HOW TO STAY FRESH IN THE MINISTRY
Leadership Lifter

Rick Warren

It is almost a cliché here at Saddleback that growing churches require growing leaders. If you’ve ever been to Israel, you’ll know there’s a real contrast between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of water and full of life. There are trees and vegetation. They still do commercial fishing there. But the Dead Sea is just that—dead. There’s no fish in it. No life around it. It’s stark. The Sea of Galilee is at the top of Israel. It receives waters from the mountains of Lebanon. They all come into the top of it and then it gives out at the bottom. That water flows down through the Jordan River and enters into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea takes in but it never gives out. That’s why it’s stagnant. The point is, there must be a balance in our lives to stay fresh of both input and output. There’s got to be an inflow and an outflow.

Somebody has said, “When your output exceeds your income your upkeep will be your downfall.” There must be a balance. Most Christians get too much input and not enough output. Bible study after Bible study, always taking in but they’re never doing any ministry. They’re never serving. So they get stagnant.

Our problem is the other. We’re always giving out. If you don’t get input, you’ll dry up.

If you don’t take in truth you can’t give it out. I want to talk with you today about one simple habit I’ve developed about how to read yourself out of a rut. I have a hobby, a habit, of collecting quotes on reading. I’ve put them together in this outline and I want to talk with you about what great people have said about using reading to stay fresh in the ministry.

2 Timothy 4:13. Paul is in prison. “When you come, bring my coat, bring the books, too, and especially the ones made of parchment.” Paul is at the end of his life. He’s in prison. He says he wants too things. “I want my coat and I want my books.” C. H. Spurgeon commenting on this passage says “He is inspired, yet he wants books. He has been preaching at least thirty years, yet he wants books. He’s seen the Lord, yet he wants books. He’s had a wider experience than most men, yet he wants books. He’s been caught up to heaven and has heard things that are unlawful to utter, yet he wants books. He’s written a major part of the New Testament, yet he wants books.” That shows you the importance. Paul says, even in my old age, even when I’m in the final phase of my ministry, I want to keep reading, I still want to keep growing, keep developing.

Oswald Sanders from Spiritual Leadership says “The man [and woman] who desires to grow spiritually and intellectually will be constantly at his books.” I remember reading the biographies of both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. Both of them were intellectual giants. They stayed fresh by having a book continually while they were on horseback riding from event to event. It’s like reading on the subway or reading on a bus. Everywhere they traveled, they had a book. I’ve seen drawings of Wesley with a book in one hand, reading, not even looking where his horse is going. He read hundreds of books just while he was traveling.
Leaders are readers. Every leader is a reader. Not all readers are leaders but all leaders are readers. A lot of people read but they’re not leaders. If you’re going to lead, you’ve got to be thinking further in advance than the people that you’re leading.

Four reasons for reading:

1. I read for inspiration and motivation.

Harold Ockenga said, “Read to refill the walls of inspiration” William Long who wrote Christian Perfection and a number of Christian classics, wrote “Reading on wise and virtuous subjects is next to prayer, the best improvement of our hearts. It enlightens us, calms us, collects us, collects our thoughts, prompts us to better efforts. We say a man is known by the friends he keeps but a man is known even better by his books.” Personally, I feel few things get me out of sluggishness than reading a good book. It gets my creative juices flowing. So the first thing I do is read for inspiration. You never underestimate the power of a book. Somebody once did a study and discovered that for every word in Hitler's Mein Kampf, a 125 people were destroyed in World War II. That’s the power of a book. One little book yet it caught the imagination of a generation and we had WWII.

Thomas Carlyle said “The best effect of any book is that it excites the reader to activity” You ought to read books that motivate you, stimulates you, help you get going.

2. Sharpen my skills.

Aldous Huxley said, “Every man who knows how to read has in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the way in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting.” Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. Your mind is a muscle and just like any muscle, the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. You cannot wear out your mind. No one ever died of an overused mind. We only use about two percent of our brainpower and even geniuses only use about five percent.

Just like every other professional, you as a minister, have to continually be upgrading your skills. The way you do that is through reading.

