

Practical Considerations for Helping the Christian Lay Person with Burnout at Work in General and in the Congregation

[South Atlantic District Pastor-Teacher Conference, January 24, 1985 Pompano Beach, Florida]

by: Mr. Donald Daley and Pastor Roger Kobleske

Roger

Don, we're here today to discuss the important topic of burnout as it relates to the Christian layman. We appreciate your being here and sharing with us your insights and experiences as a Christian layman who has worked in various fields of labor and management.

Don

Let me begin by sharing with you something I ran across in the January 1985 Reader's Digest. It will serve as an interesting illustration of what we will be discussing.

An Example

Dr. Robert S. Eliot, international expert on stress and heart disease, suddenly became his own patient. The experience, which nearly killed him, changed his life.

At 43 he had been made chief of cardiology at the University of Nebraska Medical School. For most heart specialists this would have been a triumph. But not for Robert Eliot, who was three years behind his *personal career timetable*. Besides, *his goal* to create a cardiovascular center at Nebraska to do groundbreaking research was running into *frustrating roadblocks*.

"Desperately, I picked up the pace," Dr. Eliot recalls. "I criss-crossed the country—lecturing, trying to build support among physicians, flying in and out on a moment's notice."

Though he was almost always tired, he was not concerned. He knew he had none of the traditional risk factors of heart disease: his father had lived to 79, his mother was still healthy at 85; he didn't smoke, wasn't overweight, had normal blood pressure and cholesterol, no diabetes. "I thought I was immune to heart disease," Eliot says.

In the spring of 1972, after a disappointing confrontation one day over his new institute, Eliot *blazed with anger* and *couldn't seem to calm down*. Next morning, after a long drive and *sleepless night*, he gave a medical lecture. Following a heavy lunch, he tried to diagnose cases from a colleague's slides, but his mind was foggy, his eyes were blurry. He felt dizzy.

Suddenly, Eliot says, "Intense pressure went from my breastbone up into my shoulders, neck and jaws, and down both arms. I had trouble breathing."

He began to sweat. He went to the coronary-care unit and asked for nitroglycerin tablets. No relief. He began getting bowel cramps, nausea. The pain got worse.

"The game was over. I diagnosed my own condition; myocardial infarction. I asked the head nurse for a vacant bed, stretched out and told her, 'I've just had a heart attack.'" (Emphasis added)

Burnout -A Definition

My personal definition of burnout is that point in time when people who have strived for years to achieve a goal or set of goals realize that they have failed to reach those goals. Whether the goals they have set for themselves were supposedly within reach or as in many cases goals were beyond their capabilities—there can be a point where the body and spirit are sapped of energy. A feeling of complete exhaustion sets in. The whole point is lost. Commitment is dead. There is no fight left. Flight appears to be the only solution. Quit!

Roger

Don, excuse me for interrupting. May I share some information on the definition of burnout?

Webster's defines it,—“to fail, to wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources.”

Charles Perry Jr. says, “Burnout describes negative work-related attitudes and behaviors. One of the first indications of burnout is a negative change in one's attitude toward the job and one's outlook on life.” He continues, “With negative attitude come physical symptoms. These include chronic fatigue, frequent colds, flu, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, sleeplessness, excessive use of drugs, decline in self esteem, and marital and family conflict.”

Other things associated with burnout are apathy, low morale, absenteeism, frequent job changes, psychological problems, mixed emotions, feelings of guilt, failure and self-condemnation. The whole thing reads like a long list of physical, mental and emotional symptoms of man's main problem, sin. If Christians are to meet and defeat burnout, then the word sin will have to have its place in the definition. Jesus and his Word *must* have centrality in the solution.

Who Can Burnout?

Don

Normally burnout is considered a malady for the middle and upper echelon in the executive ranks. Not necessarily so! Folks on lower levels can and have experienced burnout. Why? Because goals and desires and emotions are present within a person whether the aim is Chief Executive Officer of a corporation or a supervisor on the third shift.

