Burnout among Christian Youth Workers: A Cross National Analysis

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Abstract

The subject of burnout has received a great deal of popular and academic attention, as the issue is a common problem and experience in both the United States and United Kingdom context. This paper, after a representative literature review, presents and discusses findings about burnout among Christian youth workers. Youth workers (123) in the US and the UK were surveyed 2020 on youth ministry burnout. Causes of burnout, recovery and prevention are discussed. This research will be of interest not only to youth ministry practitioners, but also denominational leaders and youth ministry educators.

Introduction

Burnout is an often used term among those who engage in church based religious youth work as well as those who seek to train youth workers. The subject of youth worker burnout comes up frequently in ministry related magazines and popular books aimed at the religious youth worker.[1]

While burnout research is robust in the United States and the UK, academic research related specifically to burnout among church-based religious youth workers is virtually non-existent. Whereas burnout research at the theoretical and conceptual level is widespread, and whereas these models and conceptualizations have been amply explored in specific occupational subgroups, including clergy, this study takes the next step and considers those who occupy the church staff position of youth worker.[2]

Of those youth workers who have left their positions naming "burnout" as a cause, what are the contributing factors? What differences are there in how US based youth workers frame and conceptualize their burnout experience, compared to their counterparts in other countries? For those who burned out but recovered and stayed, what was it that helped them to recover? Research based insight here will buttress the efforts of those who train youth workers, as well as youth ministry practitioners themselves.

Definitions

Burnout is now considered a distinct malady. The World Health Organization defines in these words: *Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job.*[3] Although not listed by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V), Canadian and Italian psychiatrists such as Chirico have argued that burnout can be considered a particular mental adjustment disorder and is described by the DSM.[4] A team lead by Schaufeli similarly concurs.[5] Dutch guidelines for the DSM-1V-TR lists burnout as an adjustment disorder.[6]

Burnout is not something for which one can obtain a prescription,[7] but the concept of burnout is described variously by both US and non US researchers. Sometimes it is defined in terms of outcomes, such as Cordes and Dougherty's "increased turnover, absenteeism, and reduced productivity,"[8] or as "exhaustion, cynicism, and perceived (lack of) job control"[9] as well as "exhaustion and depersonalization."[10]

An academic consensus has emerged through the widespread usage of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI posits burnout as a multidimensional issue. In the words of Maslach herself *"Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy."*[11]

The MBI has been updated through the years and used extensively in both the US and EU. Schutte, Toppinen, Killimo, and Schaufeli, for example, used the MBI-General Survey among several classes of occupations (N=9055) in Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands and found the three-stage theoretical model of the MBI had good internal validity and reliability.[12] The MBI is not the only burnout survey in usage however, as a brief overview of relevant burnout research will show.

Burnout research, a brief review

The present study is at the narrow end of a conceptual funnel. The wide end begins with general studies about the phenomenon, some of which have already been described. Representatives of other general studies include follow up studies done by Maslach herself. Six key domains are predictive of burnout or the opposite, engagement: workload, control, rewards, community, fairness and values.[13] For example, workplace incongruity when it comes to perceived fairness is correlated with burnout. That is, employees who feel their treatment is not just or fair are more at risk of burnout.[14] Similar results were found three years earlier in Spain. Those who perceived a negative "justice climate" were at higher risk for disengagement and burnout.[15]

A number of research indexes look for three dimensions when predicting burnout: exhaustion, psychological distancing and lack of confidence. Psychological distancing is observed as depersonalization or cynicism, being emotionally flat or having an expedient connection to work. Lacking confidence in one's work "may manifest as a subjective sense of diminished personal accomplishment or professional efficacy."[16] These factors are visible as physical and emotional illness, absenteeism, turnover, loss of creativity, reduced commitment, reduced productivity, and other symptoms. High levels of burnout can result in unknowingly enacting harm on oneself, coworkers or clients.[17]

The middle of the conceptual funnel describes the phenomenon of burnout across intercultural contexts. Reacting to early studies which seemed to imply primarily human service workers were prone to burnout, a major study in the Netherlands showed *any* job can be toxic to the individual worker. Here a "job demands-resources" (JD-R) model was proposed as at least an extension, if not an improvement, of the MBI.[18] Subsequent JD-R model studies of 654 Spanish and 477 Dutch employees found health impairment as a result of burnout and that "…multigroup analyses showed that the structural paths of the model were invariant across countries.[19]

The narrow end of the conceptual funnel is occupation. To extend, deepen and clarify burnout conceptualizations various studies on both continents have applied burnout models to specific occupational subgroups. Among the many occupational groups studied in the US are lawyers, oncologists, human service workers, middle school teachers and dentists.[20]

Since clergy abound in both the US and other countries, it is no surprise that this particular occupational subgroup has received considerable academic attention. Here the research takes a step closer to church youth workers and their working environment. One US based study focused on the cumulative effect of external stressors, such as bureaucracy, lack of administrative support, and inadequate work conditions combined with a variety of internal factors, including idealism, a hard-driving personality, and perfectionism.[21] A meta-analysis of relevant studies from the fields of medicine, nursing, psychology, and sociology found that among religious professionals, Protestant clergy experienced the most occupational stress, whereas Catholic sisters reported the least. Among the many causes of Protestant clergy burnout was the stress ministry placed on the family.[22] At least one US Protestant denomination, the American Baptist, has tried to stem clergy departures through a "Clergy Health Initiative." This research sees a link between poor health and stress. American Baptist Pastors are now given gym memberships.[23]

