

## **Sustaining the Women's Ministry** **Keeping Balance and Avoiding Burn Out**

When you work in ministry, it's possible to have times where your ministry service takes up a lot of your time. Potentially, it may be more than you planned to give. Thankfully these periods of time are often when you are wrapped up in a project, they are temporary. Once the project is over you can rest and recoup before digging into the next event. When you have a solid team working with you, it is possible to delegate the work and lighten the load. Starting a new ministry, however, can be a bit more of a lengthy process. When you are starting from scratch you are apt to spend more time reading and researching, meeting and planning.

Whether you are starting the ministry from scratch, or find yourself doing successive events that are time consuming, you may find your life out of balance. You are spending more time on the ministry than on your other responsibilities, or spread so thin you don't have an opportunity to rest and recharge yourself mentally and physically. Stress begins to build from being out of balance, and eventually you end up completely burnt out.

There are examples in the scriptures where we can see burn out, like in Jonah. After Jonah delivered the message to the Ninevites he sank into a depression and wanted to die. After Elijah called down the fires of heaven to destroy the idols of Baael, after defeating the 850 false prophets, and even after his prayer to end the drought... Elijah ran away from Jezebel, hid under a tree and flat out told the Lord he was done & to take his life. These were men who were overwhelmed by their calling, and they needed respite. And God, provided for each of their needs.

If we plan for burn out, and we recognize the importance of balance, right from the beginning we can avoid it, or at least lessen the blow. It bears repeating from our previous session, when we are prepared in advance for the difficulties that come our way, we can overcome them. Structure is a great start to establishing balance because it evenly disperses responsibility.

However, we need to understand how to recognize someone who's life is out of balance and heading toward burnout; whether it is another team member or even within our selves.

Sharon Jaynes recommends a self assessment that includes questions such as:

- Do you run out of time to do the things that you personally enjoy?*
- Do you wish you had more support or assistance?*
- Do you lack the amount of time needed to complete your work effectively?*
- Do you have difficulty falling asleep because you have too much on your mind?*
- Do you feel as if people expect too much of you?*
- Do you feel overwhelmed?*
- Do you find that you are becoming forgetful because you have too much to do?*
- Do you feel exhausted at the end of the day?*

I would also add in some evaluating questions, that include:

- Is your spouse or children complaining about the amount of time you are away from home?*
- Do your ministry activities out number your family activities and work requirements?*
- Has your home fallen behind on housework or laundry, because you don't have enough time?*
- Are you ordering in food because you don't have time to cook?*
- Are you stressed financially because you are putting your personal income into the ministry?*

*Is your own personal bible study time suffering because there doesn't seem to be enough time?*

These are all good indicators that your life may be out of balance, and the more you answer yes to... I would caution that are you getting closer to total burn out.

We can avoid ministry burn out when we:

- plan for it in advance
- evaluate and course correct the ministry
- identify and develop future leaders

We plan for ministry burn out in advance by:

- *taking care of our bodies – plenty of rest, healthy food, exercise, etc.*
- *planning for time off between large events – make it part of the schedule.*
- *having someone hold us accountable for our time commitments.*
- *being consistent with our own personal study & prayer time with God.*
- *reviewing our personal commitments monthly, and knowing that is is ok to say no.*
- *making sure that we don't replace our responsibilities with ministry tasks.*

We plan for ministry burn out when we evaluate and course correct the ministry by:

- *recognizing that certain events require more work, and planning for it with extra time/volunteer*
- *simplifying future activities by removing elements that were unnecessary or unfruitful.*
- *delegating more tasks to team members, being mindful that we don't have to do it all.*
- *scheduling in a season break to allow the entire team time to recuperate.*

We plan for ministry burn out when we are identifying and developing leaders by:

- *preparing a leader to step up in our place when we take a temporary break.*
- *developing a pool of leaders to add to the team as the ministry becomes more time consuming.*
- *identifying leaders with talents that our team might be lacking and adding them into the ministry team.*
- *equipping a leader to take over for you (or a team member) permanently if balance isn't possible.*

When one person is feeling out of balance or burn out, it is usually the result of their own decisions. They are taking on too much, not delegating enough, not saying no enough. A single person can correct burn out in a number of ways.

- Pray about it.
- Attack it head on by taking a break.
- Seek help from a trusted friend or your spouse.
- Learn from it, so that we don't repeat it.

When the entire ministry is feeling out of balance and burnt out, it's usually an indicator of a larger problem.

- The team is not structured correctly, an important position is missing.
- There are not enough team members to execute the needs of the ministry as a whole.
- The ministry is over scheduled with non essentials, time fillers.
- Someone on the team is not doing their job and everyone else is picking up the slack.
- The team members are involved in too many other activities, and the ministry suffers.

It is possible to find yourself in the position where your entire team has a personal life that is out of balance. They may be involved in too many ministries and have too many commitments in their personal life. This is the right time to evaluate if you need to gather more volunteers or if you need to look at restructuring the whole team. Life changes, and it is wise to let the women know that if the ministry is too consuming they can step down.