Roger

I understand that there was a time when burnout was a term applied to professional people and specifically to those who were in people related professions and developed work related problems. More recently the phenomenon has been recognized to occur in all walks of life and both sexes. As proof we offer the fact that many managers today are trained to observe people and their environment with an eye on making life more liveable and productivity more efficient and rewarding thus averting burnout among factory and office help.

While Christians are not of this world, they are for awhile in this world. Regardless of their calling in life they are exposed to pressures, the world's value system, the world's methods and the temptations of the old evil foe all of which impact their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual lives. There is also the daily battle with the flesh. That Christians too experience burnout or its symptoms is not surprising because the things that cause it are facts of life in a fallen world. Just recognizing that can be a major step in treating or dealing with the phenomenon.

Goal Setting

Don

Like the man in our example, I've found that setting and striving for goals can lead to burnout. Along with the goals or aims whether material gains or the striving for position, the active person is surrounded by an environment into which he has been born—family, wife or husband, children, friends, community and religion. These play an important part in attitudes, thought processes, ambitions and the essential amount of energy and perspective which will be demanded to reach the goals which have been set .

Goals are no problem to set—it would be easy to say realistically--here is where I am today and in 20 years there is where I want to be. On the way to there I will expect to

accomplish items 1 - 2 -3 - 4 and five. No problem it might seem! Still, there are many who experience what Dr. Eliot experienced. Does the Bible give any guidance regarding goal setting?
Roger

The setting of goals is certainly important. It serves to curb the Old Adam's penchant for laziness. It gives constructive direction to our activities. It gives a sense of accomplishment when goals are met. It affords an instrument for evaluation of growth and an indicator for change if necessary and possible. For the Christian it is a valuable management tool in his desire to serve the Savior with time, talents, treasures and testimony.

The art of faithful goal setting is something only the Spirit can teach us. Specifics will vary from individual to individual owing to the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ, Christian freedom and the vastness of divine providence. There are, however, certain basic, biblical principles which Christian love seeks to apply. Paul's words come to mind, "not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14) By grace through faith in the merits of Jesus, Paul saw himself as alive forever in and with Christ. The goal given him by God for his person was eternity with Jesus. He possessed it here by faith. And it had with it the promise of real experience. "Be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) The attaining of that eternal goal came to permeate Paul's thinking and planning as far as his life in this world was concerned.

By grace through faith in Christ, Christians possess eternal life and have the same God given goal. Whether or not the Christian's thinking and planning have been permeated by that eternal perspective, it remains a gracious divine fact in Christ .

The facts of salvation wrought by God in Christ for man and applied by God to man through the Word and sacraments are the source of enlightenment and the enabling power for the Christian to be a faithful steward and goal setter. With the eternal goal clearly set before him he can plan and set gratitude goals in the faithful management of the earthly life and its components which God gives. Flowing from faith and the eternal perspective it gives gratitude goals are God serving, neighbor serving and adaptable to the circumstances God sends.

Faithful goal setting involves the Christian in honestly analyzing where God has placed him in life, what responsibilities God has given, and what resources God has given him to work with. A complete approach would be to determine and set faithful goals in the management of all the aspects of life temporal and spiritual with all these subgoals bathed in the light of and directed toward the attaining of the eternal goal. "Whatever you do whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:17)

Faithful goals need be neither so high that you end up with a high jumper trying to top the pole vaulter's standard, nor so low that you have a high jumper competing with the bar set at one foot. Faithful goals are realistic, optimistic and approached with prayer. Realistic because they observe the God given circumstances. Optimistic because faith trusts the promises of God. Approached with prayer because, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves." (Psalm 127:1-2)

Striving For Goals

Like the high jumper the Christian can prepare for possible “failure” in striving for certain goals. But failures need not stop him from continuing. Rather, it helps in the learning of personal limits and often it aids in future growth and setting eventually higher goals. The Bible makes it clear that the Christian hasn’t been promised heaven on earth, but the certainty of heaven to come picks him up. As a child of God, the Christian must realize that God expends his efforts only for the purpose of attaining blessed results. It is God who is molding and changing the Christian’s life aiming to make it like that of Jesus. In that work God uses good days and bad, successes and failures as he leads the Christian to the eternal goal. God has a way of putting “welfare” labels on experiences we may be inclined to call detrimental. Manmade distinctions between success and failure become practically meaningless when we confidently share the conviction of St. Paul, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. . . .” (Romans 8:28)

