

Burnout Proof Your Ministry

Greg Baird

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There he sat, under a broom tree (what exactly is a “broom” tree?). He was beaten, battered . . . burned out!! After all the great victories and the shining moments of faith in this man’s life, Elijah had had it. He wanted out. He couldn’t see beyond, well, the broom tree! “‘I have had enough, Lord,’ he said. ‘Take my life.’” (I Kings 19:4). What brought Elijah to this point? He had experienced some of the most compelling “ministry moments” described in the Bible. Remember God holding back the rain until Elijah spoke? Or meeting the poor woman and seeing God provide unlimited oil and flour? He was used by God to raise this same woman’s son from the dead. Then, after three years in the desert waiting on God, he came back and went head to head with one of the most wicked kings ever to set foot on the earth (Ahab, along with his wife Jezebel). Finally, a stunning victory over the prophets of Baal and an Olympian effort racing down a mountain had left Elijah running for his life. The enemy, in this case primarily Queen Jezebel, had had it with Elijah, and they were out to get him. Elijah had finally come to a point of giving up. “Just end it all right here, God”, was his pathetic plea. He was burned out on serving the Lord. (Read all about Elijah’s adventures in I Kings 17 – 19)

Have you ever been there? As a leader in children’s ministry, serving as a paid staff or a volunteer, sometimes we can get to the point where we just want it all to end. We may not want God to end our lives, but certainly we start looking for a way out of our “ministry lives”, don’t we? In spite of the victories – the child coming to Christ in our class, the teenager we invested so much in as a child who now lives a life of faith, the families we’ve been privileged to impact – the enemy (or sheer exhaustion!) has caught up with us. We feel isolated, like we’re fighting the battle alone, and we’ve been overwhelmed. Elijah said to God, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty... [but] I am the only one left.” (I Kings 19:10). We, like Elijah, feel like we just can’t continue. We just want it all to end!

Is this how God wants us to end up? Of course not! Galatians 6:9 says “Let us not become weary in doing good...” But how do we do that? How do we keep the discouragements from overcoming us? How do we keep from “ministering” to the point of exhaustion - physically, mentally, or both – when we sometimes are out there on our own? Let me suggest that, instead of getting “burned out”, we need to stay “**F.I.R.E.D. U.P.**” Here are seven ways to do so:

F – Focus on relationships

Relationships are what ministry is all about! First and foremost, our relationship with God. Ask yourself, when you’re feeling a little burned out, “How is my relationship with God?” Are you getting that necessary time in God’s Word? Are you spending time before Him in prayer, sharing your heart and listening to His? A significant question you might ask in regard to your relationship with God is “Am I making church attendance a priority?” Too often, in Children’s Ministry, we allow our attendance in the church service to suffer while we serve the kids. This is understandable sometimes, because serving the kids takes place when the service is going on! I would encourage you to make church attendance a priority.

Our family relationships are another high priority. We can pour ourselves so thoroughly into our ministry that our home relationships can suffer! We must remember that our family is our first area of ministry concern and, while we might ask our family to make adjustments to accommodate our ministry to kids, we can’t focus on our ministry to kids *at the expense of* our family.

Finally, in regards to focusing on relationships, we must remember that our ministry with the kids is really all about relationships. Sometimes our sense of “burnout” can result from focusing too much on trying to

Indications of Burnout – Psalm 22

- ! A sense of *distance from God*
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.” (vs. 1 – 2)
- ! A sense of *diminished value*
“But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads...” (vs. 6 – 7)
- ! A sense of *dissipating energy*
“I am poured out like water, and my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength has dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth...” (vs. 14 -15)

make the kids “do” what we want them to do instead of investing in helping them to “be” what God wants them to be. A change in “being” is the result of relationships.

I – Identify your calling

Why are you doing what you are doing? Is it because you are called by God to do it, or is it because you felt sorry for someone who was desperate for a preschool Sunday School teacher? Yes, for a season we might step in and assist in an area of great need, but over the long-term, we must be doing what God has called us to do or it will surely lead to burnout.

What is a calling? A calling is simply “a divine summons”. It might be something that lasts a lifetime, or it might be an “assignment” given by God for a shorter time. It is always something that you feel compelled to be part of, to accomplish, or to commit to. Not doing it leaves a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. In order to be successful in children’s ministry, there should be a sense of calling.

