

## Conversation #3

# ARE OUR LEADERS HEALTHY ... REALLY?

So far we've talked about creating organizationally and missionally healthy churches. But there's another aspect of health that gets overlooked far too often in the church, and that's the health of its leaders. The spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical health of a congregation's pastor(s) and leaders is a subject church leaders don't talk about nearly enough.

Here's the simple truth: healthy leaders create healthy churches. If a church's leadership is healthy at the top, that health will most often spread throughout the church. But the same is also true for unhealthy leaders and teams; eventually the entire body gets infected. The health of a congregation's leaders often determines the health of the congregation.

This conversation is significant because these days many leaders aren't healthy. I meet with a lot of church leaders in my traveling and speaking, and it's surprising to me how many admit (in one-on-one conversations) that they are not in a great place spiritually, emotionally, relationally, or physically. I say this not from a place of judgment but of empathy. I ran hard for a decade in church leadership, and our church grew rapidly. But I wasn't growing nearly as much on the inside as I should have been. In fact, on the inside I was crumbling in a few areas of my life.

After a decade in church leadership, I hit a wall. I burned out, moving through the darkest period of my life. It was as if I fell off a cliff and lost control of my heart, mind, energy, and strength. If you've ever been there, you know what it's like. And if you haven't, give thanks. For months, I could barely function. By the grace of God, I found a way to move through it, although full recovery took about five years. And even then, I didn't get back to normal; I had to find a new (and better) normal.

Health doesn't just happen in leadership. In fact, the demands of leadership will push you toward unhealth. The gravitational pull of leadership is away from wholeness. Headlines seem to offer a revolving door of athletes, politicians, preachers, and business leaders who have to step back because of a moral failure or scandal. Not surprisingly, under every scandal is an unhealthy leader. If you add to that the number who leave leadership for "personal reasons" (often a polite way of saying they're simply done, burned out), the body count is huge. I'm incredibly thankful that my collapse didn't take me to a place of infidelity or moral failure. I didn't even buy a sports car or quit my job. But for a season I thought it would take me out of ministry.

## HOW TO TELL IF A LEADER IS BURNING OUT

So how do you know you're burning out as a leader? How do you know whether you're unhealthy? Following are nine things I personally experienced as I burned out. While you should consult with your doctor or a medical professional if you believe you might be suffering from burnout or depression, these signs have alerted many that they're burning out. A combination of several of them might indicate that indeed you're far beyond just tired.

### **1. Your motivation is fading.**

One sign of burnout is that the passion that once fueled you is gone. This impacts your drive as you discover that the source of your motivation has vaporized. Alternately, your motivation may not be

entirely gone, but it might have shifted—from being focused on the mission to being focused on yourself. Pain, after all, is selfish. Drop a brick on your toe and see if you can think of anything other than the pain. A shift toward a self-centered motivation is a danger sign that there is pain in your life that needs to be addressed. It's interfering with your ability to lead passionately and well.

## **2. Your main emotion is numbness.**

You no longer feel the highs or the lows. This was actually one of the earliest signs for me that the edge was near. I said to my wife that it felt as if my heart went dead. I just couldn't feel what I was supposed to feel anymore.

## **3. People drain you.**

Of course there are draining people on the best of days. But not everybody, all the time. Burnout often means few to no people energize you anymore. You want to be alone. And while solitude is a gift from God, isolation isn't.

## **4. Little things make you disproportionately angry.**

When you start losing your cool over small things, it's a sign something deeper is very wrong. Disproportionate emotions of any sort are often a sign something is awry.

## **You're becoming cynical.**

Many leaders fight this one, but cynicism rarely finds a home in a healthy heart.<sup>17</sup>

## **Your productivity is dropping.**

You might be working long hours, but you're producing little of value. Or what used to take you five minutes just took you forty-five. That's a warning bell.