In another major US study, researchers considered why so many persons are leaving local church ministry and what might be done to reduce those numbers.[24]. Their survey and interviews included clergy from the Presbyterian Church (USA), Assemblies of God, United Methodist Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The study compared clergy who stayed in ministry with those who left on a number of indices. Results of burnout expressed in other studies included feelings of isolation and loneliness, stress or conflict with "those above," and doubts about one's abilities. A more recent study in the Presbyterian Church (USA) included 744 clergy. The impact of five support initiatives were analyzed: study leave, sabbaticals, ministry mentors, spiritual directors, and minister peer groups. Controlling for age and personality, none of the five strategies statistically correlated with lower emotional exhaustion. That is the bad news. The good news from the study is that two things increased satisfaction in ministry: having a mentor, and taking a study leave.[25] A meta-study of 84 other studies published in 2017 showed a similarity among clergy and other helping professions such as counselors, teachers, and emergency personnel. The common instrument used in all of the studies was the Maslach Burnout Inventory.[26]

UK and other non USA based studies on clergy burnout are more numerous than in the US, probably owing that several countries have official religions/churches (e.g. Church of England, Dutch Reformed Church). The public universities in these countries have theology departments with an aim to prepare men and women for clergy service and the sociologists in these universities (not to mention the theologians) have keen interest in pastoral ministry longevity. For example, a study in the Netherlands, using the now familiar Maslach Burnout Inventory explored comparisons between clergy burnout and burnout rates in other occupations. Several studies nuanced the MBI by additionally including a personality- type survey. Wilko, Tomic, and Evers found that clergy were less likely to burnout generally than in other professions. However, clergy with weaker "emotional stability" scores on the Extroversion and Emotional Stability Personality Inventory were at greater risk of leaving the ministry due to burnout.[27] That same year a decadal burnout snapshot was taken of a long term longitudinal

study of all Church of England clergy. Using a Maslach authorized MBI that was both anglicized and made clergy-relevant, high correlations were found between depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (r=.6234) as well as an inverse correlation between personal accomplishment and depersonalization.[28] Another study in Norway, whose dominant church is Lutheran, work/home conflict was among burnout causes in eight different occupational categories.[29]

Clergy burnout studies in the UK/EU are not confined, however, to state-churches. In the UK a massive study of Roman Catholic clergy extended the clergy-relevant version of the MBI with the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire.[30] Results were consistent with the previously cited Wilko study which included personality indices, but also with the previously cited Randal study. Leslie took clergy burnout research in a new direction more recently in exploring whether or not the presence of companion animals (e.g. a pet dog) mitigated work related stress and reduced burnout.[31] Many of the items and indices seen in burnout research thus far have been carried forward in the present study of religious youth workers.

Methodology

This study explores how those in the US and UK experience and recover from burnout. A 19-item questionnaire was conducted generating 123 valid responses. The survey instrument was reviewed and approved by the Nyack College IRB, and standard protocols for human subject research were followed. Those who took the survey experienced youth ministry burnout or had detailed knowledge of someone who experienced burnout. The survey explored both the causes and factors of burnout as well as recovery from burnout.

Sampling, population and delimitations

The authors obtained permission to conduct a web-based survey from five youth ministry resource providers. The survey did not identify individuals but one question enabled elimination of potential duplicate responses. SurveyMonkey.com was the survey platform. The completion rate was 100% and the mean time taken to complete the survey was eight minutes. There were 123 valid responses, 90 from the US and 33 from the UK. As a convenience sample, the results are necessarily only true of those who filled out the survey. However, the authors believe that a sample of this size which includes quantitative and qualitative data are of interest to and relevant to the field of youth ministry and youth ministry education.

Instrumentation

The MBI was not chosen as a survey instrument in the present study for three reasons. First, even the clergy version of MBI does not capture some of the unique aspects of being a local church youth worker. Having youth work specific questions in the survey would particularly help youth ministry educators put these issues "on the radar" of their students. Secondly, the MBI has over thirty items as part of the survey. The survey in the present study contained only a dozen burnout related items. Most importantly, there exists a much larger study of US youth workers conducted in 1998, whose items were tested for reliability and validity[32] In "A Study of Protestant Youth Ministers in America" youth workers (n=2416) filled out a 243 item survey. Ten of the items in the study are (with permission) among those 243 of the Strommen study. In the present research

respondents were given a list of twelve possible reasons for burnout and were permitted to select up to four that were contributory in their case.

The present survey included a personality question as well. Again, in an effort to achieve brevity and simplicity, the four scale "Lion, Otter, Golden Retriever, Ant" framework was adapted for an international audience.[33] As shown in the literature review above, other researchers have seen a connection between burnout and personality type. Leslie Frances continued this research more recently with his own burnout inventory which also included personality assessment.[34]

Results and discussion

A comparison of relevant demographic characteristics will set the stage for further analysis later.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

	US	UK
Number of respondents	90	30
Gender		
% Male	63	52
% Female	37	47
Marital Status		
%Married	74	55
%Single	26	45
%University Graduate	79	97
%Youth Ministry Degree	34	73
Years in that ministry (mean)	6.6	7.2

The majority of those who have experienced burnout are male in both the US and UK. In the UK, woman have burned out nearly equal the percentage of men. Considerably more US youth workers are married compared to the UK. Youth ministry educators, particularly in the US, will be interested to see that a greater percentage of the respondents in the UK (73% compared to 34%) had an actual degree in youth ministry from a college, university or seminary.

How long do youth workers, even those who experience burnout, stay in their ministries? *When counting only the full time* paid category the mean number of years stayed in the US was 5.5 years (n=44). For the UK it was 5.2 years (n=22). The US figure. (5.5 years) is consistent with research indicating that youth workers, even ones who are having hard times, stay around five years.

As to where these youth ministries took place, Table 2 demonstrates the majority of contexts in the US were in a suburban context, but the vast majority of UK youth ministries were in an urban context. The sample is 100% Protestant as well. The main personality home bases of these youth workers are similar when it comes to those whose dominant style is positive leadership. There are significant differences in the others. In this sample, the UK youth workers are less fun loving than the Americans, but wow, they (UK) are a lot more caring.

Table 2
Ministry and Personality Contexts

|	US	UK
Ministry Setting		
%urban	19	61
%suburban	54	32
%rural	27	7
Religious Setting		
% Protestant	100	100
Main Personality Type		
% leader	28	29
%fun loving	23	11
%personally caring	27	46
%detailed	21	14

When it comes to what contributes to burnout among youth workers, Table 3 shows the most important causes of burnout within respondents.