In our church, everybody is going to a seminar – salesmen, doctors, lawyers, professionals are continually upgrading their skills. You need to make a list of the skills that are needed for your facet of ministry. Then read on a regular basis. Like in my area I try to read a book on preaching, then I read a book on leading, then I read a book on planning, then I read a book on witnessing, then maybe a book on prayer. I kind of alternate between different skills that I’m continually trying to develop so that I go back and forth, always trying to improve.

Somebody has said the average salesman doesn’t read a book a year. And that’s why he’s the average salesman. He’d be extraordinary if he’d just start reading, sharpening his skills.

3. To learn from others.
You've heard me say before, it’s wise to learn from experience but it’s wiser to learn from the experience of others. All of us learn by the school of hard knocks -- trial and error. But we don’t have time to make all the mistakes ourselves. If the only way you learn is by experience, you’ll spend your entire life and by the time you get through life you’ll know it all but then you die, you can’t use it. So it is wise to learn from experience, but it’s wiser to learn from the experience of others. Listen to tapes, go to seminars, read books, look at magazines, watch documentaries.

Socrates said, “Employ your time in improving yourselves by other men’s documents, so you shall come easily by what others have labored hard for.” Doesn’t that make sense? Why waste all your time learning everything the hard way? Why not learn it the simple way – learning from the experience of others. Employ your time reading what other men have already learned and then you can learn much easier what others have labored hard for.

Saddleback is an example of learning from everybody else. We are a great assimilator church. We learn from anybody. The fact is, you can learn from anybody. You don’t have to agree with them. You don’t have to agree with everything they do. But everybody has something to teach you. We have assimilated lots of good ideas from many different sources and put them together in a new format and that’s what creativity is. Creativity is taking existing ideas – because there’s no truth that’s original, all truth has been around forever. Truth is never originated; it’s discovered. When you discover it, you just put it into a new format, and you learn from others.

Sir Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further than other men, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Every generation ought to be able to go further than the previous because they've got a bigger base of knowledge to move from. It’s just like even the knowledge of God. Throughout the New Testament, we find great revelation than the Old Testament. There is progressive revelation. Paul obviously knew a whole lot more about God than Moses did. Moses really didn’t know much about God. Moses went to God one day and said, “Who are You, Lord?” God said, “I am that I am.” What does that tell you? Not a whole lot. The fact is, we’ve seen a fuller revelation in Jesus, so every one of us here know more about God than Moses did. God’s revealed Himself over time. We have a fuller understanding of what God is really like.

By reading books, you get to interact with people you’ve never met, you get to see how the great minds think. You set in a great company of people by reading biographies. I’ve been influenced by people who’ve died even before I was even born. Yet they’ve had an impact on my life. People like William Booth, D.L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon, Hudson Taylor. Guys who were dead even before I was born. Through the medium of a book, I’m influenced by them. We only learn best by models anyway.

I think everybody ought to read Christian biographies. When you see the lives of great people, it challenges you to develop your skills. I have found, even with guys who are alive today, I often learn much more through a man’s book, than I do through an interview. Many times, I’ve read people’s books, then I’ve gone to spend time with them at a conference and asked them all kinds of questions. But I’ve actually learned more through their books than through the interview because when they write, their thoughts are organized. When you just talk to them, they kind of ramble around. They haven’t really thought through what they really think about.
We learn from other people.

4. **We need to stay current in the changing world.**

Because of the lot of speaking invitations I've had, I've seen probably, conservatively, 300 or more pastor’s studies and I’ve been in them. A casual glance at a minister’s library often tells you a lot about that person. If books are any indication of personal growth of senior pastors a lot of pastors in America stopped thinking when they got out of school. You go into their library and all they’ve got are former college books and books from seminary. They don’t have anything new. And they’re having to speak on a weekly basis. I don’t know how they’re coming up with anything fresh.

Stay current. In today’s society obsolescence comes very quickly. You can write a science textbook and by the time it gets to press it’s out of date. We’ve got to continually read to stay current. It is not enough – you cannot live you ministry on what you learned in seminary or Bible College. You have to keep growing and keep learning.

With that as a background I want to talk with you about six or seven ways on how to get more out of your reading to get the most out of it.

