

Avoiding Pitfalls in Ministry

Sharing: Think of a person you know who was going strong in ministry and who had to leave ministry for some reason. What pitfall did they encounter?

We would be wise to avoid thinking that we are immune from experiencing pitfalls: *“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide an escape, so that you can stand up under it.”* (1 Corinthians 10:12-13)

Jesus' disciples experienced pitfalls on a few occasions – here is one of them: *“Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed Him. When He came to the place, He told them, “Pray that you will not enter into temptation.” When Jesus rose from prayer and returned to the disciples, He found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. “Why are you sleeping?” He asked. “Get up and pray so that you will not enter into temptation.” Pray that you will not fall into temptation.”* (Luke 22:39,40,45,46)

The Evil One is always at work to trip us up and get us to experience a pitfall: *“Be sober-minded and alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in your faith and in the knowledge that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”* (1 Peter 5:8-9).

The Apostle Paul urged us to make sure we don't end up being disqualified: *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”* (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Here is the good news that God is able to restore us even when we have experienced a pitfall: *“He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm.”* (Psalm 40:2)

Here are my top 10 pitfalls to avoid in youth ministry – and they are all about losing something:

1. Losing My God: Someone once said: “If the devil can't make you bad, he will make you busy.” It is possible to get so busy doing God's work that we don't have time to connect with God in personal devotions including prayer and the Word. It is critical to practice the presence of God throughout your day and also carve out time for devotions, especially when we find we have a full schedule and deadlines are mounting.

2. Losing My Sanity: It is possible to get to a dangerous place where everything I eat, sleep or drink is related to youth ministry. At one point, my wife actually challenged me that I needed to get a hobby because I had become totally obsessed with youth work and all that goes with seeking to have a local and global impact. I took up bird watching as a hobby and have found that time in the bush on a Monday is the perfect way to reconnect with myself and ensure that I start each week rested and refreshed – hey, even God takes time

out to rest, so why don't we? Another way in which my sanity is preserved is by following the Getting Things Done approach – an action management system that ensures that all my commitments are tracked and nothing stays in my mind but is captured and tracked in an effective system that is reviewed regularly.

3. Losing My Family: Some years back I nearly lost my marriage because of my addiction to work and a habit of giving time to everyone and everything else instead of my family. God has called us to give our best to our family and not just the leftovers. This means making tough choices about what we will get involved in both inside and outside our youth ministry at church and also ensure that we build healthy habits around time off, meal times, birthdays and other celebrations. If we have kids to carve out one-on-one time to hang out with each kid. One of my habits has been to try and only work two-thirds of the day – so if I have an evening meeting then I will take some downtime for myself and my family either during that morning or afternoon – or the following day.

4. Losing My Support: When we function in isolation from others who can pour into our lives or even help us do ministry we are heading for disaster. I carve out time every week to meet with a fellow youth pastor so we can share our journey in ministry together and meet every month with all the youth pastors who serve in our geographical area from different denominations.

5. Losing My Team: Another pitfall is failing to build ministry around team. When we do everything ourselves we may think we are doing a great job but are not doing what we are called to do which involves developing leaders and helping teenagers gain skills that will prepare them for adulthood. We may love preaching but must equip adult and teen leaders to preach God's Word!

6. Losing My Church: It is possible to operate as if we are running a para-Church ministry rather than one that is a vital part of the wider church. It is essential to build a youth ministry that is connected to the life of the church. This means we must follow the same discipling approach as the church (even though we need to adapt ministry to teens) and ensure age-specific and age-inclusive ministry takes place. Some years back we had our own youth worship band and almost never worshipped with the wider church on Sunday mornings. We came to a realization that what we were doing was not helping teens make the transition into the adult body and we scrapped the band and now meet regularly in worship with the wider body on Sunday mornings. As youth pastor, it is critical that I am vitally connected to the other leaders of the church and attend as many meetings as possible dealing with how the church operates and participate in planning and shaping the direction the church is taking.

7. Losing My Cool: Someone once said that in ministry you can expect to get more bricks thrown at you than bouquets. They will be criticism from teens, parents, ministry leaders, church leaders, etc. As long as we don't get defensive and look for the truth in what is being shared and respond in a positive and loving way we won't go off the deep end and lose our cool!

8. Losing My Edge: Sometimes we can get into a comfortable place in ministry and end up doing some great things for just a little too long (past the sell-by-date) and suddenly we wake up and realize that our momentum has dipped and we are losing traction in ministry. There are no easy solutions to avoid doing the same thing for too long but maybe when

things are going really well we should already be considering the need to change some aspect of what we are doing! Innovation and creativity has to be central in youth ministry.

