

Death By Ministry (11 Parts)

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At our recent Reform & Resurge Conference in Seattle, my good friend Pastor Darrin Patrick from **The Journey** in Saint Louis spoke frankly of the burden that pastoral ministry is. I have pushed myself to the edge and over the edge of burnout throughout my nearly ten years in vocational ministry.

Subsequently, I have been doing a great deal of research that I am compiling in hopes of not only improving my own life but also the lives of the leaders at Mars Hill Church and the churches in our Acts 29 Network. As a leader I commonly set the pace of ministry for those under me, which can lead to wholesale burnout of others if I don't learn this lesson and teach it to others. The following points that I pray are helpful are some brief thoughts from what God has been teaching me as of late. Lastly, the fact that at least twenty-two separate organizations exist in the U.S. solely to deal with pre- and post-pastoral burnout indicate that this is a widespread problem that has only been identified and researched since the 1950s.

Part 1 - Some Statistics

The following statistics were presented by Pastor Darrin Patrick from research he has gathered from such organizations as **Barna** and **Focus on the Family**.

Pastors

- Fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches.
- Fifty percent of pastors' marriages will end in divorce.
- Eighty percent of pastors and eighty-four percent of their spouses feel unqualified and discouraged in their role as pastors.
- Fifty percent of pastors are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living.
- Eighty percent of seminary and Bible school graduates who enter the ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years.
- Seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression.
- Almost forty percent polled said they have had an extra-marital affair since beginning their ministry.
- Seventy percent said the only time they spend studying the Word is when they are preparing their sermons.

Pastors' Wives

- Eighty percent of pastors' spouses feel their spouse is overworked.
- Eighty percent of pastors' spouses wish their spouse would choose another profession.



- The majority of pastor's wives surveyed said that the most destructive event that has occurred in their marriage and family was the day they entered the ministry.

Part 2 - Some Signs

The following are indicators that ministry leaders are heading toward burnout, if not already there. Sadly, we too often become so focused on our tasks and responsibilities that we fail to see these warning signs until it is too late.

- Unusual mood swings that may include weeping without just cause, anger, or depression
- Exhaustion
- Paranoia and suspicion
- Weight change, including gain or loss
- Moments of panic and feeling totally overwhelmed
- Fantasizing about dying or running away to get away from the pressure
- Fight-or-flight cycles where you rise up to intimidate and conquer others or run away from difficulties just to avoid them
- Insomnia, including difficulty falling asleep or remaining asleep, which can lead to a reliance on sleeping pills
- Too frequent use of alcohol or tobacco
- High blood pressure
- Comforting yourself with unhealthy foods packed with fat, sugar, and simple carbohydrates
- General irritability
- Reckless driving
- Change in sexual desire of either noticeable increase or decrease
- Notable ongoing sexual temptation
- Health-related issues such as irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, heart trouble, chronic sickness, and stomach problems including ulcers
- A victim mentality that sees the world as against you and everyone as an enemy to varying degrees
- Shopping sprees and unnecessary financial spending
- Reliance on caffeine to self-medicate
- Children, friends, and loved ones begin to feel like yet another burden

Part 3 - Some Solutions

The following are simply some things I do in my own life that I have found helpful to prevent me from dying a death by ministry.

1. **Fill your plate** - In a conversation with Pastor Wayne Cordeiro of [New Hope Christian Fellowship in Hawaii](#), he gave some very sagely advice. He said that each person's plate is a different size; each person needs to first find the size of their plate and then fill it only with those things that are of highest priority. And, before adding any additional things to our full plate, we must take something else off to leave space for the new duty. Finding the size of one's plate takes time and attention. For example, I have personally seen that high-level leaders have an energy level that is unusually high and those working under them who seek to keep up with their pace find themselves quickly burning out.



