

Alan Palmer (Edited by Richard Collins)

Ministerial Burnout

The Problem

(Part One)



My Story

In 2001, I was the senior pastor of a large church in Western Canada. I was successful and respected; I looked like I had arrived. That was all on the outside. On the inside, I was dying. I was fatigued, depressed, and emotionally drained. In November that year, it came to a head. I made my way to my GP, where I confessed to panic attacks and morbid tears, among other things.

My diagnosis: a nervous breakdown. A better term would be ministerial burnout.

That was all a long time ago now. Since then, the Lord has graciously rebuilt me, my family and my faith. So why do I write? I write because I see myself in the lives of other ministers. I see warning signs all over the place. Some are right on the verge of ministerial burnout. If that's you, or someone you know, keep reading.

Why do ministers burn out?

We live in a world addicted to hurry. 'Quick, time for the next appointment, the next meeting, the next whatever. No time to waste!' All in the West are in some way afflicted by this thinking, but do pastors, in particular, experience it differently? I think they do. Dr. Gary Collins calls it 'religious stress.' The great Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, also believed in a kind of stress specifically related to pastoral ministry. He once confessed

that he was subject to prolonged periods of

depression, sufficient to drive him from home to seek refuge for a time in France.

Underlying causes of Ministerial Meltdown

I wrote an article for The Churchman once, entitled 'Clergy Stress, Causes and Suggested Coping Strategies.' My research revealed that large numbers of those in pastoral ministry are (and continue to be) abandoning ministry due to burnout. All around the world. Why is this happening?

The Sisyphus Complex

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is a man whose fate is to push a great stone up a mountain. Yet, just before he reached the summit, it would roll all the way back down to the bottom. Ministers often feel like Sisyphus. The task is never complete. There are always more sermons, more meetings, more services. And because we care, we experience the stress of never being able to complete our 'to-do' lists. It's relentless.

Unrealistic Expectations

Many churches place unrealistic expectations on their leaders. This relates to both the job itself – what it entails – and the number of hours a minister is expected to work. If you have a number of church communities to care for, you are almost set up for a sense of failure. Every minister has a limit when it comes to juggling all those balls, spinning all those plates. In addition, ministers are prone to what

Charles Hummel calls 'the tyranny of the urgent'. Every demand on them feels urgent, requiring immediate attention. This creates tremendous stress.

Carping Criticism

Many clergy are assaulted by a constant barrage of criticism. In my case, I have been criticised by congregations who found fault with almost every aspect of my life and ministry. From the length of my hair, when I was young, to my sermons - too intellectual, or not deep enough. From wearing a clerical collar or not wearing one, to the amusement value - or not - of my sermons. Some liked it when I drove a new car and lived in a new home, some didn't. When I drove a rusty heap and lived in a poor neighbourhood, they still found fault. You name it, I was doing it wrong.

Infuriatingly, many of the criticisms that ministers face are what I call 'majoring on the minors.' They focus on the non-essentials. After all, what difference does the length of my hair make in the Kingdom of God? Like the author and speaker Jeff Lucas, I sometimes wish that the Bible included the verse, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Lighten up a bit!' It's a verse I would recommend for memorization by every member of the congregation! Having said that, perhaps we clergy should also learn to lighten up a bit too. Sometimes we take ourselves a little too seriously. We can be oversensitive and it is necessary to develop a thick skin. Not all comments should be taken personally.

Clinging Vines

It's easy to be worn down by working with difficult people, the 'clinging vines' of the community. Either they criticize everything you do, or they crave attention, sapping your energy. They're there year after year, they never go away. One discouraged pastor said that 'the trouble makers never seem to leave and the helpful, cooperative people never seem to stay'.

Toxic Confidences

Ministers are also expected to carry what might be called 'toxic confidences'. In your role as pastoral counsellors, you are bound to hear the most personal, intimate and disturbing details from some of the members of your congregation. Because this

information is often given 'in confidence,' there is no opportunity for a minister to offload this information onto anyone else, not even a spouse. If this information is distressing, it can just settle inside, like toxic waste, slowly seeping into the pastor's soul where it wreaks havoc, mentally, spiritually and emotionally.

Living in a Goldfish bowl

A minister's family is sometimes said to live in a goldfish bowl. They live out their lives in the public eye of the congregation. Some congregations seem to know more about what is going on in a minister's home than the minister himself! At times, it can feel like living in a soap opera. Everyone knows about your life and the lives of your family members, and they're all talking about you. Not only that, you're viewed as 'the holy family.' Your marriage must be perfect. No cracks permitted. Even the children can come under close scrutiny, right down to the kind of shoes they wear. Privacy seems to be a right which a minister gives up at the moment of ordination. As a result, life can become extremely stressful.

You might even start envying the goldfish. At least all they have to do is swim in circles!

So, what's the solution?

If all of this seems very familiar, then I invite you to read the next article. Part Two. That's where I'll go over some possible solutions. Because I assure you, there is hope. Do not despair, God knows everything you're going through; He has not abandoned you.



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