

Burnout blues

Causes of volunteer exhaustion, and ways to avoid it

By Mark K. Brewer

Congregations have always relied on dedicated volunteers who give their time and talent to activities they value, doing so as an act of discipleship. For Lutherans, the call is to faithfully steward God-given gifts to spread the good news and serve others.

But sometimes volunteering has its dark side. Some church leaders chronically overcommit and overextend themselves beyond their ability to maintain balance.

Without realizing it, these dedicated individuals start to creep into the dreaded volunteer burnout zone. Often it begins with ushering once a month, then serving on the finance committee, teaching weekly Sunday school, sitting on the congregation's church council and then attending synod assembly. Suddenly a member's calendar is so full that being in church feels like a chore rather than a place of restoration. Sound familiar?

If your mood is low and your anxiety, stress and depression are high, you may be experiencing volunteer burnout. Similarly, if you're involved in church volunteer work or are responsible for recruit-



ing and nurturing volunteers, take a moment to assess the well-being of your team.

Warning signs

The following are some of the warning signs for burnout, according to **Where did he come up with these?:**

- Do you dread doing things that you once enjoyed?
- Are you doing more but feeling less productive and less satisfied with your accomplishments?
- Do you lack enthusiasm?
- Are you mentally absent or unfocused?
- Are you absent or tardy from your commitments?
- Has your personality changed? Were you formerly upbeat but now are pessimistic, unusually quiet or withdrawn? Are your words becoming more nega-

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- tive, cynical or flavored with frustration? Are you irritated by normal challenges and interruptions?
- Do you experience chronic fatigue from pushing yourself? Are you tired all the time without really doing much?
- Do you feel guilty about missing a church activity?
- Do you have feelings of worthlessness?
- Do you feel a separation or estrangement from God?

Causes of burnout

To address and combat burnout, it's helpful to understand and avoid its causes.

- **High expectations and perfectionism.** Perfectionism is time-consuming and counterproductive. Claire Hoyem, former church council president at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minn., saw this in herself and in fellow members with a need for perfection and control. "I think that's quite a recipe for burnout," Hoyem said. "A very hard lesson for me to learn was that sometimes a B+ is good enough."
- **Can't say "no."** Are you allergic to the word "no"? Does it hide deep inside just when you need it most? "Sometimes saying no to things is the healthier response than agreeing to do everything," said Jessica Sutherland, former council president and current vice president of Trinity Lutheran Church in Worcester, Mass. "You have to take care of yourself first."
- **Overcommitment.** If you're in a job with high demands, raising children and caring for aging parents, adding heavy volunteer commitments may not be a good idea.
- **Not taking a break.** Spending years or decades in the same volunteer positions or being constantly engaged in ministry with no breaks may lead to burnout. Put some space between your commitments and watch how it changes you.
- **Drawing from the same well too often.** Every congregation has a few "yes" people who tend to fill all of the volunteer roles. Well-meaning members responsible for recruiting volunteers "know who has a tendency to say 'yes,' and they go back to those same people over and over," Hoyem said. "What happens is that there's a core group of people who carry a large load. That becomes not only a threat to their engagement because they may burn out, but also a barrier to others who may feel they can't step forward and volunteer."

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- **Unsuitable roles.** Volunteers need to be positioned for success based on their skills, abilities and preferences. Just because a person has a master's degree in music doesn't guarantee that he will be the best volunteer to work with the children's choir. Perhaps he is a better fit for singing in the adult choir. If you find yourself in a role that is unsuitable, politely step away from it.
- **Receiving too much responsibility too soon.** New members need time to assimilate into the life of their congregation. Start with short-term volunteer opportunities before advancing to more challenging leadership roles. As an individual, take stock of these suggestions and see where you can make changes to benefit your well-being.

Become volunteer-friendly

If you are responsible for recruiting volunteers in your congregation, here are a few ways to make your congregation more volunteer-friendly:

- Have a clear vision and communicate it.
- Show appreciation in real time, not just during year-end celebrations.
- Have a well-organized volunteer program with written job descriptions.
- Make sure the job is doable. Many congregational volunteer commitments will work better if they are cut in half and shared with another volunteer.
- Design commitments with specific end dates. Open-ended commitments can lead to burnout.
- Provide an off-ramp for your volunteers. Make sure volunteers know they can say "no" if they are overextended and overwhelmed.
- Match the right person with the right job by asking others about their passions. How can you match their passion to better serve God in the life and ministry of your congregation? □

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