2. **Exercise** - Sadly, most pastors and Christian leaders I know are woefully out of shape. Many of them pound their pulpits against rock music and alcohol while their huge gut jiggles in mockery of their own gluttony. In the early years of our church plant, I ate poorly, slept infrequently, and lived off of the constant adrenaline of perpetual stress. As a result, I weighed 235 pounds at my highest point. Through regular diet and exercise I dropped back down to a lean 190 pounds. But in the past year I have seen my weight climb back up to 210 pounds as my diet and exercise routine has been trashed by laziness, travel, and the constant state of emergency. So, yesterday I cleaned out my garage and plugged my treadmill back in so I can resume daily running and lifting conveniently at home. I got started exercising this morning. I find that when I work out, I drop weight, feel better, sleep better, and am better able to lead out of health with energy. The experts say the best time to exercise is in the morning and those who work out early in the day are most likely to remain on an exercise regimen.
3. **Do not allow technology to be your Lord** - A recent issue of *Fortune* magazine had an insightful article about the average day of some of the most successful CEOs in the country. These people lived lives ruled by technology, including spending whole days each week doing nothing but obsessively responding to every single email they received. The article mentioned that the average American worker is interrupted once every eleven minutes and takes twenty-five minutes to refocus on their original task. The problem is that the alarms and bells of our technology deceive us into reacting to them even when the matter they call us to is neither urgent or important. So, turning off the chime and vibrate on your phone, only checking your voicemail and email on certain days at certain times, and turning the notification off on your email will itself go a long way toward your healing. You won't have the unpredictable fire drill caused by the bells of technology. Imagine what the world must have been like before the 1200s when the first mechanical clock was invented, or before minute and second hands were added in the 1600s, or before 1879 when Edison produced the first light bulb, thereby enabling us to stay up all night.
4. **Sabbath** - This includes taking five minutes off every hour to catch your breath, go for a walk, stand up at your desk, etc. It includes taking thirty to sixty minutes off a day to nap, go for a walk, read, garden, or whatever else releases your pressure and helps you to relax. This also means taking one day off a week to Sabbath, including a date night if you are in a serious relationship or married. This also includes a day or two off a month for silence and solitude and a few weeks a year for an actual vacation that does not leave you more tired than before it began.
5. **Pick a release valve** - Because ministry causes pressure, any leader without an acceptable release valve will either burn out from stress or blow up from sin. So, the key to releasing pressure is to find and use an acceptable release valve. This may include exercise, gardening, a hobby, journaling, or my favorite, dropping the top on my Jeep and heading into the mountains for a day of adventure to find new lakes to swim in.
6. **Work on your life, not just in it** - Rather than just pulling more hours and trying harder, time needs to be regularly taken to pull back and look at your life so that you can work on it rather than just run in it. For me this includes printing out my schedule every few months to review how I spent my time and inform my assistant of what was a waste of time that should not happen again. This also means taking time to read books on the issue of time management and burnout and biographies of great leaders to learn from their lives, and possibly even taking time to meet with a Biblical counselor to get insight on your own life and tendencies.
7. **Leave margin** - When we push our bodies, schedules, minds, and budgets to the point where there is no margin, all that it takes to destroy us is one unforeseen expense, one small emergency, or one small cold. Therefore, leaving margin is the key to not being crushed when life does not go according to plan. This means leaving extra money in the bank, leaving extra

time between appointments, and preparing to arrive at places early so that if there is traffic you will still be on time and not stressed.

8. **Spend most of your time training leaders** - While thousands of people came to see Jesus, only a handful really knew Him, and only three knew Him intimately. This is because Jesus spent his time training leaders to do ministry and without doing the same we will die from our work and sadly see it die with us as well.
9. **Work from conviction, not guilt** - Conviction comes from God and guilt comes from people. The key to being both fruitful and healthy is to do what God wants and not always say yes to or let yourself be pushed around by people who are demanding and have perfected the art of making you feel guilty if you do not do what they demand.

4. What are the sources of greatest stress?

1. Marriage
2. Troubles with boss
3. Detention in jail or other institution
4. Death of spouse
5. Major change in sleeping habits
6. Death of a close family member
7. Major change in eating habits (amount of food or change in meal hours)
8. Foreclosure on a loan
9. Revision of personal habits (dress, manners, associations, etc.)
10. Death of a close friend
11. Minor violation of the law
12. Outstanding personal achievement
13. Pregnancy
14. Major change in the health of a family member
15. Sexual difficulties
16. In-law troubles
17. Major change in number of family get-togethers
18. Major change in financial status
19. Gaining a new family member
20. Change in residence
21. Child leaving home
22. Marital separation
23. Major change in church activities
24. Marital reconciliation
25. Being fired from work
26. Divorce
27. Changing to a different line of work
28. Major change in the number of arguments with spouse
29. Major change in responsibilities at work
30. Wife beginning or ceasing work outside the home
31. Major change in working hours or conditions
32. Major change in usual type or amount of recreation
33. Taking on a mortgage
34. Taking on other major loans

