

The Slow Church Alternative

By Brandon Shields

More than a decade ago, I was radicalized to the need for a slowed-down spirituality.

An addict to speed, indoctrinated by the cultural propaganda of hurry (a conspiracy of the world, the flesh, and the devil), I found myself exhausted from an extended season spent in megachurches and a five-year sprint of ministry that included starting and pastoring a family of three churches in an urban center, mentoring two other church plants, serving on the board of a church planting network, and starting my own coaching business. So began my long recovery journey of contemplative sobriety and learning to live daily under God's loving gaze.

In the years following this second conversion experience, I've tried to read everything I could get my hands on to figure out how to practically implement this slowed-down vision. And that's why I was so excited to work through Cal Newport's *Slow Productivity* several years ago. I think this book is a paradigm-shifter, and one that pastors should bump to the top of their reading list.

Below are a few key takeaways, followed by a thought experiment for those who are courageous enough to experiment with a new (ancient) approach to the modern problems of pastoral ministry in a digital age.

The Crisis of Knowledge Work

Newport's core thesis is that knowledge work is facing a fundamental crisis, one that is pervasive and yet difficult to diagnose. And most importantly, this crisis is a feature of modern knowledge work, not

a bug; a kind of system failure that transcends the personal behaviors of any individual, group, or industry.

Here's the foundational problem: knowledge work has no agreed-upon definition of productivity. In nearly every significant sector of the modern economy, the metrics for productivity have been pretty straightforward for generations: farmers measured the output of their land (bushels per acre), factory line workers measured the output of widgets (automobiles per paid hour of labor), and so on.

But that's not the case for knowledge workers, whose daily tasks are self-directed, ill-defined, constantly changing, and require varying levels of intensity, effort, and focus. In the absence of clear metrics, Newport argues that a crude proxy emerged: "pseudo-productivity," or the use of visible busyness to define productivity. In other words, the more people can see you doing something, the more they assume you're making a meaningful contribution. And the digital age has only accelerated this disease.

The result? A catastrophic paradigm shift in how we approach modern work that has us trapped in "invisible factories" laboring in a way that is unnatural (no seasonality or legal protections like previous generations), unproductive (shallower and less innovative), and unsustainable (calibrated right at the edge of burnout).

"Working with unceasing intensity is artificial and unsustainable. In the moment, it might exude a false sense of usefulness, but when continued over time, it estranges us from our fundamental nature, generates misery, and, from a strictly economic perspective, almost certainly holds us back from reaching our full capabilities."

The Slow Productivity Alternative

To counter pseudo-productivity, Newport proposes an alternative framework he calls "slow productivity."

"Slow productivity is a philosophy for organizing knowledge work efforts in a sustainable and meaningful manner."

He draws inspiration here from the social critic Carlo Petrini's "Slow Food" movement, launched in response to the opening of a McDonald's in Rome. The movement promoted not just a critique of fast food but "an enjoyable and life-affirming alternative" that harnessed "time-tested cultural innovations" in communal dining that had been developed through trial-and-error in Italian villages for centuries: "slow meals, eaten communally, made from local and seasonal ingredients." What began in Italy has grown to 160 countries, spawning related movements: Slow Cities, Slow Medicine, Slow Schooling, Slow Media, and Slow Cinema.

Notice that Newport isn't anti-productivity or anti-ambition; he's actually arguing that the opposite is true — when we slow down and do less work at a more sustainable, humane pace, the quality, longevity, and meaning of our work actually increase. He's inviting people to reimagine ambition as *"the lost art of accomplishment without burnout."*

Newport's proposal is built on three core principles, each illustrated by stories of historical exemplars and supported by a series of practical strategies that can be implemented by individuals, work teams, and organizations.

1. Do fewer things

"Strive to reduce your obligations to the point where you can easily imagine accomplishing them with time to spare. Leverage this reduced load to more fully embrace and advance the small number of projects that matter most."

Newport offers three big ideas for reducing cognitive overload: First, "limit the big" by implementing a systemic plan for limiting significant commitments at different scales of work (broader mission, ongoing projects, and daily goals). Second, "**contain the small**" by minimizing knowledge work's "overhead tax" of smaller tasks that distract you from the larger ones. Third, "pull instead of push": instead of allowing work to be "pushed" onto our already overloaded plates, new work only gets "pulled" when there is capacity (as determined by project leaders).

Here are a few concrete strategies I found helpful in this section:

- Reduce the number of big personal or organizational goals or projects
- Preschedule your projects by time-blocking your calendar
- Use pull-based workflows

2. Work at a natural pace

"Don't rush your most important work. Allow it instead to unfold along a sustainable timeline, with variations in intensity, in settings conducive to brilliance."

Newport proposes three essential insights to recover a more humane pace: First, "take longer on key projects" by allowing creative work to unfold slowly over extended periods. Second, "embrace seasonality" by varying the intensity and focus of your efforts throughout the year. Third, "work poetically" through cultivating rituals and settings that create conducive environments for our work.

Here are a few concrete strategies I found helpful in this section:

- Double your strategy and project time horizons
- Schedule slow seasons at varying scales: weekly, monthly, annually
- Match your space to your work

3. Obsess over quality

"Obsess over the quality of what you produce, even if this means missing opportunities in the short term. Leverage the value of these results to gain more and more freedom in your efforts over the long term."