1. **ANALYZE YOUR READING HABITS**

Ask yourself some basic questions like: Is my reading planned or is it spasmodic? People will often offer you books to read but that does not mean you should automatically read them. I had a guy come to me two weeks ago and hand me a book of about 500 pages and said he’d like for me to read it. He paid ten dollars for that book. To read through 500 pages it’s going to take me at least two full days. So he’s paying me ten dollars for two days of my time. It’s not worth it. So analyze your reading and say “What are things that are going to help me?” because there are many books that aren’t going to help you at all.

How many books do I read per year since graduating seminary? Do I ever read outside my area of interest? I read a book one time called *Forty-nine and Holding*. The book claims that the average Presbyterian pastor reads only five books a year. And the average Baptist pastor reads only three books a year. It’s no wonder that there’s poor preaching going on in America. Or that churches aren’t growing. Or that people are having problems in their churches. Mark Twain said this: “The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who can’t read.” Analyze your reading.

2. **SCHEDULE TIME FOR READING**

I know that you are competent for a church of 3000 people because we’re here, we’re doing it. But the fact is, I frankly don’t think any of us are competent for a church of 10,000. I know that I’m not. I’m not sure about you either. The only way that you and I will be around to get to 10,000 is if we keep growing. All of us must keep growing, keep reading, keep developing ourselves.

The schedule is going to vary with each person. You have to decide the time that’s best for you, whenever you think best – probably when you’re uninterrupted. I read primarily at night. There’s very little on the television that’s worthwhile. So I get several hours of
reading in a day just in the evenings, because I don’t watch the boob tube that much. Television is the greatest enemy of reading. It’s so easy to come home from work, flip on the boob tube, put your mind in neutral and all of a sudden 7:00 becomes 11:00 and you’ve wasted four hours and it’s done nothing for you. If you just set aside fifteen minutes a day you’ll read up to two dozen books a year. That means in a normal lifetime, you would read over 1000 books. That’s equivalent to going through college five times.

I try to read a minimum of three books a week. They’re not real thick, most of them. Many times I get a book a day. Learning to read faster – and I’m not a speed-reader – and learning to read better is just a matter of discipline. There are a lot of books out that will teach you how to read faster. It has nothing to do with intelligence. Many books could teach you how to read faster. Establish your reading goal of how many books you want to read a year.

Become a Snatch Reader. I got this phrase from Howard Hendricks. All over my house there is strategically placed reading material. Sometimes when I just have five or ten minutes, I’ll set down and read a chapter. I have read hundreds of books in snatch reading – by my nightstand, in the bathroom, outside, waiting for dinner – ten minutes here, ten minutes there. I always keep a book or tape with me. I never go to a doctor’s office without a book. There’s reading material there but it’s not the kind of stuff I need. I never go on a plane, sit in an airport without books or tapes. All of that waiting time is useful time if you become a snatch reader. Schedule it.

3. BALANCE YOUR READING

Andrew Carnegie said “A man’s reading program should be as carefully planned as his daily diet for that too is food without which he cannot grow mentally.” The biggest mistake we make is that each of us tends to concentrate on our own favorite field. You like a certain area so you tend to read over and over in that area. That’s ok. If you don’t read much, that’s a good place to get started. You start with what you’re interested in. But you need to get occasionally outside of your pet subjects. You need to read widely. Variety is the spice of life. I’ve read books on birds, astronomy, the heart (I got all kinds of illustrations about it), a medical book on the brain. Reading widely so that it makes you a broader person. I want to know just a little bit about every subject so that any person I meet I can talk to them about it. I may not know a lot but I know just enough to ask the first question that will get them going in the conversation so you can learn from them.

I would also encourage you to read people that you disagree with. If a book does not stretch you, what are you reading it for? It ought to stimulate your thinking. If it doesn’t then that books is not much help. Balance.

4. DON’T JUST READ A BOOK, RESPOND TO IT.

I’m talking here about active reading. Suggestions:

1. Mark up your books. Write notes in the margin. I always read with a pencil in my hand. I never read without a pencil. Even when I’m reading magazines – Time or Newsweek -- I’ve got a pencil in my hand, circling to tear out for an article or illustration. A book only becomes your book when you mark it up. It’s not your book until it’s
marked up. If I say, “This is my Bible.” How do I know? Because every page has my notes on it. It’s totally marked up. This is my Bible. I encourage you to mark them up. Write things you agree with. Write things you disagree with. You could put stars, exclamation marks, question marks.