35. Major personal injury or illness
36. Major business readjustment
37. Major change in social activities
38. Major change in living conditions
39. Retirement from work
40. Vacation
41. Christmas
42. Changing to a new school
43. Beginning or ceasing formal schooling

5. How does the body respond to stress?

The body responds to stress with a fight-or-flight response of shutting down or rising up. In the flight response we are prone to take on a victim identity in which we blame others and believe that the world is against us. In the fight response our nervous and endocrine systems respond as if we were under the threat of possible death. The body cannot distinguish between modern stress and life-threatening danger; it responds to both in the following ways:

- The brain signals the release of hypothalamic, pituitary, and adrenal hormones.
- The adrenal glands release cortisol and adrenaline.
- The sympathetic nervous system releases norepinephrine all over the body.
- Hair stands up, the heart races, we sweat, the stomach churns, and the bowels loosen.
- Our blood thickens in defense of injury and our blood pressure elevates.
- Endorphins are released to dull pain.
- Glucose is released for quick energy.
- Adrenaline, which is released in seconds, is moderated by cortisol, which takes hours to bring us back to a normal state.
- Our vision is clear, our attention is focused, our memory is aware, and we feel alert and powerful or simply "on."

Once the body is in this elevated state, it takes hours for it to recalibrate itself to normal. But if there is additional stress and/or danger then the entire cycle begins again and we are caught in a Perpetual Stress Response; our body is stuck "on" like a car that is never turned off. This wears down all of its systems. Over time our stomach lining thins (leading to ulcers), our bones thin, we are open to diabetes, our immune system weakens (leaving us susceptible to colds and sickness), and our body stores fat in our stomach close to our heart. To regulate its levels, the body then craves tobacco (to calm the brain) and comfort foods and we grow fatter. In men, hormone levels decrease. For some women in extreme stress, such as combat, their bodies will actually cease menstruating. Worse still, when stuck "on" we cannot sleep, which only further destroys our well-being. This all occurs whether the stress was imposed on us or accepted by us.

6. What are the twelve steps to burnout?



Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger and his colleague Gail North have divided the path to burnout into twelve steps. These steps do not necessarily follow one another in order. Some people skip some steps, go through several at the same time, or experience them in various orders.

1. A compulsion to prove oneself (commitment to win no matter what)
2. Working harder (feeling irreplaceable they buckle down, raise personal expectations, and take on more and more responsibility)
3. Neglecting their needs (eating, sleeping, playing are sacrificed for performance)
4. Displacement of conflicts (something is wrong but I'm unsure what)
5. Revision of values (friends, hobbies, and fun are dismissed)
6. Denial of emerging problems (cynism, anger, and despising of others for being stupid, lazy, demanding, and undisciplined)
7. Withdrawal (socially withdrawn, loss of hope and direction, pursuit of sinful relief such as drugs, sex, or alcohol)
8. Obvious behavior changes (shy, apathetic, depressed, haggard)
9. Depersonalization (lose contact with self, life becomes meaningless and mechanical)
10. Inner emptiness (often overcompensated for with oversexing, overeating, drug and alcohol abuse in place of leisure time)
11. Depression (indifferent, hopeless, exhausted, life loses meaning and everything from agitation to apathy sets in)
12. Burnout (suicidal thoughts and/or obsession with heaven, physical and mental collapse, need

7. What are the signs of possible burnout?

The following are indicators that ministry leaders are heading toward burnout, if not already there. Sadly, we too often become so focused on our tasks and responsibilities that we fail to see these warning signs until it is too late.

