

An *Issues in Ministry* resource

Ministry Burnout Factsheet

1. **What is ministry burnout?**

Ministry burnout describes the condition of clergy who have exhausted the reserves of the emotional energy they normally draw on to do the work of ministry. They have given all they have in serving God until they find there is nothing left in the bank. It has been described as a declaration of emotional bankruptcy.

It is not:

- a nervous breakdown;
- a stress breakdown - a stress breakdown is usually experienced primarily as physical, rather than emotional, incapacitation, or
- a crisis of faith - although the pastor may struggle with faith issues as a result of a burnout experience.

2. **How is ministry burnout diagnosed and measured?**

Researchers have identified three primary components of the condition to help determine whether or not a person is suffering from burnout and, if they are, the degree of severity:

- *Emotional exhaustion* - measuring the degree of compassion fatigue, the draining impact of people contact, the feeling of having to work hard to produce the required result, and the feeling that one is running on empty.
- *Depersonalisation* - measuring the level of compassion towards pastoral care recipients, the ability to empathise, feelings of cynicism and 'blame the victim' responses.
- *Reduced personal accomplishment* - measuring the sense of ministry success and achievement, the degree of significance of the pastoral role, and the level of personal effectiveness and sense that one is making a difference.

3. **What are the symptoms of ministry burnout?**

Symptomatology will often include some or all of the following:

- an inability to function in ministry;
- a sense of isolation, with consequent emotional withdrawal and shutdown;
- mild to acute depression, and/or
- anxiety and/or panic attacks.

These form normal, somewhat externalised, and therefore observable, indicators of burnout. There are less obvious, but nonetheless significant - especially to the sufferer - inner aspects of the condition. Many burnt-out ministers talk about experiencing a deep sense of ministry failure - they have let God and their people down - and there is a consequent guilt that arises from such perceived failure. For male clergy - typically deriving their sense of identity and selfhood from their role - this feeling can be compounded as it goes to the core of the psyche. For married male clergy, it can be further exacerbated as a result of feeling a failure *as a provider*. If financial pressures result from having to take time off work, the consequent stress clearly adds to the sense of incompetence and inadequacy.

4. Who gets ministry burnout?

The Australian National Church Life Survey has found that the ministers who are most at risk of burnout are those who:

- are under the age of 50;
- are living alone or raising school-aged children;
- do not feel a strong sense of support exists in the home;
- were employed in a blue-collar job prior to entering ministry, and/or
- have been in ministry between 6-20 years.

Ministers who burn out have usually had a high capacity and energy for work, and a great passion for ministry. Malingerers or lazy pastors rarely burn out - they probably weren't on fire to start with!

5. How is ministry burnout caused?

Ministry burnout will often be the result of accumulated ministry frustration.

Factors in the individual *may* include:

- having their identity too closely linked to the role of pastoring;
- a tendency towards perfectionism, and corresponding lack of delegation skills;
- idealism, and/or
- a prolonged feeling of having personal ministry goals blocked.

Factors in the ministry team, congregation and/or denominational systems *may* include:

- on-going and/or poorly managed interpersonal or other conflict;
- the presence of power blocks and/or gate-keepers acting as defenders of the status quo;
- lack of denominational support, and/or
- rapid and/or inadequately managed change.

The National Church Life Survey has found that congregations that are more likely to contribute to burning out their minister:

- contain attendees that are challenging for leaders to deal with;
- have difficulty with goal-setting;
- are declining in numbers (and therefore have unresolved viability questions);
- lack a sense of vision, and
- are unable to secure personnel for lay ministry roles.

6. How is ministry burnout treated?

Every case is different, so treatment usually combines a number of components:

- Almost every minister who experiences burnout will need an extended period of time off work.
- Doctors may prescribe Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI - anti-depressant) or similar medication to enable depleted brain serotonin levels to be replenished.¹
- A psychologist or counsellor will work with the minister to help them identify the causes of the burnout and work towards a new understanding of ministry and possible ministry re-entry. The counselling process might canvas:

¹ This medication should not be viewed in the same light as earlier generation tranquillisers. The excessive level of stress hormones toxins in one's system will do a lot more damage than modern SSRIs.

- ⇒ addressing the need for affirmation and approval;
- ⇒ building self-esteem rather than role esteem;
- ⇒ combining the being and the doing;
- ⇒ developing an ability to articulate and maintain healthy boundaries;
- ⇒ improving lifestyle balance;
- ⇒ enhancing reflective capacity;
- ⇒ enhancing accountability relationships, and
- ⇒ moving from guilt-based to grace-based ministry models.

