

Burnout Proof YOUR MINISTRY

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LEARN THE 4 R'S OF A BUILT-TO-LAST MINISTRY...OR ELSE

Recently I reunited with several buddies from my early days as a youth worker in northern Pennsylvania. Two decades ago, we were each just out of the starting blocks, planting our first ministries in neighboring small churches and working together on combined events. Now we're scattered across the state and firmly entrenched in middle age. As we reminisced, one guy asked, "Who here still works with youth?"

Out of the five of us, I was the only one.

Proudly, I rolled up my pant leg to reveal a nasty carpet burn on my shin-about six inches long, three inches wide, tomato red, and swollen into an ugly welt.

"Oooo!" they said in unison, eyes big as pizzas.

I rolled my pant leg down and stood tall: "Indoor floor hockey. Diving to hit the ball. Trying to make a goal."

"Did you score?" they quickly asked.

With a slight smile, I answered, "You better believe it, and it was worth it."

I could tell my story hit on something deep in each of them-it surfaced an ache for what could have been if burnout and other more subtle obstacles hadn't derailed their dreams. All of us have faced down the specter of burnout... or will. First we think, then we say, "I can't do this anymore." Some of us quit and never return to youth work. But some of us, somehow, respond to doubt-producing burnout with, "Yes, I can." This article is about the "somehow." During my quarter-century in youth ministry, my burnout survival strategy has boiled down to four R's.

1. REALIZE THAT EFFECTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY IS A PROCESS, NOT A FORMULA.

Soon after I launched myself into youth ministry, I heard a seminar speaker say that working with teenagers is like farming-redwood-tree farming, not vegetable farming.¹ Twenty-five years later, I know the truth of that comparison-it's often helped me through the short-term frustrations that precede burnout.

I've tended vegetable gardens since I was a boy. You break up the soil, bury the seeds, keep them watered, and uproot the weeds. If you follow the formula, you'll have a ripe harvest in a few weeks.

Not so in youth ministry.

You can plow your field with an exciting outreach event, scatter your spiritual seeds, sprinkle them with holy water, and attempt to pull a few weeds in your weekly message-but you won't have a ripe crop of teenage disciples in a few weeks. If it were like that, there would be a long, long line of youth ministry recruits waiting to sign up, and many more would stay in for the long haul.

Instead, the reality is that some kids respond and others don't. Many of those who respond don't stick with it. Those who do stick with it have more troubles than our skills can address, let alone fix.² Then we're confronted with problem parents, critical church staffers, and cultural chaos. If this were a vegetable garden, it'd be a disaster. But if I'm growing redwoods...

Redwood-tree farmers know that the person who plants the sapling likely won't be around to see the tree mature into something truly great. And that's a good perspective for youth pastors/farmers. Our teenagers need activities that will prune and shape them, teaching and encouragement that will nurture them, and advice that can help them repel threatening diseases. But they also need to stand alone as they grow and mature-to feel themselves holding firm against the winds, spreading their branches, and deepening their roots. Early on, they don't look very impressive. They need time to grow...lots of it.

For example, Beth was a middle-school brat in my first youth group (it was a part-time paid position that lasted two years). She was a nonstop talker who knew just how to distract others from what I was trying to do. She was often obnoxious. She stayed in the group, however, even after I left. Years later, when she called to ask if I'd officiate at her wedding (her church was between pastors), I learned that she'd graduated from college with a degree in education and had become an elementary school teacher. She'd also been active in her church and wanted to integrate her faith into her marriage. I played at least a small part in that faith-cultivating process.

Only those who stick with youth ministry through their "burnout moments" get to revel in the beauty of the redwoods they've planted and nurtured. Longevity brings the blessing of perspective. Over time I've seen how God has influenced a teenager's trajectory, and that fuels my patience when a middle schooler won't pay attention or a high schooler drifts away or some adult gets irritated because we returned to the church parking lot 30 minutes late. Most burnout moments are mere bumps in the road, not dead ends.

2. REMEMBER TO REMEMBER WHY YOU GOT INTO YOUTH MINISTRY.

Burnout claims many youth workers because they simply forget about the reasons that influenced them to do this demanding work in the first place. We must remember why God called us to this.

Before the fall schedule rockets off the launching pad, I take time away from my responsibilities to purposely remind myself of why I'm doing this incredibly difficult thing called youth ministry. And whenever difficult circumstances make me wonder why I spend huge chunks of my life on teenagers who have no blood or financial connection to me, I remind myself why I'm in it.

During my lonely and confused adolescence, I was profoundly helped by a few important adults in my life. Each summer, camp director Chief Bob always made sure to ask about my parental problems and other life questions. He probed my faith discoveries and responded respectfully to my insights. Meanwhile, my Sunday school teacher and Bible study leader Bruce pursued me with focused attention, and seemed always ready to spend time listening to me. I owe them (and many others) a debt I can only repay by heeding Christ's words, "Do unto others."

I see myself in so many of the young people who surround me. They need guides-mentors who will walk with them through their tumultuous teenage years. I can't stand by while they attempt that journey alone. And I have a passion for raising up well-prepared, intelligent, and spiritually mature leaders in my community, nation, and world. You don't get people like that unless the "redwood farmers" in the community do their jobs.

3. REPENT OF YOUR FALSE MINISTRY MOTIVATIONS.

In a calling that has many demands and few tangible rewards, wrong motivations will put you on the fast track to burnout. Over the last two-plus decades of ministry, I've sometimes had to catch myself, and then repent from operating out of false or cloaked motivations. For example...