Again, like the high jumper being prepared for changing circumstances is important for the Christian. Wind, weather, track condition and personal conditioning affect the high jumper. The circumstances of the Christian’s life are under the providential care of God. Since God’s providential care is so wise and good and surpasses our ability to fully comprehend or anticipate, the Christian can prepare to adapt his goals to changing circumstances. Monte Stratton was a successful pitcher for the Chicago White Sox when he lost his leg in a hunting accident. He could, of course, not be a major league pitcher any more, but he could be a successful, well-adjusted farmer which he became. Here the familiar prayer, “Lord, help me to change what can be changed, to accept what can not be changed, and give me the wisdom to be able to tell the difference,” is appropriate.

The workaholic is a likely subject for burnout because he burns a candle at both ends. Chances are that there are many aspects of his spiritual, personal and family life being neglected or given lip service only. A motive check for the developing condition is wise. Jesus said, “Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (John 6:27) Again he said, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You can not serve both God and money.” (Luke 16:13) A review of his perspective on life, its purpose and goal would also be wise. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also!” (Luke 12:34) The workaholic may have the company’s approval and may be attaining professional and/or monetary goals, but Christian love asks, “Does it meet with God’s approval?”

The rustout is also a likely burnout prospect. Although the exact opposite of the workaholic, the symptoms and results listed above are often similar. The rustout may burn out because he doesn’t put to use what he has been given. Jesus’ words about the wicked, lazy servant in Matthew 5:14-28 find application for Christians regarding this point. Christians need encouragement and admonishing to faithfully use their gifts and abilities as an expression of their faith and gratitude to God.

In any case it’s only in Christ and his Word that the individual can find true meaning and purpose for his existence and work. Only there can he find help and guidance for developing a God pleasing self image, God pleasing goals and God pleasing methods for attaining goals. Knowledge of the Word gained through personal and corporate Bible study is absolutely essential for testing everything, holding to what is good, avoiding everything evil and living to God’s glory without burning out or rusting out. (I Thessalonians 5:21-22)

Don

But something I've noticed from working with people is that on the way to goal #1 whatever that may be—we have to deal with people who have their own ideas of where they want to be. And it might be the same goal that you would like to reach. What happens? Competition! and we realize that people do not behave as we would like them to behave. Pressure begins. Stress and tension become a part of our lives. The same conditions are present at each step of the way.

Competition

Roger

Competition kept in perspective and in which the “rules of the game” are followed can be a very helpful thing in developing and using God given abilities. It's used in schools to help children learn. It's used in the work-a-day world. But it is also abused. Competition aimed at bringing out everyone's best for the general welfare and a good purpose may be fine. Competition aimed at crushing an opponent for advancing self is detrimental and sinful. Christians are reminded, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interest of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4)

There is competition in the world's rat race. (How else could it be a race?) It often leads to burnout either because the individual overreaches personal limits or because repeated “ties” or “defeats” lead to questions and doubts about abilities and self worth. Christians headed for the office on Monday are usually stepping onto the opposition's home turf. The Christian will experience pressure to adapt the world's attitudes and methods in order to be a “winner.” God's Word says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) Part of this new thinking is to find one's sense of value and worth in the Lord Jesus and not in what one can personally accomplish.

The world's motives naturally tend to be self-glorifying and self-advancing. It's a dog eat dog world. The methods and ethics employed by the world are sometimes questionable and sometimes contrary to scripture. Christians can counter this by concentrating on Christ and his Word. The knowledge of salvation assured in Christ and the faithfulness of God to his promises to protect and provide will help keep the competition in perspective. So also will the directive, “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.” (Colossians 3:23-24) The author of the well known hymn “With The Lord Begin Thy Task” probably didn't have our subject in mind in 1734, but he gives the Christian sound advice as to how to approach his tasks, deal with temptations, fears and doubts and in God's strength to cope with or avert burnout in a competitive world.