Table 3
US/UK Percent Who Named Category as One of the Top Four Reasons They Experienced Burnout
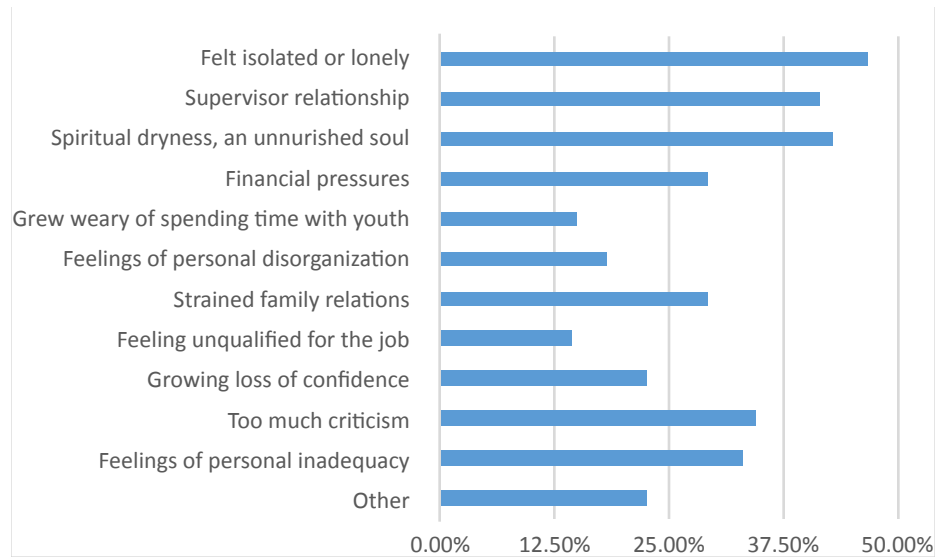
Feeling isolated or lonely, spiritual dryness, pastor hard to get along with, and too much criticism are the top four items named by these US and UK youth workers. The data can help the issues become clearer by comparing US and UK responses, as well as their ministry context of urban/suburban/rural.

Table 4
Burnout Causes US/UK Comparison: Difference of 15 Percentage Points or More
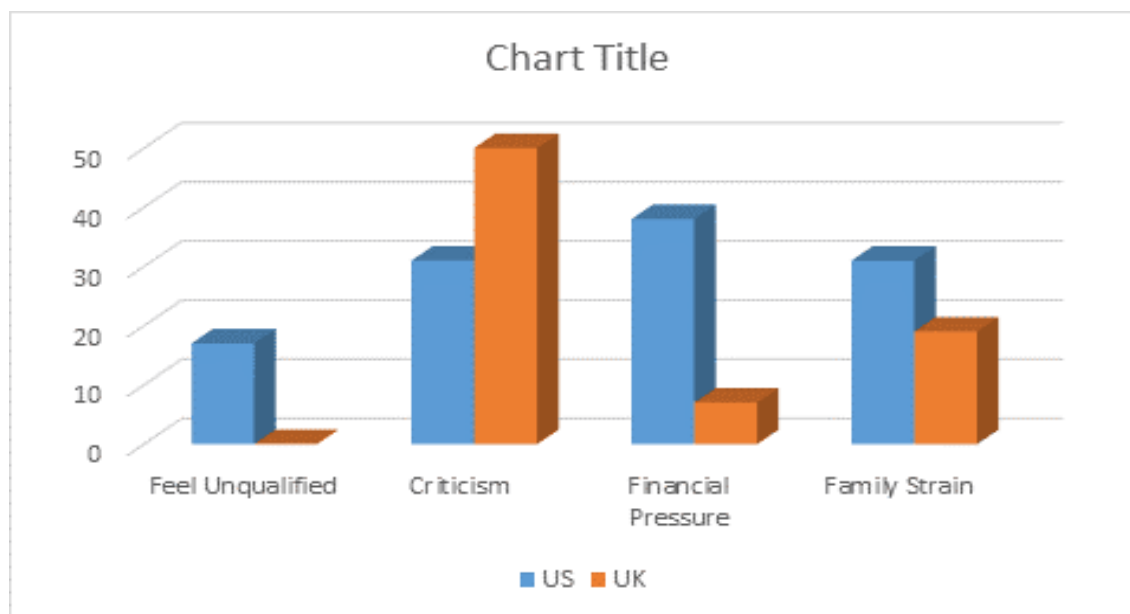
Can reasons be postulated from information in the survey as to what may be associated with these differences?

US more burned out than UK

As seen above, US youth workers are more inclined to list burnout due to strained family relations (e.g. not enough time with spouse/children) and financial pressures than are their UK counterparts. An early possible explanation of this difference would lead one to consider the marital status of these youth workers. One would think that married youth workers experience more strain than single, as marriage implies a whole set of expectations and responsibilities in addition to, and often competing with, one's ministry as a youth worker. Similarly, being financially responsible for a family is a greater challenge than only being responsible financially for one's self. Table 5 illustrates the difference in terms of marriage between US and UK respondents.

For sociologists and demographers the US/UK marriage rate differential is stark, and oft commented upon. The marriage rate for the US in 2018 was 6.5 marriages per 1000 unmarried women. The average marriage rate for the UK in a national statistics survey was 4.4 per 1000 in 2016. The U.K. rate is 33% less than in the US. Interestingly, both the US and UK have identical births-per-women (fertility rate) of 1.7. This rate is below the population replacement level of 2.1.[35]

Do these general statistics bear out among those who completed the survey? Indeed, they do. While the number of children among married youth workers was not included in the survey, the number of married US youth workers is a full 30% higher than their UK counterparts. Family and marriage could be a primary factor for the burnout reason differential in this study.