Newport suggests two core concepts for producing your best possible work: First, "improve your taste" by refining your ability to distinguish between good and great work. Second, "bet on yourself" by placing yourself in situations where there's a healthy pressure to deliver.

Here are a few concrete strategies I found helpful in this section:

- Start your own Inklings group to share and critique your work
- Invest in quality tools for your craft
- Engage in inter-disciplinary study of great work: movies, literature, business

A Slow Church Experiment

Inspired by Newport's work, I'd like to offer a thought experiment for pastors who are trying to bring spiritual formation into their churches. Imagine for a moment that your vocation as a pastor is that of a modern knowledge worker. (Dallas Willard once called pastors "teachers of the nations", whose basic task is "to present Christ's answers to the basic questions of life and to bring those answers forward as knowledge.")

Now imagine that you're pastoring a moderate-sized, growing church in an urban environment, where despite your best efforts, you find that the pace caused by the pressures of the city, the subtle ambitions of your soul, and the church's up-and-to-the-right expectations for organizational scale are conspiring to lock you into a vicious cycle of pseudo-productivity with no clear measures of holistic transformation. If you continue at this pace, you'll likely have a "successful" church, but one that will constantly push you and your leadership team to the edge of burnout.

Now imagine an alternative scenario. What if instead of consenting to an undisciplined speed that forces you to focus on scaling your growth capacity, you instead chose the constraint of slowing down in a way that frees you to focus on scaling your formational capacity? You could still have a reasonably-sized church, but with more time, energy, and space to do the meaningful work of forming disciples that got you into ministry in the first place. (I'm not suggesting that growth is inherently bad, but I am saying that often the stress, hustle, relational conflict, and damage to our souls required to stimulate and sustain growth is a poor tradeoff.)

How might you go about reimagining your pastoral work in this scenario? First, you embrace a "Slow Church" operating system for your ministry: "a philosophy for organizing pastoral ministry in a sustainable and meaningful manner, based on three principles: 1) Do fewer things, 2) Work at a sacred pace, 3) Prioritize quality over quantity." This would undoubtedly require you to renegotiate the social

contract, as both you and your church have colluded to create the current system, and sustained change is always a collective action problem.

Second, instead of merely critiquing contemporary models of church growth, you work to construct an "enjoyable and life-affirming alternative" that adapts a "time-tested cultural innovation" developed over centuries in the ancient church: a community rule of life. You could customize and implement this rule of life at multiple scales of your work: personal, team, and church-wide. This community rule of life would be aimed specifically at cultivating a leadership and community culture that pushes back on the deforming power and presence of speed by organizing around the three basic principles:

1. **Do fewer things:** this is an invitation to practice *simplicity* instead of *overload*. What if we limited the number of big church-wide goals or projects to just one per year or season? What if we had a regular habit of pruning our ministries, meetings, commitments, and tasks? What if we occasionally stripped down Sunday gatherings to ease the load for volunteers, or released people to share Sabbath meals together in smaller communities? What if we reduced our sermon load by 10–20% and developed a team approach to preaching? What if, instead of allowing new work to constantly be pushed on our plate, we implemented a "pull system" for team workflow where we only took on new work when we had capacity?
2. **Working at a sacred pace:** this is an invitation to practice *discernment* instead of *hurry*. What if we extended the timescale for our vision and strategy from 1–2 years to 3–5 years? What if we slowed down the pace to create spaciousness for team discernment and decision-making? What if we doubled new project timelines this year? What if we reduced the number of pastoral appointments we took in a given week? What if we implemented a churchwide practice of Sabbath? What if we gave our staff a monthly day of solitude? What if we experimented with seasonality at different levels of our church's rhythms — no meeting Mondays, slow seasons or rest and creativity during the winter or summer, and regular sabbaticals? What if we reserved space to think out generationally, not just weeks, months, or even years?
3. **Prioritizing quality before quantity:** this is an invitation to value *character formation* over *church growth*. What if everyone on our leadership team regularly engaged in rhythms of therapy, confession, retreats, and spiritual direction? What if we developed church metrics that valued depth, transformation, and maturity instead of merely attendance, impact, or resources? What if we set a cap on our growth rates or capacity? What if we spent time "improving our taste" by learning about and experimenting with spiritual formation models from the Great Tradition (the ancient and global church)? What if we started our own "Inklings Group" with a diverse group of pastors with whom we could collaborate on our formation efforts?

I'm not saying that everyone can or should implement all of these suggestions; I'm merely trying to stir your imagination for creative solutions to a pervasive problem. I hope that you'll take time in this season to consider this thought experiment as a leadership team and discern how you might experiment with the "Slow Church" resistance movement!

About Brandon Shields

Brandon brings 25 years of pastoral experience to his role of director of church formation at Practicing the Way, including 13 years as lead pastor and founder at Soma Church in Indianapolis. He is the contributing author to several books on pastoral ministry and holds a degree in business, a graduate degree in missiology, and a doctorate in leadership. Brandon has been married for 20 years and has four children.

About Practicing the Way

Practicing the Way is a nonprofit that creates spiritual formation resources for churches and small groups learning how to become apprentices of the Way of Jesus.

We believe one of the greatest needs of our time is for people to discover how to become lifelong disciples of Jesus. To that end, we help people learn how to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did through the practices and rhythms he and his earliest followers lived by.

All of our resources are available for free, thanks to the generosity of [The Circle](#) and other givers. The Circle is a group of monthly givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the church at large.

To learn more, visit practicingtheway.org.