Conflict

Don

Permit me another example. Let's use the individuals found in a typical corporate structure from the Chief Executive Officer down to the sweeper. First, we must realize that not only do many of the individuals in this hypothetical corporation have aims and goals that they have set for themselves, now comes the stress builder. The corporation has set goals too, profit centered goals, and each one involved now has another set of goals which demands their full attention and energy. Conflict is often the result!

Roger

That the Christian equipped by God and placed by God in his calling often finds himself in conflict with the world and the world's ways of doing things isn't surprising if we remember

that Jesus said it would be that way. That's not bad. It's good. The testimony of the Christian life shines brightly in the contrast. The pressure and stress are real. But the knowledge that the conflict exists because the Christian belongs to Jesus and the knowledge that following his ways always has blessed results will strengthen the Christian. It will help him deal with the pressure and stress of the conflict.

It is important in any given situation to identify the area of conflict and to analyze it in the light of God's Word. It may be a situation in which Christian love will want to obey God rather than men. It may be that some adjustment on the part of the Christian will be forthcoming since Christians don't always immediately see things clearly. In an extreme situation it may mean a total change. I know a former public high school science teacher who sells insurance today. That change took place when he refused to obey his superiors and teach evolution as fact rather than theory in his classes.

Taking Inventory

Don

Continuing our example. Typically a corporation which has enjoyed a profitable year, before year end, has set new goals for the following year. As you can imagine. The stockholders or owners or partnerships realize that their costs have increased because of material, labor, sales and distribution increases leaves little to the imagination than to realize the same measure of profit. There will be demands to reduce costs, improve quality and increase sales. This takes in everybody.

The chief answers to the Board of Directors. His is the ultimate responsibility. In this complex society in which we find ourselves, progress demands that we keep score each day of performance and the wonderful computer gives the Chief Executive Officer a daily picture of the cost of labor, material, scrap, down time, sales, shipments and profit or lack of it. Pressure is applied to all concerned to improve.

Roger

Taking inventory and assessing growth are part of good stewardship. As the Christian counts his blessings temporal and spiritual, gratitude follows. And so will contentment as he recounts the faithfulness of God to his promises and the perfection with which God hears and answers the petitions of those who trust in him. Cultivating gratitude and contentment is another key to dealing with pressure and preventing burnout. I Timothy 6:6 "But godliness with contentment is great gain."

Taking inventory and assessing personal growth also leads to setting new goals. The Christian faith-life is not static but active in love and service as it daily proceeds toward its ultimate goal. Since it is created in Christ Jesus to do good works prepared in advance by God, things like changing health, maturing or advancing age, changing family responsibilities and the question of the use of talents and abilities to their maximum potential will be considered. Also to be considered are new opportunities for growth or service in the community or congregation. "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more," writes Paul. (I Thessalonians 4:1)

Dealing With Stress

Don

As the corporate machinery grinds on, pressure begins to build, stress sets in daily, weekly, monthly and year end. Goals which have been set for each period may or may not have been reached.

Next in command is the president who answers to the Chief Executive Officer. He sets the goals for the vice presidents, the general managers and the production managers, cost and material managers, the shop superintendents. The foremen, the supervisors and finally for the guy on the bench or machine and his helpers.

Each one is expected to do his job. Here are people who react in direct response to their individual wants, desires and goals. The results of their response whether good or bad have a bearing on the corporate goals affecting every one else's goals. What can the Christian do to deal with these every day pressures?

Roger

Without going into the physiological or technical aspects of pressure and stress, let me say that Karl Albrecht, a recognized authority on the matter, suggests the "wellness triad." It consists of relaxation, exercise and diet. It is also called the RED plan.

Not a health food freak, Mr. Albrecht suggests nutrition and moderation. So does the Bible. The care and feeding of God's temple, the Christian's body is important totally apart from pressure, stress and burnout. Our problems are solved by a Person not by anything we may or may not eat or drink. Overdosing on anything will only create more problems rather than resolve present problems.

Exercise is still in. Approached with common sense it can be helpful. The Bible does say that it is of some value. (I Timothy 4:8) Several members of our congregation who exercise regularly have volunteered that stress and anxiety which built up during the day and the drive home were considerably relieved by some form of physical exercise.

