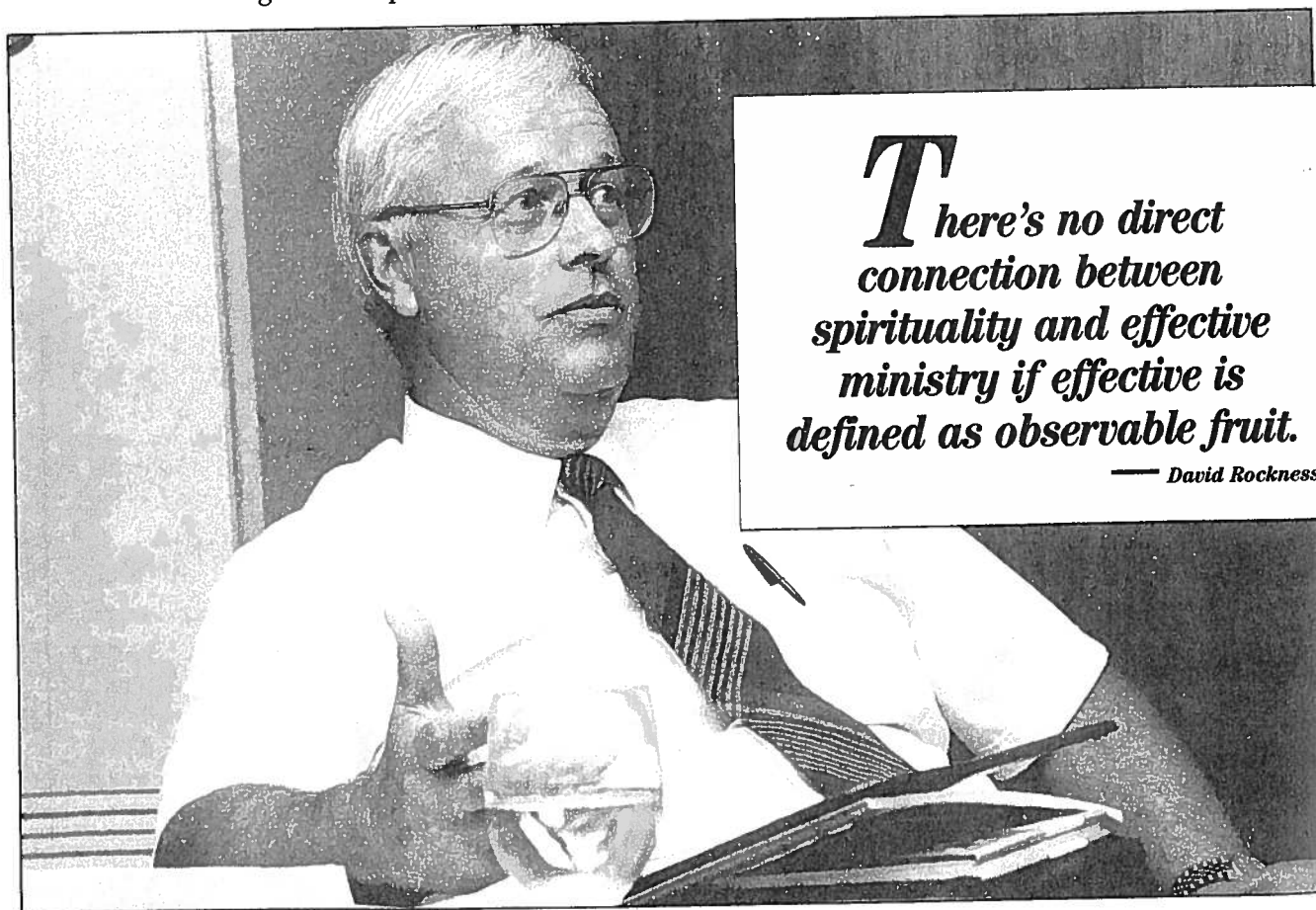
After twenty minutes he breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in his chair, reading over what he had written. He would challenge the members of his class to join him for one month to do five things: (1) meet once a week to learn how to pray, (2) work at least two hours in the church each week, (3) give God a tenth of one's earnings, (4) meet from 5:30 to 6:00 o'clock each morning to study the Scriptures and pray, and (5) tell others about what Christ has done in your life.

Then he went to his Sunday school class and issued a challenge for ten people to join in these spiritual disciplines. He gave them a week to think it over.

As we sat drinking coffee, he pulled out of his pocket a piece of paper with the five disciplines written on it from the day before.

"Here, take a look at this," he said. "Tell me what you think."

