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Burnout! Burning out! Burned out! What do these words mean to you? What fears do they evoke? What visual images do they conjure up? Do you see charred and ruined homes on a hillside that have been ravaged by a run-away fire? Do you see majestic mansions, once ornate and resplendent in architectural detail now scarred by black soot, and empty? Or perhaps you see a truck abandoned on the side of a country road, with its paint scoured black, its metal rusting. All perfectly legitimate images, but they barely capture or describe the syndrome that inflicts all "people helpers" - the final penalty for those who must care too much as a part of their job: Burnout!

Burnout has been defined as a "syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind." It is a response to the chronic, emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings. If these human beings are troubled, then burnout can be particularly rapid and devastating.

But a definition doesn’t adequately capture the essence of our concern here. No amount of theorizing will help us to appreciate how destructive and debilitating the care of others can be. See the pastor, once vibrant with power and enthusiasm, able to motivate others to service and godly living, given to caring and concern, become reduced to a useless and ineffective rubble, emotionally exhausted and deeply fearful — and you’ll understand the ravages of emotional burnout. See the spouse of the pastor, once the perfect hostess able to calm troubled waters and apply the soothing balm of comforting words and listening ears become jittery when the telephone rings, panicked by any hint that the doorbell is ringing and desperately wanting to be left alone — and you’ll recognize the exhausting tentacles of the burnout monster. Or see the pastor who once patiently and kindly plodded her way through the prejudice and projections of ignorant and insensitive parishioners become a lonely, isolated, deeply depressed recluse who cannot get out of bed in the morning and who conceals her secret siestas like a closet alcoholic — and you’ll glimpse the reality of burnout. I know, because I’ve seen each one of them in the flesh! They are as real as the air I breathe.

A pattern of emotional overload with little reward or appreciation in the context of feelings of helplessness is at the heart of the burnout syndrome. Why are pastors particularly prone to burnout? Because:

1. They have not been taught to care for others in the right way.
2. They care too much out of guilt.
3. They care too much and feel helpless about providing solutions.
4. They care too much all of the time.
5. They do not care enough about their own self-recovery.

Pastors tend to get overly involved emotionally. They tend to overextend themselves and then feel overwhelmed by the emotional demands imposed by others. And the more people there are to “feel responsible for,” the greater the opportunity for burnout. One pastor described it this way:

“There are just too many people to care for. It’s just too much. I’m spread too thin and there just is not enough caring to go around. Every day I pray to God for an abundant supply of his love..."
to give to others, but it's as if the pipe isn't large enough for it to flow through.'

Once burnout sets in, pastors don't believe they are able to give of themselves to others. It's not that they don't want to help; they can't. The gas is gone. The barrel is empty. It's also been called "compassion fatigue". The muscle of their loving heart goes weak and limp. No longer is it able to pump life-giving care and love to the rest of the needy body. The rhythm of the love-beat becomes erratic and irregular. Short bursts of compassion may be mustered in times of emergency but it may suddenly and surprisingly cease at the most inopportune times. The love machine is powerless and eerily silent, waiting for a miracle to bring it to life again. For many the miracle never happens. It is then called "burnout".

But is all this talk about burnout for real? Could it be that our gullible Western minds have such a propensity for the faddish that we may be in danger of creating a monster simply by giving it a name? Will we not rush to excuse every moment of laziness or touch of incompetence simply as a symptom of burnout? Will it not take away responsible behavior? Will the cry "burnout" not become a smoke screen for "cop-out"? One pastor, in writing on the topic of burnout, claims he is becoming "bombed out" by all the talk of "burnout", and suggests that the present preoccupation with burnout creates the danger of being "sold out".

I agree! Discipleship was never, is never, nor ever will be easy. The servants of God must not be deterred by fake disasters, invented obstacles, or exaggerated weaknesses. But burnout is none of these for the majority of pastors. It is real hazard, produced in well-meaning and dedicated "people-carers", whose motives are pure and Holy Spirit-dependence sound. They simply discover that the human frame has its limits, like every machine. When these limits are exceeded, the price is "burnout".

The warning not to allow the idea of "burnout" to be an excuse for "cop-out" is well heeded. But, on the other hand, prevention is better than cure. A thorough understanding of the phenomenon of burnout can help to pinpoint the pitfalls of this devastating and debilitating problem. My concern in this issue of Theology, News & Notes is not so much that a discussion of the inevitable potential for burnout among pastors will provide a convenient cover-up for incompetency, but so that a few readers will readily acknowledge the reality of the syndrome or that they are victims of it. It is a lot easier to understand that machines reach a stage of lifelessness and uselessness by being overworked than it is to convince so many well-meaning and dedicated ministers and people-helpers that this could happen to them. There is something strangely paradoxical about believing you are a "servant of God" and acknowledging that you are on the road to burnout! Too many see it as a sign of failure rather than as a warning signal from an over-extended physique or psyche.

Is burned-outness the inevitable price one must pay for caring too much? Is it the ultimate penalty for being a channel of God's grace? Must it inexorably and unrelentingly take its toll when the motive for service is so pure and the purpose so transcending of worldly considerations? I think not! In fact, I would say "ABSOLUTELY NO." There is a vast difference between wasting-out (in which one careens headlong into a meaningless and wasteful use of energy), and controlled "burning out" where you deliberately and by design give of yourself to the maximum of your ability so that when your life is over you have a sense of having given all you can give. The first is self-destructive. The second is Christ-glorying.

Our commitment to Christian ministry and service is to be a model to others, no matter what their calling. As we shall see in the pages that follow, the true servant of God does not have to be prematurely destroyed by ignorance of the basic principles that govern the physiological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of our existence, nor by unsanctified motives or distorted guilt. We CAN be effective "people-carers" without burning out if we will heed a few fundamental principles. I, and my co-authors, will endeavor to show you how.

- DR. ARCHIBALD DANIEL HART is dean and assistant professor of psychology at the Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Hart received his M.I.C.E. from the Institute of Civil Engineers in London and worked successfully in that discipline in his native South Africa for several years before going on to take a bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of South Africa. Dr. Hart then received his master's degree and Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Natal. Besides his work at Fuller, Dr. Hart practices clinical psychology in Pasadena and is much in demand as a speaker on the subjects of depression and burnout. He is the author of several books, the most recent being "The Success Factor" (Revell, 1984).
# Test Yourself: Burnout Checklist

by Archibald D. Hart

(NOTE: This focuses only on burnout: it is not a stress questionnaire)

Review the past 12 months of your TOTAL life—work, social situations, family and recreation. Reflect on each of the following questions and rate the amount of change that has occurred during this period. Place more emphasis on change that has occurred during the past six months. Use the following scale and assign a number in the rating column that reflects the degree of change you have experienced. BE HONEST; the value of this self-assessment is negligible if you don't!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No or little change</td>
<td>Just noticeable change</td>
<td>Noticeable change</td>
<td>Fair degree of change</td>
<td>Great degree of change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| RATING |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|

1. Do you become more fatigued, tired or “worn out” by the end of the day? 

2. Have you lost interest in your present work? 

3. Have you lost ambition in your overall career? 

4. Do you find yourself becoming easily bored (spending long hours with nothing significant to do)? 

5. Do you find that you have become more pessimistic, critical or cynical of yourself or others? 

6. Do you forget appointments, deadlines, or activities and don't feel very concerned about it? 

7. Do you spend more time alone, withdrawn from friends, family, and work acquaintances? 

8. Has any increase occurred in your general level of irritability, hostility, or aggressiveness? 

9. Has your sense of humor become less obvious to yourself or others? 

10. Do you become sick more easily (flu, colds, pain problems)? 

11. Do you experience headaches more than usual? 

12. Do you suffer from gastrointestinal problems (stomach pains, chronic diarrhea or colitis)? 

13. Do you wake up feeling extremely tired and exhausted most mornings? 

14. Do you find that you deliberately try to avoid people you previously did not mind being around? 

15. Has there been a lessening of your sexual drive? 

16. Do you find that you now tend to treat people as “impersonal objects,” or with a fair degree of callousness? 

17. Do you feel that you are not accomplishing anything worthwhile in your work, and that you are ineffective in making any changes? 

18. Do you feel that you are not accomplishing anything worthwhile in your personal life or that you have lost spontaneity in your activities? 

