

Who feeds the missionaries spiritually?

The simple answer to that question: for the most part, we expect our missionaries to feed themselves!

One of our goals throughout the pre-field preparation process in [SEND International](#) is to help our new missionaries become adept at feeding themselves spiritually. We emphasize the importance of a personal daily "Quiet Time. We encourage them to be like Mary, who sat at the feet of Jesus, rather than becoming distracted by a multitude of opportunities to serve Jesus, like her sister Martha ([Luke 10:38-42](#)). We practice various spiritual disciplines right during the training. We provide structure and some accountability for implementing what they are learning. In our last Member Orientation Program, we distributed to each new missionary appointee a copy of the [Life Journal](#), and practiced the [S.O.A.P. method](#) of journaling on several mornings. Then near the end of the two weeks of training, everyone spends a whole day alone with God, a day with no classes, when each person goes off to spend a whole day talking to God. This Day Alone with God has been a regular part of the SEND pre-field training for many years.



Why is it so important that our missionaries learn to feed themselves spiritually? In conversations with many new missionaries, I am realizing that well over half of them struggle with any type of consistency in their daily Bible reading and prayer. They are probably better than average. Wayne Cordeiro, the pastor/author who popularized the SOAP method of journaling [points out](#) that studies show that 80% of those who call themselves Christians in America read the Bibles only once a week, usually at church.

Cordeiro goes on to observe:

In a recent edition of the American Journal of Medicine, doctors published a highly revealing conclusion: The health of 21st century America will no longer be determined by what people can get the doctors to do for them. The health of America today will be determined by what the doctors can get people to do for themselves. Do you see how this prescription applies equally to the church? If we eat only once a week, then it's no wonder that the church is weak and struggling. But fresh bread can

change all of that. Regularly dining on fresh bread makes for a stalwart, strong, developed army—the only kind of force that will ever make a difference in this world.

New Hope Christian Fellowship, the church he pastors has intentionally built a culture that emphasizes that each staff person and church member must become a [self-feeder](#).

A similar conclusion was reached by Bill Hybels and his staff at Willow Creek Community Church after the 2004 Reveal study of whether the people at Willow Creek were actually maturing spiritually or not. [Hybels confesses](#):

We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become "self feeders." We should have taught people how to read their Bibles between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.

Because what is happening to these people the older they get, the more they are expecting the church to feed them when in fact, the more mature a Christian becomes, the more a Christian should become more of a self-feeder.

How does this apply to missionaries? Well, if New Hope and Willow Creek want their people to be self-feeders, even though they provide solid Biblical teaching through the various ministries of the church, how much more important is this for cross-cultural missionaries! Before they left for the field, these missionaries would have been spiritually supported by good preaching, small groups and a host of Christian friends, all in their own heart language. But once they arrive on their field of service, there may not be any good Bible-believing churches for them to attend. After all, they are going to the unreached.

If there is solid Biblical teaching available in a local church, it will likely not be in the first language of the missionary. Then, as many missionaries have discovered, even once they understand the language, the differences in culture, ways of thinking and family situations of the local people mean that more often than not, sermons and Bible lessons do not address the questions and issues these missionaries are facing. The missionary team may provide some Bible teaching during team meetings, but often these are only once a month, and any focus on the Word must compete with all the administrative and personnel questions the team must address during those meetings.

So missionaries must learn to feed themselves if they are to remain strong spiritually. They are on the front lines of a spiritual battle, dealing with stress and loneliness in ways that they never encountered back home. To remain vibrant Christians, reflecting the truth of the Gospel in their daily lives, they must have spiritual nourishment on a regular basis.

[Psalm 1:2–3](#) (NIV) tells us that the person "whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night - that person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.

A study on missionary attrition ([Too Valuable to Lose](#)) has identified various reasons why missionaries leave the field. Although mission agencies ranked "immature spiritual life" as only the twelfth most common reason for long-term missionaries leaving the field, many of the other reasons given such as inadequate commitment, lack of call, problems with peers, marriage and family conflict and immorality are also closely related to one's spiritual resilience. When all these related factors are added up, fully a third of the causes of preventable missionary attrition are directly or indirectly to poor spiritual health.