As I read his plan, I was threatened. "Sam, you aren't expecting people to do this at our church, are you?"



***T***here's no direct connection between spirituality and effective ministry if effective is defined as observable fruit.

— David Rockness

"What do you think?"

My ministry flashed before my eyes. In a church with 550 members, I was sure we wouldn't find ten people ready to accept this challenge. That would reflect badly on me because I was the only pastor they had ever had.

After what seemed like an eternity (two minutes), I said, "Let's see if we can find ten people. If we can, it will blow the lid off our church; if we can't, I'll have something to preach about the rest of my life."

Instead of ten, we found twenty-two. The next month we recruited sixteen more. Some time later, I noticed spiritual ferment going on everywhere.

Facing my guilt and getting in touch with what made me uncomfortable was the best thing I could have done.

**Leadership:** If you don't feel guilt over a lack of spirituality, then, does that signal trouble?

**Shelly:** Not necessarily. The apostle Paul said he didn't consider himself to have laid hold of it yet. But he knew the direction he was heading and pressed toward the prize. I'd say the same of myself: I'm not there, but I know my direction's right.

**Leadership:** How does Christianity contrast with the growing popular fascination with "spirituality"?

**Rockness:** The big difference is the focus. What's good about today's climate is that people are open to a reality beyond the physical and the scientific. But American spirituality is fuzzy: what a person believes is less important than the spiritual journey. Christians, however, focus clearly on Christ and the Word.

**Shelly:** We part company with the popular culture on how to deal with our brokenness. Popular culture looks within the self. There, though, we find only more self-centered pride that sets us up to fail again.

Christians look in the direction of a hill outside of Jerusalem, to the cross and Christ. So the common ground is brokenness; the departure is where we look for healing. The culture says, "Look inside"; the Christian says, "Look to Christ." There you find not only authority but integration.

In the world, you'll only find more brokenness.

Another difference is the goal of spiritual healing. Often the goal of our culture is a sense of inner peace or self-actualization. The goal of Christian healing is a new creation. Whatever the sin, it's now dead and buried. Healing is not a subjective warm feeling but a re-creation of our total personality in the image of Christ.

**Leadership:** What are the spiritual hazards of being a pastor?

**Rockness:** One hazard is resenting the very people we're called to love and lead. When they are unresponsive — for example, when we invest time planning programs or meetings and only a few show up — disappointment slowly builds. That disappointment can fester into resentment, which cuts out the heart of spiritual vibrancy.

**Shelly:** Another hazard is taking too much credit, or blame, for ministry results. I can think that if something works well, I did something right. Or if it doesn't go well, I can get down on myself.

But in my successes — fruitfulness judged the way we Americans judge it — I've discovered my spiritual life can be dry, stale, and flat because I tend to get arrogant, to feel good about myself and take the glory. I can't be close to the Lord while stealing his glory.

**Blackaby:** Moderate success in ministry can be a hazard. We can do the good but not necessarily be doing God's will. We can have the form of godliness but morally and spiritually be getting worse and worse. Moderate success can also make us content to live without the manifest presence of God.

It's easy to become so immersed in the world's way of measuring success that we become increasingly disoriented to what God is saying. We rely on the books of men to figure out how to do our ministry. And that's killing us.

I must keep coming back to the Word and ask myself, *How does God reveal himself?*

**Morris:** I see professionalism as a spiritual hazard. Some professionalism in min-

istry is necessary, but we tend to think professionals need to be smooth. But we can be smooth and empty. That catches us if we think we've learned how to do ministry right and well.

Professionalism is deceptive. In our denomination, once we become a member of the conference, we're guaranteed an appointment to a church or denominational position, and our churches are guaranteed a pastor. That's a great strength of the United Methodist system, but it's also a great weakness.

The strength is the guarantee of prophetic voices in the church. When it degenerates into a guarantee that you're going to make career advancements so you can feel good about getting ahead, it's a terrible thing.

**Leadership:** How can you keep these hazards from damaging your soul?

**Morris:** We have to be willing to take risks to foster communal spirituality. We can't hang up our dirty laundry every day, but certainly we need to talk about the reality of our experience. This, in turn, makes it more comfortable for others to risk.

**Shelly:** Let me add a word of caution. If you feel broken and are within a group that does not value openness, you probably need to seek spiritual counselors outside your church. Unless a healthy, nurturing sense of community exists in a church — and let's face it, it doesn't always — to trust in nontrustworthy and unsympathetic souls can be the last step toward destroying a pastor.

I was fortunate that during a crisis in my life the church rallied around me and my family. Ten years ago my dad, who was my primary spiritual mentor, was diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas. Three and a half weeks later, he died.

