

What Worship Leaders Need to Know

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Not long ago I attended a workshop taught by a veteran contemporary worship leader, in his current position for twelve years. At one point he mentioned that several other worship leaders began their ministries at about the same time as he did. Painfully he recounted how one after another dropped out of ministry due to extra-marital affairs, divorces, burnout, or an inability to lead and manage effectively. Of the several he began with, only two were still in their positions.

Few worship leaders think their current job will be a short-term ministry or that their careers will be a series of brief stints marked by crisis, conflict and burnout. Yet this pattern is increasingly common. Why is this happening?



The chief reason for the alarming burnout rate among worship leaders has to do with the lack of adequate training. They are simply not prepared to lead effectively in the complex and demanding environment of the evolving 21st century church. The lack of training, support and networking among worship leaders is taking its toll. For every successful worship leader there are several others with stories of pain, heartache and disappointment. Many of the best and most talented are collapsing under the load of unfulfilled expectations from their churches, pastors, teams, families, and most of all, from themselves. The sad truth is that many worship leaders are having to learn on the job, and the lessons aren't being learned fast enough. As a result the average tenure of contemporary worship leaders is alarmingly brief.

In the space available here we can only hope to scratch the surface of how worship leaders can be better equipped for effective ministry for the long haul. I believe they will need to become intentional life-long learners, that is, men and women who seek actively to grow in four main areas: spiritual formation, musicianship, theological depth, and ministry leadership.

1. Spiritual Formation

"The secret of being an effective worship leader," says veteran worship leader Monty Kelso, "begins with having the heart of a worshiper." Worship leaders are "lead worshipers," as pastor and author John Piper calls them, who lead while worshiping, not instead of worshiping. Yet the difficulties and demands of ministry often leave worship leaders with little or no extra time for personal worship and the care of their own souls. Are worship leaders too busy to worship? Eugene Peterson observes that the term "busy pastor" is an oxymoron. Busyness is not an

indication of effectiveness, but rather a product of our own vanity and laziness (The Contemplative Pastor). On the one hand, we keep ourselves busy because we want to believe we are important. "The incredible hours, the crowded schedule, and the heavy demands on my time are proof to myself - and to all who will notice - that I am important."

On the other hand, our busyness is often the result of allowing others to dictate our agendas. "It was a favorite theme of C.S. Lewis that only lazy people work hard," continues Peterson. "By lazily abdicating the essential work of deciding and directing, establishing values and setting goals, other people do it for us; then we find ourselves frantically, at the last minute, trying to satisfy a half dozen different demands on our time, none of which is essential to our vocation, to stave off the disaster of disappointing someone."

Bruce Larson (qualify him as source) calls worship "wasting time in God's presence." From a human point of view worship doesn't accomplish anything. A cartoon I saw recently in



Leadership sums it up nicely. The church secretary motions for a parishioner to enter the pastor's office saying, "Pastor isn't doing anything, he's just praying." From God's perspective, however, worship is the highest form of ministry. Worship and prayer are the work of ministry, not distractions from it. It is true that ministry activities can be worship, but they are not automatically so any more than sitting around doing nothing is meditation.

So how can we prepare for the long haul of ministry? Here are some basic steps to learning the care of your soul:

Set aside a regular time for personal worship. Find a place where you can be alone without distractions or interruptions. Listen to worship music and sing along. Or take a walk and be silent. Meditate on scripture, such as the Psalms, and let the words and images of the Bible become the content of your praise and prayer. Many evangelicals are discovering the richness of the "liturgical" traditions, such as the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, which is a gold mine for personal worship.

Be accountable to someone else for your spiritual growth. We need to be in a small group or have a spiritual director. This may rub many of us Protestants the wrong way, but I believe we have misunderstood Luther's insight about the priesthood of all believers. He did not mean that there are no longer any priests, he meant we are all priests to one another. We do not need the mediation of any priest other than the High Priest Jesus Christ in order to have an authentic encounter with God, but our brothers and sisters may minister to us powerfully by keeping us accountable and focused as we grow deeper in our life with God.

Keep your marriage and family ahead of ministry. Fuller professor Ray Anderson likes to point out that the simplest test of spiritual growth is to ask your spouse if there is more or less love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control (Galatians 5:22-23) than last year. Sadly many worship leaders have their success in ministry undercut by failures with their families. God never asks his servants to sacrifice their marriages and families for ministry. Worship ministries are time intensive and put unexpected pressures on the home. Sooner or later you will need to make tough decisions and say no to ministry for the sake of your family. Maintaining proper balances between family and ministry commitments requires hard work and clear thinking. It also requires open, honest communication with your spouse and those to whom you are accountable in ministry. And when crises arise, don't be afraid to get outside help such as marital and family counseling to help you set reasonable boundaries.

