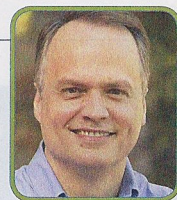


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# “Where is the joy?”: Three keys to avoiding burnout

**T**wenty-three years ago I had almost completely burned out as a pastor.

Multiple factors contributed to my ministerial “near death” experience at the young age of 30. I served in a community suffering massive economic collapse. My church loved to fight. Several mem-

“I don’t know where the joy is. But if I don’t find it again soon, I won’t survive in this business much longer.”

Fortunately, I found the joy again, and joy continues to this day. At the age of 53, I have more vocational joy than ever before. What follows are practices that rekindled my joy and have kept it

us to “divert daily, withdraw weekly, and abandon annually.”

That quote saved my vocation. While driving home from the workshop, I promised God and myself that I would faithfully live out that threefold challenge. When I got home, I made the same promise to my family. Keeping that promise

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bers relentlessly criticized me. I was also working on a doctor of ministry degree, leading preaching and worship workshops, and writing books and articles. I routinely stayed up until two in the morning doing my work.

After two years in that grueling environment, I found myself depleted—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. At my lowest moment, a concerned colleague asked me a question that rattled me to the core.

“Martin,” he said, “where is the joy?”

His brutally honest question stunned me until I finally responded,

alive for more than 20 years. My hope and prayer includes that you can learn from them as well.

## Practice self-care

Three weeks after admitting my vocational joy had vanished, I registered for a clergy self-care workshop. The presenter covered all the pertinent topics: getting regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, taking time off, setting boundaries, practicing spiritual disciplines, and developing a support system. At the end of the day, the workshop leader, like a revival preacher, offered an invitation. He challenged each one of

required significant adjustments to my workaholic lifestyle. I began making these difficult adjustments by negotiating my primary priorities with our personnel committee. We agreed that my top five priorities were preaching, worship leadership, big picture leadership, staff supervision, and limited pastoral care. Beyond that, many of my duties had to be relinquished. For example, I delegated many of my responsibilities to staff and key lay leaders. I quit attending a large number of meetings and activities. And I also curtailed some of my writing projects. I will not pretend

these changes came easy. They also disappointed some members who wanted me to continue my old but unsustainable schedule. However, other than affirming faith in Christ, marrying my wife, having two children, and becoming a minister, this serious commitment to practice these self-care disciplines was the most life-giving decision I ever made.

The day after the workshop, I immediately implemented the “divert daily, withdraw weekly, abandon annually” strategy. This felt so good I am still doing it more than 20 years later. Four days a week my daily diversion means a trip to the gym or a ride on my bike. Most days it means writing a journal entry, eating dinner with my wife, and reading a book or magazine or watching television. Although the diversions vary, I carve out time every day for non-church-related activities and that makes me a more balanced person and pastor.

I withdraw weekly every Friday. My church knows Friday as my day off and respects it. When I arrived at my current appointment, I told the congregation that unless somebody dies, I do not work Fridays. I purposely do not schedule many Friday activities either. Instead, I sleep late, read, write emails to friends, and go out to lunch with my wife. Friday evenings my wife and I sometimes get together with friends or invite our daughter and son-in-law for dinner. This daily diversion consistently restores my soul.

Now, my longstanding practice includes taking two to three continuous weeks of vacation in July. I also take a week off in January. Because our Annual Conference recommends that clergy take four weeks of vacation per year, I do not ask permission. I inform our staff parish relations committee of the four-week policy, tell them when I will be gone, schedule others to cover in my absence, and go. The

extended time off nurtures me: mind, body, and soul. My church manages to survive.

### Connect with others

After two months of diverting daily and withdrawing weekly (I had not yet abandoned annually, but it was on the calendar), the rector of our local Episcopal church invited me to lunch. I did not know it at the time, but he was evaluating me for a spot in his weekly clergy support group. Several days later, I received an invitation to join the group. It consisted of an Episcopal rector, a Roman Catholic priest, a Presbyterian elder, two United Methodist ministers, and a Baptist preacher.

Our congregation served a severely economically distressed community. Several major industries had closed down almost overnight. People left town by the thousands. Anxiety and anger consumed the community, including the churches.

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Every congregation in town was hemorrhaging members, money, and morale. Having a group of clergy friends who understood that environment made it possible to weather the storm without drowning. We even managed to produce a good bit of laughter. The group gathered every Wednesday morning at 11:00 for dialogue and support followed by lunch.

Since those difficult days, I have either joined or created a clergy support group in every ministry setting I have served. I simply could not survive pastoral ministry without a group of close clergy friends.