2. Keep a notepad or dictaphone nearby. Harriet knows this because every week she’s transcribing all my thoughts as I’m reading books. The most important thing about a book is not what it teaches you. The most important thing is the ideas that it stimulates in you. I’ll read something, then dictate an application of it to our church. I rarely sit down and read otherwise. A. W. Tozer said, “One of the tests of a really fine book is while you’re reading it, you put it down to start thinking.” That’s a test of a good book. It stimulates you so much that you write some things down. Almost everything that I teach in church growth, I got that way. I was reading a book, I put it down, and I started thinking myself. It stimulates me to get going.

5. KNOW WHAT NOT TO READ

To increase your speed reading, know what not to read. The best way to save time in reading is to be discriminating. James Bryce says “Life is too short to spend it reading inferior books.”

The world’s output of books is over 1000 per day. Over 1000 books a day are printed in the world. The U.S. Government alone publishes over 500,000 articles, papers and reports a year. Several thousand new religious titles come out every year. The Christian Booksellers’ Convention is big business. As a result there are many, many Christian books that are not worth spit! They’re junk. They have a nice title and they’re put out because the publisher needs to put out additional books but a lot of stuff is worthless junk. Let me give you eight or nine ways to recognize a jewel from junk. When you buy a book, here’s what you need to do to know if it’s a good book or not.

1) Know who the author is. This is the single primary way to buy a book. Know good authors. There are certain authors that I will buy everything they write. There are certain other authors that I won’t buy anything they write. You have to learn from experience, who’s good and who’s not good. I will read everything by Lyle Schaller, Peter Wagner, John Vaughn. There are certain guys that anything they write, I’ll read. There are other guys that I automatically know they keep putting out stuff that is not good.

2) Read the cover and the jacket. That seems obvious. When you read the cover and the jacket, pay attention to the author’s credentials. It really does matter. There are many books that have great titles and it might be cute sounding, but when you sit down and read you think, This is just a person who stays at home and decided to write a book. They don’t really have any experience in writing a book. Also realize a lot of stuff on the cover of the jacket is just hype. It’s sales copy.

3) Look at the table of contents. Read the table of contents before you buy a book. Chapter titles. Pay attention to the foreword. Sometimes I dip into it for a while to decide is it heavy, is it light, whatever.
4) Look at the bibliography and the footnotes. Before I buy a book, I always, 
always … I never buy a book when I’m in a bookstore without looking at the back and 
seeing who they have referenced. You can tell a lot about a book just by finding out 
who they quote. When I see they’re quoting people I don’t even care about, then it tells 
me it’s going to go a direction that’s not going to help me out a lot. If they’re quoting 
person I have a lot of respect for I think this might be a good book even though I’ve 
ever heard of the author. He’s quoting people I know who are credible.

5) Beware of books that claim too much. Pass over them – like, Sixty Days to 
Success, Two Weeks to Revolutionize Your Life. That kind of thing, skip.

6) Beware of books by celebrities or about celebrities. I rarely read a book about 
a celebrity. Once in a while there’s one that comes out, like Born Again, by Charles 
Colson. That was a strong book. But a lot of celebrity books are written to play off 
names. They’re fluff and a ghostwriter usually writes them anyway.

7) Read book reviews. You can read them in Christianity Today, Today’s 
Christian Woman, Moody Monthly, Leadership. Every once in a while a magazine will 
put out an article “The Books that Have Influenced My Life the Most.” They’ll ask ten or 
fifteen Christian leaders. I’ve collected those articles because I always want to know 
what books have influenced other people. I have two books in my library The Books 
You Read, edited by Charles Jones. There’s the professional edition and the devotional 
edition. He’s asked all kinds of people “What is Your Favorite Book?” Each page is a 
book recommended by a different person. People you would know: Charles Colson, 
John MacArthur, Chuck Swindoll, various pastors, and people like Bill Bright, Vernon 
McGee, Paul Cho, Howard Hendricks, James Dobson, W. A., Criswell, Herschell 
Hobbs, James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye. These are guys who recommended devotional 
books. The other book has books recommended by famous businessmen, the books 
that have influenced them. Each page is a one-page summary of a book they 
recommended.