## **You're self-medicating.**

You usually either practice self-care as a leader or you end up self-medicating. I'll spend a little more time on this symptom because it's so widespread. When you think of self-medication, don't just think of pills or alcohol. As you'll see below, there are some very socially acceptable ways even for Christians to self-medicate. But the results are still numbing.

*Overeating.* Being overweight or even obese is almost normal in some Christian circles. As someone who has to watch my weight carefully (and who does not understand how anyone can be a natural beanpole), I empathize. That said, food is the drug of choice for many Christian leaders.

*Working more.* Again, working too many hours is socially acceptable, even rewardable in some circles. As a recovering workaholic, I know. But all work and no play doesn't just make you dull; it makes you disobedient. It's ironic, but the way some leaders cope with the stress associated with work is by working more. It numbs the pain.

*Gossip.* It's just a theory, but I think when we feel bad about ourselves, we say bad things about other people. Often church leaders who have failed to care for themselves end up with enough toxins inside that they want to take down others.

*Spending.* Whether it's retail therapy at the mall, ordering more of your favorite pursuit online, or the

constant climb into a bigger house, a better car, the latest tech, or the latest trend, Christians can easily numb their pain by endlessly accumulating things that end up in a landfill one day.

*Under-the-radar substance abuse.* Sure, you're probably not going to develop a cocaine addiction. But sometimes it can be more subtle than that. Whether it's a drink every day when you get home or an overuse or misuse of your legitimate prescription, Christian leaders can fall into the classic pattern of turning to a substance rather than turning to God for relief.

### **5. You don't laugh anymore.**

Nothing seems fun or funny, and, at its worst, you begin to resent people who enjoy life. Misery loves company.

### **Sleep and time off no longer refuel you.**

Sometimes you're not burned out; you're just tired. A good night's sleep or a week or two off will help most healthy people bounce back with fresh energy. But you could have a month off when you're burned out and not feel any difference. I took three weeks off during my summer of burnout, and I felt worse at the end than when I started. Not being refueled when you take time off is a major warning sign you're burning out.

Those are not the only signs, but they are signs many people experience. Again, if you suspect you are burning out or are burned out, I would encourage you to seek immediate professional help—a medical doctor and a trained Christian counselor. Maybe you think it's just a season and you'll push through it. That worked for me ... until it didn't work anymore.

## **BURNOUT DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE: PERRY NOBLE'S STORY**

As I indicated, many church leaders struggle with burnout. That even includes successful, well-known leaders like Perry Noble. Perry wrote an incredibly honest book about his burnout and depression called *Overwhelmed*, and I had the chance to interview him on my leadership podcast. Perry was exceptionally raw and real with me about how bad it got and how desperately he wanted to end his life, even while leading New Spring Church in Anderson, South Carolina, one of the fastest-growing churches in America. He told an amazing story of how he overcame anxiety and depression to keep leading.<sup>18</sup>

Perry summed up the danger of burnout really well when he told me, "Carey, I really seriously contemplated suicide on more than one occasion. It's just one of those places. I had a friend say this: 'It's kind of like eating at Denny's. Nobody goes there intentionally, but you just kind of wind up there sometimes.' That's what happened to me. If you would have asked me when I started, 'Hey, what's your goal in leadership?' I would not have said, 'I want to get to the place where one day I want to take my life.' But I got there, and it happened over a period of time."

### **The Culprit: Unhealthy Patterns**

A number of factors led Perry to depression, anxiety, and the brink of suicide. To begin with, he said he never rested. As his church grew, the criticism got to him, but instead of dealing with his pain, he buried it in more work. He said, "One of the most unhealthy patterns for leaders is that we'll get into

a season where maybe things are growing, or things are going well ... During that season, we rev up our engines so much that we never take a day off. We never take a day of rest.”

