

January, 2006

Coping with the stress of music ministry

Paul A. Aitken, NWACDA Music in Worship Chair



It is not easy to manage the amounts of stress and strain placed upon the average church musician. Many of us keep extremely unrealistic schedules filled with everything from rehearsals to other employment to soccer practice to continuing education.

Recently, I was speaking to a friend who indicated that her dad, a professional musician, came very close to a nervous breakdown several years ago. He had filled his life with so much stuff that he could barely handle the stress of it any longer. I completely understand this predicament. In my own life, juggling professional duties alongside of my family responsibilities (and the completion of my doctoral degree) sometimes stretches me very thin. I know that many, if not most of you, can relate to this predicament.

In this day and age, unless you move to an island cabin off of northern British Columbia, you are going to have stress in your life. As a means of helping other, I have put together a few non-scientific ideas of how I cope with stress in my own life:

1. Put limitations on your professional schedule. Each and every week I am asked to do more and more work outside of my job. There are many enticing offers, but the reality is that there are only so many hours in the week. Please know that it is OK to say "no." People will respect you more if you decline the opportunity rather than performing a less than adequate job. For most, doing lack-luster professional work is itself stressful. And we don't like stress!
2. Spend time with family and friends. The reality is that a spending quality time with your family and friends is a great way of relieving stress. Take your children to a movie. Go on a date with, and communicate with, your spouse or significant other. Help a friend with a few odd jobs. Find ways to laugh with them. Improving the relationships with the people around us has an amazing effect upon reducing stress in life. Good relationships with others reduces a lot of stress in our lives.

3. Focus on the positive: I am constantly amazed at how negative people some people can be. Last February, I had the privilege of being a site coordinator at the ACDA national convention. I watched with amazement as directors filled with stress and negative energy instilled a negative aura upon their choirs. Other directors, although anxious, were extremely positive about every situation that arose. Again, their choirs reflected this same positive energy; they were happy and calm. They were experiencing much less stress! I learned a lot that week about positive energy. I learned that if we keep accentuating the positive, our stress level will be much lower. In turn, choirs will also experience less stress as they begin emulating the emotions of their director. Teach people how to treat you by accentuating the positive. You will experience less stress.
4. Forgive someone: This ties in closely to the previous point, but bears mentioning. It is mind-boggling how many of us carry grudges to the grave for things that have happened in the past. On tour two years ago, I took a choir through Oxford, Mississippi where we took a bus tour of their town. During the tour, it became apparent that docent was still bearing a grudge against the northern states in regard to the Civil War. She spoke of it as though it was something that happened last month. Is there someone in your life who you need to forgive? A former friend, a spouse, a pastor, an in-law, a child? Actively forgive that person and let it go. From my own personal experience, I know that the stress and baggage related to that memory will soon fade.
5. Wrap up unfinished business: We all have loose ends in our life. In my own situation, I decided that one of the greatest factors of my own stress load was the fact that I had not yet completed my doctorate. In fact, I had given thought to giving up on the whole process altogether! And the thought of giving up was stressful! Last October, I made the conscious decision to finish and I am now getting closer each and every day to wrapping this project up. I know that the stressful weight that will be lifted when the doctorate is done will be well worth the effort I am putting forth now. So, take a look at your life. Is there unfinished business in your life? If there is, make a concerted effort at completing the task because the stress lifted from you will be considerable.
6. Strive to improve your spiritual life: As a church music director, I am surprised that I sometimes have to remind myself to improve my spiritual life. How odd is it that I need a reminder? I work in a church! But the fact is that there is stress-relieving power that comes from prayer and from believing in something that is greater than self.

Paul A. Aitken holds music degrees from both the University of Western Ontario & Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and is presently completing a DMA in Choral Music from the University of Oklahoma. The first-ever winner of the ACDA Raymond W. Brock Memorial Student Composition Competition, Paul was recently included in the 2006 edition of Who's Who in America. As a conductor/composer, Mr. Aitken is Director of Music Ministry at Boise Idaho's "Cathedral of the Rockies" where he oversees sixteen musical ensembles in both the traditional and contemporary musical vein.