


Foreword by Will Mancini

Bruce B. Miller

Your **Church** in **Rhythm**

The Forgotten Dimensions of Seasons and Cycles



What Time Is It in Your Church?

More Praise for *Your Church in Rhythm*

“The myth of a perfectly balanced ministry is just that, a myth. Worse, the pursuit of it is a certain recipe for needless frustration and discouragement. Bruce Miller offers an alternative that is true to both Scripture and creation—a powerful force called rhythm.”—Larry Osborne, author and pastor, North Coast Church, Vista, California

“*Your Church in Rhythm* will stop you in your tracks and then move you forward in a more healthy way. We all struggle to refine and sustain our leadership. Bruce Miller brings critical insights into seasons inherent in the life and the leadership of the church. Rhythmic understanding can make the difference between success and failure, creative vitality, and resigned mediocrity. *Your Church in Rhythm* will ultimately change the way you lead.”—Jim Garlow, lead pastor, Skyline Church, La Mesa, California

“Any pastor who has struggled finding ‘balance’ will benefit by discovering ‘rhythm’ instead. Grow past the nonstop hype of making every Sunday ‘the greatest Sunday ever!’ *Your Church in Rhythm* brings ministry back to reality.”—Geoff Surratt, pastor of ministries, Seacoast Church, Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina

“Bruce Miller leads a healthy, growing church because he lives a healthy, ever-growing life that is in step with the Spirit. He has discovered what so many pastors and leaders search for—a Spirit-directed rhythm within the Body that brings forth sustained growth over the long haul. Every pastor and church leader needs to read this book!”—Jeff Warren, senior pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church

“This very practical book will help all pastoral leaders carry out Paul’s powerful exhortation—to make ‘the most of every opportunity’ (Ephesians 5:16).”—Dr. Gene A. Getz, Center for Church Renewal, Plano, Texas

“As a pastor, I’m constantly searching for the best resources to train and equip my staff and church leaders. *Your Church in Rhythm* just moved to the top of my list.”—Dr. Chip Henderson, pastor, Pinelake Church, Brandon, Michigan

“In *Your Church in Rhythm*, Bruce Miller unpacks a truth that I believe can not only save a pastor a lot of heartache, but can inject a lot of life into the heart of a church. Recognizing the ‘seasons’ in the life of our church has been very liberating and energizing for us. My prayer is that you’ll find yourself more excited about the present and the future of your church than ever before as you read this book.”—Dino Rizzo, lead pastor, Healing Place Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

“Mandatory reading for pastors, staff, church leaders, and members for Bruce’s rich insight to engaging the rhythms of church life rather than fighting against the rhythms. His description of how God has woven rhythms into the life of every ministry is a priceless principle.”—Bryan L. Carter, senior pastor, Concord Church

“One of the signs of a good book is that as you are reading it you want to thank the author for writing it. *Your Church in Rhythm* has been that kind of book for me. This provides a common language from which church leaders can have robust conversation around where their church is at, and what God is calling them to do and not to do. Most of all, *Your Church in Rhythm* invites the reader to establish a new definition of health for themselves, their leaders, and their church. Thank you, Bruce.”—Scott Wilson, senior pastor, The Oaks



Bruce B. Miller

YourChurch inRhythm

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ABOUT **THE JOSSEY-BASS LEADERSHIP NETWORK SERIES**

Leadership Network’s mission is to accelerate the impact of One-HundredX leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8.

Leadership Network...

- Explores the “what’s next?” of what could be
- Creates “aha!” environments for collaborative discovery
- Works with exceptional “positive deviants”
- Invests in the success of others through generous relationships
- Pursues big impact through measurable Kingdom results
- Strives to model Jesus through all we do

Believing that meaningful conversations and strategic connections can change the world, we seek to help leaders navigate the future by exploring new ideas and finding application for each unique context. Through collaborative meetings and processes, leaders map future possibilities and challenge one another to action that accelerates fruitfulness and effectiveness. Leadership Network shares the learnings and inspiration with others through our books, concept papers, research

reports, e-newsletters, podcasts, videos, and online experiences. This in turn generates a ripple effect of new conversations and further influence.

In 1996, Leadership Network established a partnership with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, to develop a series of creative books that provide thought leadership to innovators in church ministry. Leadership Network publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, practitioners, and pioneering churches.