Table 5
Marital Status among Survey Respondents

Q5 Married?
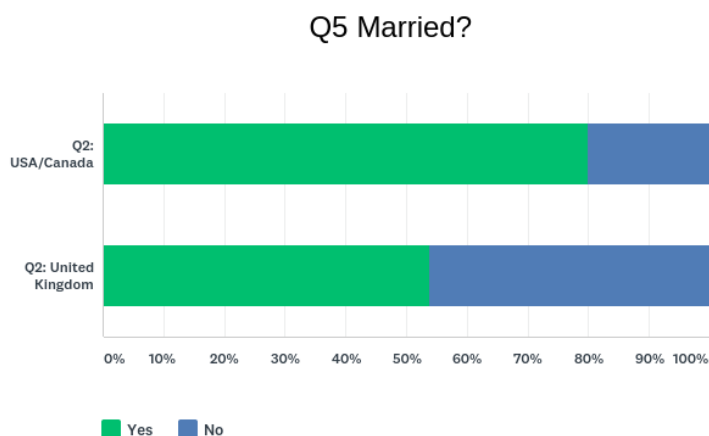
Also seen in Table 4, about 15% of the US youth workers felt unqualified for the ministry, whereas none of the UK respondents indicated that as one of the top four reasons for burnout. One possible explanation for this differential is, as has already been shown in Table 1, 34% of US workers possessed a college degree in youth ministry, whereas 73% of UK youth workers had that degree in hand.

UK burned out more than US

Only one of the top possible burnout reasons showed the UK significantly higher than the US. The one item is criticism. The researchers have anecdotal comments from personal conversations with UK colleagues that one of the characteristics of the "British personality" is to look at, or mention, the dark side of a situation first. National personalities were beyond the scope of this survey.

Employment status and burnout

Respondents identified whether they were full time employed youth workers, part time employed, or volunteers. As seen in Table 1, 63% of these youth workers are full time employed, 18% are part time, and 27% are volunteers. Interesting differences regarding employment status emerged from the data. Half of full time workers selected each of the following four elements as causes of burnout: spiritual dryness, criticism, difficulty with their supervisor/pastor, and isolation. Part time workers expressed greater difficulty with feelings of inadequacy, strained family, and isolation. Both part time and full time note multiple causes for burnout, averaging over 2.5 per person, and as many as five per respondent. Volunteers more commonly noted inadequacy and difficult supervisor/pastor, but at significantly lower rates, with no single element reaching above 38%. As opposed to paid workers, volunteers only chose one or two elements total. This difference may mean that volunteers have singular causes of burnout, as opposed to the multiplicity of factors for full time pastors. It is possible the instrument did not address volunteer specific issues and other factors must be investigated. There are multiple

causes identified for burnout among paid workers, but isolation and loneliness are significant factors among all three groups; full time, part time and volunteer.

Table 6
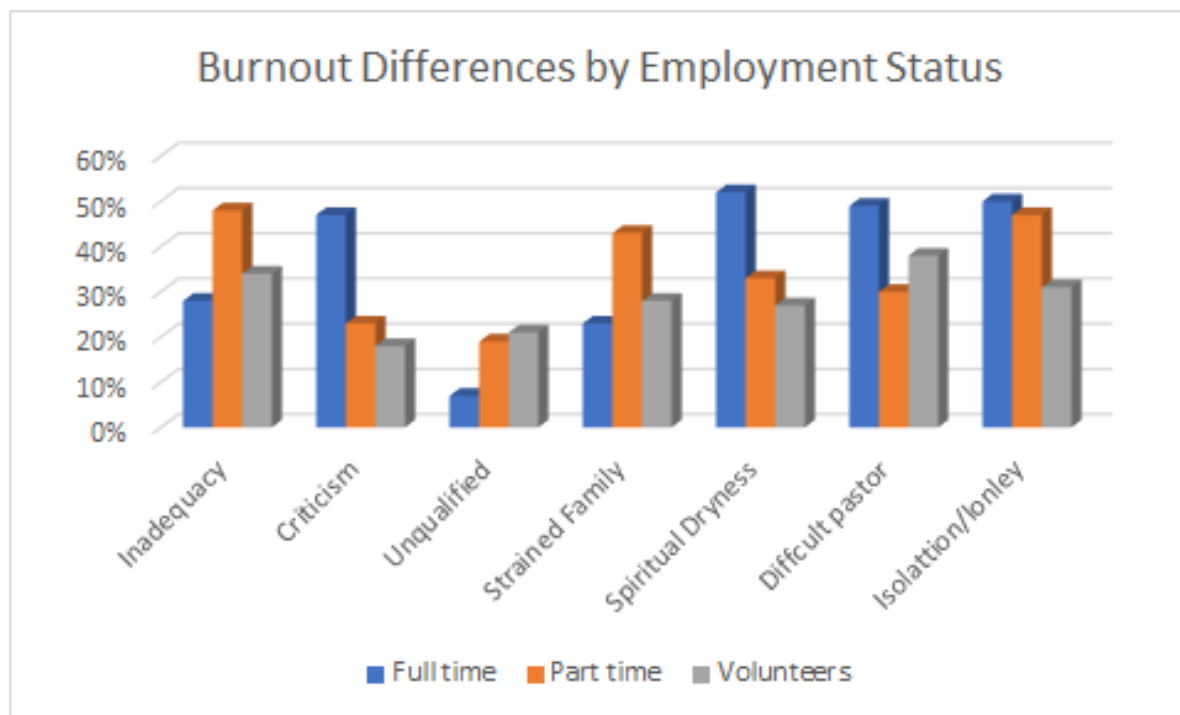
Though analyzing US/UK differences is interesting and helpful, the sad fact is that on both sides of the Atlantic youth workers leave their ministries naming burnout as the cause. A rank ordering of the causes shows much similarity in this regard.