19. Do you find that you spend much time each day thinking or worrying about your job, people, future or past? 

20. Do you feel that you are at the “end of your tether”—that you are at the point of “breaking down” or “cracking up”? 

**TOTAL SCORE**

**INTERPRETATION:**

Please remember, no inventory is absolutely accurate or fool-proof. Your score on this “Burnout Checklist” is merely a guide to your experience of burnout. Take it as an indication that your life may be out of control. If your score is very high, take steps toward finding help by consulting your family, physician, psychotherapist, spiritual counselor or personal advisor. The first step toward relief from burnout is to acknowledge, without being self-rejecting, that you have a problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>There is no burnout. You may be taking your life or work too casually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-45</td>
<td>This is a normal score for anyone who works hard and seriously. Make sure you do relax periodically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-60</td>
<td>You are experiencing some mild burnout and could benefit from careful review of your lifestyle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-75</td>
<td>You are beginning to experience burnout. Take steps to better control your life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-90</td>
<td>You are burning out. You should seek help, reevaluate your present life and make changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 90</td>
<td>You are dangerously burned out and need immediate relief. Your burnout is threatening your physical and mental well-being.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understanding Burnout

by Archibald D. Hart

Whenever one hears or reads a discussion about burnout it soon becomes obvious that there is, in the minds of many, confusion between what constitutes burnout and what constitutes stress—or rather “distress” which is the damaging consequence of stress. There are some similarities between burnout and stress. There are also many differences. A few similarities are legitimate and real. Many are erroneous.

Why should we differentiate between burnout and stress? For three very important reasons:

1. The CAUSES of burnout are quite different from those of stress.
2. The CURES for burnout are significantly different from those for stress.
3. The acceptance of the essential differences between burnout and stress can help delineate more effective preventive mechanisms.

Not only is it common to confuse stress problems with those of burnout (some evidence may even be seen in this document) but many also confuse problems of depression with burnout. Pastors who are experiencing a simple (though quite painful) and straightforward depression could be inappropriately seeing it as a problem of burnout. This tends to complicate the problem unnecessarily since the blame is placed on the wrong cause. Many who should be seeking treatment for the problem of depression are left bewildered and confused by esoteric and confusing rationalizations concerning their alleged burnout. If the problem is depression, the cure lies clearly in seeking treatment for the depression. But if the problem is burnout, the cure may require much more complex and significant life changes to be made. If the problem is depression, particularly of the endogenous type, effective relief may be only weeks away through appropriate medication. Burnout may require many months or even years of adjustment for effective recovery.

To assist the reader in developing a clearer understanding of the differences between burnout, stress, and depression, let me describe the essential features of each.

### STRESS

Hans Selye, the father of stress research, has defined stress as the NONSPECIFIC response of the body to any demand.” He emphasized that the body can respond in the same manner to many types of pressure—both good and bad. The excitement of preaching a good sermon or watching your home football team play a winning game can be as stress-producing as meeting a publisher’s deadline or facing an angry member of your church board after a meeting. Although the one causes good stress (called “eustress”) and the other bad stress (called “distress”), both make the same demand on certain parts of your body system and move you away from your normal resting equilibrium. Too much of either type can work havoc in your body.

The most devastating form of stress is that caused by the “fight or flight” response. This is the emergency response system of the body that prepares you to deal with any threat — physical or psychological. When you get very angry you trigger this response. When you become very afraid you trigger it. Complex changes within the body prepare you to either fight (including many variations of the anger response) or flee. When the system is constantly subjected to this emergency response, and when there is nothing to fight or run away from, the body adapts to this state by producing complex stress hormones from the adrenal glands that cause an increased state of “wear and tear” in the body.

Unfortunately, this state of distress can be stimulating for many pastors. They literally become addicted to the high level of adrenaline in their bloodstream and even find it stimulating and pleasurable. For them stress is the road to excitement. It is also the road to self-destruction.

While we cannot eliminate stress completely (you are only stress-free when you are dead), every effective leader needs to know how to recognize “overstress”; that is, when your physiology is unable to recover quickly from the over-demand. The symptoms of distress are designed to warn you of the excessive “wear and tear” and they provide complex self-regulating checks and balances to restore optimum functioning. These symptoms include headaches, teeth grinding, insomnia, muscle tension, gastric disturbances, high blood pressure and rapid heart beat. The reaction of so many pastors is to see these symptoms as obstacles to be overcome, rather than as signals to be heeded. They either ignore or obliterate them with medication. These may relieve the symptoms but they don’t stop the excessive wear and tear of the body.

While prolonged distress can lead to burnout, stress is essentially different from burnout in that its symptoms are the consequence of overuse of the body. They are caused by the overproduction of adrenaline and the repeated triggering of the “fight or flight” response. Stress could just as easily be called “hurry sickness”. The symptoms are often seen by the victim...
as obstacles to performance and success that he or she merely wants to get rid of. Seldom does the disease of over-stress in and of itself slow the victim down—not until the final blow is struck and the ulcer, stroke or heart attack has occurred.

Burnout is qualitatively different. It is much more protective than destructive. It may intervene when you are on the road to stressful destruction and take you out of the stressful environment. When it does it is often a blessing. It instantly slows you down and produces a state of lethargy and disengagement. In this sense it may even be functional. The system “gives out” before it “blows up”.

DEPRESSION

Depression is nearly always present in burnout. It may only be present in some stress disorders. When it is present in burnout, it is a SYMPTOM of the disorder and not necessarily a problem in and of itself.

The depression of stress is always the consequence of "adrenal exhaustion". In other words, the body produces a state of depression in which the low mood, disinterest in regular activities, and physical fatigue is designed to pull the victim out of the rat-race and produce a state of lethargy. The lethargy, in turn, allows the body to rest and recover from the over-stress.

Sometimes stress will bring out an underlying endogenous depression. The depression is produced by complex disturbances within the body's chemistry that are in some way (which is not yet clearly understood) related to some weakness or defect in the neurotransmitters of the nervous system. When subjected to prolonged stress, depression of the biochemical sort may set in. Much depression seen in high-pressured, over-worked and ambitious people (including ministers), may be of this sort. It may be a precursor to burnout and may even hasten the final “giving up” that characterizes burnout. But it can also be free standing and independent, never producing the burnout syndrome.

BURNOUT

I have tried to show that stress and depression are different from burnout. While these maladies may finally converge on the burnout road they could just as easily be taking different routes entirely. Obviously, a body system exhausted by overwork, pushed beyond reasonable endurance and depleted of resources, could become “burned out.” But, we shall see, burnout can also be reached by roads quite different from those of stress and depression.

In essence, extreme states of burnout will comprise most, if not all, of the following:

- demoralization—a belief that you are no longer effective as a pastor.
- depersonalization—a treating of yourself and others in an impersonal way.
- detachment—a withdrawing from all responsibilities.
- distancing—an avoidance of social and interpersonal contacts.
- defeatism—a feeling of being "beaten" and a giving up of any hope of being able to avoid defeat.

The table at the end of this article describes more succinctly the essential differences between burnout and stress.

WHO SUFFERS FROM BURNOUT?

Anyone and everyone is capable of experiencing burnout. However, in a culture it tends to occur more frequently in those vocations that involve “people helping.” Ministers are particularly vulnerable to burnout because they experience the greatest exposure to the needs of people and often have the least resources, from a human standpoint, to offer.

The emotional antecedents of burnout in the “people helping” professions include situations in which emotional demands are made over long periods of time; where high ideals are held by the helper and in which excessive personal expectations can tolerate no failure; where there is a lack of adequate social support to aid the helper to accept the limitations of resources—both personal and organizational. Almost every minister I know could be rated as very high on every one of these antecedents. If it were not for the resources of the Gospel, the task of ministry would be an impossible one. It is not a reflection on the ineffectiveness of the Gospel when a pastor succumbs to burnout. It is merely an acknowledgement that the glory of the Gospel is contained in very earthen vessels. Don’t be surprised if now and again they tend to show signs of weakness.

THE CURE

As in the treatment of all diseases, the cure begins with an acknowledgment of the problem. Burnout should never be seen as a sign of failure. Personally, I see it as a very important protective system—a warning signal telling us that we have lost control of our lives. Do not fear the cure of your burnout. If
What Causes Burnout?

by David G. Congo

The June issue of TIME magazine has proclaimed burnout as the “disease of the eighties.” Controversy abounds with respect to burnout. Is burnout some new malady or an old problem with a new label? Is this another American fad? Is burnout an escape or cop-out for individuals who excuse themselves for irresponsible job performance? Is it any different than depression? There is no agreement among those studying burnout with even something as basic as whether the word “burnout” should be capitalized, hyphenated, or one or two words. Researchers cannot agree on a universal definition. There are two opposing opinions as to what causes burnout. With all of this controversy, a practical issue needs to be addressed: Is there really a need for a consideration of burnout among ministers? The answer is a resounding “yes.” What does the recent research indicate?

- NEEDS OF MINISTERS
  Twenty-four years ago it appeared that ministers were dealing with stress better than most professionals and few ministers were leaving the ministry. Recent evidence presents a contrasting picture. Macdonald reports that one-third of the pastors surveyed had seriously considered leaving the ministry. In a major study of 11,500 pastors, Jerdon found that three out of four ministers remaining in the ministry reported severe stress causing “anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear, and alienation.” Bustanoby reports that one in four leave the priesthood in Roman Catholic churches. The average length of stay in a church now is less than two years. These studies support the observation that ministers are not immune from burnout and that there is an alarming spread of burnout within the profession.