Relaxation can also serve to reduce the tension level in the body. Refreshing sleep, relaxing music, a personal hobby, a vacation, or just sitting out by the pool are some ideas. Mr. Albrecht has as part of his relaxation program that which he calls deep relaxation or DR. In DR meditation plays a big role. Some of his methods sound much like those of TM and others are techniques developed by people who experienced some psychological or physical benefit.

Meditation is a foundation block in the building of the Christian life. The Psalmist says, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." We know that Jesus often "got away from it all" by getting up early or staying up late or interrupting the flow of events to commune with the heavenly Father in prayer. Meditating on a small portion of God's Word as he has opportunity and "praying continually" will certainly help the Christian deal with the pressures that cause stress in the work-a-day world. Peace of heart and mind, are enhanced perspective and above all, a strengthened faith in the love of God and his benevolent, providential care are among the blessings realized through Christian meditation. Constant dwelling on the pressures and irritations that cause stress and lead to burnout can only hasten that end. Continually thinking about what you would like to do but can't or how things could be if only you weren't in your present situation will no doubt do the same. The Psalmist talked to himself, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:5) Such meditation has the power to quiet the stressed nervous system, calm angry thoughts, create a sense of security in the midst of events seemingly out of control and generate new and different thoughts about demanding bosses or balky employees or one's own weaknesses.

Other Elements

Don

Suppose for a moment that there is a possibility to reach the goals based upon the talent which is present in the officers and work force. What other influences could affect this utopian goal? Company Politics! Remember, that in all of these good folks in our little corporation have goals set for themselves. They want to get from hereto there as fast as they can. When an opportunity appears that will perhaps help them joining forces with another person or group in competition or oftentimes in opposition to another personnel force takes shape and action. The result will be that some one will win some one will lose. And the elements are present for stress build up. Some folks just don't have it. Anger, frustration, pressure, tension, stress.

The guy on the bench is expected to produce "X" amount in his day's work. Either produce or get demoted or maybe fired. If he produces over his quota his coworkers, or if a union shop, his steward will bring pressure to bear and make his day miserable. There are people in the work force who really want to do the best that they can only to be hampered by his peers or the political structure found in his place of work. The results? Initiative destroyed. Personal goals missed. Frustration, anger, stress.

Roger

Sometimes the road to success in greater things leads through disappointment in lesser things. And sometimes adversity provides the very stones with which that road is paved. Christians do have God's unfailing promise that he will bless what they undertake in his name. They do well to say with Peter after he had experienced many hours of fruitless toil: "At your Word I will let down the net," and with prayer, patience and love toward God to continue for the time being at least in one's God given task. It is a good idea to use the occasion to evaluate what in the light of God's Word and in full view of eternity is the ultimate goal—what is essential and what is nonessential in life; to cleanse the heart of anger toward those who actually or allegedly contributed to one's failure; to explore the human factors involved in one's failure, with the view of not repeating mistakes; to rejoice over blessings which remain and enrich life; above all, to thank God for unchanged relations with Jesus, family, friends and the company of fellow Christians. Paul wrote, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

Don

Along with the examples of stress in the work place other influences have a direct bearing on the amount of stress and tension with which we can cope: Home life, a demanding or overbearing wife or husband, sickness, disease, fear of not meeting expenses, losing a job, teen age children and their attitudes and actions, the fear of drugs, promiscuity and all the other adverse influences with which we are faced each day of our lives.

Christ Centered Home

Roger

A supportive and understanding home environment will be very helpful to a worker and provider. The Christian home with Christ and his Word as its foundation and in which the members pray for and encourage one another can be a continuing source of comfort and help for the pressured and wearied soul. A Christian husband and wife who are of one mind and one spirit in regard to the meaning and purpose of life and together are working toward the eternal goal will be able to help and support each other in dealing with the tasks, challenges, pressures and problems of life. In ministering to each other they will, under God, seek to apply the promises or directives of God to their individual situations. Joys will be doubled as they share them. Troubles will be cut in half as they also share them.

Don

The complexities of our 20th century society and the problems all have a dramatic and emotional strain placed on all who strive to live a decent and normal life. I've painted a rather bleak picture albeit a realistic picture of a layman in the 20th century. And all the above are contributing factors for burnout.

