BURN OUT/STRESS AND SELF CARE IN THE MINISTRY

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Overview

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Ministry Stress and Burnout[1]

Would it surprise you to hear that right now nearly one in five parish pastors is physically and/or emotionally 'burned out'? He or she hasn't stopped functioning altogether yet – but pastors who are burned out have lost the zest for ministry. They 'go through the motions' day after day, but with little joy, and with greatly reduced capability for effective service.

The sad part of this is that pastors who burnout are among our most dedicated and committed clergy. The hopeful part is that pastoral burnout can be avoided, and, if caught in time, can usually be remedied. Both minister and congregation can take steps to prevent pastoral burnout

1. The Anatomy of Stress

Burnout, the 'disease of the over-committed', comes as the result of chronic stress. However, not all stress is bad. Everything we do causes some stress. Just getting up in the morning requires some stress (more some mornings than others!). One authority, Hans Selye, defines stress in terms of the response your body makes to any demand on it. He separates stress into 'eustress' (good stress, such as you feel with joy, fulfillment, or satisfaction) and 'distress' (excessive levels of damaging stress). A certain amount of stress or tension is necessary for renewal and growth. But too much– and too constant – stress can ruin your health and shorten your life. Thus, the question is not how to take all the stress out of ministry, but how to make stress manageable.

Stress and threat of burnout 'comes with the calling' in the ministry. Studies show that ministers most vulnerable to burnout are: idealistic and over-committed; have rigid standards for their role; are social activists; are inclined to avoid conflict by trying to satisfy everybody; are in constant direct contact with the poor, dying, sick and hurting; suffer from role confusion; can't seem to protect their personal boundaries for rest, relationships and relaxation. Chances are, most ministers will recognize in this list more than a few of their own characteristics.

There is a high incidence of stress and burnout among all helping professions, but a pastor has the extra burden of trying to serve and satisfy every individual in his or her congregation. All the more reason why both pastors and their congregations must take extra care to avoid counter-productive pastoral self-sacrifice.

After all, being constantly over-stressed is not only destructive to the minister as a person; it is also contrary to the very spirit of pastoral commitment. The minister's role is that of 'one who serves.' Constant overstress diminishes capacity to serve effectively. The pastor must stay well, not only for self and family, but also for the congregation's sake. As pastoral counselor Charles Rassieur puts it, in his book, Stress Management for Ministers (Westminster Press, 1982): 'Pastors who

[1] Text from a Minister's Life Brochure titled Ministry Stress & Burnout. Author Unknown, 1984.

consciously and without apology take good care of themselves have by far the best chance to be servants of Christ for all the years of their calling.'

2. Three Major Stress Factors

Stress comes in all sizes and shapes, but generally it starts from one of three major factors: life changes, work-related, or environmental factors.

I. LIFE CHANGE STRESS FACTORS

Adjusting to any change physically and emotionally is stressful. The degree of stress involved varies widely, from the death of a spouse (the most stressful change of all), divorce, marital separation, death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, new marriage, all the way down to such relatively modest changes as getting ready for Easter or Christmas, or being handed a traffic ticket.

II. WORK-RELATED STRESS FACTORS

Work related stress factors for parish ministers can include role ambiguity – uncertainty about what your job includes; role conflict – clash between ministerial functions and personal or family life; role overload – being overwhelmed by the expectations of parishioners; unceasing time demands – constantly being thrown off schedule by unexpected issues; lack of pastoral care – not having a solid counselor to turn to with your own problems; lack of chances to 'derole' and be taken care of yourself, for a change; relocation to a new area or job; career uncertainty – knowing your whole future can depend upon how you get along in one parish; loneliness – the fact that few outside the ministry understand the demands on you can make you feel isolated even in the midst of commitment.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS FACTORS

Environmental stress factors include neighborhood problems such as noise, pollution, crime, racial tensions, or tension with neighbors; tension with service personnel or co-workers; family problems; big general problems; fears of international war or of deteriorating social mores; plus such nitty-gritty close-up problems as leaky pipes in home or church buildings.

3. Recognising the Signs of Gathering Stress

One person's irritation is another's bleeding ulcer. We don't all respond to stress in the same way. Each has a different stress threshold – that is, point where stress becomes harmful. The secret is to find your own stress threshold, and when you sense that you are close to it – back off and change the pace. How can you tell when you've gotten 'in over your threshold'? Here are some common signs:

1. **Your body begins to reject new information** You don't even hear a lot of what is said to you, and don't remember much of what you hear. You're overloaded.