- NATURE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS
  In a national study of ministers from 32 denominations and 38 states conducted by the author, the following information was obtained:
  1. 85 percent of ministers spent two or less evenings per week at home.
  2. 70 percent worked more than 60 hours per week.
  3. 61 percent spent less than one hour per week talking with other pastors.
  4. 75 percent spent less than one evening per month purely for social time with other couples.
  5. 78 percent felt their family freedom was restricted by their career.
  6. 40 percent didn’t take a regular day off.
  7. There were two critical time periods when a pastor was most susceptible to burnout: The first was the first five years in the ministry and the second was after 15 years in the ministry.

  From a variety of research studies the following becomes apparent:

- OPTIMAL LEVEL OF STRESS
  A pastor needs to find a church setting that provides the optimal level of stress. Too much or too little stress leads to burnout. One pastor who felt no challenge in his ministry said to me, “I can pastor this church with my little finger.” Of course, the opposite end of the spectrum involves the pastor who is overwhelmed and drained by the demands of his or her church.

- EXTERNAL CAUSES OF BURNOUT
  A pastor needs to be aware of external environmental factors which have been linked to burnout: little feedback regarding one’s work, lack of family time, low salary, understaffing, many life changes and church member’s unrealistic expectations. If burnout is caused mainly by external factors, then the question is left unanswered as to why in a given church one pastor burns out and another thrives. The answer leads us to the next conclusion.

- INTERNAL CAUSES OF BURNOUT
  A pastor needs to be aware of inner tendencies which can leave him or her susceptible to burnout. The following personality tendencies have been linked to burnout:
  a. High need for approval
  b. Workaholic
  c. Unassertive, passive victim, and
  d. The “Messiah Complex”

  The pastor with high need for approval can easily become disillusioned since he or she does not often receive much affirmation. Pastors who center their basis for their self-esteem in their work and then become workaholics often defend themselves by saying they are “totally dedicated.” The passive, helpless pastor who feels he or she is a victim of their world and controlled by others is also a prime target for burnout. Finally, pastors with the “Messiah Complex” who feel they can do everything best and set out to do it are setting themselves up for failure.

  It becomes clear that it is a combination of external and internal factors that contribute to burnout.

- EFFECT ON FAMILY
  Burnout has detrimental effects on a pastor’s marriage and family relationships. Ministers who were treated with dignity and respect in their work tended to treat spouses and children with dignity. Conversely, pastors who were experiencing a loss of self-esteem and feelings of insecurity at work tended to express hostility toward their families. These pastors tend to see their marriage and family as another demand on their already depleted energy. Wives have been found to be more sensitive to their husband’s level of burnout than pastors themselves. It would be wise therefore for pastors to listen to the input from their spouses.
UNRESOLVED INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Unresolved interpersonal conflict leads to burnout. There is a tremendous drain of energy when there are harbored angry feelings. Differences can disrupt sleeping habits, thinking patterns, and normal behavior. The pastor who is angry and passive is much more likely to experience burnout than one who is angry and assertive.

Research is continuing to isolate key factors that appear to cause burnout. As each factor is identified, the question of how to avoid burnout then can be addressed.

AVOIDING BURNOUT

Life and ministry can be represented by a “rat race” or a “relay race.” In both of these analogies, there is a great deal of energy expended; there is evidence of lots of activity when people have contact with others. However, that is where the similarity stops. In the rat race there appears to be no clear sense of purpose or direction. There is no sense of cooperation, support, and caring. In contrast, a relay race evidences a clearly communicated direction, a prescribed course, a sense of team spirit and cooperation. The pastor in the rat race often feels like a victim controlled by his or situation. The transformation from rat race to relay race occurs as a pastor incorporates the following suggestions:

1. Gain a clear understanding of your strengths and weaknesses. Surround yourself with a team of people who can assist you and carry the baton.
2. Gain a clear sense of your purpose and priorities. Carefully plan the direction you feel God is leading you.
3. Go ahead and structure changes in your environment to relieve the stress. Some things can be changed—take action. Other factors cannot be changed—make adjustments.
4. Go ahead and be assertive in resolving interpersonal conflicts and differences.
5. Give yourself and your family a break from the demands of your job. Take time to relax and have recreation in order to be restored.

The demands of the pastorate can be lightened as the pastor makes the adjustment from seeing life as a rat race to a relay race. Ministry needs to be a team effort. The pastor can run with the baton, then be excited to pass the baton on to others.

Burnout is an alarm to signify life is out of balance. A pastor needs to take time for renewal and relationships. As changes are made:
- Tiredness can be replaced with renewed energy.
- Tenseness can be exchanged for a relaxed being.
- A troubled spirit can be transformed into a tranquil spirit.
- A sense of torn-ness can be replaced with wholeness, and a pastor tormented with negative thoughts can regain the mind of Christ.

REFERENCES


DR. DAVID G. CONGO is associated with H. Norman Wright’s Family Counseling and Enrichment Clinic in Santa Ana, Calif. Dr. Congo received his Psy.D. in clinical psychology from the Rosemead Graduate School of Professional Psychology, where he also received his M.A. in the same discipline. Dr. Congo possesses a master’s degree in pastoral psychology and counseling from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and did his undergraduate studies at York University. His book, “I Have a Burned-out Spouse” (Regal) will be released this summer.
Prime-Time Pitfalls (and Possibilities)

by H. Newton Malony

Recently, Bishop James Armstrong of the United Methodist Church resigned his bishopric and his role as president of the National Council of Churches. He stated that he had been so preoccupied with his work that he had violated his obligations to his family and his friends. He wrote a letter of apology to the church and said he was checking himself into the hospital of The Menninger Foundation for evaluation and treatment.

Bishop Armstrong was experiencing mid-life ministry burnout. He had been through all the exigencies of professional training, the vigor of early ministry, the achievements of distinction and promotion and the rewards of being elected bishop. He was in his prime. Yet he resigned. Why?

Some might say that Bishop Armstrong exemplified the Peter Principle—i.e., he had been promoted to his highest level of inefficiency. This happens. At times, ministers who are excellent pastors and stimulating preachers are “honored” by being elected to administrative positions in their denominations—only to find themselves ineffective and dissatisfied with their new role. This is the theme of Laurence Peter, “The Peter Principle” (1970) which recommends that persons resist the honorific temptation to accept promotions which involve tasks at which they are not proficient or do not enjoy.

This can lead to disillusionment and a sense of being trapped. In the United Methodist tradition, bishops are elected for life. Bishop Armstrong knew this and may have resigned in the midst of his finest hour because he realized there was no other alternative. It is part of the same church’s tradition that its district superintendents (functionaries just below bishops) serve only for six years and then return to service as pastors—a procedure which assures they will not burn out in roles they do not enjoy.

A second reason Bishop Armstrong may have burned out at midlife may have been the “bed-at-the-church” syndrome. This syndrome stems from the oft-heard statement by pastors, “I’m at the church so much of the time I might as well move my bed down there.” There is an almost invariant relationship between size of church and numbers of committee meetings. I well remember an experience from my own years in parish ministry. In explaining to me why they were asking the bishop to move me to another church, a church leader explained, “You call too many meetings. We think you would be better suited to a bigger church.”

I think this is probably as much a fact of personal expectations as it is the demands of the size of the church. Often ministers feel responsible for everything and they think they have to attend each meeting and approve all decisions. They might as well move their beds to the church! This is a false sense of responsibility that is frequently grounded in insecurity which, in turn, provokes the constant stress syndrome alluded to by Hans Selye.

Exposing oneself to persistent strain such as this overtaxes the physical and mental systems of the person and can lead to fatigue and depression. This is the body’s way of attempting to reconstitute itself. This is a synonym for burnout and it is understandable why it should occur at mid-life.

Yet a third reason Bishop Armstrong may have experienced mid-life ministry burnout is “we-don’t-pay-wages-on-Saturday” truth about the role. Of course, this is the truth about all of the helping professions such as teaching, social work, and counseling. Financial rewards are never exceptional and, more importantly, the results of the labor are equivocal, delayed, and uncertain. In these professions, early idealism gives way to puzzlement; puzzlement gives way to discouragement; discouragement gives way to disillusionment; and disillusionment gives way to bitterness and burnout. People don’t change quickly. They often resist and delay. Even when ministers think things are going well, supporters turn to enemies.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that shortly before his retirement, Bishop Armstrong had to defend the National Council of Churches against widespread negative criticism. He must have experienced much hurt over what he interpreted as misunderstanding and hostility. Quite likely, he wondered what it would be like to start all over again in building confidence and trust. Ministers, like the housewife, find their work is never done, while another’s work ends with the setting sun!

A final possibility as to why Bishop Armstrong burned out is the unique “line-support contamination” characteristic of ministry. Although all leaders have responsibilities for the administrative processes of the organizations they lead (i.e. the “support” dimension), only ministers
have the parallel task of exemplifying, producing and proclaiming the essence of the organization (the “line” dimension) on a weekly basis. Line and support responsibilities are contaminated more in ministry than in other professions. The army, from which the terms “line” and “support” come, never requires its leaders to assume both responsibilities—but the ministry does.