Table 7
Rank Order of Burnout Causes (updated April 6)

US (N=90)	**UK** (N=30)
1. Felt isolated or lonely	Felt isolated or lonely.
2. Spiritual dryness, unnourished soul	Spiritual dryness, unnourished soul
3. Financial pressures	Too much criticism
4. Pastor/supervisor hard to get along with	Pastor/supervisor hard to get along with.
5. Too much criticism.	Feeling inadequate

6. Feeling of personal inadequacy	Loss of confidence
7. Strained family relations	Strained family relations
8. Feel unqualified	Personal disorganization
9. Weary of spending time with youth	Financial pressures
10. Loss of confidence	Grew weary of spending time with youth

The top two reasons for youth worker burnout in both countries are the same and have implications for youth ministry education in both the US and UK. Youth ministry education must include significant help for practitioners in anticipating the loneliness that is part of the reality of ministry. For example, a student graduates from a youth ministry program, then moves to accept a position at a church in a different part of the country. He or she may have no close friends or family in the community. It is possible that there are no others in the whole church who are near the youth workers' age. Zoom and FaceTime do not provide a complete replacement for in-person in-place fellowship. Denominations and youth work training resources should help students address this reality. Loneliness may also occur if church members have a low view of youth work, seeing youth work as a stepping stone to something more important. Feeling "less than" certain contributes to a feeling of isolation. Personal spiritual formation and soul feeding similarly needs to be a high priority. Youth workers can take steps to mitigate the effects of loneliness and spiritual dryness.

Number three for burnout in the US is financial pressure. Money management and financial planning is not necessarily part of youth ministry education at the undergraduate or graduate level. The wise youth ministry educator can devote class time or have a special seminar on this issue. One helpful notion is to ask students to learn how to develop a cost of living budget for any place in the country. The authors know of one youth ministry undergraduate program that requires its seniors to develop a complete personal budget (including tithe and taxes) for two cities that are at least 800 miles from their current home. A candidate in a final interview with a church, given the right tools, could know immediately if they are able to live on an offered salary. For example one student had done her homework. When given the salary figure in the Board meeting she knew it was not enough. She answered them in the words, "I appreciate what you've just said, and being here would be a wonderful place, but I've done some research and know it's impossible to live around here on that amount of money. I know you wouldn't want me to live 80 miles away where things are more affordable." The Board was very impressed by her preparedness. Ultimately, they offered her $10,000 more per year, and she said accepted the position.

As seen in Table 7, in the UK the third most chosen reason for burnout is "too much criticism." In youth ministry education, educators can help students know the value of being on time, thoroughly planning details, and doing everything possible to help young people feel loved.

Unfortunately, criticism is part of the picture of any ministry and it is important to give youth ministry students forewarning that it does happen. One helpful idea is to make sure graduates understand their own personalities. Some personalities, especially the personality home base described as "deeply caring" tend to experience criticism as deeply wounding and will fixate on negative events. This youth worker needs a shoulder to cry on or at least an ear to hear and a friend to help process negative feedback. Mentors and networks, discussed below, can provide this vital function.

Narrative responses

The survey instrument contained three questions that asked for their thoughts and reactions. The vast majority of respondents answered all qualitative questions. Their responses both affirm and nuance the statistical data described thus far.

Certainly, the earlier charts in this paper have highlighted many of the contours of youth ministry burnout statistically. These numbers represent the experiences of actual youth workers trying their best to fulfill their callings. The researchers found reading the narrative responses in many cases to be very painful, and in some cases infuriating. Question 13 invited respondents to say more about any of the listed possible burnout causes and to share their actual stories.

Causes of burnout

What causes burnout from the perception of the youth worker? A frequently mentioned theme was "conflicting expectations." For example, one respondent wrote "I was hired to be the youth pastor and was told 'do whatever gives you energy and makes you excited.'" He went on to describe hidden agendas that were at odds from his own vision of youth ministry. Another wrote "too many people trying to manage me." Another described his chagrin to realize each of the church Trustees felt it was their duty to tell him (their 4th youth pastor in less than six years) what he should or shouldn't be doing on a daily basis. Another spoke of the experience of "bait and switch." Hired to be the youth pastor, he found upon arrival his job also included children's ministry. Another explained that the Elders (as individuals, not as a Board) had authority to tell this youth pastor what to do (apparently, they individually micromanaged the senior pastor as well). One respondent bemoaned the stress of experiencing a senior pastor exit, with the new senior pastor having a completely different view of what constitutes youth ministry.

Another theme emerged from some of the female respondents that youth ministry became nearly impossible once they had their own children. One described it "much more emotionally draining to be a youth pastor plus being a mom."

Many of the respondents mentioned words related to total exhaustion: "overwhelmed," "grew tired," "doing everything," "too many ministries," "going crazy doing family and youth ministry," "too much on my plate." Some explained they had no opportunity to rejuvenate. Facing failure to live up to expectations, some expressed embarrassment, or even shame, reluctant to ask for help of any kind.

Leaving ministry

A significant minority of people experiencing burnout do not return to ministry. How do those who have experienced burnout describe their journey following the phenomenon? Fifty-

one of the 123 respondents did not recover and did not reenter vocational ministry. Of the 51, only four reported entering a volunteer role or serving in some way. Those who left paid ministerial work and stepped into volunteer roles (n=4) mentioned ideas like "still loves kids but doesn't have to deal with the bureaucracy," and working at a "slower pace." Several noted moving areas of ministry or changing churches when moving to a volunteer basis. Of those who did not return to ministry (n=51), some described being "in recovery." While implying a potential future reentry into ministry vocationally, this group was a minority (n=2) of those in the "having left ministry" category. Ultimately, the vast majority of those who left ministry expressed no intention to return to ministry or lead in volunteer roles. Burnout in ministry is synonymous with leaving ministry and will be permanent for a significant minority. Those who burnout and do not recover, do not enter ministry and have a very low likelihood of entering volunteer positions. Conversely, recovery is generally considered synonymous with reentering vocational ministry.

