

A pastor's study

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [Mar 19, 2014](#) issue



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One of the best essays I've ever read on the practice of ministry is Joseph Sittler's "The Maceration of the Minister." Sittler reflects on how the seminary student is solemnly told that big concepts like the kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*) demand a lifetime of study and reflection. But then the student becomes a pastor. Sittler's description of the transition still makes me laugh out loud:

Visit the [former student] years later in what he inexactly calls the "study" and one is more than likely to find . . . a roll of blueprints; a file of negotiations between the parish, the bank and the Board of Missions; samples of asphalt tile, a plumber's estimate.

The pithy paragraph came to mind almost every day of my final year of ministry because our congregation was moving through a major building project. I even had my own hard hat with my name on it, and I'd look at it sitting on my bookshelf and ruefully remember Sittler's words.

Many of us love the busyness, energy, and creative dynamism of a robust church. Many of us love the program direction and even the management. And yet all of us pastors must summon an uncommon discipline if we are to reflect the priority and importance of preaching.

It can be done. Sittler wrote:

It [the congregation] is likely to accept, support and be deeply molded by the understanding of Office and calling which is projected by its minister's actual behavior. It will come to assess as central what he, in his actual performance of ministry and use of his time, makes central.

The preacher, Sittler concluded, must order her or his time around study, reflection, and sermon preparation. I discovered that the congregation appreciates knowing that the minister takes preaching seriously. The practice I developed—and it's not unique or original—was to block off segments of time throughout the week for reading, study, and sermon preparation and to be strict about never infringing on them. I learned the hard way that sermons not grounded in a significant investment of time were not very good.

At first I felt guilty about affording myself the luxury of uninterrupted time. But I came to understand that this was what the church's members called me to do, were willing to pay me to do. I told the personnel committee and church leaders about the time I devoted to preparing sermons and was delighted to have their understanding and support of my attempt to honor those who invest a morning of their busy lives in coming to church and listening to what the preacher says, always hopeful that it will contain a word from the Lord.