



Church members can burn out too

TN24 Training Notes series: Management

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The problem of burn-out among clergy and Christian staff has been noted and discussed for some time. But it happens within church congregations too, especially when a heavy load falls on a few willing, or not so willing, shoulders.

How can we help church volunteers not to be put in a position where their health, their family and their spirituality are put at risk? Whose fault is it when it happens? These notes offer some guidance to help churches consider the issues.

It is, perhaps, not a popular topic to cover. After all, once someone has offered to do a job in our church we come to rely on their contribution. We hardly want to let them go. But this is an issue that must be faced.

Two parts of the problem

1 Why burn-out happens

To understand the issue, put yourself in the shoes of the individual church member. You agree to take on the role of helper in the young people's group, or leader of the home group, or Gift Aid Secretary, or convener of the Outreach Group, or editor of the prayer diary. For some time things are all right. You feel you are doing your fair share of the church's work and there is a certain satisfaction in using your gifts to serve the Lord.

But then things start to go wrong. Here are some possible reasons.

- **Family**

The children are growing up and you find that teenagers need more of your time than younger children. Or, living on your own, you agree to have your ageing mother to live with you. Or the growing volume of church work means that you and your spouse hardly ever have an evening in together.

- **Work**
You get that promotion, but are now expected to work longer hours. Or you take on a course of study to get an extra qualification and that knocks out three evenings a week. Or you are made redundant and lose the motivation to get on with anything.
- **Health**
That nasty attack of 'flu lingers on and you feel less than 100% for several months. Or the stress of several things combined means that you are continually tired and church activity becomes a chore, not a joy.
- **Church**
Your group leader moves away and you are asked to take on full responsibility – a replacement helper is never found. Or the building appeal takes off and the Gift Aid job becomes more complicated. Or the 'year of mission' means that the Outreach Group's workload doubles.
- **Stagnation**
You were full of enthusiasm at the start, but after a few years in the role it has lost its excitement for you, and you feel you are keeping the show on the road, rather than launching a new show. No one reviews how you are doing. No one asks what it feels like. You feel stuck.

2 The effect it has

All very understandable from your point of view, but the workers in the harvest are certainly few and the church's leaders do not seem to have spotted that you are having trouble. But *you* soon become aware of problems in these areas.

- Physical: lack of sleep, stress-related symptoms, loss of vitality.
- Mental: a feeling of guilt, insecurity, lack of peace.
- Spiritual: your daily time of prayer and Bible reading drops away to almost nothing.
- Relational: relationships deteriorate with your family and friends who soon get negative messages about the Christian faith.

Is this really what God wants? Of course not. But why is your church deaf and blind to what is going on? Possibly, because they can't afford to lose you, without realising that they are doing that anyway! Perhaps they are more interested in keeping the church programme going than in caring for their workers.

Two parts of a solution

1 An education programme for church leaders

Here are some fundamental points all church leaders need to learn.

- 1 If you do gifts surveys of any kind, you need to do some kind of **availability** survey too. This means putting yourself in your members' shoes and asking people what they can honestly offer – for now.

- 2 Recognise that one person's availability will differ from year to year, from season to season, and even from week to week. This points to regular reviews with each person and keeping alert to changes (family, work, health) in between.
- 3 Consider how certain biblical examples might apply to church life today: letting the newly marrieds off major responsibilities for a year, the sabbatical principle for everyone (yes, even a whole year off all church jobs), and so on.
- 4 Avoid harking back to a few years ago. Society has changed: some in work are under immense time pressure, many more mothers are now working. Examples like these have an enormous impact on the 'church employment scene'.
- 5 Look out for the church workaholics; help them, rather than rejoice that they are prepared to do yet more.
- 6 Perhaps other people need to be brought in to help shoulder the load. This points to a carefully thought-out all-member ministry programme.
- 7 Acknowledge that service in the world is a proper priority for many of our congregation, so release them from too much service in the church.

Churches place too high a value on internal activities as opposed to witness in the world, care of one's family and looking after one's body. Many are simply too task-centred. This means that most churches are trying to do too much with the resources they have at their disposal.

The implication of all this may be the need to cut your church activity level. Too many are trying to do too much. You also need to consider the demands your church makes on people in terms of number of services and activities attended. And most churches still maintain activities that are past their sell-by dates.

To take this thinking further, read Article A43 on this website, *Every member on active service*. In particular note part 3 on ensuring people fit roles which includes the ideas of both enthusiasm for the role and time availability.

2 Other practical ideas to ease the burden

No space here to cover these in detail, but here are some of the kind of points to consider.

- Introduce limited-term appointments throughout the church. Make it the norm to do three (or however many) years and then move on, rather than getting stuck.
- Hold regular reviews of every worker. These do not have to be at the level of detail of a staff member's appraisal interview, but this would enable potential burn-out to be spotted before it became a real problem.
- Bring in apprenticeship schemes to prepare for hand-overs. Try to have No. 2's in as many jobs as possible so there can be a natural succession.
- Suggest job sharing or a team approach where possible. Most people find it better to be part of a supportive team rather than serving solo – and then have an opportunity to share and discuss their frustrations.

- Emphasise that taking on a new role means giving up something else. Many churches are simply trying to do too much with limited human resources so this may mean cutting the activity programme. So:
- Review your activity programme and whether you need to cut back on it in some way.
- Agree that sometimes it may be more appropriate to employ people rather than rely on volunteers. This can be a too-easy solution but some posts are better done by paid staff – with major implications for finance of course.
- Review facilities and equipment to ensure people spend time on essentials rather than waste time and energy on faulty or second-rate machinery. Many churches seek to get by on old equipment. This can be counter-productive.

But of course all this has implications for staffing and supervision – and therefore activity!

It also means you need to think about people's service outside your church as mentioned above: in their workplace, at their children's school, in the local clubs and societies. Might this be more important for the Kingdom than propping up a church group of some kind?

At the rock bottom level, it's all a question of how much you love and care for each other in your church. That may call for a change in attitude, rather than one or two quick-fix solutions.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN24. See also Articles A43, *Every member on active service*, and A47, *15 principles of volunteering*. Plus Training Notes TN31, *Affirming volunteers*, TN36, *Square pegs in round holes*, TN55, *So, who should be in the dock?*, TN67, *Stress and the Christian worker*, TN100, *Why some offer, why some don't*, and TN139, *Church workers in teams*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running an event on volunteers for you.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN24 under Management.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans AL1 4AG
Tel: 01727 832176 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>