That is why many ministers can be found in their offices as early as 6:00 a.m. on Sunday morning preparing the sermons they will deliver that very day. The time they allot for that task early in the week is often consumed with a problematic mixture of administrative detail and pastoral visiting. By mid-life, most ministers are like Bishop Armstrong. They have learned to manage this contamination of line and support obligations fairly well. But they have a conviction they are not doing anything well and they feel constantly frazzled.

It is no wonder one would feel burned out with this pressure and that some would want to just get out from under it—as the Bishop did.

What can be done about burnout? Some wit might say “Ban it!” Ban burnout indeed! This is similar to the oaf who responded to the pronouncement that “somewhere a woman is giving birth to a baby every sixty seconds” by advising “find that woman and stop her!” Neither the population explosion or burnout will disappear with pompous pronouncements. More is needed if we are to stop ministerial mid-life crises. Bishop Armstrong is but a publicized example of a disease that will turn into an epidemic if it is not addressed forthrightly. Burnout can be prevented:

1. If it is anticipated;
2. If life-long assignments are avoided;
3. If busyness is not used as an antidote to insecurity;
4. If success is intrinsically defined; and
5. If negotiation of a ministry is used to avoid excessive responsibility.

Initially burnout should be anticipated. The over-idealism of early ministry can be curtailed without diminishing commitment to the role. Realism needs to be communicated so that young professionals will not expect too much either of themselves or of the persons they serve.

Next, life-long assignments, such as that of United Methodist bishops, should be avoided and new roles should be assumed on a trial basis. Being trapped and unable to turn back or alter one’s destiny are the acids of burnout. The wonder is that more bishops do not resign! Boredom as well as ineffectiveness and yearning for old experiences—all may eat at one’s self-concept. This can be prevented by not accepting roles where one’s freedom of movement is severely limited.

Insecurity is, at one and the same time, a given of existence as well as a function of life experience. Many ministers preach this but forget it—as evidenced by their busyness. The antidote to insecurity can never be activity—it must be faith. Ministers need to constantly remind themselves of this and give a day’s work for a day’s pay, yet allow themselves the respite and relaxation they deserve in order to be refreshed for another day.

Moreover, success, like security, should be defined less in terms of outer success and more in terms of inner satisfaction. This is a theme as old as Plato and Aquinas yet as new as Rogers and Maslow. The easy temptation to equate success with numbers and promotion is a trap-door into which many mid-life ministers will fall when resistance comes and people fail. Loyalty to the call to serve and obedience to the demand for faithfulness—they may be sufficient, even if they are not total definitions of success.

Finally, parish ministers have been the most flagrant violators of the dictum that no job should be taken without a job description. Although it is commonly assumed that everyone knows what ministers do, this is simply not true and many ministers are themselves responsible for confusing and contaminating expectations. Ministry can be negotiated and by no means is it a sign of low commitment to say what one does best within the limits of time and energy.

Yes, burnout can be prevented. As the old saying goes, “a person can if a person will!” In fact the WILL to prevent burnout may be an obligation in ministry. The Bible states, “Be not weary in well doing” (Gal. 6:9). Although this passage has sometimes been used to admonish ministers to even longer hours and more unselfish service, it could be interpreted as a call
Burnout as a Symptom of Theological Anemia

by Ray S. Anderson

“A clergyman walks in. He’s a big man, 240 pounds. He strikes the desk with his fist and says, ‘Look, there’s nothing more boring than walking around the block. If I have to eat differently than the rest of the family I’m not going to. Besides if God takes me then he takes me. Then I’ll be traveling without any baggage.’”

Dr. Taylor, a physician concerned about clergy morale, paused, as if peering once more into the mental picture he had created for some clue, and then continued.

“Professor Anderson, here is someone who believes that if he gives himself to the work of God, God will look after him. Even if he burns himself out for God, his future is secure. What is this person really saying?”

Now it was my turn to pause. I was being asked to respond as a theologian, but I experienced an instantaneous flash-back through 11 years of pastoral ministry. Quite without thinking, I replied, “The man is experiencing a kind of ‘quiet despair’ that can subtly creep into one’s ministry, and he may even be experiencing an unconscious ‘death wish.’”

Dr. Taylor was intrigued, and I must admit that I was not a little surprised at the intensity with which I had responded. Was I diagnosing the blistering, overweight clergyman, or delving into my own pastoral psyche? I suspect that it was the latter.

I remember a series of sermons I had preached from Job, and the strange sense of identity I had with him when he cried out:

“Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may. I will take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hand. Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to his face. This will be my salvation, that a godless man shall not come before him.” (Job 13:16, RSV)

Let’s face it, this is frankly suicidal! I see Job as feeling caught in an inescapable bind. He is convinced that his life is given over to God, and yet God has become his adversary. There is only one way out: risk himself to the very edge of destruction, then God himself will be his vindication and his salvation.

This is the “Job syndrome”: “My ministry is slowly killing me, so I will ‘take my flesh in my teeth’ and kill myself through my ministry. Then we shall see what God will say!” Many a minister has preached his own eulogy as a healing balm to his ulcerous soul.

PERSONAL INADEQUACY

Coupled with the despair over never being able to satisfy these demands of the ministry is the personal sense of inadequacy for this task, not least of which is the growing sense of spiritual inadequacy. The One who called has now disappeared into the calling itself. Left to herself, the minister can only seek to atone for the sins of spiritual failure by throwing herself even more into the work of the ministry. It becomes a vicious circle. The demands of the ministry produce a sense of inadequacy. Inadequacy carries the overtone of spiritual weakness. One turns to God in desperation, seeking some relief, escape at least, if not renewal. Failing here, too, there is

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It is one thing to experience God as one's fate, and quite another thing for the work of the ministry to determine one's fate.

nothing to do but throw oneself more deeply into the work of the ministry. And the cycle repeats itself again.

- **PERSONAL NEEDS**

  Periodically, someone will intervene with a common sense question:
  "Shouldn't you be concerned about your physical health?" or "You need a day off once in a while, what do you do to relax?"

  Caught in the undertow of this "divine madness" which has seized one in the name of ministry, how does one explain that the risk of a physical, or even emotional, breakdown is almost incidental compared to the high stakes for which one is playing in the deadly game of ministry? Can we now understand what the pastor is saying when he or she says that God will "look after me"?

  Of course ministers know when they are neglecting their own physical and emotional well being, the same as they know when they are precariously close to nervous exhaustion or dangerously close to the point of "throwing in the towel"; and taking the emotional and spiritual equivalent of "Chapter 11" in the bankruptcy clause — it's burnout time!

  This is why being told, or even warned, is not an effective deterrent to becoming a casualty. In a sense, this well-meaning appeal to common sense actually can compound the problem and accelerate the vicious circle. "We are driven"; is not only an effective advertising slogan for the Datsun motor car, it is the shrill echo of the divine call sunk deep into the psyche of a minister who seeks salvation through ministry.

- **FACTORS CAUSING BURNOUT**

  Let's become overly melodramatic, let us reflect a bit upon the factors that might cause the typical symptoms of "stress fatigue" or "burnout" to assume the unique proportions of "clergy burnout".

  There may be a root problem in how one perceives being "called of God" for the ministry, and the "calling of the ministry". Those who enter into pastoral ministry are encouraged to pursue this occupation as a "divine calling". "If you can avoid becoming a minister with a clear conscience before God," we are often told, "then you do not have the calling." The implication being that the "call" is so unavoidable and thus, inevitable, that it marks one for life — it becomes one's fate. "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16)

  Whatever existential assurance this sense of "calling" gives, it soon takes a pragmatic turn in being understood as a calling "to the ministry." Here, there is a subtle shift from the emphasis on the one who calls, to the work of the ministry as a calling. It is one thing to experience God as one's fate, and quite another thing for the work of the ministry to determine one's fate. When this happens, the calling to ministry comes close to being fatal.

  Here, I believe, is the source of what I earlier called the "quiet despair" which can seep into one's celebration of the sacred task and turn it into a joyless marathon of sheer endurance. We all know what the ministry is:

  - It is the torment of the artist who must fashion creative and inspired sermons to be thrown into the insatiable crawl of the hungry hordes who appear at least once a week for the "Word of God."
  - It is the weariness of the long-suffering doctor who hides her own illness from the patients who extract her vital energy in scheduled and unscheduled counseling sessions.
  - It is the exasperation of the executive whose goals and plans are sabotaged by an army of volunteers, each of whom is serving a different master.
  - It is the loneliness of the shepherd, whose faithful following of the lost sheep for the sake of their finding, leaves his own humanity starved for affection and comfort.
  - It is the dilemma of the priest, who dispenses forgiveness freely to sinners in human words and gives assurance of God's presence through a community of loving persons, and yet who is told to seek the solace and strength he needs from God alone in his private place.

  This is the work of the ministry — an insatiable and unrelenting master whom we serve in the name of Christ.