2. Musicianship

A worship leader I know told me recently that he has all but given up playing his instrument. He is so busy managing his ministry that he has little time to practice, and he frequently bumps himself out of the lineup on Sundays to make room for other players. I couldn't help but note the wistfulness in his voice, so I asked him if he missed playing. "Yeah," he said, "I really do." As musicians, worship leaders lead other musicians by example. How can team members be expected to practice if the leader doesn't? How can we expect musicians to improve if we're not improving, but getting rustier instead?

Rekindle your love for your instrument. Worship

Leaders' Workshop clinician Scott Andrews likes to point out that if you knew that the finest musician in the world planned to attend your church next Sunday, you might just practice a little more this week. When in fact, we play for the Creator of music every week, and we honor Him when we play skillfully. Don't be afraid to take lessons if they are needed. Many of the best vocalists and instrumentalists still do. It pays to study your instrument, and to learn (or re-learn) the theory. There are plenty of resources for self-directed learning, including books, instructional videos, and websites. Above all, learn to read music if you don't already. It may be hard, but you'll be glad you made the effort. No matter how well you play by ear you will increase your effectiveness significantly as a leader and a musician if you can prepare and follow charts.



Become a more versatile musician. If you are a keyboard player, for example, you can learn modulation and improvisation to improve "flow" between songs. Learning underscoring will help you add musical dimensions to other elements of your service. Mastering MIDI technology will further expand your versatility. Acoustic guitar players should move on to electric guitar or bass.

Learning new musical styles on your instrument increases your versatility. A musically mature worship ministry will have a "signature sound," a style that is most comfortable for the congregation, but it is important not to let the sound become totally identified with one style. Worship leaders can create an atmosphere of experimentation and exploration of new musical styles by modeling maturity with their own growth as musicians.

Rekindle your love for music. Spend time simply listening to music. Many worship leaders complain that the only music they have time to listen to are the worship CDs they scour in search of new songs for their congregations. Become what Wheaton professor Harold Best calls "a musical pluralist," by expanding your horizons by listening to unfamiliar musical styles. Go to concerts and watch videos; study the masters and learn from their art. By learning music at a deeper level and continuing to improve on your instrument, you will communicate to your worship team, and to the congregation, a high value for the role of music and the importance of musical excellence. Your enthusiasm will rub off on others, and your passion for ministry will return.



God created us to be learners and gave us the ability to acquire knowledge and skills. While formal education for most people ends with graduation from high school or college, learning continues throughout the whole of our lives. Recently ministry leaders have become aware of the need for programs that continue learning.

Formal study at the undergraduate or graduate level is a common form of continued learning. Degree completion programs are booming as many colleges and universities respond to the desire of men and women who, at mid-life, want to finish their bachelor's degrees. Graduate schools are responding by making masters and even doctoral degree programs more flexible and accessible.

Non-formal learning through seminars, workshops and conferences is another growing avenue of learning. Many employers and professions now require workers to attend continuing education events. A number of churches and parachurch organizations also offer training. These events tend to focus on practical concepts and skills related to the workplace or ministry. Self-study or small group study is becoming more and more popular. Many learners have personal study plans that include non-formal learning and reading. Reading books and discussing issues in study groups has become more popular in the past 20 years.

3. Theological Depth

Perhaps the best defense against ministry burnout is continuous learning and growth at the theological level. It is commonplace for ministry professionals, especially music ministers, to play down the importance of theology. Many worship leaders tell me, "theology is irrelevant to me. I need practical stuff." But how irrelevant is theological understanding, really? Several years ago, Ray Anderson of Fuller Seminary wrote that "clergy burnout is a symptom of theological amnesia. Many pastors and ministry professionals discover only too late that deeper theological roots might have prevented pain and frustration.

"A pastor and former student of mine, I'll call him Jeff, began his studies at Fuller ready to quit the ministry. His ministry was a shambles - tragedy of errors, poor leadership, conflict, miscommunication and wounded pride. His church was clamoring for his resignation, and his wife had delivered an ultimatum: "quit now or I'm leaving you." As Jeff sat in my office, tears streamed down his face. "I want you to know, Dr. Redman, that this is my last shot," referring to his program of study. "If this doesn't work, I'm outta here."



My response to his dilemma astonished him. While I did recommend the expected practical solutions like marriage counseling for him and his wife and some intervention from his denomination to sort out problems in his ministry, the most significant assistance I could give him was theological. More than anything, he needed to find his theological bearings again. So together we designed a program that included some heavy-duty biblical and theological studies. By the

time Jeff graduated in the spring of 1997, he was a new man. Although he was eventually removed from his church, Jeff has since started at a new church where he leads effectively with a new sense of purpose and commitment.