Recovery and return

The majority of those experiencing burnout reentered or stayed in ministry (n=72). These recovery stories described a variety of paths toward return to ministry. The main elements described as contributing to recovery were counseling, sabbath, reaffirmation of calling, new job site or supervisor, boundaries/delegation/margin, spiritual disciplines, and network support.

Professional help/counseling

Over 19% of those who eventually recovered from burnout and returned to ministry received some form of counseling. While a relatively low percentage, it is the second most common recovery element among the participants. The counseling focused on a variety of topics including forgiveness, self-care, accountability, calling, dealing with loss, and boundaries. Some form of encouragement from leadership, pastor, or mentor was often connected to receiving counseling and thus staying in ministry.

A significant break/sabbatical/vacation/unemployment

The most common recurring theme in the stories of burnout recovery were that of sabbatical. Widely described as "extended vacation," "significant break," "time off/out," "unemployment," "work leave," and "sabbatical." Some kind of break or sabbatical, voluntary or involuntary, was mentioned by one third of all who reported eventual recovery. These breaks ranged from a "long vacation" and up to several years off and might include a time of unemployment or non-ministry related work. The time away was not empty. The majority described specific activity that paired with the sabbatical such as participating in counseling, mentoring, self-care, prayer, reflection and more. These elements will be described separately below. It is important to note that at least ten respondents took a small sabbatical that was proactive to address the burnout situation. These proactive sabbaticals were most often initiated by a mentor or pastor's direct intervention based on what they observed in the individual's life.

Affirmation of calling through reflective activities

"I had lost sight of why I was serving in ministry." Recovery from burnout was often connected to realignment with purpose and calling. Ten of those who reentered ministry noted that they actively spent time reflecting on their calling, often noting a reflective element to their sabbatical or counseling;

When I felt burnt out. I took a pause to re-evaluate why I do what I do.

Taking time out to reflect on calling.

I worked through burnout. It was taking time away to work through the journey I had been on.

[Through counseling to] …see the truths I needed to see and begin to believe in my calling as a leader again but from a place of a loved child of God, not having to prove myself.

Times of quiet and reflection more readily available and proper supervision. Cried out to God for a love for his church again rather than the hatred that had been building up. Knew couldn't return without it. After two years recognized completely changing attitude and renewed love and passion for his church so returned to church ministry.

The survey did not address calling specifically as a cause or factor in burnout, yet it was raised repeatedly in the discussion of recovery. Frederick Buechner has noted that "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[36] [36] Discovering one's deep gladness requires being attentive to God. "Attentiveness" could be the most important outcome of counseling, spiritual disciplines, or extended reflection during a sabbatical. All of these were frequently listed as factors in recovery and connected to reflection on and affirmation of calling. Burnout is often explained by misalignment of the worker with external factors in the environment. However, in the long term, ministry activity and technique will not outweigh the impact of spiritual formation or personal development.[37] Os Guinness notes that calling is not to do something or go somewhere. Loss of calling makes ministry disconnected from God and become simply "work."[38] Reconnecting relationship with God to ministry calling reinvigorated the work of ministry and was a significant factor in recovery for these pastors.

New job or pastor is supportive

Burnout is often related to work relationships. The senior pastor or direct supervisor were primary relationships. Recovery was sometimes made possible by moving locations, thus moving away from a toxic work environment or relationship. This comment was common and exemplified 21 participants, "Moved job to a supportive church and slowly rebuilt faith, confidence and love for youth work. New staff team were not inclined to be critical but supportive…manager was inclined to believe the best. New Diocese provided counselling. Diocese Youth Adviser was also supportive and from the beginning." Comments centered on being "empowered" and having their "voice listened to." A second set of themes regarding a

change in job was that a new ministry or supervisor provided space for reflection, a less intense set of work expectations or pace, and better supervision. Thus, in many cases, something needed to be removed, such as toxic relationships or busyness, while several positives were added by the new work environment/supervisor.

Several youth workers commented on a needed alignment with philosophy of ministry or leadership style. "I recovered by being let go and taking what I learned from that experience to find a church with a leadership culture that was more the DNA I possessed in my natural leadership tendencies." These participants noted that the causes of burnout and recovery were more related to self-awareness and misalignment with ministry philosophy. Misalignment is an important sub theme and demonstrates that not all burnout relates primarily to personal issues, broken relationships, overwork or other common burnout sources.

Boundaries, margins and delegation

For a minority of those who stayed or reentered ministry, boundaries, margins and delegation were significant or primary contributors. It was clear that lack of delegation may have been a cause of burnout and was a factor in recovery. Of those who returned to or stayed in ministry, nine specifically mentioned delegation of duties in relation to recovery.

Asked volunteers to take some ownership on things within our ministry.

Elders and pastor removed some duties from my plate.

I started doing less, and asking for help.

We shifted work responsibilities.

Delegation was a form of lightening the load and involving others in the work. For this subgroup, the burnout resulted in more people doing the work of ministry in more equitable workloads. "Giving away" the work is a fundamental strategy for health in the ministry and minister that may also prevent burnout and is a significant factor in recovery.

Delegation was often connected to other comments about "letting go," or "removing things from my life." These comments fall under the idea of setting boundaries. Boundaries are self-imposed limits that define one's sphere of work and responsibility.

I had a moment where I realized I had to start saying no to things that were not immediately expected from me.

Stepped back from a couple other things or organizations that took time.

I've started saying no to things that are not directly within my responsibilities.

Lack of boundaries threaten the health of the ministry and minister. Two of the major causes of boundary issues are avoidance, where one does not say no because they do not know how to ask for help, and control, where boundaries are ignored to gain influence, control or power. Cloud and Townsend suggest that healthy boundaries cannot be developed apart from

supportive relationships with God and others.[39] Their research aligns with this subgroup. Soul care, counseling, mentors and supportive leadership were all regularly mentioned in connection with the creation of boundaries and delegation.