  Have I been overly dramatic? I suppose so. But to paraphrase Jesus, "I am speaking not to those who are at ease, but to those in dis-ease." I am attempting to be heard as one who speaks from out of the battle, not as one who offers good advice from the sidelines. But I speak as a survivor, not as a victim. And I tell of hope and freedom, not of retreat or escape.

  I firmly believe that what is needed in times of stress is intervention, not merely information. There are others more capable than I who can describe modes of intervention which deal with emotional, physical, and social causes of
distress, and suggest forms of therapy which lead to greater well being of body and soul.

What I suggest in this discussion is that there may well also be a theological intervention which can be helpful. Much of what I have described above is as much due to bad theology, in my opinion, as it is to an unhealthy psyche. Jesus, I will insist, had a better theology than his critics, not to mention his disciples. When he reached the point of exhaustion from teaching and healing, he had the freedom to stop and to spend time alone or with his disciples, with an instinct which told him that his freedom from the claims upon him was upheld by the same gracious Father who gave him the freedom and power to teach and heal. When told that his dear friend Lazarus was sick unto the point of death, he remained three days where he was. He felt sure that his Father loved Lazarus as much as he did, and that he could go whenever the Father sent him (John 11).

It is bad theology to have to love the world more than God, and to confuse our service to God with our being sent into the world. It is bad theology to invest the calling of God in needs of the world, rather than in our being sent to the world to do God's work and to reveal his glory. There is, I believe, a sick theology and a healthy theology which contributes to either a sick or a healthy ministry. A theology which cripples and destroys the self-esteem and sense of worth of a minister is not made better by "success" in ministry. A theology in which there is no "sabbath rest" for the one who does the work of the ministry, is a theology of the curse, not a theology of the cross. A healthy theology contains healing for the healer and freedom for the fight of God's battles. A healthy theology, of course, is a theology of a loving God who knows that to be God is to be responsible, even for our faltering and fallible efforts.

Perhaps the turning point began the night I spent hours counseling a woman who had spoken of suicide to her teenage children, who subsequently called me to minister to their mother. This was not the first time. There had been professional psychotherapy. There had been the interminable hours of pastoral counseling recalling the promises and grace of God. But now, well after midnight, the end of my resources had come. Quietly, I stood up and said, "I'm going home and going to sleep. I am not God and I am not anyone's savior. In the morning, if you are alive, call me, and we will talk again."

I remember going home with the knowledge that I might well have to prepare for a funeral. But I also knew with a deep sense of assurance that I could do that if I had to. For I sensed that God was now my advocate and not my adversary. Yes, I was betting on my judgment that she would survive — and she did. But that was a turning point for me. I understood more of the grace of God than I had ever before. I understood the grace of God because I was in a position to receive the grace of God.

Through the realization of my real inadequacy for which only the grace of God could suffice, I experienced once again in a new way the reality of God as the source and sustaining power of my "call" to be a minister. My "ministry" no longer could be identical with my salvation or destruction. This was the beginning of a theological renewal for me which lead to liberation and a deep sense of goodness within myself. This sounds strange, even as I write it. For I had been taught that "nothing good" dwelt within me, and that a feeling of well being and satisfaction was dangerously close to pride. But this goodness was not like "being good", or thinking of myself as better than others. It was the echo within me of "God is good", and therefore what I do, even with its limitations, is part of that goodness that he is. I felt called to be an agent and instrument of that good. I felt good about myself because I felt forgiven and loved. No longer was I living on the edge of that terrible "marginality" in the ministry, where the abyss always looms threateningly over and against every action. In being driven back by obstacles, in being confronted with failure and frustration, in being attacked by symptoms of over-stress, I experienced the healing of God's goodness from within.

Jesus had a "good theology" of the sabbath. Not only was the sabbath to be understood as contributing to the good of human persons, but he realized in his own person the healing effects of God's sabbath rest. As the Lord of the sabbath, he not only interpreted the sabbath in terms of God's purposes, but he fulfilled the sabbath rest through his own weak human flesh. He brought the sabbath out to the causistry of the legalist mind through which paralyzed and immobilized human persons were impaled ever more severely upon the bed of self-incrimination. He remembered that for the Jews, there was at least one liberating moment each week when they could stand with their backs straight against God's gracious goodness and say to the six days of work and travail, "you have no power over me, for we live out of God's shalom, and we are a people of peace and wholeness."

We who are called of God for Christian ministry are called first of all into the sabbath rest which Christ...
himself completed through the offering up of his own humanity in obedient and faithful service to God. With our backs straight up against the rock of his own healed humanity, we reach out to meet human needs, do battle with evil, and take the Word of God upon our lips to proclaim his salvation. No temptation has ever overtaken us, says the Scripture, which has not already been experienced and healed in Jesus (Heb. 4:15). I venture to say that no injury can ever be sustained in the work of God's ministry for which there is not already healing waiting at home.

Dare I suggest some practical helps for those who might be looking for the way to inner healing, without appearing to resort at the end to merely "good advice?" For what these hints are worth, they come out of my own pilgrimage.

First, I would turn to the source itself for all good theology, contemplation of Jesus as the paradigm for ministry. In his own priestly prayer, Jesus said to the Father, "As thou didst send me into the world, so have I sent them into the world" (John 17:18). On a sheet of paper I once wrote "AS HE WAS SENT" on one side of the page and "SO I HAVE BEEN SENT" across from it on the other side. In an exercise which took me back through all of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, I listed all I could discover that helped me to understand how Jesus had been sent to this world. Then I began to list under the corresponding column all of the ways in which I was sent to minister in a way that precisely corresponded with how he had been sent. This was absolutely revolutionary for me, and my theology began to be healed. By the way, I had sermon material for months out of that exercise!

Second, I would explore the inner correlation between ministry and theology. I firmly believe that a ministry which produces dissonance and distress in the minister reflects a ministry that is theologically impoverished. Theology is the interpretation of God through his Word and Spirit in the arena of the Gospel's struggle for the reconciliation of the world. Jesus knew what he was doing when he healed on the Sabbath, when he forgave sin in the streets, when he drove the money-changers out of the temple. He was saying this is what it means to know and experience the living God. Methods can show us how to do ministry. It is the purpose of theological reflection to give us the courage to know and to say that our ministry is Christ's ministry. It may sound strange, and there will be disbelievers, but I maintain that the renewal of one's theology through the rediscovery of the reality of Christ's presence and power in ministry will reduce debilitating stress and restore the joy and hopefulness of ministry. A daily journal in which theological reflections upon the evidences of Christ's ministry in one's own work of ministry will become a diary of spiritual and personal renewal. It is true!

Third, I would consent to be part of the sheep as well as being the shepherd. When the sheep we are attempting to feed appear to us as ravenous wolves, we are the ones who are in distortion. When I began to feel that there was goodness within me because I was forgiven and loved, I experienced the circle of my life opening up and I could allow other people to love me and affirm that goodness. Frankly, I found that professional ministerial groups only reinforced my inadequacy by making me feel like a competitor. Perhaps it was only my problem, but I have not seen anywhere in Scripture that there is much healing and feeding when shepherds get together! Jesus, as the great shepherd, loves and cares for the sheep. In permitting ourselves to be part of the sheep, even if only in the small and limited ways available through informal and intimate social gatherings, there it is that we experience absolution for our sins of being the minister, and...
A Pastor’s Perspective: One

by James B. Scott

Watch the ball. watch the ball. wait... wait... let it drop... now! Whack! Perfect shot, 21-game! For years now I have been playing with a class-A racquetball player and I finally won a game! A great feeling, especially for a 44-year-old. Triumphant, I thought to myself, “I have never felt healthier or stronger in my entire life.”

I know that my control on the court is reflective of my growing life control. It’s hard to believe that four years ago I was sitting in Dr. Arch Hart’s office, a classic example of what is commonly called “pastor burnout.” It’s strange how that experience has given me a new set of eyes, not only to “see” myself, but also to “see” others. Since that time I have seen innumerable men and women in every sphere of life going through what I did. For me the burnout seemed to happen so fast. It was totally unexpected.

Actually God was the problem! After all, he is in charge of life. And men and women who work hard and obey all the rules, especially pastors, live happily ever after. True, or not true? Or was it just a matter of faith? Perhaps I just needed more faith.

As I think back to four years ago and try to recapture what happened, I find myself looking at a part of my history which feels distant and unrelated to my present being. Yet I am grateful for every new and changed person because of it. I’m trying to remember why I “crashed and burned.” The church and the ministry had always been of paramount importance to me and I had enjoyed some “peak experiences” in previous church situations. Consequently, I believed I could make any church grow regardless of its previous history or my limitations. At that time I was in a church which I believed had unlimited possibilities, and my dreams and hopes soared. After all, I had been hearing from some people that “with God all things are possible.” I bought that philosophy because I wanted it.

Unrealistic expectation of the ministry? Inflated ego needs? Pastor and congregation going in different directions? I painfully discovered that some things cannot be changed, and I had to accept that fact.