I would suggest that the ongoing spiritual health of missionaries is not so much determined by the strength of the Bible teaching in their home churches or the quality of their theological education, but by how well those missionaries are able to feed themselves spiritually from the Word once they get to the field. Would you agree?

What does the Bible say about self-feeding?

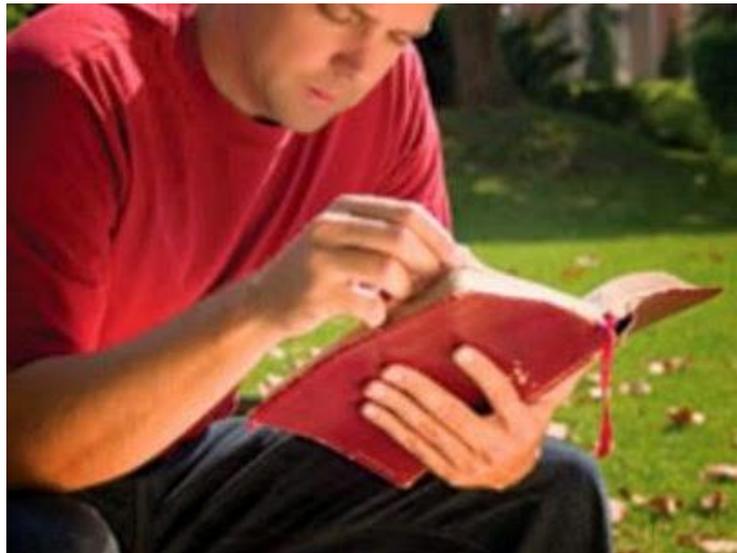
But can self-feeding be biblically supported? Some have [questioned](#) this concept. After all Jesus told Peter to "feed my sheep", not "teach my sheep to feed themselves." There are several direct references to self-feeding which are decidedly negative (see [Ezekiel 34:2, 8, 10](#) and [Jude 1:12](#) which all refer to shepherds who feed themselves, preying on the flock to enrich themselves). Isn't the concept of self-feeding just following the individualistic worldview and culture so prevalent in the West? Isn't the spiritual development of every believer dependent on the Body life of the church ([Eph 4:16](#))?

First of all, let's be clear that self-feeding is in no way undermines the importance of the Body of Christ in spiritual nurture and discipleship. We need the other members of the Body of Christ ([Cor 12:21](#)). Feeding oneself does not mean that one is ignoring the value of the church and spiritual mentors and teachers. As [Wayne Cordeiro](#) convincingly points out, our list of possible mentors is not limited to those who are living where I happen to live. When we read and meditate on the Scriptures, we are confronted with multiple mentors, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The writer of Hebrews says "Abel still speaks, even though he is dead" ([Heb 11:4](#)). We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses ([Heb 12:1](#)), the mentors of our faith whose lives and words are recorded in the Scriptures. We can learn from each one of them.

Furthermore, self-feeding does not preclude taking in what other members of the church today are saying to us - but the ministry of these other members of the Body may come in written form (e.g. devotional writings, commentaries, theology) or audio/video recordings (e.g. downloaded sermons, worship music, audio books).

You see, when we are talking about self-feeding, we do NOT mean that we are cooking the food ourselves.

All we are doing is taking the lids off the various pots on the stove, and making sure the food, already beautifully prepared gets into our mouth on a regular basis. We are not passive, but actively seeking and planning our spiritual intake.



Secondly, let's acknowledge that widespread literacy and the printing press have made self-feeding much more of a possibility for Christians today in comparison with those in the first century. Digital audio and video recording and the Internet have multiplied those possibilities. We are in a very different era than the first-century church that might have had one copy of the Old Testament and one or two letters of Paul available to them. We are not dependent on a few literate people to audibly read the Scriptures to us when we are sitting in the same room as they are.