9. Losing My Balance: Our vision statement at His People in Johannesburg is: “We see lives, communities and society transformed through discipleship in the Word, the presence and the power of God”. I have come to realize that it refers to three legs of a stool: The Word of God, the Presence of God and the Power of God. When any of these are lacking in our personal lives or in our ministry than we are heading for a fall.

10. Losing My Focus: So finally, it is possible to say yes to so many different things in life that we end up drowning in a sea of activities and do a lot but do nothing really well or properly. I made it my aim some years back to devote my life to working among teenagers and so far nothing has derailed me from that focus. It helps me make wise decisions about my use of time and resources and has helped me to stay focused on what God has called me to do with my life. A well-crafted mission statement with clear roles defined for our lives will also help in this are. My mission is to be a Christ-follower who equips family, friends and next generation leaders to be disciplemakers. And I live my mission through six roles: Disciple, Husband, Father, Youth Pastor, Mentor and Student. Creating two goals for each role each week and scheduling something in my diary that will move me towards achieving those goals is a critical part of staying focused for me.

One of the best tools I can share with you for avoiding pitfalls in ministry is to help you find and live your mission.

Finding and Living Your Mission

1. Craft Your Mission

There are four questions to answer in crafting your mission statement:

(1) **What Do You Want to Be?** What *noun* best reflects what you will 'be' for a lifetime?

(2) **How Can You Become This?** What *verbs* best describe the impact you want to make?

(3) **Who Do You Want To Impact?** What *people groups* do you want to impact?

(4) **Why Do You Want To Live This Kind Of Life?** What is the *end product* of your life?

lifetime noun

verbs of impact

people groups to impact

end-product of impact

My Mission is...

2. Identify Your Roles

These are the contexts in which you will live out your mission.

* List all the roles you play in life

* Group the roles into categories

* Select five or six roles to work with

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

3. Create Your Goals

Role #1: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Role #2: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Role #3: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Role #4: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Role #5: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Role #6: _____

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

4. Plan Your Week

There are six steps that will help you turn your mission into reality. You should consider using a weekly planner. A *daily planner* is so 'close up' that you end up focussing on what is right in front of you and urgency and efficiency can take the place of importance and effectiveness. Using a *weekly planner* is a better tool as it helps you focus on fulfilling your mission. Here are the guidelines for planning your week:

A. Review your Mission: The first step in programming for the coming week is to connect with what is most important in your life. The key to this connection is referring to your mission statement that reminds you of what is most important in your life and that which gives your life meaning. This process will also help you to schedule into your week a significant number of important activities.

B. Identify your Roles: Now you make a list of all the roles you fulfill in life. The total number of roles must not exceed six as it is difficult to mentally manage too many. If you have more roles, you could combine some of them (i.e. family - for husband, father and brother).

C. Create your Goals: Next, you should think important results to accomplish in each role during the next seven days. You can create goals by asking yourself: "What is the most important thing I could do this week to have the greatest positive impact." While many goals may come to mind, you should limit yourself to one or two important goals for each role.

D. Schedule your Activities: Most people are always trying to find time for important activities in their busy lives. They move, delegate, cancel or postpone things - trying to find time to do important things, but the secret is not to prioritise the schedule but to schedule the priorities. You also need to create time zones - these are big chunks of time that are set aside for important activities. Here is how to go about scheduling your activities:

(1) Identify Your Big Rocks: Look ahead through the week and make a list of all the things you must accomplish that week. Another key is to think through your roles in life and think of one or two important things you need to get done for each of your roles.

(2) Block Out Time For Your Big Rocks: Get to your weekly planner and allocate time for the important things before you week gets filled up with little, lesser important things.

(3) Schedule Everything Else: Now you can fill in the little to-dos, daily tasks and appointments. You may like to record upcoming events and activities as well.

(4) Adapt Daily: You may need to rearrange things during the week. Don't feel that having a weekly planner means that everything is set in concrete.

E. Evaluate your Progress

Evaluation should be done weekly and monthly: (1) *Weekly evaluation* - at the end of the week ask questions like: What goals did I achieve? What goals did I miss? What kept me from accomplishing my goals? What challenges did I encounter? Did I protect my priorities when I made decisions? How much time did I spend on important activities? What can I learn from this week as a whole? (2) *Monthly evaluation* - at the end of each month or quarter, ask yourself questions like: What patterns of success or failure do I see in setting and achieving my goals? Am I setting realistic but challenging goals? What keeps me from accomplishing my goals?