A couple of Sundays later, I was wrung out, weary, spiritually dry. As I sat on the platform during the last song before I was to preach, I knew I could not preach. It wouldn't be authentic. It wouldn't be from God.

So I stood before the church and said, "I don't have a thing to say to you today. And it would be false of me to go through these notes I've prepared because I'm dry and

barren and don't have anything to give."

I don't recall if I led a prayer or if I just stepped down and had the congregation sing another song. When the service ended a few moments later, I didn't have the heart to greet people. I escaped out the back door, embarrassed and humiliated, thinking I would have to resign from the church.

But it turned out to be a formative day in the life of the church. For the first time, the church saw their preacher as a human being who also had feet of clay, who was caught in the impasse of hurt and brokenness. The outpouring of love and affirmation that followed was overwhelming.

"Thank you for letting us know you're human, that you're real," many said. "Thank you for trusting us with that. And we'll be as responsible with your trust as you have been with ours."

It became okay in our church to admit pain, more acceptable for others to confess their struggles. Today our church is known for being a nurturing, healing, loving, grace-filled place.

**Leadership:** What are the signals that you're on the right track spiritually?

**Shelly:** When there is spiritual health, there is tension.

For instance, on one hand, we must be committed to the Word and its unyielding norm for holiness. On the other hand, we ought to confess how inadequate we are in following this Word. Without this tension, I can be flinty, arrogant, driving people away. This is the god of legalism, the god of infinite demands.

But vulnerability can degenerate into exhibitionism. Then there's no stability, no sufficiency. So we need to be open and transparent yet acknowledge that God's Spirit is making us adequate.

There's a "golden mean" between the sinner's confession of bankruptcy and our need to be holy as God is holy.

**Morris:** Another positive tension that indicates spiritual health is being able to walk in God's presence and enjoy him for ourselves, yet still feel the world's hurts.

Recently it struck me that I run around with pretty good people: they're friendly, creative, fun to be with, and for the most

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— Henry Blackaby



part well-educated. My friendships were causing me to miss seeing the world through the eyes of the broken, lonely, and downtrodden.

I decided I needed to do something to change my perspective, so I went to night court. In Nashville, all of the arrests made in the county and city of Nashville are brought in before a magistrate during night court. Fifty seats are available for spectators.

As I watched the parade of people, suddenly I realized, *Hey, we're not winning. The kind of people I run around with are not typical.* I saw broken families, I saw drunkenness and poverty, I saw the victims of fighting and cutting, the rawest kind of life you can imagine. I discovered I was completely out of touch with the hurts of people.

Befriending pretty good people had caused me to ignore a world in pain.

**Rockness:** I would add another: being approachable. Some ministers I'm naturally drawn to; with them I feel comfortable being myself. But with other leaders I'd never consider admitting any struggles.

A good pastor-friend recently said to me, "I've just realized that most of my closest friends have been or are in AA or support groups. They've learned to be vulnerable." This vulnerability is the outgrowth of recognizing and naming our own personal pain.

But openness can be dangerous. One day this friend decided with his session to open up his heart. He was having problems so he laid his heart bare. Afterwards one of the elders said to him, "We haven't

paid you to come and tell us your problems."

**Blackaby:** My walk with God is connected to what's happening in my family. That's the first alarm system.

One of my children flunked tenth grade and got in with the wrong crowd. He had to go to court. Everything was going well in the church, but the alarm bells were going off at home. During that time, my wife and I had to say, "Our son and God are on center stage, and God has told us to stand back. When he wants us on center stage, he'll call us in." That helped me, then, to help my children. God eventually redeemed that situation.

**Leadership:** Is the spiritually healthy pastor going to be more effective in his or her ministry?

**Rockness:** It depends what you mean by "effective." There's no direct connection between spirituality and effectiveness if you define effective ministry as observable fruit. Some of the most spiritual ministers I've known have not had what most would call "effective" ministry.

I've had a difficult time coming to terms with this. While in seminary, I was a youth director. On every weekend retreat for the youth, I'd get as tight as a drum, anxious over whether the kids would tune into God. *These are important spiritual opportunities,* I thought. *If these kids are fooling around, they won't hear the gospel.* I was so uptight I couldn't even eat.



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— Danny Morris

Riding home from one of these retreats, my wife said, "Dave, when are you going to release the spiritual work to God? Why are you so uptight about it? It affects the way you relate to the kids. You try to be funny but aren't funny at all. Be yourself. The rest is God's work."