But we still need to carefully examine whether there is any biblical support for the concept of self-feeding, in which a believer takes the initiative to nourish his or her soul outside of what happens

in the context of congregational meetings. I believe we can find some good models in Scripture that argue for the importance of individual and personal times of prayer and meditation. Jesus spends extended times of prayer alone with His Heavenly Father, even in the midst of very busy ministry times ([Luke 5:15-16](#)). He sends off his disciples to cross the lake, but he stays behind alone on the mountainside to pray ([Mark 6:45-47](#)). He leaves his disciples to pray by himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, and asks them to pray for themselves during this time ([Matt 26:36-41](#)). Daniel has a regular practice of praying three times a day in his home in Babylon ([Dan 6:10](#)). The Psalmist frequently speaks of meditating at night, when he is all alone ([Ps 1:2](#), [63:6](#), [77:6](#), [119:148](#)).

In many ways, Timothy is an even closer parallel to our missionaries than the examples above. Timothy is asked by the Apostle Paul to stay in Ephesus to help a church struggling with false teaching. While he is there, he is urged to teach the church good doctrine, but he is also told to nourish his own soul. He is probably not going to get much good teaching from the church elders, many of whom he needs to dismiss. Many of our newer missionaries find themselves in a similar situation, not because the church which they are attending is teaching heresy but because the sermons in a foreign language and from a different cultural perspective do not really address their

heart needs, even if they could understand them.



Paul tells Timothy, his missionary in Ephesus, "Train yourself for godliness" ([1 Tim 4:7](#)). This is a personal command, directed individually to Timothy, although of course applicable to any believer as well. Later in the letter, Paul tells Timothy to pursue godliness ([1 Tim 6:11](#)). Godliness is our personal devotion to God. It is individual, not corporate. By telling Timothy to train for or pursue godliness, Paul is implying that godliness will not develop

automatically in the life of a believer or even the life of a pastor/missionary. To grow in godliness requires initiative, it requires discipline, it is goal-oriented.

This training for godliness is inseparably connected to an ongoing training and nourishing oneself in the Word. Just prior to telling Timothy to train himself for godliness, Paul says that a good servant of Christ Jesus is "nourished on the words of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" ([1 Tim 4:6](#)). "Nourished" is in the present tense. As I have said in a [previous blog post](#), Paul expected Timothy to be a lifelong learner of God's truth. It was not good enough to have gone through Grandma's Bible School and Paul's Missionary Internship. Timothy needed to be a lifelong student of the Word.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul, even more directly, instructs Timothy to make sure he feeds himself. Paul writes,

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

[\(2 Tim. 3:14-17\)](#).

Note the emphasis on continuing (μένω - present imperative, sometimes translated as "abiding") in what Timothy had learned in the past, which was grounded in the inspired Scriptures. But note as well the purpose that Paul gives for the Scriptures - "so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Scriptures do more than provide the content of our teaching and preaching. I believe what Paul is saying to Timothy is that first of all, the Scriptures are intended to teach us, rebuke us, correct us and train us in righteousness. The Scriptures, as we remain in them day after day, will train us and prepare us to do whatever God has called us to do. Only then are we competent to teach, rebuke, correct and train others.

What does it mean to feed yourself spiritually?

What does self-feeding involve?

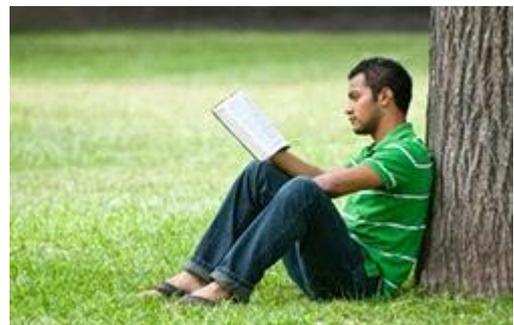
Now I would like to define more clearly what I mean by self-feeding. I think there are at least five critical elements:



1. Taking responsibility. Self-feeding means we take personal responsibility for making sure we are regularly nourished on the Word. If we feel spiritually under-nourished, we don't assign primary blame to the church we are attending, but to ourselves. Responsible people are self-disciplined. Paul reminds Titus that those who will lead and encourage others must be

self-controlled, disciplined and "hold firm to the trustworthy word" ([Titus 1:8-9](#)). Self-feeding doesn't just happen when and if we have time. We must consistently say "no" to other interesting and even good activities to make sure that we spend time in the Word and in prayer on a regular basis. We make sure that our natural laziness and forgetfulness doesn't overcome our good intentions. We set our alarms to get up so we have time for the Word before our first meeting of the day. We put [Days Alone with God](#) on our calendar. I have a little alarm that goes off on my phone every morning at 8:00 to remind me to review my memory verses. (By the way, I highly recommend this little free app called "[Remember Me](#)".)

2. Establishing rhythms. Self-feeding means we establish some life rhythms of regularly spending time in the Word. I like the word "rhythms" more than "habits" because "habits" can have a very negative connotation, or sound legalistic. But regardless of what we call them, we need some pattern of life that regularly brings us back to the Word and two-communication with our Lord. In other words we show up at meal times on a regular basis. We know we won't die of starvation if we skip a meal now and then, and we shouldn't beat ourselves up with guilt if we miss a Quiet Time once in a while. Maybe aiming for 5 solid spiritual meals a week is a more realistic goal for you than insisting on a Daily Quiet Time. Besides my daily time in the Word, my weekly rhythm also includes an unhurried, extended time in the Word on Sunday mornings. This works well for my schedule here in Ukraine since our worship service is in the afternoon.



3. Planning ahead. Spiritual self-feeding involves committing oneself to some kind of nutritious diet. For our physical diet, we don't plan to just eat candy bars, chips and Coke. If they become a regular part of your diet, it is likely due to a lack of structure or planning in your life. As your mother used to tell you, you need the five food groups as building blocks for a healthy diet. Likewise, in the spiritual realm, we also need a menu plan that systematically takes us through "the

whole counsel of God" ([Acts 20:27](#)). There needs to be some kind of structure to how we read the Bible and how we process what we are reading. The Life Journal includes a [Bible reading plan](#) that takes you through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice each year. If that reading plan involves too much reading for your appetite, cut back on the amount but still don't just spend all your time in the Gospels and the Psalms. Even worse, don't just crack open your Bible at random and read whatever chapter your eyes fall on. Ligonier Ministries has several excellent options for Bible reading plans on [their website](#).

4. Keeping track. A healthy diet requires planning ahead. It also demands taking stock of what has happened in the past. We step on to the bathroom scale to see if we are gaining or losing weight. We go to the doctor for our annual check-up and he sends us for blood tests to check our cholesterol level. We open the refrigerator to see what left-overs might be available for lunch - or what needs to be replenished the next time we are at the grocery store. In the spiritual realm, we keep track by doing spiritual inventories every once in a while. A few different examples can be found on the [Helps for Your Day Alone with God](#).

But we also keep track by recording what God has been saying to us through our time in the Word. For years, my journalling was very haphazard and not very helpful. Then I discovered the [S.O.A.P. method](#) of journalling, and found it to be a simple, yet very effective way of recording what God has been teaching me. I record my journal entries right into the notes section of my [Logos Bible Software](#), and so the journal entries show up as little icons attached to the Bible text. (You can see some sample entries in previous blog posts [here](#) and [here](#).) It has been so encouraging to read those journal entries in subsequent years, as my Bible reading plan takes me through those same passages again. I see how I have grown since my last journal entry on the passage. I can see how God has been working in my life, continuing the process of equipping me for every good work ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)). By journalling what we are learning from the Word, we are making sure that we are good stewards of the spiritual food that God is providing to us on a daily basis - that we don't take it for granted or undervalue what God is saying to us through His Word.