Leadership Network is a division of OneHundredX, a global ministry with initiatives around the world.

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FOREWORD

If genius is the ability to illuminate the obvious, then Bruce Miller is a genius. The insights in this book just might transform how you lead for the rest of your life.

Rhythm is everywhere, in every moment. Your brain cells, this moment, receive life with each heartbeat. In this moment, you are whirling unaware in patterned motion as planet Earth spins like a bike wheel and pedals its orbit around the sun. Inside of you and all around you, reality dances to the cadences of the creator's music. When God painted this world, his favorite brushstroke was rhythm.

Yet we are tempted to miss this fundamental context of our lives. Rhythm to us is like water to a fish. As such, the reality of rhythm becomes something we take for granted. It's always there but rarely explored.

Hence, this book is a wake-up call for every leader who has not yet examined rhythm as a feature of life in general and church life in particular. I know I've been guilty. The alarm clock's ring left a powerful question—both challenging and haunting—echoing in my mind: “What if, in our casual awareness of rhythm's ever-present dynamic, we have missed the deepest wisdom of leadership?”

Prepare for this book to sound the perils of ignoring rhythm. Guilt, busyness, stress, and even despair can win the day in our “rhythm-dumb” approaches. Among many strategies stained with artificial idealism, Bruce Miller debunks the kingpin—the notion of “balance” that marks many of our mental models in ministry.

As you dive into this book, I am particularly excited to commend three other aspects:

First, the principles of this book are incredibly actionable. Bruce boils down six simple and compelling strategies that you can take and use everywhere you go. Don’t be surprised when you get up from your favorite reading nook to find these six new tools strapped to your pastoral tool belt.

Second, the principles of this book are universally applicable. There is no time or place and there is no theological conviction or leadership style where rhythm doesn’t apply. If you, like me, are tired of the myriad of “how-to-do-church” books, then be happy! *Your Church in Rhythm* delivers 24-karat gold by transcending models, methods, and trends.

Third, the author of this book is a one-of-a-kind Kingdom laborer. As a leader, Bruce couples the mind of a military strategist with the heart of a willing foot soldier. As a follower of Jesus, he fuses intensity with integrity and honesty with optimism like no one I know. Over the last twelve months, I have enjoyed getting to know Bruce and his team. They glow with a rare spirit that is “*All in*” and “*All together*” for Jesus.

Now, with the turn of each page, journey into this lost river of wisdom. From wet feet to waist deep, you will discover that which is at once strangely familiar and yet completely new.

Will Mancini

Founder, Auxano, and author, *Church Unique*

PREFACE

It was July in Auckland, New Zealand, at a leadership conference, when it first struck me that the idea of a so-called balanced life is unbiblical, impossible, and toxic. Instead, rhythm offers a much richer picture of a healthy life. My earlier book *Your Life in Rhythm* paints that picture of a rhythmic life.

Two friends, Mark Sweeny and Greg Ligon, asked me if “rhythm” could apply to churches. If a rhythmic life is better than a balanced life, would not a rhythmic church be better than a balanced church? It made sense to me. If living life in rhythm leads to less stress and more fulfillment, could it be that doing church in rhythm would also reduce unnecessary stress while increasing effectiveness? These questions took me on a journey that eventually led to *Your Church in Rhythm*.

Along the way our church contracted with Will Mancini and the Auxano organization to consult with us. As the author of *Church Unique*, Will has an amazing ability to help leaders clarify the unique identity of their organization. When Will and I discussed uniqueness and rhythm, we recognized that both rhythm and uniqueness are “metaconcepts.” Metaconcepts are unbounded by the size, age, or theology of a local church. A metaconcept transcends most categories that divide and distinguish churches.

No matter what strategy, model, or approach you take, identity and timing are relevant to your ministry. No matter what its culture, structure, or style, a local church carries out its mission in rhythmic seasons and cycles. To be effective for Christ and for ministry to be truly enjoyable, churches need to know what time it is. In what unique time is your church ministering? I've written this metaconcept book for church leaders of all flavors in the hope that it will contribute to making your ministry more effective and enjoyable.

