

Ideas For the Pastor Approaching Burnout

(A collection of perspectives from people responding to a social media inquiry)

In August of 2009, I learned of a pastor who had entered the following phrase into a Google search page:

"im a pastor on his way to burnout help"

This looks like a cry for help to me. However, the good news about this is that he is most likely not at burnout yet and recognizes it enough to do some searching.

So I then posted the following on my Twitter and Facebook accounts:

*"If you are a ministry leader and you're reading this, I'm sure you've experienced some or all of the sentiment shared by this unknown soldier's Google search. What advice would you offer him? What should he do NOW to avoid the devastating effects of burnout? **Share your thoughts.** Your insight is what we need. Together we can help out one another. Let's help each other **Serve Strong!**"*

The results of that inquiry are as follows. If you find yourself approaching burnout, perhaps there is something in what various people shared that will help you on your journey. May God bless you as you seek to serve God and finish strong!

We face burnout when we get TOO comfortable with what we are doing. It becomes a chore, we can do it in our sleep. I would pray for God to get us out of our comfort zone so we can grow.

Try and identify why you feel like this.

- are you doing too much
- encountering conflict in the church
- neglecting your time.
- Not disconnecting???

Take time off and go to a pastor retreat with your spouse.

Don't think about the church so much, do something you enjoy.

Read "Leading on Empty" by Wayne Cordeiro

Get another pastor to share with and pray with.

Get a Counselor if your marriage is in trouble.

Let people do more, and don't give in to a pastor's control-freakish tendencies.

OK, first...What pastor is NOT on their way to burning out? I serve church leaders and I don't think it matters whether you're a pastor, principal, corporate muckitymuck, doctor, lawyer or Indian chief...aren't we all, eventually on our way to a burn out? So...don't get too worked up. Step back and assess not so much what are you doing that's leading to the burn out, but what AREN'T you doing that's leading to the burn out.

Are you saving time for family and friends?

Are you saving time for time alone with God?

Are you saying NO to the good things to make room for the great thing?

I tend to burn out when I work too much alone, don't spend time with my family and friends, forget to slow down and listen for God and, most of all, I say YES to too many things.

If the model is not a biblical one, where one man is saddled with the responsibility to care for the saints by himself, without a mutual team of elders/pastors (call them what you like) to carry that load together, can we expect God to give us strength to do what He has not asked us to do? "We all know someone has to be in charge if anything is going to get done." Well, that isn't a scriptural basis, but a worldly one.

I applaud those saints who have taken on this role. I just don't think it is the role God called them to (but in most denominational settings, that is the way one understands the "next step" under that calling).

The solution, then, would be to develop those who share that load and with whom (yes, within the congregation) the pastor can be mutually accountable as peers.

This is very common if a pastor is going it alone and thinking he or she is the only one who can do the things need doing. I am a lay minister who has learned in the last few months that simplicity is best and that you don't have to do things the same old same old way. We all need to be reminded that ministry is to be shared. One thing that is necessary for all people in ministry and caregiving is to eat right (watch the coffee hour and potluck foods and carbs), don't skip meals, exercise daily! Yes Sunday is a good time to take walks and get outside. Set aside a personal Sabbath day just for you. Get a pastoral care team that can help shoulder the burden. Meet with other pastors for one on one time! For heaven's sake don't forget to take a vacation! If it isn't in your contract

Serving Strong

www.servingstrong.com

www.servingstrong.typepad.com

www.twitter.com/ServingStrong

as part of your compensation then renegotiate! Remember Jesus needed help so he called the 12. Call your 12 or more!

Whenever I have been challenged in this way ("burnout" or extreme frustration, hopelessness, etc.), I always examine myself in my own relationship to or quality of fellowship with the Lord. I have personally found that there is nothing that has the capacity to pull one away from their own personal time and walk with the Lord, than being in ministry. Somehow the needs and demands of others tend to accumulate and often are allowed to take precedence over one's own needs or the needs of their marriage and family.

Along these same lines I go back to the basics to determine if I am where I should be (spiritually and naturally), doing what the Master has called and appointed me to do. I have that if I am not doing what the Lord has given me to do or not doing what He has called me to do in the way He would direct it to be done, there is little if any grace to do other than repent and realign myself with Him first and foremost, and His calling to serve secondarily.

One other thought, when is the last time you took some time off and refused to talk or to so much as think about ministry or stressors? Even the Lord God rested on the "7th" day. While Sunday is not an option for most of us in fulltime ministry, nor Saturday, Try taking Monday or at least one other day off to do nothing but rest or spend personal time being ministered to. For, golf is a great distraction and more often than not it's good for a great laugh. :)

Last but not least, seek out the fellowship of fellow ministers who should be able to at the least afford you some wise company and perhaps a bit of counsel and encouragement. You are not alone and even prophets of God have faced this dilemma (Elijah and the Juniper tree), and just as others have faced this and prevailed in the Lord's grace, I pray that you will.

