

# How to avoid volunteer burnout

**L**ay volunteers make the church happen. They feed youth groups; they support the church financially to carry on ministry; they make up committees that serve the congregation; they teach Sunday school classes and lead home Bible studies; they reach out to their neighbors and co-workers to share the hope of the gospel; they grow in personal faith. In all these ways they worship Jesus Christ and give His church its concrete public expression.

But they also grow tired; sometimes slow down; and even wear out.

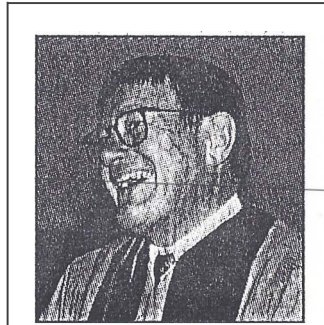
If this is true, then we in the church need to think carefully about how to encourage these strategic folks so that they don't burn out. In this regard, I believe that four principles apply equally to the lay volunteer and the professional church servant.

## Grace, Teaching, Fellowship

In the book of Acts, the church is first described as those believers who repent, believe and receive God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ and then are united in the "Apostles' teaching and fellowship (Acts 2:38-42)."

This means that we are volunteers or "apostles" ("ones sent out") because of grace. This is not to downgrade the need for our development of talents; but talents notwithstanding, we have all become Christians by grace. Therefore, we will always need God's grace to sustain us and we will need each other to encourage us in grace.

I'll never forget a week I once spent at Laity Lodge in Texas. On the first evening, the director introduced every member of the lodge "family" to those of us who were guests for the week. Everyone was presented: the maids, summer workers, dishwashers and cooks. He introduced each one and told about their families, their local church involvement, their hobbies and their ministries. Then they shared with us their



**From Your Pastor**  
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hopes that we, too, would have a growing Christian experience together at Laity Lodge. Consequently, that evening we all were bound together by a common gospel objective and a common fellowship. Burnout is much less frequent when those New Testament bonds are part of a volunteer's experience

### Authority To Act

Volunteers need the authority to move and flex and do what needs to be done without what I call the tyranny of tiny strings. Churches can sometimes lose their ability to move decisively and flexibly because of the tight little strings of endless, needlessly deferred decisions.

In every living church there must be a creative balance which enables people both to understand the larger vision and to act decisively and flexibly to meet particular situations without the hindrance of unnecessary roadblocks. Of course, every fellowship needs checks and balances in policy making, but the spirit of the institution should be one of goodwill, trust and adventure so that the experimenter and innovator is not squeezed out, but rather encouraged.

Balance happens in a church in direct proportion to the sense of consensus within the fellowship about what is major and what is minor. Such a shared consensus comes from a healthy focus on the gospel experienced in the community of

faith by people who care about each other because they have felt God's care. Knowing this keeps us mellow enough to roll with the mistakes we inevitably make.

### Beware of Power

The third principle is a necessary companion to the second. It comes as a warning: Beware of power! Both volunteers and professional church staff must guard against the temptation to become the ones who tie the strings on people and programs.

When we give in to that temptation, we ourselves become the oppressors of initiative and creativity, and those who work with us must either obey us, humor us or deceive us in order to remain our co-workers. Such co-workers are eventually used up, one by one.

How can we avoid this temptation? We must begin with the healthy doctrine of power taught in the New Testament. According to the gospel, authentic power is not power we have to use over others, but it is Christ's concrete victory over sin and death; it is the life-giving and redeeming power of Jesus Christ. For the Christian leader, all power is actually our confidence in the power of Jesus Christ. And such a confidence is not oppressive toward others.

### The Joy of Service

The fourth principle applies to us all. It is the discovery that our work is both a serious task because of God's greatness, and a happy task because of His companionship with us through His people. It can be fun to drive teenagers to a retreat, to wash dishes after the morning prayer breakfast, to serve communion.

The joy comes from knowing that we are where we want to be—serving His people. And that joy keeps us refreshed. Perhaps, after all, that's what the psalmist meant when he said, "I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of the Lord ..."