"Moving Forward in Your Spiritual Life"

**by Richie Hughes**

"I'm not going back, I'm moving ahead. I'm here to declare to you, my past is over. In YOU, old things are made new, surrendered my life to Christ, I'm moving forward!" The lyrics to this song by my good friend Ricardo Sanchez have transformed many lives, mine being one.   
  
As leaders, we are constantly reviewing and analyzing data that is critically important, but in reality, it is all yesterday's news. Don't get me wrong. As a former executive pastor of Free Chapel in Gainesville, GA and Irvine, CA we must be somewhat obsessed with data. An old basketball coach of mine used to say, "The stats don't lie!" I found that to be so true. Churches like businesses must be into numbers. Our budgets, attendance, baptisms, etc. all measure the growth or lack thereof in our ministries. The growth of the church is important, but what about your growth, and most importantly, your spiritual growth? There are no hard "stats" for that, so how do you know when you are moving forward?   
  
I remember when my Senior Pastor, Jentezen Franklin informed me that we were going to launch a church in Irvine, CA. Wow! (A bunch of guys from the South doing church on the West Coast? Really?) My mind began to spin, not with fear or doubt, but excitement! I wondered aloud, would our ministry model from GA work in CA? How would we transition staff to our new location? How are we going to pay for all of this? Ok, maybe just a little bit of apprehension rolled in.   
  
Make no mistake, God can do anything He wants and no group of men can ever take credit for what God has done at Free Chapel, but as I was reminiscing with a close pastor friend just recently at Cornerstone in Athens, GA, God always exceeds our expectations when we give Him all of ourselves in our effort. So how do you give Him all of yourself? In our staff coaching sessions, I often share what I believe are three critical components of moving forward in our own spiritual lives:   
  
1. **Preserve YOUR Individual Identity.** We must be ourselves, plain and simple. God knows we all wish we could communicate like Andy Stanley, John Maxwell or Rick Warren, or maybe our voice fill the room like Mac Powell from Third Day in the worship experience. But I have found that God loves not only those guys, but He loves you and me just the same. More amazingly to me, He likes us! Now, I'm not talking about a Facebook click for a like, but God really enjoys our communication style, our worship style and everything that makes us who we are. We as leaders don't have to be the most creative pastor in town. Yes, God loves creativity and people appreciate the preparation, but think about this: as a former high school basketball coach, I never called plays for my team to run with the intent of showing how smart I was as a coach. I called plays to win the game! Likewise we should not start new programs, campaigns or teaching series to show that we are more creative than that "other" church down the road, let's do series and programs that reach people, change lives and win the game! I remember a reporter asking my friend and Atlanta Braves pitcher, John Smoltz what was his "best" pitch? I loved his answer: John didn't reply my 96 MPH fastball or my 90 MPH slider or my incredible change up, he simply said, "The one that gets the hitter out." John got it right! Leaders, do we understand the ultimate goal? How about our staff? In the midst of all this, it's important to be yourself!   
  
2. **Realize the importance of Real Relationships**. As I travel from church to church, this issue is the one I see so many leaders doing poorly. To stay fresh and continue our personal growth in Christ, it's important to:   
  
Find a hobby. You might think, "I don't have time for a hobby." I hear it everywhere I go. You need to find time. Take up running, fishing, golf or the latest craze I have seen is at the shooting range. I'm not going to say what the virtual targets are and it troubles me a little to see so many "gun friendly" pastors who get a little crazy out there! But I am a firm believer that without a release, your effectiveness as a leader and even a communicator will suffer greatly. Be careful though, my competitive spirit will sometimes overtake me and I may just "accidentally" throw a club on the golf course when the breaks don't go my way. Note to self: That could be hazardous to your testimony! Stop throwing clubs.   
  
Find close friends outside your church body. The conversation has got to be about something other than the church all of the time! During my time as an executive pastor, I intentionally had a small core of about four people that were my "best" friends. Of the four, only one attended our church. We enjoyed friendships with parents on the soccer field and basketball court while watching our children compete. Of course my golfing buddies were patient enough to hang out with me on my day off. The bottom line is to find a release, it makes your time with God that much more special.   
  
3. **Preserve and Protect your Personal Passion.** One of my favorite worship leaders, Israel Houghton wrote a song called "Go back to your first Love." When I listen to the lyrics, it reminds me of my personal salvation experience. Do you remember that moment? Of course you do! Are you still as passionate in your personal relationship with God, or are you spending so much time and energy leading others that your personal time with God has diminished? Admittedly, I am guilty! When I started as an executive pastor at a mega church, I was so consumed with the church and the people that in my first three months in that position, I was hospitalized with ulcers. I had to evaluate some things and in doing so realized that my personal growth in Christ was suffering, not to mention my body.   
  
Maybe you are like I was, reading every leadership book, blog, etc. and doing your best to keep up with the latest trends in ministry. Here is what I determined: ask and believe God. Time in prayer and devotion will always trump overworking, over downloading, and overanalyzing the things we do constantly as leaders. I'll say it like I heard it from the Lord, "Who do you think inspired all of those leaders to write those thoughts? Those thoughts came from me!"   
  
Lastly, I am reminded of what helped bring me back into spiritual growth and development:   
  
1. **My personal worship time.** I hope as leaders that we participate in the worship segment of service. Like you, my cell phone stays hot with texts from department heads and volunteers and we seem to find ways to put out fires throughout our weekend services. But what about the fire in our hearts? Do we allow ourselves to just take a moment and experience God? Our church must have something pretty good to offer or no one would come. I encourage YOU to worship in the service you have worked so hard to plan for others, as much as possible. Other times for me are when I worship in the car blaring out worship tunes and most days when I run, I fill my ears with worship music and carelessly sing along just enjoying my time with HIM. Find your space and time to worship.   
  
2. **Read the Bible for pleasure, not just for sermons or teachings.**Wow! I remember when someone told me that. It was like a bucket of cold water in my face! Probably like you if you teach, I usually sit down with my Bible, pen, paper and laptop all at once. This advice was good for me. Sometimes we need to just read the Bible. Period! No agenda, just out of the pure joy of reading the greatest book ever written. Will you get sermon ideas? Yep, but that is a bonus, not the intent. Life Church's YOUversion has made it possible to read the Bible anywhere, anytime. Download the app to your phone and just enjoy the Word of God.   
  
By practicing just a few things I've shared, you as a leader can not only increase productivity in yourself, but teaching these principles will have a trickle down effect in your leadership of others. More importantly, your personal relationship with God will grow and become, or return, to that level of passion that God seeks from you and seeks for you.

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