

DANGEROUSLY

DISCOURAGED?

Adversity,
despair, and
disillusionment—
these children's
ministers
have been to
the brink...
and survived.
Here's how
you can, too.

by Jennifer Hooks





ome call it a dry spell. For others it's a low point. Whatever you call it, a dark season in your ministry life can seriously impact your motivation, your love for ministry—even your faith.

Several children's ministers* bravely shared with us their stories of adversity in ministry, stories you can probably relate to. We took their tales to the experts—professional counselors and career coaches—for their insights on how to find encouragement again.

■ **With Friends Like These...**

Danette was a children's minister for 14 years at the same church—the church she always thought she'd grow old in. But when a new pastor came on board, it was quickly apparent that he didn't like Danette. Despite an uncomfortable and at times unhappy relationship, she was determined to stick it out. Finally after four years, the pastor pulled her into his office and fired her. Then he instructed her to lie about her firing and tell her team she'd resigned. She was tortured by that mandate, so she remained silent and refused to lie. On Staff Appreciation Sunday, the pastor stood at the pulpit and announced that Danette had resigned.

Distraught—but needing work—Danette accepted a children's ministry position at another church. It was clearly not the best fit: Danette, a veteran leader, was now being micromanaged and “trained” by someone who'd never even served in children's ministry. After four years in that position, she finally quit, utterly disillusioned and feeling separated from God.

“I'm scared,” she admits, speaking of the

emotional distance she feels from God. “I never would've thought this could happen to me. I always felt so close to God, but I don't anymore. I'm better, I guess, but I'm not where I used to be spiritually.”

Danette has stepped away from ministry at this point, and she worries that her relationship with God is in jeopardy.

■ **Find Yourself—and Your Faith**

“One of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned is this: God is way more concerned about me as his child than he is about my performance in ministry,” says Julie Beader, children's ministry consultant and founder of Connect Ministries International ([connectministry.com](http://connectedministry.com)). “When we've been through tough, emotionally draining circumstances (and unfortunately ministry can be loaded with them), we often forget to take the time we need to heal. We're so used to moving forward at a rapid pace that we just keep going and sometimes don't notice that we're bleeding all over the place.”

Danette's initial situation with the pastor may be an underlying cause to her feelings

*Names have been changed for privacy.

of separation from God, notes Phil Monroe, a Christian psychologist, biblical counselor, director of the master's program at Biblical Seminary, and blogger (wisecounsel.wordpress.com).

"Danette's spiritual shepherd wounded her instead of mentored her as he should have," comments Monroe. "When God's representatives act in ways God would not, it does damage to the soul. Danette may need to be more aware of how this damage has interfered with her relationship with God. She likely has a view of God that's been challenged by these circumstances. She needs a friend to walk with her on a regular basis. Ultimately this friend may be able to help her see that her disillusionment is with humans and not with God, and that her faith is not in his human structures but in the Christ who suffered alone on the cross for her. She should find a friend who'll pour into her (not by lecture or advice) by being present and

crying with her during her pain."

When we experience a situation that traumatizes or rocks our faith, it's critical to step back, reflect, and heal before attempting to forge ahead, says Belder. "When we try to move forward in ministry while carrying bitterness, anger, resentment, or even hurts, it's dangerous for us and for those we're attempting to minister to," cautions Belder. "It flavors our ministry. You have to get to the bottom of it—and it may get messy—and get things right. That may mean some serious time alone with God, or it might involve some counseling."

■ When Parents Attack

Veteran children's pastor Sarah was concerned when one of her best teachers came into her office and said she was ready to quit. The teacher's preteen class was out of control—so much so that the teacher of 16 years asked Sarah to step in. Sarah was appalled—the kids were disrespectful and disruptive. They even threw things at the teacher. After many failed attempts at discipline, Sarah took a drastic step and called a meeting with the parents and kids. She told them if they didn't shape up, she

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wouldn't promote them to the youth group.

"What a mistake!" says Sarah. "Instead of the parents disciplining their kids, they turned on me and said they weren't aware of a problem, my discipline policy was flawed, and my teachers didn't follow through. I left the meeting in tears... One thing I learned: You don't mess with Momma Bear—and certainly not a whole pack of them!" Sarah canceled class for the next week to give the teacher, the kids, and herself a break.

"It was very discouraging," she admits. Even though her pastor supported her, Sarah reeled; her confidence had taken a major hit from the attack. She knew her reputation and her previous rapport with many of those parents might be irretrievably broken. "I was questioning everything about myself and my ministry."

■ Plan Your Defense

A parent coup can be nightmarish, especially

when the attacks are personal in nature. In this situation, say experts, the best response is to step back and let the dust settle while you think things through.

“Sarah’s experience shook her faith in herself and her abilities to the point of wanting to quit,” says Krystal Kuehn, a licensed professional counselor, author, and co-founder of NewDayCounseling.org and BeHappy4Life.com. “Never make a decision when you’re experiencing strong emotions such as deep frustration or anger. Work through your emotions first,” Kuehn advises. “And remember that people blame others rather than take responsibility. That doesn’t make it your fault.” But, cautions Kuehn, don’t overlook the possibility of self-improvement. “Recognize the opportunity in the situation to learn and grow as a leader and disciplinarian.”

Sarah came out of her situation bruised, but intact. The turning point for her was when a child from the class approached her and said, “Pastor Sarah, I can’t learn anything in class.” That helped Sarah get her resolve back.

“After that, I made sure those kids behaved,” she said. “I sat in on every class, and the kids were aware that if they disrupted once they were out of the class. Over time, everything eventually blew over. I’m sad that some bridges may have been burned, but I’m proud that I stuck to our policies and defended my teacher—who is still teaching.”