2. **Loss of options** Your mental horizon closes in; you have trouble seeing alternative courses of action.

3. **Regression** Stress overloads can make us act childish – breaking things, or 'hiding our heads' as we may have done when we were frustrated or frightened children. In adult life, these childhood responses can be self-destructive.

4. **Inability to change harmful patterns** When you're under stress from too many changes, it can seem too complicated to say 'no' to additional demands. You find it easier to just heap on more commitments. There's truth to that old line, if you want something done give it to the busiest person.

5. **Fatigue** When you're under excessive stress, your body craves more rest and sleep than usual. Give in and rest!

6. **Depression** This usually relates to change or loss of someone or something close without taking time to grieve over your loss. Stress can precipitate signs of clinical depression.

7. **Physical Illness** Stress upsets your whole glandular system, raises blood pressure, and keeps body systems in a fight/flight state of tension. This constant state of ferment makes you vulnerable to everything from colds and muscular aches to ulcers, heart disease and strokes.

4. Next stop – Burnout

All the above signs are signals of gathering stress, which, if allowed to become chronic, will almost inevitably bring on a much more debilitating general state: burnout.

Psychologist Christine Maslach has described burnout as 'a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and by development of a negative self-concept, and negative attitudes towards work, life and other people.'

Signs of burnout:

- Decreased energy; 'Keeping up to speed' becomes increasingly difficult.
- Feelings of failure in vocation.
- Reduced sense of reward in return for pouring so much of self into the job or project.
- Sense of helplessness and inability to see a way out of problems.
- Cynicism and negativism about self, others, work and the world generally.

Studies have shown that clergy members go through a classic cycle on the way to burnout. They begin with enthusiasm and perhaps unrealistic expectations for achievement, combined with over-identification with their role. This stage is followed by stagnation, as the mundane realities of personal, financial, and career-development requirements begin to press. Then comes frustration, a sense of being inadequate to accomplish what needs to be done, and doubts about whether or not it's all worth the effort.

Actually, this stage of frustration can be a turning point for the minister: either upward again to enthusiasm and new effectiveness through a constructive re-channeling of his or her energy; or down into a fourth stage of apathy and chronic indifference that marks complete burnout.

5. It Takes Two to Un-tangle

It has often been said that most of the stress associated with ministry comes from two sources: The pastor, who expects too much of himself or herself, and the congregation, which expects too much from the pastor. True burnout also begins with the same two sources. Both must work together to prevent the pastor becoming tangled in a snarl of continuous stress.

6. How a Pastor can be Revitalized

1. FIND FRESH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Insightful new ways of praying, for example, new approaches to scripture reading; the kind of serene continuity in observing a daily office, such as Matins, Compline, or Psalms; daily meditation; personal retreats and days of silent contemplation; spiritual mentors or friends.

2. TAKE TIME OFF

Daily breaks. Weekly breaks. (No pastor should put in more than 50-55 hours of work in a week.) Quarterly long weekends off. Yearly breaks of at least a month. (This may seem long to some parishioners, but then, aren't ministers on 24-hour call, seven days a week in their jobs?) Sabbaticals every six or eight years, to renew, re-educate and recharge mental and spiritual resources.

3. ESTABLISH A SUPPORT NETWORK

Parish clergy need a special kind of support, because they work under continuous observation from hundreds of potential critics. They need the support of being told they're doing well, and are loved and cared for as individuals. This sort of affirmation should come not just from people inside, but also from people outside the congregation. Where from? Clergy peers (who know better than anyone else the pressures of the ministry). Regular prayers by the congregation for [and with] the pastor. Political support within the parish and in the judicatory, from individuals who have the minister's perspective, and who will support him or her when needed. Personal support to help the pastor change his or her ways of functioning in order to relieve stress and become more effective. Spiritual support, because 'a pastor needs a pastor, too,' to provide strength and nurturing.

4. ENRICH YOUR LIFE AT HOME

The family is our primary support system. Family problems place enormous added stress on the minister. Marriage enrichment seminars can help make even the best marriage better. Family therapy can help any family to greater health.

The minister's family should take full advantage of ways to enrich their own life together, and the wise congregation will encourage them.