In the following chapters, we will peer into the forgotten dimension of time and explore two kinds of rhythm: *chronos* and *kairos*. You and your fellow leaders will learn how to discern “what time it is in your church” by identifying your organizational stage and ministry seasons. When you grasp your “time,” you can apply the *kairos* rhythm strategies to focus on what will most advance Christ’s mission in this unique moment for your church. When you recognize the five *chronos* cycles embedded in our natural world, the three *chronos* rhythm strategies will empower you to pace your church, build mission-enhancing rituals, and oscillate intensity and renewal so that you prevail for a lifetime in fruitful ministry. My hope is to open your eyes to a new horizon that offers fresh insights to strengthen your church’s ministry and lighten your burden as you serve Christ.

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I thank God for Jennie Tissing, who aided me in preparing the manuscript and kept step with me in the intense times. Laurie Wright, my excellent assistant, maintained faithful support and kept all communication on track. Most of all, I thank God for my wife, Tamara, without whom I would be lost and this book would not exist. All glory to the King of Kings.

INTRODUCTION

Time: The Forgotten Dimension

We want our churches to be effective for Jesus Christ. And yet, we're not satisfied with what's happening. Not enough people are coming to Christ. Average church members are not serious enough about their faith. There is no silver bullet, no one solution. But there is a dimension many church leaders have not adequately considered, a question we've not asked deeply. "What time is it in your church?"

Sometimes a simple question opens new horizons. Questioning timing opens a dimension that has often been neglected. I am not referring to time management, but rather to a deeper sense of appropriate timing, a discerning of the opportune moment and conversely what does not "fit" in this season. We can learn how to dance church to the God-shaped rhythms of life.

Life is not static, linear, or uniform. It moves, oscillates, vibrates, and pulsates. A good church will find ways to harmonize with created and providential rhythms. Churches, like all organisms and organizations, develop through stages, experience seasons, and live in the cycles of creation (days and years). In this book, I attempt to open a new horizon on which we will see six rhythm strategies for wisely leading our churches so that we are more fruitful in ministry and ministry has more joy.

If you ignore rhythm, you can hurt your church by wasting resources on concerns that don't fit this time in your church's life. For instance, if you're a church planter in the early days it's not the time to develop policy manuals or refined processes. Much stress and guilt often come from attempting ministry that does not belong in this stage or season. In contrast, if we employ rhythm strategies, we can materially improve the quality of our ministry by releasing pressure and increasing focus. Churches that seize unique opportunities in a particular ministry rhythm find they increase their impact by focusing on what is timely. The effectiveness of "forty days" spiritual campaigns that were modeled after Saddleback Church's original demonstrate the power of focus. Adopting a rhythm approach can change the way you approach ministry because it lets you see it all through a new window.

Rather than feeling constant pressure to do everything all the time, you can flow ministry in life's rhythms if you pace yourself in natural cycles and oscillate between intensity and renewal. When churches release expectations that don't fit this time in their life, they reduce stress and experience more peace. When churches pursue unique opportunities that fit this stage of their organizational life or this season of their ministry, they find greater fulfillment in Christ. When church leaders seize timely moments, they find joy in accomplishing more of what God has for them in this place, at this time. They start having fun.

Rhythm is an intuitive concept that most people grasp from a few common observations, but it is common sense that can be most uncommonly applied. There are two main types of rhythm: *seasonal flows* and *regular cycles*. Flows are like stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end—a sense of linear development created by the arrangement of elements. Cycles are repeated sequences, such as a heartbeat, a sunrise, or the cadence of a drum—they are movements or variations characterized by regular recurrence or alteration. For instance, worship services are a weekly cycle for most local churches. They are regular, repeating, and consistent. In contrast, receiving a new pastor into a church begins a common season with its pattern of getting to know each other. Yet the

time when a specific church will transition leadership can't be predicted like a sunrise.

Discovering the insights of rhythm may feel like a rediscovery, like déjà vu. When I explain the concept, people often say to me, "I've always known that but never put it into words." Or, "I knew that, but have never paid much attention to it." *Your Church in Rhythm* opens a window onto organizational timing, a dimension that we know is there but forget to take into account, to the detriment of our churches and our lives. Because rhythm is neglected, we do not ask crucial organizational timing questions that would improve our leadership. Too many churches are sterile, ineffective, in conflict, or bored. We are not celebrating life or having fun. Rhythm is a fresh way of thinking about church life; it's like opening the shade on a forgotten window. The forgotten window is time.