■ The “Pastor’s Wife”

Paula and her husband planted a church two decades ago, and today it’s thriving with hundreds of members. Paula took on the children’s ministry at the church’s inception, at first volunteering a couple hours per week. Soon her work turned into a part-time, paid position of 20-plus hours... and then 40-plus hours. As the work increased, so did Paula’s love for children’s ministry—even though her paycheck did not. The ministry thrived under her direction.

The downside: The ministry’s growth has been matched by an increase in problems with parents and team members. “I’ll never forget just being floored as one of my nursery volunteers got in my face, screaming at me at the top of her lungs because we had a mouse in the building,” says Paula.

Despite her love for the kids, years of full-time work at part-time pay, critical parents, and a job that’s evolved into an unmanageable beast have slowly worn her down.

And Paula admits she’s silently struggled with something else: “When things are going well, I’m ‘the children’s director,’ ” she says, “but when they aren’t, I’m ‘the pastor’s wife.’ ”

Paula says she’s demoralized and experiencing a personal crisis, even though she still loves ministering to children. She’s considering quitting, taking a lower-level position, or continuing on while trying to work through the problems.

■ Redefine Yourself

“Paula has two options,” advises Beader. “One, let someone else take over. This on the surface seems like the easy option, but it sounds like Paula’s dedicated and gifted for this area of ministry, so it would be a tragic loss for her and the ministry.

“The second option may seem like a bitter pill to swallow,” continues Beader, “but it may also carry with it the greatest measure of fulfillment and reward in the end. Paula needs to begin to earn, command, and expect respect. Like the centurion that Jesus met, once she settles in her mind whose authority she’s operating under, she’ll find it easier to stand tall and not be walked on. Remember, the one out in front is the one who takes the most hits. Criticism will always be part of life, so she’ll do well to learn to glean what’s useful from it and toss the rest. As she leads with confidence (not to be confused with arrogance), over time the perception will change and her clear leadership will take her to the next level in her ministry. And P.S.: Titles don’t mean a thing.”

■ On the Fast Track... to Burnout

Trent is a high-profile children’s minister at a megachurch. He’s an author, a sought-after speaker, and still a hands-on children’s minister. He also has two months of unused time off because he hasn’t taken a vacation in three years. Recently he realized something was wrong but couldn’t put his finger on it. He eventually became so ill that he missed a month of work. At his lowest point, he was bedridden and plagued with severe insomnia. When the doctor finally diagnosed him, he was shocked: Trent was clinically depressed—a side effect of serious, pervasive burnout and stress in ministry.

■ Recognize When You Need Help

“Clinical depression is a serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act,” say the medi-

cal experts at Berkeley's Tang Center. "Clinical depression isn't a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed away. Clinically depressed people can't 'pull themselves together' and get better. In fact, [it] often interferes with a person's ability or wish to get help. It's a serious illness that lasts for weeks, months, and sometimes years."

Trent's experience speaks to other children's ministers who are trying to do it all. Their diagnosis may not be as serious as clinical depression, but severe burnout can have devastating personal and professional ramifications.

"The limelight has a way of [burning out] some leaders," says Monroe. "We're not capable of this kind of work over the long haul, and so we come to the end of our physical and emotional selves. Many individuals in this state of physical burnout either try to get back to their former ways or just leave it all behind. It's hard for leaders to see themselves as needy or as 'the patient.' But that's what they need to be."

"In our ambitions and our ideas of what success is, it's so easy to lose sight of the big picture," says Beader. "It's possible that the future

won't look anything like the past—and that may be exactly God's plan."

"One thing people have to understand is that you can even burn out doing what you love," agrees Trent. After counseling, regular care from a doctor, and a schedule overhaul, Trent says, "I'm doing much better."

Where Are You, God?

Not long after Dan arrived at his children's ministry for work one morning, he took a phone call he'll never forget. There'd been a terrible car accident, and emergency workers were calling for a chaplain. Dan's pastor was out of town, so Dan agreed to come to the accident scene. Once there, he met a mother of two young children and a newborn. The father had been killed in the accident. The mother was inconsolable—and furious with God. That day and in those that followed, the mother harshly rejected any attempt Dan made to console her, even rejecting his mere presence. So Dan focused on being unobtrusively supportive and helpful, and over the next weeks he prayed constantly for the woman and her children.



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But two months after the accident, Dan learned that the woman's newborn had died of SIDS. Dan continued to pray and tried to reach out to her, again to no avail. A few months after the infant's death, the woman was arrested on drug charges. She went to jail and the state took her children.

Dan was dismayed—he'd spent months supporting and reaching out to the family, untold hours praying for them, and despite all this, the family was torn even farther apart and had turned completely away from God.

"It all seemed so . . . ineffective," Dan laments. Though time has passed, Dan says he's still haunted by the family, still haunted by the fact that his faithful ministry to them was seemingly in vain. "I still think about them and wonder how they're doing," he admits.

Give It to God

In situations such as this, Dan says he learned that children's ministers have to recognize that it's actually God that people are rejecting—not them. "It's not personal, even though it may feel that way." And, he says,

he also learned the importance of "dusting yourself off" when you're knocked down. "My advice? Don't let rejection or failure affect your faith," he says. "Our responsibility is to reflect the Light—we're not the source of Light. So if you've done that, then you've done what you are meant to do. And you have to be okay with that."

"When we try our very best and it doesn't produce the results we hope for, we assume we've failed," says Kuehn. "[But] we never know just how much our support, presence, and prayers play a part in God's ultimate plan in other people's lives. Never give up—on what God can do in this family, on God's faithfulness, and on his power at work in you." **cm**

Jennifer Hooks is managing editor for Children's Ministry Magazine.

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