The thoughts and feelings that came from being blocked were overwhelming. First, there was the financial pressure. For the first time in my life I could not live off my income, and the church was presumably too weak to pay more. How was I going to tell my children that they could not have braces? The financial pressure burst open a number of doors of despair: failure, ineffectiveness, helplessness, pain, anger, and depression.

I remember sitting at home feeling sorry for myself and thinking “God needs to do something about this situation!” Slowly I realized that perhaps I needed to do something! Who I was and where I was in life were not enjoyable, therefore the conclusion was clear: I needed to change me and/or the environment. I believe that obedience to the absolute control of God also means personal responsibility for taking personal self-control of my life. I knew I needed to talk with someone in addition to my spouse. Thanks to God, I have a wonderful relationship with my spouse and a strong healthy marriage that certainly gave me support that I don’t know how to measure, only appreciate.

I had heard of Dr. Arch Hart of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. At first he was hard put to see me but my need to talk was stronger than whatever needs he had to limit his counseling. Talking the situation out with Arch was extremely helpful, and he suggested taking a doctorate (which I did). At least a thousand times I have shared how I “crashed and burned” and did the only acceptable thing I knew to do — go back to school and earn a doctorate.

Part of the philosophy of my family learned in my childhood was to go into action and make things happen regardless of the situation. So I did. Before I left my church I started a private school with a first-year enrollment of 100 students. I changed my nutritional habits. I sold our house to relieve financial pressure and moved to another neighborhood, and I began mapping out a strategy to get well — to get back to where I wanted to be. From the depths to “weller than well” is sometimes a long journey. But four years passed in a hurry, and it was four years of growing enjoyment and strength.

The most difficult part of the death of a dream was the feeling of loss and fear of not knowing if anything would ever come along to replace the loss. Accepting the reality of who I was and where I was without any assurances of the future were both different realities in what appeared to be a bleak prospect. I knew I needed to be around positive people again. (One of the aspects of getting well and strong is, in my opinion, by surrounding oneself with positive people. I don’t think I can overemphasize how important this was, and is, to me personally.) Changing one’s environment can work miracles. Brokenness and healing has, by the
power of God, produced unexpected results in my life. Strange how the pain of brokenness can miraculously bring about wholeness, and a tenacity of power and resource unknown previously. First: Today I am physically stronger than I have been in twenty years. Second: I am intellectually stronger because I am able to return to spending more time in meditation and study. Third: I am emotionally stronger. I don’t let people get to me like I used to and am more willing to find and confront real issues. Fourth: I am stronger spiritually because I am more consistent in my faith that God’s love and power. My prayer life, my faith in God which never left me, can and will point my life in the right direction.

There are at least two other ways I have changed. One is that I have separated God, the church, ministry and_

Do you know what a pre-empt bid is? It is a bridge hand with one long suit but not enough power. That situation forces you to bid higher than you normally would and then count on your partner for support. That’s similar to what happened to me when my husband/co-pastor experienced clergy burnout. Our long suit was that the majority of all we were and had was tied up in this one church situation — our two careers, our meaning and purpose, all our financial resources. When the church situation became blocked and half of our two-person team experienced burnout, we felt we had lost most of our power because so many valued and familiar props were no longer supporting us. The primary path to our long-term goals had been temporarily thwarted. These circumstances forced a higher bid out of me in order to keep the family functioning and to relieve my husband enough to give him time and space to work through what was happening to him. He and I quickly redivided our responsibilities, and we had to count on each other’s fulfillment of those tasks as well as each other’s support.

In retrospect, I see that we were not as powerless as we perceived ourselves. This observation should encourage others to keep exercising their options as though they are still in control even if they do not feel as if they are.

Bidding higher meant that I had to stretch myself — in both familiar areas and in new environments. Our daughters were pre-adolescent and needing considerable involvement with their parents. I had to increase my involvement so that my husband could use some of his previously more than 50 percent of parenting time on himself. After selling our house to ease our expenses, we realized that one of us was going to have to learn to control and build up our finances. We also helped ourselves by removing me from the blocked environment by my accepting a call as interim senior pastor of a church in another part of the city. This step was the most difficult one we took because we not only thoroughly enjoyed and benefitted from our ten years of co-pastoring, we had invested so much of our efforts, time — and ourselves — to establish a husband-wife team back in the early 1970s when such a concept was relatively new. Even the congregation who helped cause the burnout cried with us over the break-up of our ministerial team. However, this most painful step was very probably the most important advance we made in terms of progressively dealing with the burnout situation.

The reasoning behind this crucial step could be expressed as ‘support and separation.’ We knew that we needed to tangibly and verbally continue to express our support of each other, but we also sensed that our survival hinged on separation as well. It is strenuous to live with a spouse during burnout; it takes all the energy you can muster to actively support the other, and to cope with the many changes and fears of the uncertain future. It is depressing to live with someone who is depressed over a
long period. For those reasons, we had to separate ourselves as much as possible without losing contact and support.

One of us was already down; we could not afford for the other to be brought under the same suction. My husband's job was to deal with his inner situation, explore his feelings, fight his way back out, rebuild his life. Of course, he had resources — God, Dr. Hart, me — but the real work was his alone. My job was to keep the rest of us functioning and headed on some type of constructive course. Sometimes that meant I had to say, with tears in my eyes, "I love you, but I can't participate in this right now or we'll both go down." We each worked very hard at our newly assigned functions.

There was another form of separation we had to learn and to achieve — separation of identities. Again, pain and progress were intricately linked. The pain of separating our identities

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The cost of burnout can be high — both for the pastor and the church. Recovery is not without its price. All those involved in the life of the pastor — family, parishioners, and friends, will be affected by it. Sadly, many burnout victims exist in churches, the mission field, "people-helping" agencies, offices, and factories, but they go unrecognized and therefore unhelped. This often leads to drug or alcohol abuse (often secretive), or isolation depression which will eat into the psyche of the sufferers like a cancer. The Spirit of God may not find an eager and effective response from the hearts of these burnout victims. Prayer will seem like a nightmare; the Scriptures will sound hollow, and even the thought of "fellowship" will evoke feelings of panic. What is even more unfortunate is that many will not even acknowledge that they could have such a problem. They will deny it, refuse to accept it, blame others or circumstances for it, but not take the first step toward a cure: being honest with themselves and admitting that they are in a state of burnout.

A FRIEND IN TIME OF NEED

Sometimes it may be necessary for a spouse or friend to confront the victim with some honest feedback. In fact, I have not encountered many pastors or missionaries who have themselves taken the initiative in seeking help for their burnout problem. Invariably it is in response to another's caring concern that they have taken action. "You see," the customary pastor will say to me during the first visit, "my spouse is very worried about me. I don't think the problem is that serious but to please her (or him) I'm here." Bravo! Doing it for a spouse is better than not doing it at all.

IS BURNOUT A SIGN OF FAILURE?

Since most burnout situations are more the product of bad circumstances than of bad people, the pastor needs to be reassured that his or her burnout is not necessarily a sign of personal failure. Unfortunately, given the sensitive nature of the guilt mechanisms most of us are heir to, we are more likely to attribute burnout to defects in ourselves than to the circumstances of our work. This can lead to a great sense of personal loss and a deep depression. In such a depression the victim is hardly likely to seek help without persistent prodding by a caring spouse or friend! Reassurance that there is a way out of the abyss, without provoking further guilt feelings, should open the door for further help.

SHOULD YOU SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Severe cases of burnout, where the pastor is in a state of emotional turmoil, extreme fatigue, negative, depressed and withdrawn, should be treated by a professional. Burnout can be the cause or consequence of so many other problems that self-help in severe cases will only aggravate—not help it. In fact, wherever possible, don't hesitate to seek the counsel of a competent professional.

For most, though, burnout will be a less serious problem. Attention to some basic principles could prevent it from worsening, and could bring about relief and restoration of a vital, spontaneous and dynamic personal, spiritual and professional life. Since no two burnout situations are identical, coping needs to be tailor-made and is most effective when it occurs at several levels. Attention must be given not only to personal aspects of the burnout, but also to social and institutional aspects as
Richard Lazarus, a prominent stress researcher, has suggested two general types of coping that can be applied to the problem of burnout:

1) Direct action and
2) Paliation or indirect action

In direct action, the person actively tries to change the source of the problem by confronting it and finding positive solutions. When the source of the problem is ignored or avoided, the likelihood of burnout is increased.

In indirect action, the person tries to understand the source of the problem by talking about it, adapting to the source by making adjustments to it, and diverting attention from it by getting involved in other activities.

Neither of the above coping strategies is better than the other. Both are necessary for successful prevention or recovery from burnout. Needless to say, all coping is carried out in a spirit of dependence upon the source of all our strength. God alone knows the depth of our despair, and he can give us the power to rise from it if we would trust him for it.

Since burnout begins slowly, steps to effective prevention can be taken very early in the process. Prevention is effected by implementing the techniques of coping at an earlier stage in the burnout process.