R – Recognize your gifts, abilities & limitations

In much the same way as recognizing what God has called us to do, we must also recognize what we are gifted at, what our past training and experiences have prepared you to do, and also what you are not good at. As a Children’s Pastor, my gifts and abilities are in the area of administration, leading and training others, and teaching large groups of kids. What I’m NOT gifted at is teaching small groups of kids. If I was required to do so, I’d be burned out in a matter of weeks! Aligning our strengths with our ministry requirements will not only help us *avoid* burnout, but also *energize* us to complete the ministry we’re called to do. As it says in I Peter 4:10, “God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God’s generosity can flow through you.”

E – Exercise your mind and body

Physical exercise may “profit us little” in comparison to spiritual exercises, but it will “profit us much” in dealing with the everyday stresses of life. Make sure you have some plan to get out and exercise – take a daily walk, visit the gym, or join the church softball team (my favorite!).

Mental and emotional well-being is very important to avoiding burn-out as well. Exercising our mind through reading, learning and other mind-stimulating exercises can lead to better emotional health, which allows more resiliency in everything we do. As

Dr. Richard Swenson points out in his book *Margin* (Navpress, Colorado Springs, 1992), “When we are emotionally resilient, we can confront our problems with a sense of hope and power. When our psychic reserves are depleted, however, we are seriously weakened. Emotional overload saps our strength, paralyzes our resolve, and maximizes our vulnerability.”

D – Develop your ministry skills

Growing yourself is essential to staying engaged with your ministry and avoiding burnout. We must depend on God to truly accomplish His purposes in our ministry, but simply knowing how to do what we are being asked to do relieves a great deal of stress and frustration. There are many ways to grow and develop our ministry skills, including:

- ◆ attending Children’s Ministry training events (Group’s *Children’s Ministry Magazine LIVE* is a great place to start!)
- ◆ investing in and reading resource books and materials (including those not specifically written for Children’s Ministry, like in the area of communication, leadership, or personal relationships)
- ◆ subscribing to e-Newsletters
- ◆ asking a more experienced person to teach and mentor you
- ◆ find Children’s Ministry network meetings to attend and participate in
- ◆ subscribe to Children’s Ministry training or personal development CD’s

Contributing Factors To Ministry Burnout

- ✓ A sense of too much to do
- ✓ Being ill-equipped to handle responsibilities
- ✓ Personal or family stresses
- ✓ Personality or relationship challenges
- ✓ Poor alignment of gifts & abilities
- ✓ Inability to say “no”
- ✓ Physical health challenges
- ✓ Little or no support from supervisors

U – Understand the place of your ministry

Our ministry has a tremendously important place in our life, but it is not the only thing we ought to invest ourselves in. Besides taking care of other responsibilities, we also ought to allow time for fun, for other areas of interest and for relaxation.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright once told of an incident that had a profound influence on the rest of his life. One winter when he was 9, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, no-nonsense uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. He pointed out his own tracks in the snow, straight and true, and then young Frank's tracks meandering all over the field. "Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again," his uncle said. "And see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that." Years later the world-famous architect liked to tell how this experience had greatly contributed to his philosophy of life. "I determined right then," he'd say, "not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had." (Story as told in Focus On The Family update letter, September, 1992).

P – Pray

When Jesus "got away from it all", what did He do? Invariably, we find Him praying. Praying can do everything from help us "vent" (yes, we can share our frustrations with the Lord!) to simply allow us to sit quietly (how often does that happen?). Prayer is the instrument God provides for us to have two-way communication with the Creator of the universe, yet we so often leave it sitting on the shelf. God says to "pray without ceasing", yet we often "cease to pray" when burnout nears. God wants to support us, to empower us in what He has called us to do. Isaiah 64:4 says, "For since the world began, no ear has heard, and no eye has seen a God like you, *who works for those who wait on him.*" Yes, God wants to "work for us" and one of the primary ways we can "wait on him" is through the avenue of prayer.

In the end, our friend Elijah was a burnout survivor. As he came before the Lord, God revealed Himself to Elijah and gently guided him to the next step in his ministry. In fact, He blessed Elijah with an assistant, Elisha (which is another great way to help avoid burnout – find an assistant! But that's another article!). As we faithfully serve God in our ministry to His little ones, let us pay close attention to staying F.I.R.E.D. U.P. instead of burned out.



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