Perry so rightly pointed out that overwork is the most rewarded addiction in our culture. People praise you for working hard, and the praise feels good. “They will sing your praises right up until you get into your coffin, and then, they’ll forget about you,” Perry said. “We can get so addicted to positive things said about us, it can push us into thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, the world can’t live without me. I can’t rest.’” Overwork combined with success can eventually lead to an adrenaline rush addiction. Like most workaholics, Perry stopped making time to have fun, even though he had a young family and a great team around him.

Looking back, he said he saw the irony that you’re often more creative when you’re having fun and taking time off than when you’re not: “There are times when you get relaxed, when you get in an environment where you start having fun, and you have the best ideas. ... So what if we, as leaders ... took one day a week and just did something fun that we enjoyed? A fully charged leader can accomplish more than a partially charged leader, every time.”

## **Recovery**

What turned it around for Perry? It was taking the exceptionally painful step of admitting his struggle to those close to him. He had lots of shame about it, even more than he’d experienced when he had a pornography addiction years before. But when he confessed to his best friend, the heaviness lifted. “A lot of people have been forgiven for their sin, but they’ve never been healed because they’ve never confessed it. There’s a big difference between being forgiven and being healed,” Perry pointed out. “I learned the power of being healed by confessing that out loud and just telling somebody, ‘Hey, I’m wrestling.’ Because I told him, I was able to tell my leadership team. I was able to find a good Christian counselor who was able to walk me through some things and navigate me through some things.”

Finally, Perry also realized that his anxiety and depression required medication. “If something’s wrong with the brain, medically, there’s a chemical imbalance in the brain. If God, through common grace, has given us science and medicine to be able to fix that problem, then we shouldn’t just try to pray that problem away. If God has given us medicine to try to heal that problem, then I think we should take it.”

## **Over to You**

I hope you realize that if you’re struggling, you’re not alone. Pride will push you to think you can handle anything. Fear will keep you from telling anyone you can’t. Despite Perry’s story (or my story), if you feel there’s still too much of a stigma attached to burnout, anxiety, and even depression to feel comfortable talking about it, get over it. Once you crash, you will have no choice but to tell people. If you start the dialogue early, you might be able to get help early and prevent a full-out crash.

The only way you will ever last in ministry over the long haul is to stay spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally healthy.

## **TEN HEALTHY OPTIONS FOR SELF-CARE**

So maybe you’re not burned out, just in a tough season. We all get there. How do you stay healthy? How do you go from surviving to thriving? The best thing you can do as a leader is take excellent

care of yourself. When you carve out time to take care of yourself, you'll always be in a better position to take care of others. A church leadership team composed of healthy individuals has a much better chance of becoming a truly healthy team. Ironically, it's in caring for others that most leaders make the mistake of neglecting self-care.

That said, staying emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and physically healthy is easy to understand but takes discipline to realize in your life. While there may be nothing truly novel in these ten options, when you practice them they have a staggeringly positive impact on your personal health and well-being.

### **1. A great daily time with God:**

Whatever method you use, time with God matters.<sup>19</sup> And your personal walk with God is often a casualty of ministry. Why is that? It shouldn't be! Personally, I read through the Bible every year. I find it helps me tackle passages I'm not preaching on and reminds me that I'm a follower of Jesus first and a leader second.

### **2. Exercise:**

Being out of shape physically means you will never be in top shape mentally or emotionally. I don't like exercise either, but I kept at it until I discovered a form of exercise I liked. A few years ago, I discovered I like cycling and I invested in a road bike. Your story will be different. You might end up walking, hiking, running, taking up CrossFit, or competing in marathons. It's up to you. The point is to get moving.

### **3. A healthy diet:**

You are what you eat. We're learning daily how broken the food chain is and how closely our physical and mental health is tied to what we eat. Dumping the processed foods for whole foods can be a great place to start.