I think it's more complicated than just "adding" a few dashboard questions to my life. For me, burnout comes from a lack of fulfillment. When I am neglecting the role that God has created me for and allowed the "needs" of my organization to direct my decisions and habits, I begin to experience burnout.

I would encourage this pastor to temporarily setup some strong boundaries. I would give him/her permission to only do the things that he is excellent at and called to do. He could allow the other things to fall. One of three things (or a combination) will happen: 1) He will find out that those auxiliary things weren't that important to get done; 2) Someone will recognize that these things aren't being done and find their ministry within; 3) force the pastor to invite others into ministry.

Another starting point for burnout in my life is when I feel the things I'm doing are accomplishing anything. Everyone wants their life to count for something. If I don't

Serving Strong

www.servingstrong.com

www.servingstrong.typepad.com

www.twitter.com/ServingStrong

believe my life is making a difference, then I become more susceptible to burnout and feelings of waste. This probably piggybacks on the fulfillment issue, but I think it's equally important to take notice of.

I agree with the one who mentioned how important Sabbath keeping is for everyone, especially clergy. If I may, I'd like to outline that in a bit more detail, because I think that this is key to getting perspective on priorities, refreshing the level of commitment to ministry, and diminishing the resentment factor.

The first things I would do would be to make a commitment to rest, and that means accountability. Get the right folks involved. In my denomination (United Methodist), that means my bishop and my district superintendent. One must include the leaders of the church, so that means the Staff/Parish Relations committee.

Your group might be the deacons, or the trustees, or whatever you call the folks who decide the pastor's fate from year to year.

Once you've assembled your accountability group, you have to get their help. They have to help you commit to a regular cycle of rest.

That means attempting normalcy in serving the local church. What will it take to get closer to an eight hour day? How can the load be shared? What would it look like to delegate at least part of the pastoral care workload?

It also means weekly time off. How many of us work Monday through Friday, work like a dog around the house on Saturday, then put in a 12 hour Sunday? Family and self care are a must. You cannot commit to ministry with a family at your side unless you are willing to put in the effort to do your part within your family.

Yearly vacations are a must. And retreat time that is NOT considered vacation are equally valuable.

None of this can be done alone. So procuring accountability and permissions are vital to this process. And the process is flexible. Go with what works in your local setting, keeping a prayerful ear open to the leadership of the Spirit.

Some of you might be thinking, with all this resting, when does the pastor work? It is not about the quantity of working hours, it becomes a question of quality working hours. The time you spend in ministry will be vital, refreshed, passionate and 10 times more effective, especially over the course of a career.

If all that rest seems silly, you can always opt to work 60 hour weeks, 52 week years, and burnout in 10 years...

Serving Strong

www.servingstrong.com

www.servingstrong.typepad.com

[www.twitter.com/ServingStrong](https://twitter.com/ServingStrong)

I think you're on the right track by identifying that you're on your way. Once we know where we are going, we need to stop and identify where we want to be going instead. Every day we make tons of decisions that lead us one way or the other. Find a ministry partner to review these decisions and make sure that everything you are doing is leading you to where you want to be. Let go of the things that don't get you there--even when it doesn't seem pastoral.

Take time to re-fuel and know that if you can't do it on your own, get a life coach to help you. You as an individual, your family, your ministry and the Kingdom is worth you doing what's best for you!

From my own experience, burnout (and the path toward it) is tightly connected to the paradox of the yoke of Christ. ("My yoke is easy, and my burden light.") The critical distinction between the yoke of Christ and the other burdens we typically carry runs along the axis of pride and shame. Pride (common to our oft-inflated egos) creates in us an unhealthy desire -- perhaps even an addiction -- to do more than what God has called us to do, to be who we are not. Like the volleyball player on a weak team, we have trouble staying in our assigned area, and heroically take on challenges and duties that are outside the reach of our strength. Shame (nearly unavoidable among those with high standards) has the opposite motive, but the same result. Deeply disappointed in our own shortcomings (and exacerbated by any evidence that others are disappointed in us), we apologize too much, over-correct, and over-compensate, hoping that by sheer devotion and determination ("I will never betray you!") we can overcome the weaknesses we so deeply regret.

Replacing the overgrown burdens that burn us out with the authentic yoke of Christ requires that we resign from the jobs we were not called to do, surrender the battles we were not called to fight, and release the claims we were not called to make. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build." Then we can be free enough -- and strong enough -- to carry the yoke he gives us.