If delegation is "giving away," and boundaries are "saying no," then margins are "saying yes." Margin is the intentional space in a schedule that protects health and priorities. It is not simply down time or short vacations, but prioritized space that allows for self-care and reflection planned into the weekly or monthly schedule. Margin also prevents emergencies from waylaying priorities because the space is available to deal with the crisis without displacing mission central activities. This concept was expressed in a variety of ways.

Intentionally putting days off in my diary in advance

Taking only partial breaks here and there, but my whole life slowed down.

We had three pastoral retreats (3 years in row) that focused on emotional healthy leadership. This led to pursuing a course in soul care, which helped deal with my own personal issues and hangups.

[Planning] in advance for working a weekend / 2-3 evenings in a given week.

In research on youth pastors and ministry networks, Severe describes a "Pac-man syndrome" where youth pastors often cannot stop working to reflect, are fulfilling an unrealistic quota of activities, and are driven to maintain a program that threatens to consume them.[40] His data suggests stopping regularly to reflect (margin) and reducing a quota of activities (boundaries and delegation) are critical for congruence of methods and philosophy. For this population, boundaries, margins and delegation are vital to prevent burnout and are significant factors in recovery.

Soul care and spiritual disciplines

Many of the above changes or elements enabled the youth worker to engage God in new or deeper ways. Sabbath and mentors, for example, gave modeling and space to practice neglected spiritual disciplines. While disciplines themselves are not merit bearing, they place the participant in a path to meet God and grow. Ignoring disciplines such as mediation, prayer, study, worship and fellowship were connected to both the reason for burnout and the road to recovery. The practice of spiritual disciplines in the recovery process was noted to renew passion, personal health and increase faith.

Network support

Over 15% of respondents note a significant friendship or ministry network in their recovery. One participant put it well, "friendships built among the youth leaders enabled us to talk and encourage each other through these times. We prayed for and carried each other in bad times." Ministry partnerships and friendships were listed as major causes of perseverance, reaffirmed calling, encouragement, challenge, accountability, support and prayer. While other factors above were often described as playing a part in *recovering* from burnout, these networks

of support were most often described as "the reason I *stayed* in the ministry because of the community and support." A network and community clearly added to the perseverance factor. These relationships gave "the confidence that God isn't done yet. That the vision God gave would see its fulfillment."

Multifaceted recovery

Just as there are a variety of sources impacting the causes of burnout, recovery requires multiple elements. Each of the six main areas leading to recovery listed above are mentioned by 10-33% of the respondents. What is striking is the lack of a "silver bullet" for recovery. If there is a silver bullet, it is the collection of multiple facets. The vast majority of those who recover from burnout self-describe a multifaceted approach with at least three elements. Half name four or more areas that contributed to recovery. Especially striking was the connection between sabbath and reaffirmation of calling. Another major collection of responses connects counseling, self- care, boundaries and spiritual discipline.

Preventing burnout

Youth workers do not have to continue to fall into the same burnout patterns. Respondents that have experienced the pain of burnout shared their ideas of how other youth workers can preclude burnout in their own lives and ministries. In the narrative responses, 98 youth workers gave one or more ideas for burnout prevention. Table 8 reveals the words that became recurring themes.

Table 8
Words Used to Prevent Burnout
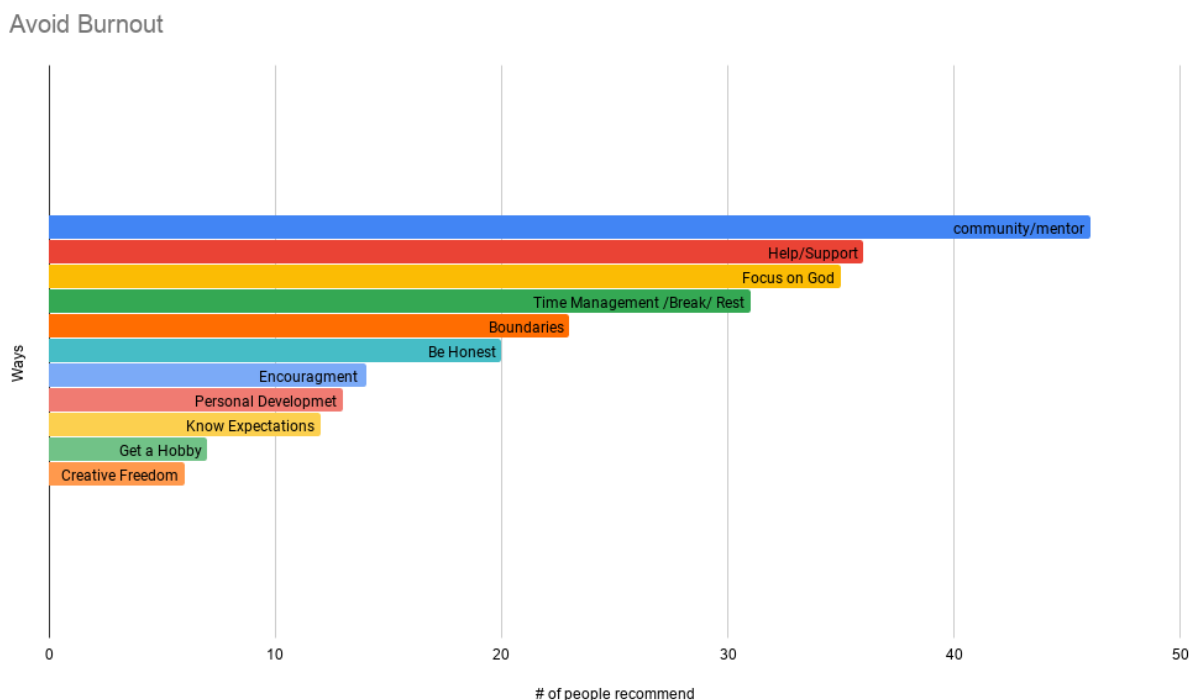
The most mentioned recommendations made by youth workers included finding an outlet through community/mentors, help/support from their team and leaders, getting help with time management, and a deeper devotion to prioritize one's spiritual wellbeing. More subtle thoughts, but also related to the most frequent recommendations, included maintaining boundaries, being honest, the importance of encouragement, personal development, clear expectations, outlets through a hobby, and creative freedom within the ministry. Similar language and ideas were often presented. Many of the noted recommendations are interconnected and together help in avoiding burnout.