### Remember the positives

After several months of practicing self-care and connecting with my clergy group, I felt myself slowly rising up from the dead. The final step in resurrecting my vocational joy began with a three-month journaling experiment. Keeping a journal was not new to me; I had done so since high school. However, given my

dismal ministry setting, it digressed into a laundry list of complaints, whining, and negativity. So I decided to shift the focus.

First, I went out and bought a new journal. Then, on the first page, in large bold print, I wrote down these words from the apostle Paul: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8, NRSV). Although I continued to record vocational struggles in my journal, I made a new rule. At the end of every entry, I had to list at least one thing about pastoral ministry I was grateful for on that day. That simple discipline helped transform my vocation from joyless duty to heartfelt gratitude. My three-month experiment of remembering the positives evolved into a lifelong, life-giving practice. More than 20 years later, I continue to affirm the

positives of my vocation, both in my journal and in my daily prayers. While I love many things about this vocation, three items in particular consistently stand out.

First, I love the *freedom* of this vocation. Ministers are blessed with remarkable autonomy. For example, few people enjoy the flexible schedule that clergy do. If we want to attend our child's school program, spend an afternoon reading a book, or make a trip to the dentist, we do not have to ask permission. We also get to set our own priorities, goals, and dreams. And, as long as we cover our essential pastoral tasks, we can specialize in a particular passion like counseling, small groups, evangelism, or worship. Most people only dream of a job with such freedom and flexibility.

Second, I love the *relationships* of this vocation. Pastoral ministry, especially in long-tenure pastorates, allows us to build relationships with members and staff that deeply enrich our lives. I know church members



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Here at the *Ministry* magazine editorial offices, we are planning another issue featuring and recognizing the work of pastors who have more than one church. In order for this issue to be valuable to ministers around the world, we need your participation. You are invited to prepare an article for *Ministry* magazine. Here are some suggested topics you may consider:

- Training lay leaders to effectively work with you
- Designing sermons to meet the needs of different churches
- Addressing family life in a multichurch district with special emphasis on children
- Organizing the evangelistic outreach in a district
- Coordinating boards and committees in a district
- Working with the communities in the district
- Creating a spirit of cooperation among the churches
- Recognizing the needs of the pastor's spouse and children for continuity as the pastor preaches in a different church each week

If you pastor several churches, you will no doubt have other topics in mind.

**NEXT STEPS:**

- Email, write, or call and discuss with us the topic or topics you are suggesting.
- Once we have agreed on the specific topic, we will ask you to proceed with the writing.

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can sometimes be difficult. But most of them are good people who love, respect, and support us, and it is a joy to be their pastor. Who else, besides clergy, get to make relationship building the core of their vocation?

Third, I love the *transcendence* of this vocation. Pastors have the remarkable privilege of pointing people to something bigger than ourselves. We stand in the pulpit and share the Word of God for the people of God. We visit the hospital and remind people by our presence that God is with them even in their fears. And, in death, we affirm, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Who could ask for more from any vocation?

### Conclusion

The movie *The Prince of Tides* tells the story of a high school teacher and football coach named Tom Wingo who lost his joy, both vocationally and personally, but then found it again. The beginning of the movie finds Tom struggling with unemployment, burnout, and marital problems. However, after a long and painful process of healing, Tom reunites with his wife and children, returns to his vocation, and finds renewed contentment and joy in his life. In the final scene of the film, we see Tom mowing the grass of his high school football field. In voiceover narration, Tom says, "I am a teacher and a coach, and a well-loved man, and it is more than enough."

As did Tom in *The Prince of Tides*, I lost my vocational joy. However, by practicing self-care, connecting with others, and remembering the positives, I found it again. Best of all, the joy continues today, stronger and richer than ever before. Therefore, I can affirm with Tom (with minor revisions), "I am a pastor and a writer, and a well-loved man, and it is more than enough." 

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## Pastoral burnout statistics

According to the *New York Times* (August 1, 2010): "Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could."

- 45% of pastors say that they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the demands of the job.
- 52% of pastors say they and their spouses believe that being in pastoral ministry is hazardous to their family's well-being and health.
- 70% do not have any close friends.
- 75% report severe stress causing anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear, and alienation.
- 80% of pastors say they have insufficient time with their spouse.
- 90% work more than 50 hours a week.
- 94% feel under pressure to have a perfect family.
- 1,500 pastors leave their ministries each month due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure. (The above statistics come from PastorBurnout.com.)

## Resources for dealing with pastoral burnout

- PastorBurnout.com is an invaluable resource on pastoral burnout. It includes burnout statistics, causes of burnout, humor for dealing with burnout, and resources for overcoming burnout.
- The following three books will also help pastors deal with burnout:
- Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2009).
- Anne Jackson, *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
- C. Welton Gaddy, *A Soul Under Siege: Surviving Clergy Depression* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).