- Unusual mood swings that may include weeping without just cause, anger, or depression
- Exhaustion
- Nervous twitch
- Fragmentation
- Disassociation or checking out
- Canker sores
- Paranoia and suspicion
- Weight change, including gain or loss
- Moments of panic and feeling totally overwhelmed
- Fantasizing about dying or running away to get away from the pressure
- Fight-or-flight cycles where you rise up to intimidate and conquer others or run away from difficulties just to avoid them
- Insomnia, including difficulty falling asleep or remaining asleep, which can lead to a reliance on sleeping pills
- Too frequent use of alcohol or tobacco
- High blood pressure
- Comforting yourself with unhealthy foods packed with fat, sugar, and simple carbohydrates
- General irritability

- Reckless driving
- Change in sexual desire of either noticeable increase or decrease
- Notable ongoing sexual temptation
- Health-related issues such as irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, heart trouble, chronic sickness, and stomach problems including ulcers
- A victim mentality that sees the world as against you and everyone as an enemy to varying degrees
- Shopping sprees and unnecessary financial spending
- Reliance on caffeine to self-medicate
- Children, friends, and loved ones begin to feel like yet another burden

8. What margins help to prevent burnout?

When we push our bodies, schedules, minds, and budgets to the point where there is no margin, all that it takes to destroy us is one unforeseen expense, one small emergency, or one small cold. Therefore, leaving margin is the key to not being crushed when life does not go according to plan. This means leaving extra money in the bank, leaving extra time between appointments, and preparing to arrive at places early so that if there is traffic you will still be on time and not stressed. There are four basic areas where margin is essential and to wisely steward those areas we must ask what fills these buckets:

1. Emotional Energy
 - What fills this bucket?
 - What empties this bucket?
2. Physical Energy
 - What fills this bucket?
 - What empties this bucket?
3. Time
 - What fills this bucket?
 - What empties this bucket?
4. Finances
 - What fills this bucket?
 - What empties this bucket?

Which of these buckets fills up most quickly for you? Which bucket fills up most slowly for you? Which bucket empties most quickly for you? Which bucket empties most slowly for you? What can you do to count the cost in each of these areas before you make a decision?

9. How can I better organize my life to reduce stress?

1. Accept the size of your plate and fill it.
2. Exercise.
3. Do not allow technology to be your Lord.
 - a. Have two cell phones.



- b. Have two email accounts.
 - c. Have someone schedule appointments and screen all email.
 - d. Consider getting rid of your voicemail.
 - e. Delete emails quickly.
 - f. Have an assistant send you a daily items email.
 - g. Use an out-of-office autoreply as needed.
4. Sabbath hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annually.
 5. Schedule your vacations first and block them out on your calendar.
 6. Pick an acceptable release valve.
 7. Appoint someone other than your wife as your lightning rod.
 8. Spend most of your time training leaders.
 9. Pay attention to what God is saying through your body and emotions.
 10. Feel your emotions but do not allow them to drive you in a bad direction.
 11. Do not worry yourself into a frenzy.
 12. Work from conviction, not guilt.
 13. Get a coach or a counselor.
 14. Have a study and an office.
 15. Schedule meetings rarely.
 16. Say no, and keep saying no.
 17. Get a wedding coordinator.
 18. Carry a notebook at all times to jot thoughts and notes.
 19. See your days as buckets to fill.
 20. Consider regular medical massage.

10. What can be done to help the pastors' wife?

- She needs a clearly defined and guarded role.
- She needs some help with the kids and house.
- She needs some help getting to and from church on Sundays.
- She needs a designated parking place.
- She needs a handful of safe relationships with other godly women.
- She needs to choose her own friends and define her own relationships.
- She needs to see her first jobs as Christian, wife, and mother, not free hire for the church.

11. In what ways should a pastor view their ministry?

- Ministry is your fourth priority after being a Christian, husband, and father.
- Ministry is your job, not your life.
- God rewards faithfulness, not just fruitfulness.
- Your salvation and righteousness are gifts from Jesus and not contingent upon your performance.
- If you do not Sabbath, God will impose a Sabbath upon you.
- A series of sprints, with nine natural breaks out of the pulpit, rather than a marathon.
 1. First Sunday of the Year (January)
 2. Daylight Savings Day (March)
 3. Mother's Day (May)
 4. Memorial Day (May)
 5. Father's Day (June)

6. Fourth of July (July)
 7. Labor Day Weekend (September)
 8. Thanksgiving (November)
 9. Week after Christmas (December)
- Jesus is the Senior Pastor and the church is His

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