"Coping" refers to efforts that are made to master the conditions causing the burnout when automatic responses are not readily available. Coping, in itself, does not imply success—just effort. What always surprises me is how effective it is just to make some effort to change the circumstances of the burnout. This can dramatically restore a sense of hope, even when the effort is not altogether successful. Helplessness seems to vanish when the smallest of attempts is made to control the cause.

Richard Lazarus, a prominent stress researcher, has suggested two general types of coping that can be applied to the problem of burnout:

1) Direct action and
2) Paliation or indirect action

In direct action, the person actively tries to change the source of the problem by confronting it and finding positive solutions. When the source of the problem is ignored or avoided, the likelihood of burnout is increased.

In indirect action, the person tries to understand the source of the problem by talking about it, adapting to the source by making adjustments to it, and diverting attention from it by getting involved in other activities.

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2. ROLE CONFLICTS: I doubt if any other vocation has as many diverse roles attached to it as ministry. The pastor is expected to be a good preacher, teacher, counselor, administrator, business manager and friend to many. A multitude of expectations are imposed on the average pastor. Many of these can cause conflict and stress that can be very debilitating. Research in industrial settings has repeatedly demonstrated that role conflict leads to stress and burnout. This is also true of ministry. The following steps can be helpful in preventing role conflict:

a) Know what your goals are for your ministry. Clarify your internal expectations by talking them over with a trusted confidant. You will experience enough ambiguity from others as to
what you should be doing—at least ensure that you are clear about your own goals.

b) Clarify the expectations others have of you and decide which you believe are consistent with your calling. Be assertive and ask this: “What do you expect of me?” Then be assertive in accepting or rejecting those you want and negotiate changes in these expectations so as to fulfill your calling.

c) Focus your roles. Scattered goals doth produce scattered people. Identify your strengths and the talents God has given you, and then concentrate on these. Since you must give an account to God of your own ministry and not to your congregation or any other institution, make sure you are free to exercise that ministry.

d) Educate your congregation in the complex issues of being a minister, the diversity of roles you must play, and in the debilitating effects of these. If they know what you experience they will be a lot more understanding and less demanding than if they don’t know.

3. THE PITFALLS OF SYMPATHY
Much burnout in “people helpers” is due to an inability to keep personal emotions sufficiently detached to avoid over-involvement in the pain of others. Stated very bluntly, the issue is: How much can a pastor take of the emotional or spiritual pain of others before it starts to burn him or her out?

The Christian minister or missionary is particularly vulnerable here. He or she is called to be “all things to all people.” They are supposed to “bear one another’s burdens” and “weep with them that weep.” But how much contact with troubled people can be tolerated if one must become emotionally involved with all of them? While not becoming indifferent to the pain of others, it is necessary for the minister to develop an appropriate degree of self-protection so that he or she does not become emotionally destroyed.

There are many reasons why ministers are overly affected by the pain of others. They may be guilt prone and use their own “weeping” over the pain of another as a way of alleviating their guilt feelings. Paradoxical, isn’t it? Especially since they preach a Gospel that offers forgiveness. Or they may become overly involved with the pain of another to satisfy some deep personal need (conscious or unconscious). It can also be an excessive need for attention, recognition or appreciation. In some strange way the vicarious pain helps to alleviate these needs and may even be a boost to self-esteem.

Perhaps the most important reason is that pastors are not taught to differentiate sympathy from empathy. They erroneously believe that they are required to feel “sympathy” for all who hurt. Psychologists prefer the concept of “empathy” as a special form of sympathy because it describes a way of relating to another that shows care and love but does not produce a reciprocal pain. To understand the difference, consider the following: Sympathy (as it is most commonly experienced) is a way of comforting another by showing that you also feel their pain. It too easily becomes patronizing. It robs others of the right to feel their own pain and not have you diminish the importance of what they feel. The vicarious suffering with another in sympathy can easily become selfish and self-satisfying. Sympathy in effect says: “I know how you feel because I feel that way also.” Empathy says “I can never know what you feel because your pain is unique. But I do want to understand how you feel.” Clinical research has shown that empathy is much more helpful and comforting than sympathy. Hurting people only hurt more if they see that their hurt causes others to hurt also. Hurting people are healed by understanding, not by someone else becoming emotionally affected by their hurt.

We should all work out our theology of compassion before becoming involved with a hurting world. On the one hand we must be ready to “weep with them that weep” (Rom. 12:15), but on the other “We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). We ought to know when we are being motivated by neurotic needs to feel the pain of others and be willing to surrender our neuroticism to the cross of healing so that we can be “blameless and harmless, the sons (and daughters) of God” (Phil. 2:15). We are hardly “harmless” as ministers when we operate out of a neurotic need to sympathetically feel the pain of others. Not only do we destroy ourselves, but we rob those who are hurting of the respect due to them in their suffering.

■ CONCLUSION
Although burnout can be a traumatic, devastating, depressing and even life-threatening experience, it can also be the beginning of true maturity. It can be the start of greater self-understanding.

—TO PAGE 21
Suggestions: Preventing Burnout and Stress

by Archibald D. Hart

1. Learn at least one relaxation technique and practice it on a regular basis. This helps to rest critical components of your body's emergency system.

2. Balance your life by exercising regularly. Good physical conditioning strengthens the body's immune system and increases endorphins which are the brain's natural tranquilizers.

3. Get proper rest. Allow adequate time for sleep. Contrary to what we have been taught in a previous generation, most of us need more sleep than we get. Adrenal arousal reduces our need for sleep — but this is a trap since we will ultimately pay the penalty for it.

4. Learn to be flexible. Only the Gospel is unchanging. Your ideas and priorities may need to change. Flexibility reduces the likelihood of frustration.

5. Slow down. Remember, God is never in a hurry. "Hurryness" is a human characteristic caused by inadequate planning and poor time management. Hurry speeds up the "wear and tear" of our bodies and minds and increases the production of destructive adrenaline.

6. Learn constructive ways of dealing with your anger. Our Gospel is a Gospel of forgiveness — dispense it liberally to all who hurt you. Remember that anger is a "signal" telling you something is wrong with your environment, or it is evidence that you are in a "fight or flight" mode. Identify the source and confront it assertively.

7. Pay attention to "little hassles" — they are more likely to kill you than the big ones. It is the everyday, minor irritations that are the deadliest. Keep them to a minimum.

8. Develop your ability to be empathetic in your care of others and keep sympathy under control. Understand your own neurotic needs so that they can be kept out of the way of your pastoring.

9. Focus your ministry on essentials. Reduce redundancies, eliminate unnecessary activities, avoid demands that will stretch you too thinly and learn how to say "no" kindly, without giving offense and without experiencing a sense of guilt.

10. Stay in touch with reality. Do not let your ambitions outrun the limits of your capabilities. Aim too high at unrealistic goals to satisfy an unsanctified ambition will only lead to burnout.

11. Avoid states of helplessness by taking control and implementing a coping strategy no matter how minor. Helplessness is often an "erroneous belief" that you are trapped and no solutions are possible. Exercise faith, believe that solutions are possible, and you can break out of the helplessness cycle.

12. If you cannot resolve a major conflict area in your life, leave it. Move on if necessary. Notions of being super-human often keep us in severe conflict situations. We believe we should be able to master every circumstance and this can lead to a persistence that is destructive. Even Jesus was hindered in what he could do (Matt. 13:58) and had to move on. Why not you?

Finally, don't be afraid to seek professional help when you need it.

Understanding Burnout

— FROM PAGE 6

anything, give yourself permission to experience it — recognizing that it is protecting you from a far worse fate. Pray for the wisdom and courage you will need to realign your life with God's purpose and plan. Heeding the warning signals of your system's disintegration is only the first step. Determinately following the remedy will require much patience and perseverance. I will explore the steps of the remedy in a later article.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BURNOUT AND STRESS

- Burnout is a defense characterized by disengagement.
- Stress is characterized by overengagement.
- In Burnout the emotions become blunted.
- In Stress the emotions become over-reactive.
- In Burnout the emotional damage is primary.
- In Stress the physical damage is primary.
- The exhaustion of Burnout affects motivation and drive.
- The exhaustion of Stress affects physical energy.
- Burnout produces demoralization.
- Stress produces disintegration.
- Burnout can best be understood as a loss of ideals and hope.
- Stress can best be understood as a loss of fuel and energy.
- The depression of Burnout is caused by the grief engendered by the loss of ideals and hope.
- The depression of Stress is produced by the body's need to protect itself and conserve energy.
- Burnout produces a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.
The affirmation we need to continue to minister. Such relationships "restore my soul", for we experience his shepherding together (Ps. 23).

Stress produces a sense of urgency and hyperactivity.

Burnout produces paranoia, depersonalization and detachment.

Stress produces panic, phobic, and anxiety-type disorders.

Burnout may never kill you but your long life may not seem worth living.

Stress may kill you prematurely, and you won't have enough time to finish what you started.