THE FALLACY OF THE GOOD, BALANCED CHURCH

Over the last forty-year generation, authors have created various paradigms for the mature God-honoring church. Years ago in *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (1974), Gene Getz offered three vital experiences; then Rick Warren gave five purposes in *The Purpose-Driven Church* (1990);¹ then Willow Creek offered the six "Gs" defining commitments for church members in the 1990s.² Others have described eight characteristics (Hemphill) and nine marks (Dever) of a mature church.³ Yes, churches should balance edification, evangelism, and exaltation; they should engage in vital worship, mission, and discipleship. Church-goers should magnify God, mature in Christ, minister to others, and engage in mission. Churches should be internally healthy and externally focused. Yet none of these models explicitly take into account the rhythmic life cycles of a church.

Other leaders, books, and conferences have recently helped churches become simpler in their organization (Rainer) and focused in their ministry (Stanley). We've been encouraged to consider the culture of our church (Corderio and Lewis) and how our church can prevail

(Pope). No matter what our culture or uniqueness, we are to be missional (McNeal), externally focused (Swanson), and building bridges of irresistible influence (Lewis).⁴

Without critiquing any one of these models in particular, or even comparing them, I'm making a metacritique that applies to all static models. None of these models are wrong, but how they are applied in the flow of ministry can create dysfunction. When we get to real-time, in-the-trenches ministry, how do we relate these models to what we are doing? If in any given time period we attempt to make our church fit each mark, letter, or purpose of a balanced church, we are in danger of toxic perfectionism. Rather, in any given period at our church, we need to focus on one element or another, but not on all of them.

Although it is often more implied than overtly stated, most authors who write about what makes a good, healthy church assume that a God-honoring church balances all the aspects of a mature church. In my earlier book, *Your Life in Rhythm*, I critique the notion of "balance" as it is applied to life in the sense of a "balanced life" or the attempt to balance work and life.⁵ I argue that balance is unbiblical, impossible, and hurtful. The critique of balance in life has an analogue in the notion of a balanced church.

The concept of balance is flawed because balance happens in a frozen moment. Yet you cannot pause life to weigh its balance. Your ministry never stops; it is always moving and changing. There is no DVR remote control that will pause church.

Balance communicates a fixed value, as if there were some magical configuration of proportionate effort and time to a set of purposes or ministries that would determine a healthy church. But a well-run church should be unbalanced when examined in certain time segments: a week, a month, a year, or even a period of years. Although some things, such as the Gospel mission and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, are constant, ministry happens in time.

A rhythmic approach complements all these wise models of being and doing church by bringing the metaconcept of rhythm to bear on the discussion of how to form a God-honoring, Gospel-advancing local church. *Your Church in Rhythm* does not offer a paradigm to replace or

compete with these other church models and approaches. Rather, it adds an often-missing view. Whether you are emergent, purpose-driven, organic, simple, programmed, contemporary, missional, creedal, seeker, traditional, reformed, or liturgical, you can be rhythmic too. Rooted in creation patterns and providential reality, rhythm applies equally well to churches, regardless of size or theology. Rhythm is an essential dimension of the created order; recognizing it gives crucial insight, whether your church is fundamental, evangelical, Catholic, denominational, liberal, or Pentecostal. If you grasp and deploy the six rhythm strategies outlined in this book, your church can experience less stress and better results, whether it includes twelve people or twelve hundred. As a complement to theological orthodoxy, organizational effectiveness, financial integrity, and missional clarity, rhythm brings better timing and this will improve our churches.

THE PERIL OF IGNORING RHYTHM

Pervasive Christian media create and feed unreasonable expectations in every area of ministry. As we read the blogs, go to the conferences, and download the podcasts, we hear about churches that are outstanding in various important aspects of ministry. We see what they are doing and become convinced that we too must be an outreach church; a praying church; a multiplying church that starts other churches; a recovery church; an emerging church to reach the next generation; a theologically deep church preaching the true Gospel; a technologically cutting-edge church using new media; a mission-minded church with a heart for the world; a sticky small-group church; a missional church with a heart for our community; a multisite church with many venues; and a stewardship church with a culture of generosity.

We think that something must be wrong with us—and something is wrong with us. In our attempts to “have it all” this year, we constantly push people to an artificial ideal. Ignoring rhythm can damage you and your church because you’ll waste time on issues that are untimely. There is hope for better churches by sorting out good advice not only by its efficacy and value but also by its timeliness for this stage and these