So if I define effectiveness as a typical American — that I'm going to see people respond a certain way — and I don't get results, I can begin to doubt myself. God measures effectiveness his way, which we rarely see.

Part of being a spiritual man or woman is being faithful to what God has called us to.

**Shelly:** A baseball player can be great on the field but lack integrity, character, or spirituality. But you cannot be a kingdom servant without your heart being genuinely related to God for daily discipline and molding. There's something fundamentally different between being an effective servant of God and being an effective third baseman.

The push for outward effectiveness is often the cause of spiritual burnout and people leaving ministry. When God called the Old Testament prophets into ministry, he sometimes told them they would be rejected, that nobody would listen. Sometimes if we're spiritually effective, we create enemies. So we're back to the issue of faithfulness.

**Blackaby:** I struggled with this when I responded to the ministry. I grew up in the

hard environment of a logging, mining, and fishing community in northern Canada, next to the Alaskan border. Then I went to the university in Vancouver. Later, as I weighed entering the ministry, I wrestled with the question of significance.

"Henry," I heard the Lord say, "if you knew that I was calling you to Northern Canada to live in a logging camp, and no one outside of the logging camp would ever know who you are, and if I was going to keep you there all your life, would you respond?"

I had to work through that. I finally said, "If the God of the universe lets me represent him anywhere, that is more than I deserve and more than I can handle. Success is doing what the Master asks."

**Morris:** I've been growing more sensitive to my inner spirit, asking, "What stirs in my spirit?" And if what stirs inwardly is stirring outwardly in my activities, I have integrity.

There's nothing wrong with activity if there is a consonance between activity and what you know inside, deep within your inner spirit, what God has called you to. Spirituality and activity have to go together.

**Leadership:** When does spiritual activity become spiritually lethal?

**Shelly:** After preaching three services on Sunday, I feel drained and dry. I fill my bucket during the week and pour it out on

Sunday. That kind of dryness we ought to welcome. God has given us opportunity to expend energy that regenerates naturally and speedily. But that's different from drying up spiritually.

Spiritual dryness of the lethal sort develops in several ways. First, through sin, when I in some fundamental way betray my integrity as a Christian before God.

Second, when I begin to feel an aversion for the holy. If I'm not drawn to prayer, don't desire the Word, don't want accountability, intimate relationships.

Third, when I become alienated from those closest to me — my wife, my children, my friends. That indicates something unspiritual is going on in me. I'd better do a serious heart check before God to probe why I'm pulling back, why coming before God is odious rather than attractive.

**Morris:** After seminary I served as an associate for two years and then moved to start a new church. Within four years the church had constructed a building, and at the end of five years, the church had grown to 550. I felt good about my success.

Yet I had dried up spiritually in the process. The hardest thing in any week was to get into the pulpit. I had nothing worthwhile to say. It was devastating.

My wife would say, "Danny, are you excited about your sermon for Sunday?"

"Mm hmm."

"Have you worked on it?"

"Mm hmm."

Invariably she'd ask the clincher question.

"Have you prayed about it?"

That was the hardest question to answer because I hadn't. I lived like that for quite a while, and it was agony.

While driving one day with my wife, we began talking about it. I pulled into a parking space, and she began to weep. I, in turn, began to weep. Then she turned and put her hand over mine and said, "I feel as if we're trapped."

Her comment grabbed me. My wife and others were asking spiritual questions I had no answers for. I, too, felt trapped.

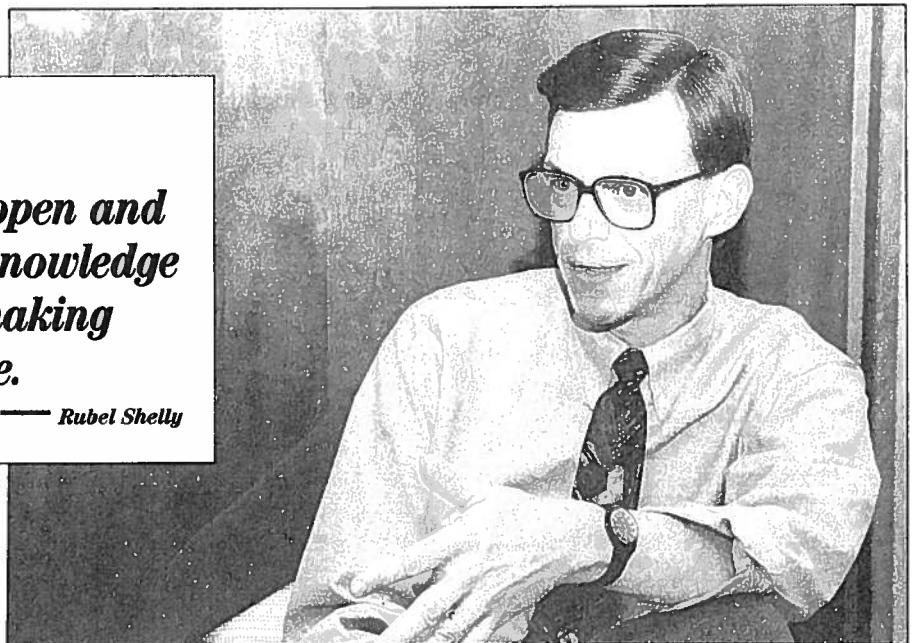
That day, weeping in our car, I made a commitment in prayer to make a change. I pulled out of that parking space with a renewed commitment to my inner life. Slowly over the next several months, my inner spirit came back to life.