5. Giving feedback. Effective self-feeding requires that we are in regular communication with the cook, giving feedback on the meals you have eaten and what you would appreciate in the future. If you are the cook as well as the consumer, this feedback happens automatically. But in the spiritual realm, the cook is not us, but the Divine Author of the Scriptures. This communication or feedback with the Cook is normally called prayer. Cooks like to be thanked often and what specifically you appreciated about the last meal. Cooks also want to know what you would like on the menu in the future. Now the Holy Spirit already knows what you need, but He still appreciates you telling Him of your heart needs. Make sure you tell the Cook what you are planning to do now that you have been well-fed.

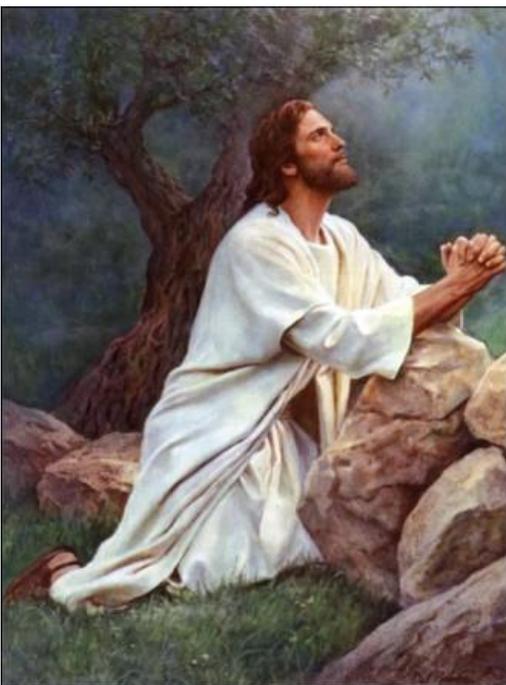
How do you train others to feed themselves?

Now as a missionary trainer, I realize that just writing about these concepts or even explaining them clearly in our pre-field training does not automatically translate into life transformation in the lives of our missionaries. If only it was so easy!

I am deeply encouraged as I spend time with fellow missionaries, and noticed intentional initiatives to feed themselves. The last few weeks have been no exception. I have seen them taking time at the beginning of a busy day to read the Word and pray. I heard them share fresh things that God is teaching them from the Word. A young mother passionately speaks about her love for the Scriptures. Another young missionary family still learning the language sits down in their living room with their two toddlers on Sunday evenings, and listens to a recording of one of a message from their home church.

But I also hear missionaries admit that they have gone for long periods of time without reading their Bible for personal nourishment more than once or twice a week. Well over half of our new missionaries in our pre-field training program admit that they are not at all consistent in their personal devotional habits. This greatly concerns me, although I am grateful that our new missionaries are so transparent about where they are struggling. Maybe just as many missionaries of my generation were inconsistent in their spiritual disciplines when they began their missionary careers but they just never told anyone.

But given what we now know, we, as a training department, have decided that spiritual formation is of utmost importance in our pre-field training programs. We seek to equip new missionaries for effective transition into fruitful cross-cultural ministry first of all, by fostering within them a commitment to the regular practice of nurturing their relationship with God. Our #1 desired outcome for these new missionaries is that during the duration of the Member Orientation Program, they will "review healthy habits for spiritual growth and practice spiritual disciplines that will sustain them in the context of spiritual warfare, cross cultural stress and the day-to-day sacrifices of missionary life."



So back to our question. How do we train missionaries to feed themselves? I think our best model trainer is our Lord. His disciples were no spiritual giants or prayer warriors when he first selected them. But their ministries and the church they founded are characterized by a devotion to the Word and prayer ([Acts 2:42](#), [6:2-4](#)). They obviously learned to feed themselves - as well as others - during those three years with Jesus. How did Jesus teach his disciples to spend time in prayer and in the Word?