Counseling The Victim

Roger

Christians can and sometimes do burnout. If that happens, doubts, fears and the temptation to despair will increase. There is hope and help. The Gospel of Jesus is the power that renews faith, changes attitudes, opens eyes to new ways of looking at things and rejuvenates the spirit. Counseling which concentrates on the facts of salvation in Christ is what the burnout victim needs. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses..." (Hebrews 4:15)

The pressures and stress which the Savior experienced as the world's sin bearer especially in Gethesmane, the hall of judgment and on Calvary were real. He knows, understands and helps.

By concentrating there, feelings of guilt, failure and worthlessness can be dealt with. On the basis of full forgiveness and new life in Christ mistaken priorities can be adjusted, attitudes toward work and its place in life improved and a value system in keeping with what Scripture says about the whole person and the whole of life adopted. Above all a heightened appreciation for the grace of God can grow and develop.

Patience and prayer on the part of the counselor as well as encouragement for the victim to use the Word and sacrament will be called for. The progress, at least at first, may likely be slow. But dealing with a soul's salvation is something more than simply getting a burnout victim back on his feet and producing. The visits, words of encouragement, prayers and support of fellow Christians will also be vitally important. Especially helpful can be the visit of a fellow Christian who "has been there."

Don

You have heard much today about burnout. How to recognize the symptoms and some ideas about what to do about avoiding the collision course that many of your acquaintances and friends are bent on—perhaps you too.

Some good points and findings of today's research have been brought into focus. Susanne Kobasa, a researcher of stress and burnout at the University of Chicago defines three characteristics which she labels as stress hardy characteristics: challenge, commitment, control.

Again, attitude plays a major roll. The stress hardy person views most difficult tasks as a challenge. Once the task is appraised and a method to achieve that task has been resolved, they get into the act with a commitment. And as long as they have commitment to the undertaking an excitement is felt. Without commitment any project is unrewarding and stressful.

With the challenge and commitment the progress becomes achievement and with achievement the feeling of control of the situation is felt. That feeling of empowerment takes over. Success is sweet!

But we are all made up of all kinds of stuff—all different with varying degrees of threshold limitations. We are all different people.

However, we have an edge. We measure all things in the light of the Word. Paul states in Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God."

The bottom line—Jesus is in control. “D on’t sweat the little stuff.”

In The Church

Roger

Don, do you recall that time a while back when you called and asked to be relieved of your duties on the church council? Can you briefly state what led you to make that request?

Don

Primarily, I was experiencing exhaustion from some health problems. Not having had health problems before I wasn’t prepared for the impact. Gradually I developed some negative thoughts toward work in general.

Roger

We, of course, understood and tried to be as supportive as possible. Was there anything about your work on the council that may have contributed to your decision?

Don

I don’t think there was anything specific. There were things with which I disagreed. But I guess that’s normal. Things that caused some great disappointment were our general failure to get an effective outreach program going, the lack of growth in our school and an apparent attitude in our congregation which was satisfied to go to church on Sunday, stay for coffee and not much more. I felt that there was just nothing I could do to help and so in that state of health and mind I thought that rather than be a detriment I’d better get out.

Roger

You’ve raised some very interesting points. I’d like to pursue the first point briefly because it may be one that is quite common. I’m sure that there are many decisions made in council and voters’ meetings that aren’t unanimous. In those areas where God’s Word does not speak directly, we usually try to determine his will through study and discussion. Often opposing points of view lead to better understanding and the exercising of good Christian judgment. I think you agree with that. If we keep in mind that we’re trying to determine and do God’s will rather than any individual’s or special interest group’s will, then whether the final decision is exactly as we might like or not, we can know that we contributed by being there and participating. Do you think that keeping that approach in mind might aid the person who, at least in his own mind, seems to be swimming against the flow, losing and being tempted to quit?