**Blackaby:** Jeremiah described the presence of God as a spring of living water. So when I find myself spiritually dry, I ask, "How is it possible to have a daily walk with the spring of living water and be dry?" If I'm dry, something is wrong with my relationship to the fountain. Out of our innermost beings, God said, will flow rivers of living water.

Human reasoning says, "Won't you naturally go through dry spells?" But as I look across Scripture, it seems that any time

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— Rubel Shelly



there is spiritual dryness, the problem is that our hearts have shifted and we are missing the fountain.

So I've made a commitment to come alongside spiritually refreshing people. I've made a covenant with several of them: If they ever sense my heart shift, ever hear me talking differently, they will love me enough to say, "You're somehow different today than you were the last time we were together. Is there anything wrong?"

This has been one the most precious gifts to me.

Just recently I had to do this with one of my close friends. "It's just not the same," I said. "What happened?" My friend then began to weep and opened up his heart.

**Rockness:** During one stretch in the twenty-one years I've been in Lake Wales, I made a slow descent into depression, primarily because of staff problems and because I didn't have anyone with whom to share the stresses of ministry. My wife, Miriam, sensed my depression and from time to time would ask, "Are you depressed?"

"No, I'm not," I'd always reply.

She diagnosed my condition before I was able to admit it, and she started praying daily for my spirit. When I was ready to hear it, she encouraged me to get help. The Lord brought two men from our church alongside me, and we created a small group for encouragement. I slowly began to recover.

Now we meet weekly. They now know me well enough to sense when I'm up or down. The group has proved to be a good source of accountability as well, which was not its original purpose.

I discovered there are no Lone Rangers in God's work. If he's placed us in a marriage and then in the context of the church family, those are spiritual resources we should draw upon.

**Leadership:** How can we intentionally build spiritual strength while serving others?

**Shelly:** A musician needs to practice each day. I've learned I also have to build into my day in a disciplined way a brief period of time with Scripture and prayer. I call it my minimum daily requirement.

But a musician also will need intense

practice periods prior to concerts or learning new pieces. So will the spiritually attuned person. In a difficult time, in a time of dryness or stress, I'll have to seek God's face much more than my minimum daily requirement. I may even seek out others to pray with me and for me.

**Blackaby:** One of my disciplines is to put my life alongside those God has mightily used in history. I read their biographies, noticing the common-place things from their lives. I've enjoyed Spurgeon's book called *A Pastor at Prayer*, which is not the record of his sermons but of the prayers he prayed before he preached. Common to all of the great women and men of God is prayer.

**Rockness:** In seminary I had a professor of New Testament who took seriously the spiritual lives of his students. One of the first things he said to our class of freshman was, "In the next three years of seminary, you will do a lot of Bible study and theology. Don't ever let those studies take the place of your daily devotions — ever."

That's been my ideal for ministry. Through the years, though I haven't always been faithful, I've stubbornly refused to allow my sermon preparation to take the place of my devotional interaction with God. The motivation for each is completely different. The motivation for a daily devotional is to build my relationship with Jesus whereas my sermon study is to help others build their relationships with Christ.

In addition, in the long run we need to keep a Sabbath day holy. For us, Sunday is not a day of rest. So we need to force ourselves to rest another day.

**Morris:** I would add you need not only the day off each week but a day each month in retreat and, ideally, a month each year on sabbatical. Of course, that won't be economically feasible for many pastors, but it's a worthy goal to shoot for. It would certainly mitigate against the burnout pastors are experiencing in epidemic proportions across the church.

In the Christian spiritual life, bifurcation is not an option. You can't say, "This is my spiritual life, and this is my work life." They're one. And it will take a lifetime for that to be learned. □