### **4. Proper sleep:**

In some circles it's seen as cool to brag about how little sleep you get. But not with healthy leaders. Get seven to eight hours a night. Take naps. I really think sleep is one of the most underrated leadership secret weapons there is.<sup>20</sup>

### **5. Intentional white space in your calendar:**

Most leaders are afraid to make appointments with themselves or even to budget time for message writing, planning, or thinking. You can schedule appointments with yourself, time off, and downtime in the same way you schedule meetings. Just do it!<sup>21</sup>

### **6. Healthy friendships:**

Ministry can be draining. When was the last time you hung out with a friend you didn't need to minister to? Who makes you laugh until you cry? Go hang out with them. Regular doses of life-giving relationships can make such a difference.

### **7. Margin:**

You are at your most kind when you have the most margin. Ever notice that? I find that's true of me. It's true in terms of my calendar but also true of finances. How can anyone be generous with their

heart, time, money, and attitude if they have nothing left to give?

### **8. Hobbies:**

Writing, blogging, and podcasting are my hobbies these days. You can be much more interesting than that. Take some pictures. Take up hiking. Get crafty. Study the constellations. Your hobby will fuel some passion in your life.

### **9. Family time:**

Take a road trip. Go out for dinner. Have some fun! Throw a ball in the backyard. Play hockey in the driveway or shoot hoops.

### **10. Coaching and counseling:**

For about twelve years I've had coaches and counselors who have helped me get through road bumps and life issues. They have been invaluable. Yes, I pay them money, but it's an investment in my family, my church, and my life. I'm different and better for it.

I know at the end of your life, you will be so much better for pursuing the path of self-care rather than the path of self-medication. Self-care takes intentional planning, but it's so worth it. Eventually leaders who don't care for themselves end up out of leadership or ineffective in it.

## **YOU'RE NOT ALONE**

So how healthy are you? How healthy is your team? I realize those are exceptionally personal questions. I also realize the answer can precipitate a life crisis. But if you're burning out, the crisis is coming anyway. You might as well get in front of it. And if you're only moderately unhealthy, dealing with it is still by far the best option. You can get back to normal, but it will be a new normal.

As a team or church board, it's important to create a healthy climate in which people can be honest about how they're *really* doing. At first the conversation might seem shocking or even overwhelming. Hang in there. The way you hold this conversation will be pivotal. Create a safe place for people to talk without fear of judgment. Offer to help anyone and everyone who needs help.

After all, remember the mission is at stake. One of the best gifts you can give your church is a healthy set of leaders. Actually, it's the best gift you can give their spouses and their kids as well. So do whatever it takes to have an honest conversation about health. And then get healthy.

And to every leader reading this who realizes they might be burning out ... you're not alone. You're really not.

## Conversation #3

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*This conversation will be a little more difficult than the others in this book because the subject is inherently personal. If you have someone on your team or in leadership who you suspect is burning out, it might be a good idea to have a one-on-one conversation with them rather than singling them out in a group or dropping “hints” in a meeting.*

*Nonetheless, teams are wise to talk about burnout as a way of ensuring they stay healthy. Please realize that the group questions, though, are no substitute for well-motivated, loving, and honest conversations that happen one-on-one.*

### **Talk About It**

1. Have you been in an organization where a leader has burned out? What was it like?
2. Did anything in my story or Perry Noble’s story about burnout surprise you?
3. Is the health of your leaders a goal your church actively pursues?
4. What could you do to ensure your leaders stay healthy?
5. *Workaholism is the most rewarded addiction in our country.* To what extent does your church culture reward workaholism?
6. Of the different ways that leaders self-medicate, which are most prevalent in your church?

### **Get Practical**

1. Does your church have a network of trusted Christian counselors to whom you can refer your leaders and members? If not, what will you do to put one in place?
2. In addition to checking in on leadership issues with staff and key volunteers, many healthy churches will also check in with leaders on a personal level. What do you need to do to create the kind of culture in which these conversations can happen regularly?

### **Make It Happen**

Is there anyone on your team who is showing more than a few signs of burnout? Are they aware they might be burning out? What will you do to help them?