Don

No doubt, there are times when we forget that approach and take things too personally. We become sensitive to rejection and lose interest if our ideas are seemingly rejected and apparently considered to be without merit. Having served on boards and committees for 38 years, in retrospect I can see how the hand of God and his infinite wisdom resolved many things in ways other than what I thought best. It’s important to remember that the Lord is doing his work through us and to find our joy in him rather than in personal triumphs and thus be able to continue serving even though our ideas aren’t always accepted.

Roger

I’m sure that there are many congregations who would like to have vibrant programs active in every phase of Christian ministry. The disappointments you expressed earlier are relatively common. What do you think could be done to rectify the situation?

Don

Over the years I’ve been a member of many different congregations. The problems seem to be common. The hearts of the people need the Word and sacraments. Not until they are

properly motivated by being led back into the basics of salvation can the fruits of faith appear. Patiently waiting for God's Word to work is the key.

Roger

I agree. As you know that's one of the reasons why we have had as our on going goal to encourage all of our people to make Sunday school and Bible reading a regular habit. That's also part of the reason we started a midweek Bible class. However, don't you think that some specialized training is also necessary?

Don

Certainly. Most lay people need training in the various areas of ministry if they are to serve. If I'm not mistaken, I believe that Paul writing in Ephesians 4 states that Jesus gives Pastors and teachers to the church to equip God's people for works of service. I think sometimes individuals are willing and volunteer to serve only to become embarrassed or feel totally inadequate because they lack training. That kind of experience can lead to burnout very quickly.

Roger

Another thing to keep in mind is that we Christians don't all have the same gifts and abilities. Paul in Romans 12 encourages each Christian to identify his gift(s) and then with love and joy to serve Christ and his Church. Careful planning and analysis on the part of a nominating committee is vital. I know of a situation where a man has been elected to the council as chairman of the building and grounds committee. He's gifted in that area. But it would be disastrous to make him the secretary since he doesn't read or write. That's an extreme, but it makes the point.

Don

Another thing along those lines. Just because a man is a C. P. A. doesn't necessarily mean that he ought to be the church treasurer. Obviously, he has that gift. But people often have more than one gift. And asking a C. P. A. to be church treasurer may not always be the wisest choice. Variety is the spice of life and his service in the church may be enhanced if he is able to do something else provided the willingness and ability are there.

Roger

Don, in your years of service did you ever find yourself in an office or position in which you were expected to do something but you weren't quite sure just what?

Don

No, I wouldn't say that. Pastor Bartz took me under his wing and instructed me in the various workings of a Lutheran congregation after I was confirmed as an adult in the Lutheran church. However, in my years of service I have on occasion witnessed that type of thing. I can tell you that it is vital that people who are asked to serve be given clear instructions that are easy to follow if they are not to become frustrated and tempted to quit. In my opinion materials ought to be made available or some instruction provided for the entire congregation setting forth the various types of Christian ministry we try to carry on and what is involved in each type. That way when people are asked to serve they can go in with their eyes open.

Roger

I recall as a youngster being asked by my father to do things which he knew how to do and he assumed that I did too. Generally, I failed to carry out the task; he became upset with me; I became frustrated. Obviously, you had a very close working relationship with Pastor Bartz. What can pastors do to foster a good, working together relationship with their people?

Don

Well, Pastor Bartz put time in with me apart from regular meetings. He developed a very good rapport by being able to relate to people where they were at and didn't create an air of

superiority. He didn't talk down to people. He understood that people's faith isn't always the same and that they have varying degrees of understanding. He was confident in the Word and humble in his obedience.

Roger

In some of the reading I did I found a suggestion that the pastor and council plan and hold a special enrichment retreat. At this retreat aspects of the pastor's office and role in congregational affairs would be examined in the light of Scripture.

A simple thing like reviewing the called workers weekly, monthly and annual calendar can help do away with the bickering that can arise over who is busiest. The same would be done with the various offices of the council. Time would be spent on an in depth study of inter-personal relationships in Christ. I found it an interesting suggestion. But I wondered if it wouldn't be better to have a leader from outside the immediate group. It might prove helpful in discussing some of those difficult times that occur during meetings.

Don

We laymen find even more joy in serving if we have the feeling that we are working with the pastor and not for the pastor. While the pastor may have his own personal goals, goals that involve the congregation's life and work should be set by mutual agreement. The laity needs to be kept informed of the goals and progress.