* I'm not in youth ministry to find the fountain of youth. It's embarrassing to have to say this, but nothing stops the enemy advance of creaky joints and an aching lower back. Every time I play a physically active game, I'm reminded of just how old I am. That doesn't mean I stop playing-I just accept my limits and occasionally brag about my injuries. But the real quality of my youth ministry has little to do with my physical limitations. Today I'm less tempted to focus on big, busy activities and more set on discerning kids' spiritual and emotional needs and responding to them. I practice a slower, more person-centered ministry. And I don't wear down as quickly.

Years ago I watched a video that featured a bunch of youth group members lauding one of their adult leaders as a fun, caring, and insightful mentor to them. Then I saw the guy-he was a man in his 70s whose "job" was to hang out with these kids and help out wherever he could. I'd like that to be me in another 25 years.

* I'm not in youth ministry to (surprise) gain fame and fortune with my catchphrase-worthy programs and magic touch for changing lives. Of all high school seniors who play football, just one in 17 will go on to play in college. Of those, one in 50 will get drafted by a National Football League team. That means that approximately 0.09 percent of high school senior boys who play football will eventually be drafted by an NFL team. Those statistics sound about right for youth ministers who are hoping to make a name for themselves. Fame and fortune are likely not headed down the highway toward you. And if you do taste them, they probably won't last.

I'm not in youth ministry as a stepping stone to adult ministry. My purpose in youth work can't be to prepare me for an adult ministry position. If that's my goal, I pitifully misunderstand the nonhierarchical nature of ministry in God's kingdom.

However, youth work does prepare you for working with adult leaders in the church. Your experience with junior highers may develop skills you need to work with trustees and church board members who can't focus on what's important, who won't listen to your wisdom, and who sabotage your best efforts. I've often used youth ministry exercises to open administrative meetings and remind the group of its purpose, goals, and the necessity of teamwork. I know if I can deal with arguing 14-year-olds, I can deal with aggravated adults.

* I'm not in youth ministry to "fix" kids who've suffered from negative cultural and parental influences. I must repent of my desire to fix what teenagers' culture and their parents have messed up. Even Jesus couldn't do that, at least not in his first coming. At best, I can help them resist the pervasive evil influences around them.

To make it long term in youth ministry, I dare not listen to the voices that cry out, "Keep those young people off the street and out of trouble!" That's so beneath my true calling. Whose goals are those, anyway? People who don't like teenagers, mostly. I'm in this for and with young people, right where they're at.

4. REFRESH YOUR BODY AND SPIRIT...JUST DO IT!

Youth ministry responsibilities burn lots of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. Over time, this energy drain makes us restless, weary, and worn out-unless we've refreshed our bodies and spirits. When I'm on the verge of burnout, it's usually because I haven't sought refreshment for my body and spirit. Without lots of external support and internal reinforcement, I'm doomed as a youth leader.

* I must maintain a private spiritual life, growing in relationship with God. My times of Scripture reading, study, and contemplation are vital.

* I must join in corporate worship, fellowship, and service beyond what I do with the youth group. Sometimes I visit another church or attend a concert just to offer praise and hear God's Word in a new way.

* I must be part of a youth ministry team. Once, and only once, I tried to fly solo in youth ministry. On a camping trip that included a day at an amusement park, one of our kids went into diabetic shock. I nearly went into "youth worker shock" and vowed to never lead a group by myself again. Now I share all aspects of our program with a small cadre of adult leaders. And I call on parents and church friends to assist whenever needed.

* I must attend learning opportunities that deepen my knowledge reserve for youth ministry. I need to be with leaders whose words and experiences validate my struggles and esteem my efforts. That's why I make sure to attend local and regional training events³-some of them specifically aimed at youth ministry and some that deal with wider issues of faith, culture, and ministry.

* I must frequently tell others about what God is doing in the lives of young people, and what may yet happen. By reporting to fellow church members, or showing off carpet burns to old friends, I encourage their support and prayers. Plus, I reaffirm God's presence and activity in the midst of my ministry endeavors.

* I must occasionally take time off and away. God can handle it, and I'll be better for it. I sometimes skip a weekly meeting and opt out of a youth event, trusting my teammates to lead and giving myself a time of rest and recreation on my own or with my family.

* I must enjoy the young "redwoods" God sends me, have fun with them, and give thanks for the privilege of helping them grow closer to Christ. If it's all drudgery, I spiral into ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction. But if I can look forward to a good water fight, a crazy game, or an innovative Bible study with a group of kids I (mostly!) enjoy, it's all a blessing beyond measure.

I still think my carpet-burn youth ministry is worth it. My leg has healed now, so I'm ready for another wild game. When I can't play anymore, I still plan to be here, able to minister more effectively than ever before.

1 If you really want to make an impact on the world for generations to come, embrace your role as a "redwood farmer." The comparison is worth exploring: Redwoods are the tallest trees in the world-one reaching over 360 feet tall grows in the Humboldt Redwoods State Park. One giant redwood sequoia, the General Sherman Tree in Sequoia National Park, is 272 feet high and more than 36 feet in diameter and is widely considered to be the world's largest tree overall. You've likely got a few "giant redwoods" sitting in your youth room right now-probably the ones who are giving you the biggest headaches.