Community

The feeling of isolation and loneliness is ranked highest which correlates with the recommendation that it is essential for youth workers to have a community or network of youth workers to connect with and/or personal outlet through a mentor. Youth workers recommended finding a group of youth workers to meet with regularly, "...people who genuinely understand what pastoral life is like." Shared experiences with other people create connection and understanding.

Having one or more persons with whom one can be accountable can be a great help. One youth worker suggests, "give people the power to help you protect boundaries and work/life balance." Another one states, "find a mentor that is able to see burnout before you do." When a community/mentor is given this role there is a greater chance that youth workers will be able to identify and take measures to prevent burnout warning signs before they happen. These people will then be a support in ministry and other aspects of life. Mentors and communities of practitioners will be able to guide the youth worker to deal with the issues that could lead to burnout.

Community outside the church/work life was also highly recommended. Having people outside of ministry is suggested to help "keep things in perspective." One could also apply this by having hobbies that have nothing to do with ministry. Many youth workers suggested finding hobbies that "give life." Hobbies can bring people together, help relieve stress, give an outlet, and allow one to create relationships with others that have no relation to ministry. If isolation and loneliness are sources of burnout, a healthy community is a solution and a guard against burnout.

Living faith

Spiritual dryness ranked second as a reason for burnout. This directly correlates with the recommendation that it is essential for youth workers to focus on their relationship with God. Youth workers made it clear that one cannot avoid burnout without a continual pursuit of a relationship with God. Respondents urge youth workers to pursue God daily. The authors know one youth worker who is allowed the first hour of his day in the office for his own spiritual growth and relationship with God. Closeness with God comes before texts, emails and the "to do" list.

Disciplines suggested by these youth workers include reading the Bible, practicing sabbath, spiritual retreats, worship, prayer, study of Scriptures and practicing silence with the

Holy Spirit. One youth worker shared that "only when I started to consume the Word, did God give me a passion to want to know more." Spiritual disciplines ignite and fuel youth workers in their ministry. Closeness with God is a great defense against burnout. When youth pastors realize that God is the source and the most vital giver for their ministries they are better positioned for longevity in ministry.

Asking for help and support

A significant minority mentioned the wise development and use of volunteers and other staff in the leading of the ministry. A healthy team will help prevent burnout. While some youth workers may think he or she can do all aspects of the ministry singlehandedly, all the time, that lifestyle is a recipe for burnout.

Having a well-utilized team, in other words, delegation, gives others the chance to participate in ministry as well. To prevent burnout, pastors must jettison the idea that asking for help is a burden on others. In addition, the pride of doing it "on your own" leads to burnout tendencies. Once a youth pastor acknowledges their team wants to help and is capable, they can share the burden of ministry. Giving volunteers ownership of a role that is important will unleash pastors and volunteers to flourish. Being part of a team means each member has their own role and responsibilities, and the person in charge can lead the group but should not take up everyone's positions.

Another recommendation is honest communication, especially with the head pastor or supervisor or, in the UK, the line-manager. When one is able to be honest with a direct supervisor, there is a better chance at getting help. There is no way to grow and be poured into if needs are not being communicated. The supervisor's support and encouragement contributes to burnout prevention. One respondent summarized pointedly, "Don't suffer in silence."

Taking a break

Lastly, burnout can be avoided by taking a break and resting. A consistent recommendation was for youth workers to hold their boundaries especially when it comes to time management. Instead of waiting for a sabbatical or vacation, regular renewal must be a part of the weekly rhythm of the youth worker. This research suggests modeling life not after a battery, fully drained and disposable, but using the metaphor of someone continuously linked to the power source by constant practice of rest and renewal.

Many youth workers stress protecting the day off. A significant minority advocated to not work on that day and instead focus on other areas of life. Youth workers need to hold a healthy work/life balance. The pitfall of strained family relations can be reduced. Youth workers must have boundaries, discussed earlier, to maintain relationships outside of ministry. One put it this way, "Have boundaries in place- work schedules and days off, what you will say "yes" to and what you will say "no" to."

Summary and conclusions

Further study of youth worker burnout would be advanced if the percentage of youth workers who burn out in a given year was known. If studied by denomination, a "total number of youth worker" figure would be known, and an annual or bi-annual survey of these youth workers

could be conducted to arrive at a rate or ratio of burnout to non-burnout. If such a study were done longitudinally, a variety of intervention strategies could be tried and assessed as to their utility in addressing the burnout issue.

      In this study, simple percentages and rankings were purposely the only analytical tools employed. Certainly, analytical sophistication would be both deepened and extended if standard statistical social science procedures were applied such as zero-order correlations with levels of statistical significance as well as multiple-regression analysis.

Implications

      Senior leadership or mentors may be the most significant factor in early awareness of burnout as well as a quick and healthy recovery. Counseling and sabbatical rest are often connected with the supervisor by either requiring it, recommending it or providing the resources. The supervisor is the first key to detection and healthy recovery. Conversely, the direct supervisor is also cited as one of the most common causes for burnout. Navigating supervisor relationships as well as caring for subordinates must be part of ministerial leadership training. Several of the elements needed for recovery are also preventative in nature such as sabbath rest, counseling, boundaries and community. Organizations and individuals can build health and reduce the occurrence of burnout using these same approaches. Those who recovered needed resources on boundaries, creating margins in their work, and navigating their supervisor relationship. These areas are of curricular concern for educators.

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[2] Nomenclature differs by denomination and setting. Church based youth workers who are paid are variously called youth pastors, youth ministers, student minister/pastor, youth director, and others. In this study the term "youth worker" is the predominant term used for paid or volunteer.

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