It's better to have a team of fresh new faces, full of energy, than to have a team full of women who are plain burnt out.

There is a local church that has a policy in place that no one can serve in the same ministry for more than two years. The current leader identifies and prepares the next leader, then they have a ministry fair where people can sign up to fill in the additional positions within the ministry. If no one signs up for a particular ministry during the ministry fair, then ministry is closed down for the next two years. Their goal is to ensure no one is burnt out. This church even uses this cycle with their deacons and elders, cycling every two years. When an deacon/elder retires, they replace him as needed.

In a Women's Ministry two counties over, they plan out their year as a team. Then each month a different person from the team is in charge of executing that month's plan. By the time the year is over, each woman has had an opportunity to lead in some capacity. Additionally, each woman gets one month off of service.

Both of these are examples of how at the ministry level, and at the church level, we can fend off burn out by having a plan in place.

Having a plan in place is a good start, but it isn't fool proof. Using the self evaluation questions from before will help you identify potential burn out in yourself. However, we also need to learn how to recognize it in others. If we can catch the early signs of burn out in our team members, we can hopefully stop it from happening.

As a leader, here are some things you can watch out for:

- *Have you noticed a change in meeting attendance, from regular to sporadic, or even missing several meetings in a row?*
- *Have you noticed a decrease in participation in the meeting, or less volunteering than usual?*
- *Have you noticed an attitude that seems like the person is physically at the meeting, but mentally seems to be absent?*
- *Has the person mentioned outside of the ministry meetings any indicators that they are stressed out, overwhelmed, or exhausted?*
- *Is there anything going on in their life that requires their full attention (like an ill spouse) and they are only coming to the meetings because they don't want to let the team down?*
- *Have you noticed her passion for the ministry seems to have diminished?*

If you notice anything along these lines, have a talk with the team member. This is an opportunity to let her take a break, knowing the team is fully supportive of their need to take some time off. Women want to know that it is ok to take a break, with assurance that no one will be disappointed in them, and that there will be space for them to return if /when they are ready.

Something you should avoid is assuming a person from the team wants a break, because of things

happening in their lives. Several years ago my husband had a series of major surgeries. Yes, it was a trying time for my family. I was worried about his health and well being, and I was also stuck in the house with him for nine months. For most of it he couldn't function on his own, and my help was required. My once active lifestyle was slowed down, greatly. Most of the day he spent asleep, and I didn't really have anything to do with myself but sit and worry. In between his sleep sessions, I would help him out of bed, tend to his wounds, get his food and drinks, and dispense his medication.

I really needed something in my life that would distract me from the worry, things that would fill up the time he was asleep. It was healthy for me, and as much as I would try and volunteer to do things for the church or one of the various ministries.... I was being turned down. They wanted me to focus on my family, and they didn't want to over burden me. Which I love and appreciate their desire to take care of me, but they were making an assumption. A woman going through a divorce or newly widowed, might want to fill her calendar and get herself out of her empty home. She might want a distraction to keep her from spiraling into a depression. She may be looking for a place where she feels wanted, valued and validated. When a woman is in a fragile state where her world is falling apart, she may need structure and a place where she has some sense of control and input into the future.

This is why communication is important, we can give these women permission to step down. But, if she declines the offer... accept her answer; let her know she can change it at any time. If she asks for more responsibilities, don't necessarily write off her request. Give her a little more (not a lot), assign her some tasks that you wanted to get done that are not time sensitive. This could be researching a location for a future retreat, looking for some resource books for women's ministry, or even a project like redesigning the ministry's logo or website (if that is a talent she has). I like these activities because they are not needed by a deadline, she can work at her pace... and if it happens, the emotions of her situation hit her and she suddenly realizes she does need a break, dropping these tasks doesn't effect the ministry's current calendar. I'm not suggesting busy work for the sake of busy work, make sure they are tasks you were going to do anyway. I am suggesting giving her activities that can work with the ebb and flow of emotions she may face during that time.

Sustaining a ministry means that we are prepared for the inevitable challenges that will come our way. It's more than just having a large selection of events to chose from to ensure a long term active ministry for the women of the church. Sustaining the ministry also includes the over all health and effectiveness of the team who is spearheading these events. We need a constant flow of new ideas and energy, we need to make sure that we are giving our team members time to rest, equipping our team with tools and new leaders, we are encouraging everyone (including ourselves) to take care of our own mental and physical health; keeping our personal priorities in tact, and not neglecting our own spiritual health.

When we plan for burn out, we are actually fostering balance.

We foster balance through:

1. Structured Leadership Team
2. Effective Calendar Planning
3. Developing New Leaders
4. Equipping Leaders with Knowledge/Skills
5. Evaluation of Events and Team Performance
6. Clear Team Communication
7. Establishing a Support System