

Burnout Prevention

Many of us entered pastoral ministry with wonderful training, gifts and talents acknowledged by others, and dreams of great things God would accomplish through us. We pictured huge, enthusiastic congregations hanging on our every word. Hundreds would be saved. Every week! Our congregation would love us to death and appreciate our every act of unselfish service. They would offer to mow our lawn, invite us to dinner often, and shower us with gifts of gratitude.

Then we attend our first church board meeting and notice several snails zooming by us in the passing lane. We find out we're dealing with persons who are even more sinful than we are—imagine that! Our dreams are quickly crushed by the realities of sinful human nature. Week after week, month after month, year after year, very little if anything seems to change. What difference are we really making?

It's like the feeling I had about 15 years ago when I tried to solve Rubik's cube without the book. I poured a lot of energy and thought into it and got nowhere. I eventually quit trying. We lived together in the same house—that cube and I—but I no longer tried to change it.

That is somewhat the story of my first pastoral experience. I was tired of trying to change the church. All my efforts seemed to make zero difference. We coexisted for a while in the same church, but I decided I would pastor elsewhere. My second pastorate was a better fit, but not without its own problems.

Some spend themselves completely and die in one huge flameout to further Christ's cause. Many in the helping professions have given so much for so long, they feel like they don't have any more to give. We're burned out. What a waste to lie as a casualty by the side of the ministerial highway, out of gas, out of vision, and out of ministry.

We all want to finish well—to finish out. Paul wrote in Acts 20:24, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and

complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” Let’s consider some strategies to avoid becoming ministerial roadkill.

Remember Your Call

If you volunteered for the front lines of spiritual battle without God’s pulling you by the ear, you’re a better man than I! I was dragged kicking and screaming into ministry. I remember a pastor who once told me that if I could be happy in any other profession, I should.

Heaven knows I tried. But I couldn’t elude the hound of heaven. God allowed me to work for the PA Fish Commission for 4.5 years as an aquatic biologist, my perfect job. I thought. It didn’t bring the fulfillment I expected. I couldn’t escape the persistent, relentless internal pressure toward full-time Christian ministry. I knew I’d never have any peace until I yielded to the call, so, reluctantly, I did.

Remembering that call helps me know I belong in ministry. Ministry isn’t easy, but if God has called you, you belong. According to Ephesians 4:7-11 we’re God’s gifts to his church, given as pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry. That doesn’t mean we’re the perfect fit for any church, but if God has indeed called us, it encourages us that we belong in ministry. We need a sure sense that God placed us as the leader of the band when it’s time to face the music. God’s call never leads us where his grace can’t keep us.

The call to my denominational staff position was just as certain as my call to full-time ministry. It was somewhere between dream and vision early one Thursday morning accompanied with complete assurance that associate for discipleship was exactly where God wanted me. I had never experienced anything else just like it, nor have I since. That happened several months before I interviewed for the job. I didn’t tell the staff committee who interviewed me, believing that God would confirm in their hearts what he had in mine.

The assurance that I am where God wants me helps me to weather the storms that might otherwise make me doubt. It also tells me that he is

preparing persons to be receptive to my ministry. Not everyone, but some. You're in the same situation. Your call is your anchor.

Unload Your Burdens

Pastor Toby's wife appeared to be dying, soon to leave him alone with an infant son. When asked how he could cope, he calmly said, "I'm a warehouseman, not a warehouse. I handle each burden only long enough to unload it in the warehouse. God is the warehouse. I am the warehouseman."

Caring pastors can quickly accumulate a crushing emotional load of the problems of others. Someone is fired. Someone else has a marriage breaking up. A teenager is killed in an auto accident. Ounce by ounce, day by day, imperceptibly the burden can grow to become overwhelming. One at a time these burdens must be unloaded in the warehouse. 1 Peter 5:7 invites us to cast all our anxieties on Jesus because he cares for us. Howard Hendricks once asked a man how he was doing, and the man said he was holding up as well as he could under the circumstances. Dr. Hendrick's response was, "What in the world are you doing under there?"

Delegate

In Exodus 18 Jethro suggested that Moses appoint capable men who could handle the simpler cases. Sometimes we enjoy playing the buck stops here role of Moses. We love to be needed. It makes us feel important. Sooner or later, however, it wears us out.

Think TEAM. Delegating allows others to experience the blessings of ministry. Jesus delegated all his work to a small group of men who turned the world upside down. In John 20:21 he said to his disciples, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Running the race with others helps all to finish.

Remove Your Cape

It's impossible to do everything that everyone in your congregation expects. Jesus certainly doesn't! He's limited not by what he can do, but only by what's best. We're limited in both regards. Let's take off our capes and recognize our humanity.

We need to channel our energy into fulfilling the mission we have discerned through prayer, wise advice and experience. That mission will determine our priorities. Prayer and the ministry of God's Word will be central. In Acts 6:4 the apostles said, "and [we] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

It will be difficult for those of us who insist on doing everything "right." It will be hard for those strongly motivated by the need for the appreciative strokes, recognition, or approval from others. We must choose our races if we're going to finish the one that's most important.

Laugh at Yourself

We must beware of taking ourselves too seriously. I remember when I was pastoring at Cherry Grove and serving communion, the base of the communion trays fell clanging to the floor during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I didn't laugh at the time because it didn't seem appropriate, but I have when I've thought about it many times since.