I also have books: The Minister’s Library, vol. 1 & 2 by Ceril Barber. It has several 
thousand books analyzed. If you ever want to study, say, the book of 1 Corinthians and 
it will tell you all the major commentaries on 1 Corinthians and which one are good and 
which ones are worthless, which are conservative, which are liberal. It saves you a lot 
of money.

Another book I got at seminary, Essential Books for Christian Ministry. Another The 
Devotional Resource Guide by Joseph Allison. Selecting the Best in Classic and 
Contemporary Literature. The Readers’ Guide to the Best Evangelical Books, this has 
personal favorites of people. A Basic Library for Bible Students, Encounter With Books.

8) Note the publisher. Over the years you learn that there are certain publishers 
that produce good books. There are certain publishers that produce junk. Eerdman’s 
is known for producing scholarly material. Zondervan is known for producing more 
practical, popular material. They have a good reputation for the things they publish.

9) Wait a while before you buy. I rarely buy a book when it first comes out. If I 
know the author, I buy when it first comes out. But there’s a lot of books that come out 
that are “hot” books – everybody’s reading them. If they’re worthwhile then they’ll stand
the test of time. If you find a book that’s been in fifteen printings, it’s worthwhile because it means it’s stood the test of time. A lot of books hit the hot market and they’re best sellers and everybody’s reading them but they’re bad books (like Real Men Don’t Eat Quiche or The Yuppie (or Preppie) Handbook). Wait around. Good books will prove their worth by staying on the market for an extended period of time.

6. MAKE A MONTHLY TRIP TO THE LIBRARY

I do. Put it on your calendar and once a month go to the library. Why? You don’t go to the library to find books with Christian values because they rarely have any books of Christian value. But you go to see what’s new in other areas. I look for books on management, advertising, human behavior, psychology, self-help, lots of things like that. The main reason I go the library once a month is I do a monthly review of all the magazines. That way I don’t have to subscribe to them. Most of them are not worth subscribing to. You can go spend an hour or two and cover about forty magazines. Flip through them. Once in a while you’ll find a good article. and photocopy it. If you ever have to speak, throw away all your sermon illustration books. They’re worthless. Any sermon illustration book written before 1968 is worthless. Most of my illustrations come from Time magazine, Newsweek, television. Why? Because people are reading Time magazine, Newsweek, and they look at television. I want to be able to go through my entire ministry without having to quote G. Campbell Morgan or Charles Spurgeon every week. Nobody knows who those guys are. Look at the library for material like that.

7. BUILD YOUR OWN LIBRARY

“If a book is worth reading, it’s worth buying,” John Ruskin said. When you build your own library you’re doing two things.

1) Books are tools. Every profession has its tools. You can’t be a doctor without a stethoscope. How can you be a carpenter without a hammer and a saw? The tools of the minister are books. We’re feeding and leading and we’re in the communication business. Books, and now tapes, are the tools of the ministry.

I’ve learned in doing home repairs that the job is a lot easier when you have the right tools. A couple of years ago I bought a ratchet set. That has saved me so much time. Before, I had one little crescent wrench and I would try to unscrew and screw things up with a crescent wrench. Before that I had just a pair of pliers. When I bought a ratchet set, it’s so much easier, changing a tire on your kid’s bike when you have a ratchet set. I’ve tried to trim trees by tying a saw to a long stick. If you’ve got the right tools, the job is so much easier. Many things get easier and easier when I have the right tool handy.

2) Books are a heritage for my children. There are two things that I encourage you to leave your children. One, a lot of photographs of everyday situations. In most photographs we take everybody standing – a formal picture at Christmas or Easter or Mother’s Day. Take pictures that are a slice of life kind of thing. They’re going to like that a whole lot more later on. When I grow old and die, I want to leave my kids pictures which help them remember things they want to remember. And I want to leave them my library. That’s a heritage. If, by chance, any of my kids go into the ministry or even if they don’t, I have a library that is invaluable because I’ve already been collecting on it for twenty years. To be able to pass that on to my children is an instant heritage for
them. I have books in my library that were given to me by my father which was given to him by his father. Some from my great grandfather who was a minister. That’s a heritage. Look at your library as something that you can pass on to your kids.