5. GET REGULAR EXERCISE
The ministry is normally a sedentary profession; without added exercise, the pastor's vulnerability to heart disease is greatly increased. Tennis or golf is NOT an exercise program; it's just kidding yourself. A pastor needs frequent, regular, interesting exercise, planned to fit his or her temperament, schedule and available resources. Some pastors like to run. Some do yoga. Some even take a brisk walk, in the cemetery! Whatever – 30 to 60 minutes at least three times a week, should be a regular ritual for every pastor – for the sake of the congregation!

6. FACE YOUR FEARS
Every human being finds something in life threatening. Fears don't go away; they simply weigh on us. Drinking and overeating are often ways to try to avoid threatening fears. When we're ready and willing to confront fears, we're on the way to casting off the burden. But admitting fear is hard for a pastor, simply because pastors are somehow supposed to be 'above all that'. For a pastor who needs help or support in facing fears, therapy or members of a support network can help greatly.

7. PRACTICE SELF-ASSESSMENT
Many pastors flounder along day-to-day, never taking time to figure out what's happening to them, never taking time to improve things. Taking time to assess your own needs, your points of greatest stress, and how well you're coping with these needs and stresses can make an enormous difference.

8. GET THERAPY
The healthier we become, the more we have to offer to others. Therapy is not inexpensive. Yet if it means the difference between ineffective ministry and vital, healthful ministry, can a pastor or congregation afford to miss out on it?

9. LAUGH!
Did you know your body would not let you laugh and develop an ulcer at the same time? It's true. Laughter has tremendous healing power. Take time out for laughter!

7. The Congregation can Help Avoid Pastoral Burnout by...

1. Taking the first step. Ideally, if lay people took more active responsibility in discussing and solving problems in the church, stress wouldn't reach the crisis stage so often. If everyone is truly open when goals and priorities are being established, the difficulties can be singled out before factions develop.

2. Encouraging your pastor's continuing education. Urge your pastor to develop his or her skills in resolving stress and role conflicts through classes, seminars on human relations, conflict management, and group organizational techniques – at the church's expense.

3. Helping a fresh, eager young pastor. Since the first four to five years are the hardest, encourage your young pastor or assistant pastor to attend young pastor's seminars, seminary follow-up courses or other training.

4. Recognising that the Pastor is human, can make mistakes, and can't do everything for everybody, even if he or she wants to.

5. Recognising unrealistic congregational expectations and adjusting them in conjunction and co-operation with the pastor.

6. Understanding that a minister needs support, time out, feedback, and compensation - both emotional and monetary. No one can constantly put out without ever taking in.

7. Seeing that your pastor has an adequate staff. Whether the help is full-time, part-time or volunteer, your pastor deserves an adequate staff to make sure the demands on his or her time are not excessive.

8. Protecting the privacy of your pastor's family. Do your best to remind your fellow parishioners that your pastor's family is not the property of the Church. They're not assumed to be 'unpaid staff' either.

‘In recent years, the notion of burnout has become popular as a way of explaining the state of exhaustion and dysfunction experienced by well intentioned individuals who lose their energy and persistence. It is more likely to occur in people, whose job involves a great deal of nurturing, although it can happen to individuals in the most ruthless corporations. Generally, it is less likely to occur to “idea-people” than to “people-people”. And it may aptly describe the state of some mothers, fathers, spouses, and grown children who get themselves in similarly stressful family positions.

Since studies of stress indicate that the worst possible combination of work conditions is high-performance [expectations], continued demand, combined with little control over the situation, the position of clergy may, by [it's very] nature, be dangerous to health.’ (Friedman, p. 216)

8. Return from Burnout [2]

When we find ourselves attempting to undo the problem of continuous stress, there are two general areas to consider: 1) Engage in practical activities; and 2) develop a theology of self-care.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

Instead of being attached to major stress-producing activities, such as work overload, consideration of some healthy practical activities could be consistently implemented. Here are some examples from the literature:

- Take time out.
- Enrich the family at home; make home a peaceful “haven”.
- Get regular exercise.
- Fast.
- Laugh, have fun.
- Take time to assess your own needs.
- Face your fears.
- Consider avenues of restorative recreation.
- Develop a realistic work load.
- Re-negotiate your job description or role.
- Make small but consistent changes.
- Adopt an optimistic bias.
- Consider those things that will produce joy and peace.
- Learn new ways of communicating.
- Learn to resolve conflict.