1. **Model it** -- Over and over again, Jesus demonstrated his dependence on his regular communion with his Heavenly Father. He regularly spent extended times in prayer, often alone ([Luke 5:16](#), [6:12](#)), but sometimes in the presence of his disciples ([Luke 9:18](#)). It was after Jesus had spent time praying that his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray ([Luke 11:1](#)). During the night that he was betrayed, the disciples, despite being so sleepy that they could not pray themselves, noticed how fervently Jesus prayed so that his sweat fell like drops of blood ([Luke 22:44](#)). As Dallas Willard so powerfully argued in "[The Spirit of the Disciplines](#)" Jesus gave them not only a faith to believe but also a lifestyle model to follow. Christ had developed disciplined practices that kept him constantly in fellowship with his Heavenly Father and we as his disciples are expected to emulate his lifestyle, not only believe his words. As recorded in [Spiritual Secret](#), this missionary statesman's children recalled how deeply they were impacted by their father's commitment to spending time with God. On overnight trips in China, they would see him get up for two hours in the middle of the night to spend uninterrupted time in the Word and prayer while everyone else was sleeping.

2. **Give them supervised opportunities to practice what they had observed** -- In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus went off to pray, but he asked his disciples to also spend time in prayer. He did not invite them to pray together with him, but rather encouraged them to pray by themselves. Then he came back to check up on them to see how they were doing. They failed miserably (they all fell asleep). But within 40 days, in the upper room after the Ascension, we find them "constantly in prayer." ([Acts 1:14](#)). In our pre-field training, we not only talk about the spiritual disciplines; we practice them right in the classroom.

3. **Tell them what is at stake** -- In the garden, Jesus twice tells his disciples to pray "so that you will not fall into temptation" ([Luke 22:40](#), [46](#)). In Mark and Matthew, He gives a further reason for the critical necessity of prayer, "for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" ([Mark 14:38](#)). The subsequent events suggest that if the disciples had been praying, they would have stood strong in the face of the temptation to deny Christ at His arrest.

4. **Give them a simple structure** -- When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray in Luke 11, he gives them a very simple model. The Lord's prayer, as we call it, has amazing depth, but its structure is not complex. One of our new missionaries told me that what they needed more than anything to become consistent in their devotional habits was some type of structure. For this reason, we encourage our missionaries to use the Life Journal with its Bible reading plan and SOAP journaling method.

5. **Use stories and analogies to illustrate the concept** -- Stories capture attention and are easier to remember than lectures or commands. Jesus' parable about the sower ([Luke 8:1-15](#)) taught the disciples the importance of hearing and clinging to the Word. His parables about the friend at midnight ([Luke 11:5-10](#)) and the persistent widow ([Luke 18:1-8](#)) taught them to always pray and not give up.

6. **Commend those who prioritize self-feeding** -- In every Member Orientation Program, my colleague, Carl Kresge, tells the story of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him ([Luke 10:38-42](#)). We find this story is a powerful way of illustrating the critical priority of investing time in fellowship with our Lord. Jesus makes sure that Martha and his disciples recognize that Mary's choice to spend time with her Master was not wasted time, and in fact, was a better use of time than what her sister Martha had chosen to do in preparing a big meal for Jesus. Jesus shows by

word and example that ministry opportunities (serving Christ) must not supersede spending time in intimate communion with Christ. We want to make sure that our missionaries never feel guilty for spending extended times in prayer and the Word when they could be doing ministry.

7. Demonstrate how much these disciplines have

impacted your life -- Jesus drew his strength and wisdom from his intimate relationship and fellowship with his Father. Prior to critical decisions, he prayed ([Luke 6:12](#)). When everyone wanted to speak to him, he prayed and established fresh priorities ([Mark 1:35-36](#)). Before he asked a critical question of his disciples, he prayed ([Luke 9:18](#)). He knew that the Father always heard him ([John 11:41-42](#)). He was confident that he always did what the Father commanded him to do ([John 14:30](#)). The impact of this uninterrupted intimate fellowship on his life and ministry was supremely evident. His wisdom, his joy, his confidence and his holiness were unparalleled. At times, the disciples could even witness a visible external transformation of their Master while he was in communion with the Father. Luke records that while Jesus was praying in the presence of Peter, James and John, his face and clothing was transfigured ([Luke 9:28-29](#)). As he wrestled in prayer prior to his crucifixion, apparently the disciples saw an angel appear to him to strengthen him ([Luke](#)

[2:43](#)