To any lay people listening to this tape, I urge you to set up a generous book allowance for your pastor. I don’t have any sympathy for members who complain that the pastor’s preaching is dry and dull and yet they won’t give him the tools to keep it fresh. How do you get freshness? By reading. I encourage you to do that. If you’re a pastor, ask for an allowance.

**HOW DO YOU BUILD YOUR LIBRARY?**

1. Buy paperbacks when you can. There’s no sense buying a hardback unless it’s the only way you can get it. You’re not buying them for show, you’re buying them to be useful.

2. Look for bargains in used bookstores. That’s a real key. I am a used bookstore fanatic. Approximately half of my library I’ve bought in used bookstores. I rarely pay full price for a book. I find it on discount, on sale or I go to a used bookstore. I bought a guide that lists every used bookstore in Southern California. It’s in my glove compartment. When I’m driving somewhere, I’ll stop and pull it out and look for a used bookstore. Sometimes the religious section is only three feet long and I get only one book out of it. I have a hobby that any time I go on a speaking engagement to another town, I find the used bookstore. I stop at the motel room, look up in the Yellow Pages. Two weeks ago in St Louis, I was at the airport Marriott and that night I knew I was going to have an extra hour. I called a taxi and went downtown to a used bookstore. I found two books I’d been looking for over a year. The cost of the taxi ride still made the book cheaper than if I’d paid for it full price because it was a rare book. Look at bargain bookstores.

If you want to get good reading lists, whenever you’re near a seminary, pick up seminary class reading lists. I’m going to Fuller this next week. I’ll go into the doctrinal office and pull up the required reading list for every doctrinal class, even though I’m not going to take those classes. Those professors have already done the research and they’ll tell you the required texts and those are the ones worth reading.

A word about tapes. They’re a great resource today. I listen to more tapes than I read books. I’m in the car all the time. If you drive just 15,000 miles a year you'll spend the equivalent of about 41 eight-hour days in your car. You'll spend over a month, nearly two months. I encourage you to redeem the time with tapes. They are a fantastic tool. I’ve taken several college courses in my car. I have taken courses on speed-reading, management, time management, speaking. In addition, I’ve listened to hundreds and hundreds of sermons for inspiration. The number one place I listen to tapes is in my car. The number two place I listen to tapes is doing yard work. I take one outside. It’s battery operated. While I’m doing something in the garden, I listen to tapes. I rarely just set down and listen to a tape. Do it while you’re doing something else.

I encourage you who have to prepare messages or Bible studies, let the great teachers of the day be your research assistants. A lot of pastors and ministers today are hiring research assistants to do research before their messages. I spend approximately
sixteen hours per message in study. If somebody buys my tape of a message I’ve done, say – on the family, and they are getting ready to do a message on the family. They buy my tape for $3.50 and listen to that that I’ve spent sixteen hours getting the material, they’re paying me twenty-one cents an hour to be their research assistant. If you had to prepare a message on the Second Coming, and you bought a tape by John MacArthur and one by Chuck Swindoll and one by Charles Stanley and one by Dave Hawking and one by Chuck Smith at maybe, three bucks a tape. You’ve spent fifteen dollars to get the combined research for probably what they spent fifteen hours a message – well over a hundred hours of study of those guys who have tools. So you can multiply yourself by listening to tapes, reading books, and filling your mind with those kind of things.

Let’s me close by saying we need to remember that the Bible is our number one priority reading. You can get so caught up in reading other books that you don’t read the Bible. You need to remember you need to make time for that. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. We need to spend more time reading it than anything else.

Prayer:

Father, I hope that some of the things I’ve shared today will encourage each of us to keep growing, to keep stretching, developing. Lord, we realize that if we only give out and never take in, we’re going to dry up. We know that as the church grows, we must grow. In order to stay competent we must be developing and becoming all that You want us to be. I know that when our church had just a hundred people in it, I was not equipped to pastor a church of several thousand. But as I learned and grew You’ve helped me to become more able to handle the situation and I pray now that You would help each of us to continue reading and listening and learning and growing so that we can become effective and would not be a hindrance to your kingdom but be useful tools. For we pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.