

Managing to Stick Around, Part Three by Syler Thomas (originally appeared in *Youthworker Journal*, Sept/Oct 08)

U2 is arguably the greatest rock band in the world. In my opinion, no band in history has been able to stay at the cutting edge of rock music for as long as they have, almost thirty years now. The key to their success? There are a number of factors, but the reason their music has stayed consistently relevant and popular is that they have been able to reinvent themselves when necessary. After the worldwide success of *The Joshua Tree* in 1987 and the subsequent concert film/album *Rattle and Hum* in 1988, the band's next album three years later went in a completely different direction. In fact, lead singer Bono described *Achtung Baby* as the sound of four men trying to chop down the Joshua Tree.

Many die-hard fans (myself included) didn't quite know what was going on. We were comfortable with the sound we were used to. But the band couldn't just keep doing the same thing they had always done and expect to get the same results. The longer we stay in youth ministry, the same rule will apply to us. From time to time, we have to be willing to reinvent our ministry model and even ourselves as leaders.

As I mentioned in my last column, after seven years of doing ministry one way, our ministry was stagnating and I was dissatisfied with the effectiveness of our current model of discipleship. After pushing through a mini-pre-midlife crisis and attending a very helpful conference, I decided to revamp our Sunday evening program, including moving weekly small groups off of weeknights and onto Sundays. Students who were used to the existing model were skeptical that it was the right decision and it disrupted what I had been used to for seven years as well. But three years later, I can safely say it was the right decision.

I share this story with you to communicate the simple lesson that, in order to stick around in youth ministry, you have to be willing to *reinvent yourself* and to sometimes even make drastic changes for the sake of the ministry. Here are a number of other suggestions to help you stay in it for the long haul:

Delegate. One of my mentors told me a long time ago that you need to try to give away the tasks that are burning you out *before* they burn you out. You'll be surprised how many people are willing to help you if you will ask them. Often, it will feel like it's so much easier to do it yourself than to let others do it. You're right; it is. But in the long run, it will pay off.

Develop a thick skin for criticism. This is harder said than done, but if you let each critical statement affect you, you will never last. I've written elsewhere about handling criticism, but the bottom line is to receive what God might be teaching you through the critique, and ignore the rest. If you find yourself bitter at the critical party, pray for God's heart for that person, and find a trusted confidante who can help you process your frustrations.

Prune activities that burn you or other volunteers out. There are certain activities that will burn you out. For years, our Winter Retreat was a 4-day, 3-night retreat. I had a hard time

getting volunteers for it, and I regularly returned from it burned out. For my own well-being and that of the ministry's, I decided to change it to a 3-day, 2-night retreat. There were good ministry reasons to make the change, and many students were upset about it, but now I look forward to the retreat, and the volunteers and I leave it energized rather than exhausted. Don't be afraid to adjust or eliminate events that do more harm than good.

Make time for the ministry activities that bring you life. For me, that's meeting with students that are either actively seeking God or those that have a lot of questions. As our ministry has grown, I have less personal contact with students, so I make sure there are a handful of students I personally pursue, and it nourishes me spiritually as much as it does them.

Don't forget your first love. This is simple and cliché, but it's true. It is easy to get so caught up serving God that you forget to pursue Him. Nothing will dry your heart up and make you long for something else than to try to do ministry out of your own energy. Aggressively protect your time with God.

Here's to your efforts and my efforts towards doing everything in our power to stick around for a while.