

## **A Counselor's Perspective – by Bill Oldham, M.Div.- LAC**

Please allow me to introduce you to Rob. He is 25 years old and passionate about making an impact on young people. Students love him. Parents support his effort to improve the spiritual life of their children. Many students say they have had significant life change as a direct result of Rob's ministry in their lives. By outward appearances, Rob is good at what he does.

Rob has been married to Cheryl for 5 years and they have two rambunctious children. Both Rob's and Cheryl's parents live in other states. Cheryl is not paid a salary by the church, but has been told that she should not work outside the home. She is expected to support her husband's ministry and be involved at all youth functions. Together they spend nearly 90 man hours per week in church ministry. To be successful, Rob must spend at least 4 of each 7 evenings at school functions or ministry events. Other nights he has students in his home for more intense individual ministry. When Cheryl is not involved in ministry events, she is left to care for the children by herself.

Youth ministers are responsible for the spiritual and emotional needs of the youth in his ministry. Rob acts as confidant for dozens of teenagers while advising them on every facet of teenage life: sexuality, dating, parent / teen relationships, parents' marital separation or divorce, grief, peer pressure, spiritual development, career counseling, depression and suicide and many others.

Rob receives unsolicited criticism from someone on a regular basis. Parents criticize him for not giving special attention to their child's particular needs. Elders and Deacons express frustration that the rate of numerical growth isn't "what they'd like it to be." The Senior Pastor seems to be unsupportive at times. On one occasion the Senior pastor did not back him on a proposal that they had agreed to present jointly to the board. Rob felt "hung out to dry." He is held to a high standard of outward creativity, consistency, energy, and numerical growth. If one of the students gets in trouble in his personal life it is as if Rob is held personally responsible.

If that's not enough, his wife sometimes expresses frustration at the low priority given to family life. She feels like an unpaid staff member, and it is robbing her of a dream of a home life that takes priority in her husband's life. She has no one to listen to her and support her and her family's needs. ....meanwhile they are struggling to pay their bills on a meager salary. She tries to be patient but finds her husband under increased pressure to meet the demands of ministry and understands that if she doesn't keep quiet, he may be let go. Still, she sometimes feels that the ministry has taken over their family life. Rob can't seem to please either the church or his wife and grows frustrated and borders on bitterness. Once his passion, the ministry seems to sap his energy and joy and he is discouraged. Rob once felt superhuman as he enjoyed a level of success. Now he often feels like a failure on all fronts.

Rob is in a crisis. The pressures are enormous. He feels increasingly isolated and finally uses up his remaining emotional reserves. That is when Rob comes to see me, a professional counselor. Rob is concerned for his career, his family and his emotional health. He believes he is all alone and feels defeated

that he must employ a professional counselor just to keep his head above water. And counseling is expensive. Most youth minister budgets cannot stand the extra expense so he stops counseling as well. With counseling support he may be able to extend his ministry for some period of time, but counseling alone will not be enough to reverse the downward spiral. A few months later he resigns and takes a job as an insurance salesman.

Rob is not a real person, but a composite of youth ministers that have come to me for professional help when they have nowhere else to turn. When I ask these bruised men of God what they need most. They say things like, *“I need a safe place to be genuine and share my real struggles.”*

If you understand anything about church ministry, you understand that there is simply no body that can meet this need for openness and support within the average church structure. If church leadership or key parents or the students catch wind that their youth leader is struggling, he will almost certainly lose his ministry. If he had support that was insightful, safe and genuine, he might be able to maintain or regain his strength and fulfill his calling.

That is why I am so excited about Exago. Exago is one answer to the pressurized isolation youth pastors face every day. The vision is simple. Put them together. Provide a safe place for them to minister to each other and be ministered to by men who have been in the trenches. Exago is a forum in which these leaders may find “genuine” relationships, free to be “real” with each other. Mutual support and a sense of camaraderie with peers is just what the counselor ordered. The vision of Exago is to provide this forum for lonely, weary leaders to find the hope, training, and encouragement they need to carry on.

Imagine Rob if he had been a member of an Exago Network when he first started out. He might never have hit bottom. He might have learned to balance home and ministry life. He might have stayed off the downward spiral of isolation and ministry fatigue that resulted in personal crisis. He might have learned how to interact with his church leaders and endure the criticism that sidelined him from doing his passion.

Exago is a vision of a safe and supportive place that will help keep gifted youth leaders doing what is that we need them to be doing...*leading*.

Bill Oldham – Counselor