

Several years ago, we were involved in the development of a new test facility at work. We had some competition at another Air Force Base where they were trying to produce a similar product. The application of their device was different, so though there was some tension between the two groups, we still stayed in communication with each other.

I visited them one time and they gave me a tour. By this time, however, they had taken their product out of the laboratory because it was too difficult to work with. My guide proclaimed, with what seemed like almost a sense of pride, "Yeah, we had to get rid of it. We burned out two engineers on it."

I was a little shocked, especially when I thought of our own work. We had not burned out any engineers, although someone later said that we might have "singed a few". When the idea of using metrics to measure the health of an organization began to take hold at our company, I sent this in as a possible metric: Number of Engineers Burned Out (Them: 2, Us: 0). This was not embraced as passionately as I had hoped. But the fact that we had no burnouts was a measure of how good our team was and how much they became involved with our project.

Perhaps we could still use this metric in the church. But we should use it in our concern for those who have drifted away, or worse, those who we have turned away from God. The use of attendance is not a good metric, for a dynamic equilibrium can exist where there are as many new people coming as there are others leaving. This can even happen in a growth situation. One of our problems is that we have 'greeters' to meet the visitors and new members, but we don't have 'searchers' to go out and find the old.

In fact, our excitement over new people is overpowering. I have seen many times an inordinate affection for "new" people, especially a preacher or other church worker. They are always "the greatest!" But we are all familiar with 'the honeymoon effect'. After a period of time, the interest wears off and is redirected towards someone else. This is like a boy going to one girl after another, never staying with one for very long. There is real excitement in the chase only. It reminds me of the problem a dog has who loves to chase cars: what will it do when it catches one?

We might condemn the boy and say that he is sowing his wild oats, and we hope that he will settle down later. But what if our own daughter is involved with him? Is there any fundamental difference with the church? We find ourselves in the same type of situation. And sometimes, like a girl who gets 'in trouble', people leave with an unwanted burden which is difficult to bear.

Have you ever seen a church 'leader' that has been responsible for chasing people off? I knew of a youth minister who, after a small exodus, said that he was glad to get rid of the troublemakers. I know of another minister, after hearing of a person's beliefs, asked him not to come back. There is always someone who tries to eliminate those who aren't 'spiritual' enough. Jesus spoke of this type of evangelism in this way: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to (Matthew 23:13)." And we are all guilty to some degree. We need to think about how many people we may have chased off. This is not a metric that we should be proud of.

The Bible tells several stories of those who were driven away. One of the earliest relates the struggle between Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16, 21). Because of the mutual jealousy between them Hagar was forced to leave: twice! They were incompatible, but they should have been a family. Then there was Joseph – 'gotten rid of' by his brothers (Genesis 37), David – driven away by Saul (1 Samuel 19 and elsewhere), and the man the Pharisees cast out of the synagogue (John 9). You may notice that jealousy is a common theme for all: either of those cast out or of Jesus.

The old cliché is: "Familiarity breeds contempt." But it ought to breed True Love. Our relationships should grow deeper and stronger with time, like glue that is given time to set. We should continually become closer to each other. Of course, in any family there must be some time where we are away from each other. But if we are not growing in our love then we are not being what we should be. Let's try to keep our "burnout" metric as low as we possibly can.

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