THE NEED TO DEVELOP A THEOLOGY OF SELF-CARE

Some Christians still believe that there is something un-Christian about giving serious consideration to our own health and sense of well-being. For some, to take care of themselves, increases their sense of guilt. An example is taking time to relax.

Self-care begins with understanding the difference between self-indulgence and being good to one’s self. We need to understand that self-care is an appropriate response to the gift of your body, health and life from the Creator. For this to happen, Christians need a theology of self-care.

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF SELF-CARE

The challenge may be to find an articulate, evangelical theology of self-care, providing biblical guidelines for managing stress and avoiding burnout. Without one, however, we lose the key motivating force for getting people to take care of themselves. To take care of ourselves is important. People have the right and need to know that the Christian faith and life is one of joy, peace and fulfillment; not one that creates burned out shells – particularly in its leadership. Can you imagine Jesus, as He practiced his ministry, burned out? The following thoughts are put forward as a start toward a biblical and theological rationale for self care.

A THEOLOGY OF ‘CALL’

If our interpretation of our ‘call’ is to serve people, rather than serve God with people, can we not expect, eventually, to suffer stress and even burn out? If we believe that every time our people need something of us it is God calling us to serve, then exhaustion will destroy us. People’s needs are insatiable! If I feel guilty when I say ‘NO’ to their demands, then I’m

[2] This section is adapted from Stress, Burn Out and a Theology of Self Care: An Introduction by Philip Collins. Regent College lecture notes, 1985.

headed for collapse. Should not God's call to me to apply God's grace in my life, living in peace and joy, modeling a way for my people to live in that grace? Even though servant hood should characterize my ministry, I have primarily a call to serve God. We are not saviors; but those who offer guidance and leadership through modeling as well as teaching wholeness and potential in Christ.

UNDERSTAND THE 'SOUL'

Today we seem to hold more to the Greek view of the body (soma) – as weak and carnal. We need to restore the Hebrew concept of the body as part of the whole; that is, the soul. Whatever makes up the person is the Hebrew idea, including our bodies, spirit, emotions, aspirations, and personality. If we took to heart the Hebrew perception, then we would take seriously the fourth commandment to rest. We would exercise more, play more, monitor our intake, and perhaps even fast. See Matthew 11:28, 'Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.'

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Spirituality has been of interest in the evangelical church. An emphasis has been given to prayer, the means of grace, the spiritual disciplines, meditation and the idea that we should serve God without thought of public recognition or personal acclaim. We could manage a great deal of stress if our spiritual life was rich and meaningful. We receive spiritual renewal by being constantly filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and with the Word of God (Colossians 3:16). We must learn, as Elijah did, that nothing will offset burnout like communing with God. Freudenberger wrote, 'no one can produce constantly without replenishing his resources.' Almost without exception, burned out believers are those who have been giving out for years but have not been spiritually replenished (Mark 6:31). This, not doubt, applies to praise as well.

THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

In much of the secular material on stress and burnout, the suggestion is that everyone needs a 'support network'. They mean by this that we need people around us who will affirm and support us. Transition and stress technologist agree that the quality of support we receive is a major factor in our ability to withstand the strain of change and tension. The need for support is basic to human existence. This has vast implications for the church. Fellowship, closeness and 'community' are the foes of burnout. The evangelical loner, so proudly private that he is reluctant to permit anyone to invade his personal space, is all too common. Experiencing rewards and setbacks in a vacuum, he is ripe for burnout. Conversely, it is hard to imagine a believer experiencing burnout or chronic stress who enjoys a close, sharing fellowship with other believers, and who both gives and receives edification.

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

An important difference between the believer fired up and the believer burned out is pacing. The former works in a steady, unhurried pace. The latter is sporadic, working in frenzy, then drifting off in search of something new to get revved up about. We are often reminded that in the promise of the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8), the Greek word for power (dunamis) is the source of our English word, dynamite. But, more pertinent to burnout, is the derivation from this source of our word 'dynamo'. The need for Christians today is not dynamite but dynamo. The former goes off with a big bang and then is all burned out; the latter continues steadily to produce, day in and day out. The Williams translation of Philippians 4:13 is helpful: 'I have power for all things through him who puts a dynamo in us.' We can be over-committed to programs; we can never be over committed to Christ. We need to know the difference.

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