Theological Anemia

The separation of our work roles also included each of us as pastors separating our identities from the church and from the ministry. Before that freeing separation, we soared; we dragged if the church soared; we dragged if the church dragged. The state of our ministries had been the state of our lives, and we had wanted it that way. This separation required the most delicate operation because it was more surreptitious and difficult.

Now, wouldn't I love to tell you that "All's well that ends well"? Eventually that probably will be true, but for now that pre-empt hand forced me to deal with some of these same issues as my husband did. I am in the midst of my own burnout. Technically I'm not sure whether I am in burnout or whether the actions I took in response to my husband's burnout de-railed me from my original objectives. Either way the symptoms are similar, and the struggle to be on a new track involves the same elements. Based on what I learned as an observer, this is what I'm doing as a participant: trying not to take any obviously wrong step; trying to take one small positive step at a time, counting on that eventually producing positive results; working full-time for an enjoyable parachurch agency; preaching every other week in the church.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES


For a guide to new sources of personal spirituality, see the writings of Henri Nouwen, particularly, The Wounded Healer.

Pastor's Perspective: One

—from page 16

me. We are four separate entities. My life is not dependent on the ministry: my life is dependent on God alone. Second, I love meeting the needs of people in my congregation; and yet I am acutely aware that my life and my family life are God's work — they and I have needs that must be met. I am Christ's friend, Christ's follower, and Christ's servant; I am a husband, a father, and then I am a pastor.

A year ago we started a new ministry and congregation with one unchurched person. It was, is, and always will be Christ's ministry, not ours. At the time of this writing there are more than 100 formerly unchurched people in the congregation, and we are thoroughly enjoying our new life together. I have yet to make an evangelistic call. My people see me as: 1) preacher, 2) Bible teacher, 3) trainer of leaders — and that's what I want to do. The people see it as their responsibility to bring people into the church.

I have no idea what tomorrow has in store. I take one day at a time, little by little. I only know to thank God for what he has done to and for me. Four years ago I hardly had the physical strength to get up in the morning, and now, I've got to go to a very important racquetball game...

There's so much more to tell, and if it will help you to talk with me about it, do call me at (512) 366-0606.

Pastor's Perspective: Two

—from page 17

was eventually freeing and actually enhanced our togetherness. It may sound like overkill if you have not been through it, but during the worst of burnout, one of your fears is whether the one you love will come through intact — or come through at all! I felt gently, but firmly, pushed to deal with becoming a widow. I felt deep grief, and then I reconstructed a theoretical life for our daughters and me. Facing this pain and fear, coming to solutions, facilitated the separation of identities and removed some obstacles to clearer, calmer thinking.

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husband has started; realizing that I have more options than I feel that I have; being supported by my spouse; taking it one day at a time.

Slowly, God is bringing healing.

Preventing Burnout

—FROM PAGE 17

and increased awareness of our need to depend more completely on God’s Spirit for our ministry. We become less confident in our personal strengths and more trusting of him who can make us strong because we are weak, because “His strength is made perfect in weakness.”

Such quantum leaps in personal growth seldom occur to those who live sheltered lives or for whom everything seems to go right. They do not develop strong roots into the resources of God’s spirit because the winds of their struggles seldom blow hard enough. It is the man or woman who has weathered and mastered burnout who is wiser, stronger, more insightful, trustworthy, and God-dependent than any other. While this is nothing for them to boast about, I do know that they are able to communicate the Gospel to needy souls in such a way that in all things they are able to approve themselves...

...as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distress...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich: as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

II Corinthians 6:4 & 10

A Bibliography of Helpful Books

Your Perfect Right

Although written from a secular point of view, “Your Perfect Right” is a balanced treatment of the topic of assertiveness. Not only does it give a clear rationale for assertiveness which is quite compatible with a Christian view of personhood, but the exercises are well designed and very effective in developing appropriate assertive behavior.

Stress and the Manager
by Karl Albrecht and Hans Selye, New Jersey: Prentice Hall (1979)

Insisting that much stress is induced by those who manage people, this excellent book not only provides a clear overview of the problem of stress but also on how managers can avoid stress in themselves and others.

On Being Human

Section 3 of Dr. Anderson’s book is particularly helpful in that he discusses how the community of Christ can be used to sustain and enrich one’s personal life and faith.

Beyond Assertiveness
by David Augsburger and John Faul, Waco, Texas: Word Books (1980)

How to be assertive yet affirming, leveling yet loving, confronting yet caring—are the themes of this book. It also provides a relaxation exercise and some discussion on the role of the emotions.

The Relaxation Response

This is a classic treatment of what relaxation is all about. Not only does Dr. Benson explain the psychological and physiological benefits of relaxation, but a technique for producing the relaxation response is clearly described.

Burnout in Ministry
by Brooks R. Faulkner, Nashville: Broadman Press.

Examining many dimensions of burnout—physical, emotional, spiritual, and social—Faulkner brings the perspective of one who has faced the problem personally. It is a valuable guide enabling the pastor to recognize and avoid the specific problems of the pastor that cause burnout.

Depression in Ministry and the Helping Professions

This book is designed to help pastors and other people helpers understand the causes, cures, and prevention of depression. Describing the broad range and varieties of depression, the author provides an in-depth understanding of those depressions that are endogenous (from within the physiology) and exogenous (from the environment). The book’s value lies in helping pastors separate the experience of depression from that of burnout.

The Success Factor

The unbalanced pursuit of success has surely got to be a major cause of stress and burnout. Warning that “unsanctified ambition” can be disastrous, the author introduces the notions of “holistic success” and warns against the pitfalls of having a simplistic “positive thinking” attitude. He then presents the idea that “reality thinking” is more consistent with a Christian perspective on the quest for success and provides valuable exercises in developing the habit of reality thinking.

Burnout—The Cost of Caring

Although written from a secular perspective, this book does help to see the pastor’s burnout problems in the context of other “people helping” professions. Excellent chapters on involvement with people as a source of burnout and personal characteristics as a source of burnout will be helpful to all pastors.

Stress/Unstress
by Keith W. Sehner, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.

This popular treatment of the problem of stress will help the pastor to understand how stress can contribute to burnout. The author is a Christian family doctor and he includes sections on clergy burnout and spiritual growth through prayer. The whole book motivates the reader toward better health through a planned program of exercises, nutrition, and spiritual growth.
Attention!  
Events of Special Interest

- The next few months are going to be lively with some very important, rich events for Fuller, our friends and alumni. First, mark your calendar now and plan to attend the Alumni Celebration of 1984 which will delight, entertain and amuse all day May 11. The festivities will begin at 8 a.m. with golf at Brookside Country Club. For those who choose not to chase the little white ball around the grassy knolls, professors will be available for personal consultations during that time (no grading allowed!) Theme for the day is "Mid-life Dimensions," with our very special guests, Jim (D.Min. '79) and Sally Conway, whose ministry to those in mid-life is burgeoning across the country. Jim and Sally's informal, informative chats will be interspersed with lunch. an ice-cream social and candlelight is planned with a special greeting from Dr. David Allan Hubbard. Expecting around 50 denominational executives and pastors to attend, CEFI was understandably overwhelmed when more than 600 people appeared, not only from the area, but from across the nation and four other countries. Some pastors from Chicago were so impressed with the seminar that they requested CEFI to come to their city to enable their colleagues to receive the benefit of the expertise of Dr. C. Peter Wagner, Carl George and others. So May 29 through June 1, another "How to Plant a Church" seminar is going to be given at Pheasant Run Convention Hotel just outside of downtown Chicago. This is an ideal opportunity for Fuller alumni and friends to make use of resources which don't often come to the east. Plan now to hear, besides Dr. Wagner and Rev. George, Dr. Robert Larson, Dr. Juan Carlos Miranda, Rev. J. V. Thomas, Rev. Samuel Jones Jr. and Rev. Richard Warren, all of whom have expert church growth and church planting ministries. For registration information, contact CEFI at (818) 449-0425. Outside California, call (800) C FULLER. Early registrants (before April 30) will receive a bonus: Dr. C. Peter Wagner's book "Leading Your Church to Growth;"  

- Dr. Clifford Penner, a Fuller alumnus and board member, with his wife, former nursing professor Joyce Penner, have brought their popular "Enjoying the Gift of Sex" seminar to thousands across the country. Now Northern Californians will have the opportunity to attend the Penner's seminar May 18 and 19 at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Newlyweds and those who have been married for years will find this seminar a practical guide to enrich their marital relationship. Continuing education credit is available. To register, call the Office of Continuing Education, (808) 449-1745, ext. 3359, or Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, (415) 328-3240.  

- Without careful estate planning, you could be denying your family the assets which are rightfully theirs after your death. Did you know many states in the union have pre-made wills for those who die intestate? Did you know if you own stocks or other income-producing assets which are increasing in value, you can give all the increased value of those assets to your heirs tax-free? To find out more about innovative estate planning ideas and methods to protect your heirs, contact Frederick W. Mintz, Director of Estate Planning Services, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, Calif. 91101-1790, (818) 449-1745, ext. 3617.