7. How can the congregation help?

- by permitting the minister to take time to fully recuperate - with burnout, there is a significant difference between feeling better and actually being better;
- through encouraging notes, cards and emails - visits and face-to-face contact are rarely helpful, especially in the early stages of recovery;
- by praying for their pastor;
- by exercising their own spiritual gifts in order to maintain and progress the church's ministry and mission, and
- by reflecting on what contribution, if any, the church's culture and systems may have made to the minister's condition.

Possibly the most difficult issue for congregants to understand when their minister is suffering from burnout is that whenever they might see or interact with their recovering pastor, they *look* and *sound* healthy. They don't present as being sick². They may be able to successfully accomplish all manner of tasks, gardening, even extensions to the home, and not be affected or incapacitated in any way. Some may hitch a caravan on the back of the car and go away for a month or more, having what looks a lot more like a holiday than a period of recuperation. Parishioners also have difficulty with the fact that the minister may choose to worship in another congregation, or even another denomination, during the period of their recovery. The question (complaint?) - 'If our pastor is well enough to go to church, why don't they come to their own church?' is not unusual.

The reason for both of these apparent contradictions is that the minister's burnout condition is largely role-related and contextual. It is as a pastor that the minister experiences the feelings of anxiety or other burnout symptoms. To have to interact with congregants, or even be amongst them (for example, in a worship service or other church meeting), especially in the early stages of recovery, can result in a significant setback. The minister needs this time away from their people in order to develop a new set of ministry understandings and skills.

8. How much time will a burnt out minister need to have off work?

This can vary as well. A very small percentage of clergy are unable to return to ministry, or if they do, they have to move to another ministry role or placement. Mild burnout cases may not need sick leave. Instead, the pastor could take their annual holidays and return to work fully recovered. A minister who experiences moderate burnout will probably need between three and six months off. A rule of thumb for less severe cases might be that when the minister is feeling well enough to take up ministry for seven consecutive days, then to wait a further month before resuming duty. Severely affected clergy will probably

² One minister going through burnout told the writers - with tears in his eyes and frustration and anger in his voice - that he wished he had two broken legs so that he could prove that he was unfit for duty.

need a year or more for a thorough recovery. In a minority of cases, a pastor may need up to two or three years off work, or away from pastoral work.

9. What happens when the minister returns to work?

The minister will probably return to work gradually, in stages, possibly two days (or part days) a week initially, with periodic review and appropriate increments over time up to a full ministry workload. The minister's specific responsibilities should be properly identified at each stage, so that they know exactly what is expected of them. The return to work process should be marked by negotiation and be properly monitored. The least anxiety-producing tasks should be included in the minister's responsibilities at the beginning of the return to work, building up to the full range of duties over time.

The return to work is often marked by significant challenges to congregants. During the period of recuperation, the minister may have been involved in many hours of counselling, spent a great deal of time in searching their soul, made some major decisions about the way they intend to carry out his or her pastoral role in the future, and completely changed their leadership style and their model of ministry in order to become more resilient.

The minister usually returns to a congregational system that is largely unchanged since they left it. The pastor may appear to be more laid-back, looking for greater lay participation, wanting to be more intentional about time off, time out and family time, and may be talking (and preaching!) a whole lot more about 'letting go and letting God' or something similar. This change in the minister may confuse some parishioners and anger lay some leaders. The accusation of pastoral laziness or worse may be bandied about.

The writers' observation of what is happening here is that it is the beginning (if the minister and congregation can remain together for the journey) of a cultural shift. Based on their learnings through the time of recuperation, the minister may be hopeful of moving the people from a guilt-based to a more grace-based ministry, from program-oriented to a more people-oriented church life, and move themselves from being the CEO of the church to a spiritual companion to God's pilgrim people.

All change is stressful, and some is painful. Pastor and people need to work through this time of transition prayerfully and carefully together to ensure that all the benefits of the cultural change are fully realised.

10. How can ministers avoid burnout?

Burnout can re-occur if ministers do not learn from their first burnout experience. The National Church Life Survey has found that the clergy who are least likely to burn out are those who:

- are generally satisfied with life;
- enjoy a quality family life, including effective work/family boundaries;
- have a faith that is alive and growing;
- enjoy good physical health;
- do not feel socially isolated, i.e., they have an effective support network;
- have a strong sense of call to the ministry;
- are not burdened with personal financial concerns, and
- tend to be generally positive about changes in society.

The best way for congregations to help the pastor (and other church leaders) avoid burnout is to contribute positively towards a church culture that intentionally develops, promotes, supports and reinforces these values.

References

Kaldor, P. & Bullpit, R. (2001) *Burnout in Church Leaders*, Adelaide, Open Book Publishers.

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