Roger

Do you think that demands on a layman's time for work at or about church can at times be unreasonable?

Don

I've never seen or experienced that. It depends on what type of work the person wants to do. Personally I think that councilmen in general could spend more time helping with the visiting and spiritual care of the people. If a layman knows that his job is going to require more than the standard number of hours per week, he may certainly decline an office. And he should be permitted to do so without a guilt trip being laid on him. I'm also of the opinion that the welfare of the layman's family should be considered. Not only in terms of the time away from home and at church, but also in terms of instructing the wife and possibly family in the nature and importance of what Dad will be doing. That way they can be supportive and not resentful.

Roger

Most of us at one time or another have heard the lament, "Why are we the only ones who ever do anything around here? We're tired of doing all the work ourselves." Don, I don't know if you've ever heard that tune or sung it with your fine Irish tenor voice, but I think you can understand the problem and see how that attitude can lead to burnout.

Don

I believe that the song is sung usually by those who are engaged in some physical labor around the church, maintenance, repair, building and grounds type work. Their task isn't very glamorous. That type of work can take up a lot of time. Generally, however, they are the people who have the ability to do those things while others may lack health, strength, talent or interest to do what needs doing. Words of encouragement for doing well what is often an unpleasant job and words of appreciation expressing the entire congregation's gratitude for their efforts are helpful. A gentle reminder that whatever we do we do for the Lord is also in place.

Roger

Sometimes it really is the same people doing the same things because size of congregation or other circumstances dictate it. We can understand that people do get tired or

“saturated’ and occasionally need a break. Plans can be made and alternatives explored to alleviate that type of situation. A motivation problem can only be ministered to by the Word.

Don

Another thing. Good budget planning and providing adequate equipment and materials is also important in keeping the program going. Frustration results when people don’t have the things they need to do a job with satisfaction. The church typist may soon no longer be the church typist if the equipment doesn’t work.

Roger

Good planning and management of time is also important. Well planned and organized meetings with written reports and set agendas will save time and encourage rather than discourage attendance. Having meeting nights definitely set in the monthly calendar and sometimes even setting the length of time the meeting will run will help laymen and called workers plan their calendars.

Don

How many times haven’t we heard, “The church is only interested in my money and time not in me.”? Regular visits by informed members from the church expressing Christian love and concern for the whole membership’s spiritual welfare will nip a lot of those problems in the bud. It will also reveal where problems are developing so that they can be dealt with before the individual is approached with a stewardship or work program. Obviously, coordination of all the programs is vital.

Roger

Keeping the membership informed about the work program of the congregation, its problems, needs and progress can serve to stimulate interest, encourage greater participation and help develop a sense of working together. The church newsletter is commonly used for these purposes.

Don

I’m sure there are many more ideas and approaches that could be examined or tried in attempting to prevent burnout on the part of laypeople in their service in the church. Hopefully, we’ve touched on some bases. But Christian love and understanding that covers a multitude of wrongs coupled with respect and concern for each individual’s spiritual well-being are absolutely essential. The Bible says,

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

Books

- Albrecht , Karl. *Stress and the Manager Making it Work for You*. Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Clifts, New Jersey. 1979.
- Johnson, Douglas W. *The Care and Feeding of Volunteers*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee. 1978.
- Hayes, Tim. *Spirit Controlled Temperament*. Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois. 1966.
- Norden, Rudolph F. *Key to The Full Life*. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri. 1963.
- Perry, Charles Jr. *Why Christians Burnout*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Camden, New York . 1982.

Papers

- Russow, H. E. *The Peace of God Shall Keep our Hearts and Minds in Christ Jesus*. Colorado Springs, Colorado. 1971.

Articles

- Halvorson, Richard C . “The Pastor And The Board Maintaining Healthy Relationship.” *Leadership*.
- Fowler, John W. “Getting The Most From Volunteers.” *Ministry*, July, 1983.
- Held, Ronald G. “How To Develop Qualified Workers.” *Leadership*, Spring, 1984.
- Thomas, Larry. “Extinguishing Teacher Burnout.” *Your Church*, September, October, 1983.