

Spiritual Stress Fractures
by Bob Young
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I've never had a stress fracture—at least in my physical body. I think I've seen a lot of them—in the spiritual body of Christ!

I'm a lot easier going than many people realize. A few years ago, we had a health fair at Ohio Valley University. At the time, my multiple roles as Bible program chairman, executive vice-president, and campus master planner were placing lots of pressures on my life. At one booth in the fair, stress levels were tested by seeing if a little rock changed color in your hand. Some of my colleagues were amazed: the rock turned not black (as they expected), but bright blue. "You mean you're not stressed!" Well yes, I was experiencing stress, but there is a difference between stress and handling stress. Sometimes I handle stress well, sometimes not. I know, for example, through my DiSC profile, that when I am under extreme pressure, I become a "rules keeper" and generally make life unbearable for those around me.

Stress is often a fracturing experience in relationships. Churches that experience stress need someone to help relieve and work through the stress. Why? Stress tends to eliminate sound judgment, personal communication, and effective leadership. Churches under stress are in trouble if they don't know how to manage stress and work through it. Conflict management best begins with stress management. Effective stress analysis and relief may eliminate much of the potential conflict.

Take as an example a church that experienced stress as a result of several uncontrolled factors. First, there were significant leadership changes. Three youth minister changes in less than 24 months, a new minister, continuing changes in the leadership (eldership) as a result of moves, deaths and normal transitions followed. The result was that the elders (perhaps in an effort to regroup) stopped effective communication. Second, doctrinal questions arose during the ministry of the new ministers. Congregational and cultural communication was already minimized, and the result of questioning was further isolation of the leaders. Other stressors could be noted in this real life example, but these are sufficient to illustrate the severity of the problem. The result was a stress fracture. Another church experienced a church split, an unsuccessful effort at reconciliation, and a subsequent division with hardened positions and lines drawn. Members were not talking to one another—communication was virtually stopped. In the midst of this, a new set of elders was appointed at one of the congregations. The ministry staff is relatively young and inexperienced. They called me as a consultant to assist in understanding their situation and needs. I immediately saw the stress fractures.

In a 2004 survey of U.S. workers, 27% reported being overwhelmed "often or very often" by the work they had to do. Most of the ministry reports I read show that ministry is among the most stressful of professions. Add that most church leaders are volunteers with limited time to donate to the church, and one may wonder why churches don't have more problems than they do.

What I am describing is more often the rule rather than the exception. It is well documented that too much stress unhandled is unhealthy for individuals. What is bad for individuals is also bad

for organizations. The church not only suffers when its leaders (paid or unpaid) are overstressed, the church suffers when its members and the volunteers it depends on are stressed. The response of many churches to this circumstance is to add more activities and place even more stress on its members.

As I have grown older, I have learned something important about stress and work. The key to accomplishing more is often doing less. Of course, simply doing less may leave important things undone, unless one at the same time reestablishes priorities and determines what activities really have the greatest potential of contributing to the success of the organization.

This is a hard lesson for churches, for ministers and for elders. It is a hard lesson for church members. Much of what we expect is based on a tradition that, frankly, is hardly growing the kingdom in most places. I suggest it's time for a fresh look at what really glorifies God and advances the things of the kingdom.

Churches that engage in such fresh and courageous conversations will find new spirit and new energy. But the greatest advantage a local church gains is the possibility of avoiding stress fractures!