This past November my wife and I reached 34 years in full-time church ministry. In our day, we have seen many a leader lose their zeal for God and fall away from the work of the Lord. Often it is due to the fact they did not take the adequate time needed to seek the Lord on a daily basis for self-renewal. Other reasons include not having a balanced life that incorporated things that advanced their physical and emotional health (instead of just focusing on their work and ministry).

The focus of this brochure will not be how to recover from burnout, but some of the signs of burnout. (I will mention a few points at the end that will aid in recovery.)

I also have been guilty of not taking enough time off. Having never taken more than 10 days off for vacation in over 34 years of hard grueling ministry, with 95 percent of them only five to seven days in length and, up until the past year, never taking off one full day per week to rest my mind.

At my present age, I am now being forced to change my patterns because I have exhausted much of my mental energy, and I can no longer cheat. (The main reasons I have lasted this long without regular time off are because I keep a strict diet, I exercise regularly and spend time seeking God every morning.)

I knew it was time to stop cheating because of some of the symptoms of burnout I came perilously close to experiencing. Over the years I have done a lot of research on this area and also ministered to many leaders suffering from this.

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Ten Signs of Leadership Burnout

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by
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The following are signs of emotional/mental burnout:

1. You lose focus and clarity of thought.

When experiencing burnout, your mind hits a wall and fogginess of thought instead of clarity. Sometimes your short-term memory even deteriorates because of the mental overload.

2. You lose your passion for work and/or ministry.

You dread going to the office and conducting meetings. You do it because of a commitment more than it being a passion in your life.

3. You go from being a leader to being a maintainer.

The primary calling of a senior leader is to be a visionary. Visionaries are at their best when they receive instruction from God at the top of the mountain and then come down and give vision to the congregation or organization. When in burnout, the leader does not have the capacity for any more vision.

Hence, all forward motion grinds to a halt and the leader now goes into maintenance mode trying their best to hold everything together all while they hope they will once again get back the energy needed to take their organization to the next level. (Unless they take the adequate steps for restoration, they will only get worse and not better, and they will begin to see people leaving their church or organization. Unless there is a compelling vision coming forth from the leader, the people scatter; read Proverbs 29:18.)

4. You have a continual sense of hopelessness.

In burnout your hope for the future grows dim, depression begins to set in, and you begin to view the world with dark grey lenses because everything negative is highlighted in your mind.

5. You isolate yourself from others.

When in burnout, you start creating more and more emotional space from others because you lack the emotional and mental capacity to carry on extensive conversations and/or minister to another person's needs.

6. You run from new challenges.

One of the main reasons a church needs to ensure their senior pastor takes regular sabbaticals is because unless the leader goes away for an extended time to renew and refresh themselves every few years, the vision of the church or organization will be limited because the leader will begin to shy away from new challenges, new vision and forward motion. An unrenewed leader will greatly limit the capacity of the church to expand and grow.

7. You don't want to problem solve.

A person in burnout doesn't want to strategize or problem solve because it takes too much mental energy.

8. You dream more about retirement than taking a mountain.

I knew I was starting to get too close to the edge because I kept on envisioning the scene in the movie Gladiator when the lead character Maximus is about to die and he keeps envisioning the next life in paradise when he would rest from war and enjoy life with his loved ones. When you are dreaming about laying down your weapons instead of going off to war to defeat your foes, then you know that it is time to get recharged!

Anyone who lives for retirement is a person who has already stopped living! For example, when senior pastors get to the place where they are looking at their own watch on Sunday because they cannot wait until the services end so they can go home and relax, then you know they need to be retrofit and recharged! God has called leaders to minister out of their abundance and overflow, not out of the fumes from an empty tank!

9. You lack patience for all things mundane.

Those in burnout lose their patience for all things petty when dealing with relationship challenges. (In the past they had grace for the immaturity of the saints, but in this state they have no patience for it.) They also lack the patience to deal with the average things needed to maintain oversight of their staff and organizational business.

10. You view ministry as work rather than a calling.

The greatest privilege I will ever have in my life is to represent the Lord Jesus as the overseer of a local church. It is not a job but a calling. When in burnout, sometimes the only thing that stops a pastor or leader from leaving the ministry is economics (their paycheck). The moment I stay in a church for the salary is the moment I have gone from being a shepherd to a hireling. It is not a job but a holy vocation (1 Corinthians 4:1).

HOW TO RECOVER:

1. Honor the biblical sabbath.

Take time away to pray, study and refresh yourself, and take at least one day off a week. For pastors, they cannot count Sunday as a day off because it is a work day. What has worked for some pastors is to take a weekday off or from Friday night to Saturday night (but Saturday is often spent in sermon preparation so that may not work for some).

2. Spend time enjoying the Lord on a daily basis.

I believe that burnout comes the quickest when we stop spending adequate time with the Lord. Hebrews 4 teaches us that when we enter God's rest we cease from our own labors; when we attempt to lead in our own strength God allows us to lose our energy because unless the Lord builds the house we labor in vain (Psalm 127).

3. Prioritize the things that are life-giving to you.

God has wired each of us in a way that certain things we do are life giving and other things deplete us. For example, being around people energizes extroverts, and introverts are sapped of energy when with people. Introverts need to schedule regular time alone to recharge in order for them to meet the challenges they face daily.

Prioritize time with God, reading the Bible and church for spiritual renewal, key friends, family for emotional strength, exercise for physical health, hobbies, good music and literature for mental renewal.

4. Recapture your original calling and vision.

When lost at sea you need to read your compass to get back on course. When we lose clarity of vision and focus we need to read our journals and recapture things God told us in the past that enabled us to recapture our original calling and commission.

5. Stay accountable to others within a leadership community.

We all need spiritual mentors and spiritual oversight. If you are a pastor, find a pastoral community of leaders in which you can experience peer friendships, coaching and accountability. If you are in a local church and you are a leader, attach yourself to the leadership communities that are available to you. Proverbs teaches us that as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens the countenance of another man. Being in a community can hasten your restoration, isolating yourself from other leaders and from the body of Christ is one of the devil's strategies to destroy us because during fragile times in our lives we need wise input from others more than ever!