To avoid potential burnout you need to grow deep roots. Here's some ways you can begin to deepen your theological foundations, whether you've never read a single theological book or you've got a Ph.D. in theology.

Develop your own theology of worship. Start by studying the key biblical passages that relate to worship. Read books and articles that present a theological slant on worship, as well as literature with a practical leadership approach. Sign up for worship workshops or conferences in your area. Take classes on worship at a college or seminary. Finally, writing your perspective out in the form of a 20-25 page essay will help you crystallize your thinking. As Samuel Johnson said, "reading maketh a man broad; speaking maketh a man ready; but writing maketh a man exact."

Get to know your pastor at a theological level. Find out his or her theological perspectives and passions, and start a dialogue. Most pastors have strong theological interests they developed in seminary, but few have regular opportunities for theological conversation. Chances are they'll welcome the opportunity to mentor your theological growth. Have him or her suggest some books or articles to read. Try reading a book together, then meeting once a week to discuss a chapter or two. Good books to start with might be *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* by Hughes Old, *Worship Evangelism* by Sally Morgenthaler or *The New Worship* by Barry Liesch. If you're new to worship ministry, sermon tapes, particularly those on worship, are a great starting point.

Be part of a learning community with your ministry peers. Get connected to other worship leaders and learn from them. Worship workshops and seminars are great places to

network with colleagues in your area. Developing one-on-one relationships with ministers at other churches will educate and inspire. These relationships can expand into groups that can provide encouragement and accountability for growth.

Develop a strategy to deepen the theological awareness of your team. Prepare and lead Bible studies for your team on key worship passages in the Old and New Testaments. Get them subscriptions to *Worship Leader* and other publications, and have regular times to discuss articles and features that impact your team.

4. Ministry Leadership

The inability to lead and manage the worship ministry is a chief weakness of worship leaders today. Good ideas and intentions are often undermined by a lack of personal organization and poorly handled relationships. Worship leaders don't have to be management geniuses to lead their teams well. But neither can they neglect the fundamentals of building an effective ministry. You do not need an MBA to lead worship, but ministry leadership will take you out of your comfort zone. Max de Pree, the long-time chairman and CEO of Herman Miller, Inc., wrote, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader must become a servant and a debtor" (from *Leadership is an Art*).

For the in-between years, there are a few key areas of leadership focus that require purpose, direction and focus.

Take charge of your schedule and get

organized. Begin by reserving time each week for personal worship, practicing your instrument, and study and reflection. Watch out for unnecessary meetings. Management

expert Peter Drucker believes that an organization that spends more than a third of its time (12 hours a week) in meetings is bankrupt. Learn to use your computer for organization and communication. Utilize volunteers to help you with routine tasks. An office manager or administrative assistant attending your church can show you how to set up filing systems and how to keep the inevitable paperwork flowing across your desk.



Make time for key relationships in your ministry. Keep plenty of time available to spend with your pastor and other leaders in your ministry, time not just spent on pressing ministry issues. Leadership is about trust. Trust can only be earned in relationships, and relationships take time.

Make time for long range planning and strategizing. Balance the immediate with a view of the bigger picture. "The problem with planning services," observes veteran worship leader Monty Kelso, "is that Sunday comes around every week." Many worship leaders find themselves caught in the trap of weekly planning and have little opportunity to step back for a look at the bigger picture. Establish annual goals and objectives, such as special events or trips, that reach beyond the weekly service.

Learn how to deal with conflict in a godly way. Many musicians are conflict avoiders who hope that conflict will go away if they don't pay attention to it. But as Joseph Garlington has said, "what is buried alive stays alive." Many worship teams are poisoned by conflict that started over surprisingly trivial things that fester and infect the whole ministry. As leaders we need to lead by example and model godly conflict resolution following Matthew 18.

Develop a feedback system that allows for honest evaluation. Musicians are notoriously thin-skinned when it comes to criticism. One negative comment can put someone into a funk that lasts for days. Yet without feedback it is impossible to know how you're doing. At some point successful worship leaders learn not to take feedback too personally, whether negative or positive. Instead they sift it for what can be learned and disregard the rest. I am aware of one particular church where the worship team, including the pastor, meets directly after each service. Each person in the circle contributes one thing he or she thought went well and one thing that needs to be fixed. The critique includes the message. Everyone takes notes, and action plans are developed and approved to correct the problems at hand. Each service and the ministry as a whole needs to be carefully evaluated by getting honest feedback.

