

# Burnout

by EARL F. PALMER

Member-leaders together with employed pastors and staff members make the church happen. They feed youth groups; they support the church financially to carry on ministry and spend the money as well; they make up committees that serve the congregation; they teach Sunday school classes and lead home Bible studies; and those who are pastors preach each Sunday to the people; they reach out to their neighbors 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 wear out.

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

## I. Grace, teaching, fellowship

In 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 passage indicates we are *all* volunteers or "apostles" ("ones sent out") because of grace. The need for our development of talents and ordination are in no ways diminished. But we have all become Christians by grace. Therefore, we will always need God's truth and grace to sustain us and we will need each other to encourage us to grow in grace as we grow in age.

## II. Authority to act

Each of us who serve in the Church needs 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. This danger may show up in decision slowdowns and even stoppages while leaders wait for a consultants' survey results.

In every living church there must be a creative balance that 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 when the spirit of the institution is one of goodwill, trust, and adventure, then the experimenters and innovators will be encouraged, not squeezed out.

Balance happens in a church in direct proportion to the shared 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 feel God's care. Knowing allows congregations and leaders to roll with the mistakes we inevitably make.

## III. Beware of power

The third principle is a warning — a necessary companion to the second — beware of power! Church leaders, both volunteers and professional staff, must guard against the temptation to become the ones who tie the strings on people and programs

or overestimate the importance of their own roles.

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

How can they avoid this temptation?

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.

## IV. The joy of service

All those who serve in the church must discover that their work is both a serious task because of God's greatness, and a happy task because of His companionship with them through His people. It can be fun to drive teenagers to a retreat, or wash dishes after the Morning Prayer breakfast.

The joy comes from knowing that we are where we want to be — serving people in the name of our servant Lord. 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* ...

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