

# Running the ministry marathon: Part 1

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Part 2: [Looking in](#); Part 3: [Looking around](#)

## Ministry is a marathon

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me ...” (Acts 20:24a, NIV).

What in the world was Dean Karnazes thinking? Karnazes is better known as the “Ultramarathon Man,” and for good reason. In 2006, Karnazes ran in 50 marathons in 50 days in all 50 states. That’s right, 50 marathons ... in 50 days ... in all 50 states!

Karnazes’s book, *Ultramarathon Man*, was the No. 7 bestselling sports book worldwide in 2005. In 2007, he was named to the list of the top [100 most influential people](#) in the world by *Time* Magazine. Dean Karnazes is a man who knows how to run a marathon—and more.

In many respects, ministry is a marathon. Those of us involved in vocational service to God are competing in a great race that is nothing less than a long-distance, oftentimes lifelong, endurance marathon. Little wonder the Bible often draws upon the imagery of the race to describe the Christian life.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our

eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV).

## **Watch out for the ministry marathon “walls”**

Real marathon runners talk about the danger of “hitting the wall.” There usually comes a time during the race when fatigue and pain begin to take over, and suddenly, the thought of giving up enters into the runner’s mind.

If ministry marathon runners are not careful, they also can “hit the wall” of ministry fatigue, pain and frustration. Oftentimes, once that “wall” is hit, the consequences can be pretty devastating.

Consider the following results of a [survey of pastors](#) conducted by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth:

- 80 percent believe pastoral ministry is affecting their family negatively
- 33 percent say being in ministry clearly is a hazard to their family
- 75 percent have reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once every five years in their ministry
- 50 percent feel unable to meet the needs of the job
- 90 percent feel they were not trained adequately to cope with the ministry demands placed upon them
- 40 percent report having a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month
- 37 percent have been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church
- 70 percent have a lower self-image since they have pastored than when they started
- 70 percent do not have someone they consider a close friend

Pretty sobering statistics, aren't they? It seems many in the ministry these days are, in fact, hitting a "wall," and they simply are not managing the rest of their ministry marathon very well.

According to a 2010 New York Times article on [clergy burnout](#): "Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could."

It is clear that while many in the ministry are devoting a lot of time and energy to caring for others, they simply are not doing a very good job caring for themselves. Tim Wright—author, minister and himself a marathoner—asserts in his book *The Ministry Marathon*: "Ministry, by its very nature, demands a great deal of our time and personal investment. The needs of others tend to set the tone for each day. As a result, we often find it difficult to squeeze in time to focus on our own lives."

"We race from one meeting to the next, from crisis to hospital call, from sermon preparation to denominationally sponsored events. And we barely have the chance to take a breath. We're continually sprinting through the day, but the sprint never ends. Eventually, we wind up running on empty. We begin to feel the stress mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Some of us are so exhausted, in fact, that we're ready to give up."

## **Four 'looks' for running the ministry marathon**

I have been a runner for most of my life. But in addition to being a literal runner, I also have been "running" in the marathon of ministry for some 30 years—25 years in pastoral ministry and 12 years in teaching ministry at

Dallas Baptist University.

During this time, I certainly have hit my fair share of ministry “walls.” There were seasons in my ministry that seemed to be more like a never-ending, 50-marathons-in-50-days grind. Throughout this race, however, I have discovered several key directional “looks” that have greatly helped me along the way.

I will share these “looks” with you in a series of articles over the next several weeks.

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