Another time at Cherry Grove I made a first visit to the home of an unchurched father of one of the ladies in the congregation. At the end of our visit, I said, "Maybe I'll stop by again." I hoped that the visit had paved the way for another. His response was, "Don't mind if you do. Don't mind if you don't."

Humor is an excellent stress relief valve. If, on the other hand, we're defensive and supersensitive to the smallest criticism, pastoral ministry will be torture because for every action there is an equal but opposite criticism.

Distinguish Job from Career

Allow me to get personal. God has called me into full-time ministry. In the beginning I thought that meant Campus Crusade for Christ. After I spent two years in Crusade, God gave me the desire to prepare for a lifetime of ministry at TEDS. Then I became a pastor at first Cherry Grove and then at Saxton and Broad Top. Then I served as the Associate for Discipleship for the Eastern Regional Conference of the Churches of God.

My career is full-time ministry. I am now in my sixth job in that career. My calling to and passion for Conference staff position told me that was in the right place. I couldn't see ever changing. I did.

If you know God has called you into full-time ministry, you will never be happy outside it. Perhaps, however, your sense of burnout is because you are in the wrong job. Like shoes that don't fit, a ministry that doesn't fit brings unnecessary pain.

To be successful in a job we need:

- An interest in it
- A level of demand that isn't too much or little.
- The required skills
- A sense of fulfillment from it.

Burnout can result if just one of the four is missing. There is a balance that needs to be achieved between right fit and contentment. What often happens is that pastors lose the enthusiasm and excitement they once had. They go through ministry motions, but their heart isn't in it anymore. Almost always that will result in the congregation losing excitement and enthusiasm for God and his church as well.

There is no perfect job. The grass may seem greener in some other place, but we will quickly discover that we still must mow it. We need to realize that none of us is ever fully happy, successful, skilled or satisfied. We need to apply Philippians 4:11b: For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. The answer to every church problem isn't to resign and move to another church.

Renew Your Strength

Fatigue is a reality of pastoral ministry. The Christmas and Easter seasons can be overwhelming, not to mention the nights in the emergency room, the unexpected funerals, dealing with petty problems of parishioners, etc., etc. Passionate preaching is physically draining. The high of the preaching experience sets us up for an emotional and spiritual crash.

Chronic fatigue kills spiritual passion. We need to allow our body and soul to recover from the trauma of preaching. We need a day off. If we spend that day mowing the lawn, changing the oil, etc. that might be somewhat helpful, just because it gets us away from ministry, but it's not really a Sabbath. The Sabbath restores our energy and passion. I find Sabbath on the Susquehanna River with a fishing rod in my hand. The solitude, beauty of nature, and recreation renew my strength.

Don't wait for your board chairman to say, "Pastor, the way you work is making us all tired. We insist that you ease up to charge your spiritual batteries. We'll pick up the slack." This has been a closely guarded secret for years, but at Saxton I was told to take two days off every week. I did that as the Associate for Discipleship even though it meant working an average 10.5 hours a day the other five. I usually spend one day working around the house and the other recharging my spiritual and emotional batteries. Cut out the least essential 20% of your work and treat yourself to a weekly Sabbath. Someone might complain, but what else is new?

Check Your Fuel

For years the fuel I used was 98% study and preparation with 2% prayer additives. I thought I had to say just the right words. I still have the tendency to want to say things just right, but now I know that prayer is far more important than saying the right words. Right words by themselves have about as much impact as a gnat flying into an I-beam. I'm often reminded of Zechariah 4:6: So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.

We had a two-cycle lawnmower that required a mixture of gasoline and 2-cycle oil to operate. The other mower took just gasoline. We had to be careful which fuel can we used. Without the oil, the 2-cycle engine would burn up. Prayer is like that oil. Our preparation is like the gasoline. Both are important. To prevent burnout, we must guard against the tendency to go very light on the oil.

In John 15:5, Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." If we are frustrated by a lack of fruit from our ministry, the nature of our abiding relationship is the first place to look. Are we short-changing the feeding of our own soul through the Word and prayer? Are we praying as if everything depends on God?

Focus on Faithfulness

Pastors as a group are very insecure. We can set up our congregation as the mirror of our self-worth. If we gain their recognition, approval, and appreciation, we're okay. For perfectionists one unhappy person counterbalances 20 contented ones. Several times a year at Saxton I used interactive sermons in which congregational participation was encouraged. One Sunday one man mumbled loudly enough for everyone in the congregation to hear, "That ain't preaching!"

This individual wasn't in the best of health. I could just picture doing his funeral. Near the end of the funeral sermon he would sit up in the casket with one last breath to power his speech. With that gasp he would utter, "That ain't preaching!" and would then fall back down.

I know none of you have ever imagined similar things concerning your parishioners! The point is, I couldn't please that person no matter how hard I tried. He will not be my judge, and your chief critics won't be yours. Ultimately only the Lord's commendation or condemnation matters. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Beware of using your congregation as a mirror of your self-worth.

Imagine three tractors. The first is a huge noisy one that is pulling a mountainous weight when it dramatically flames out from too much strain. It's an instant candidate for the scrap heap. The second is an ancient machine embedded in the ground for children to play on. It's so rusted inside and out that it will never work again. The third is an old Ford that has been mowing weeds in an orchard and pulling bins of apples for more than 30 seasons. I want to be like the third tractor that remains productive year after year. I want to finish the race a winner. How about you?