

Clergy Stress and Burnout or All Stressed Up and No Place to Blow

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This is the age
Of the half-read page
And the quick hash
And the mad dash
The bright night
With the nerves tight
The plane hop
With the brief stop
The lamp tan
In a short span
The Big Shot
In a good spot
And the brain strain
And the heart pain
And the cat nap
Till the spring snaps
And the fun's done.

Virginia Brasier

In an article in *Leadership* (Winter 1983) James D. Berkley introduced his article on burnout with the following:

“A few months ago a friend of mine—one of the most gifted and effective pastors I have ever met very nearly drove his car off a bridge. Intentionally. The pressures of ministry ate to the core of this young pastor of a thriving church. He mentally composed a farewell message, determined the best freeway bridge for his purposes, and planned the final escape that would neatly conclude his depressed existence.

But before he got in his car, he remembered he had an appointment. Instead of suicide, he dutifully attended a committee meeting.

Another friend serves a small church with large problems. When I asked how the ministry was going, a long sigh best described his feelings. He is not sure how long he can take it.

Still another pastor, young and dedicated, admits to a succession of stomach ailments. Every contact he makes, every decision, every responsibility finds its way to his viscera. Antacid manufacturers love him.

So many pastors enter their calling with superior training, gifts and talent to spare, and all the drive in the world, only to be pressed through the ministerial sieve. Great dreams turn

into defeat, despair, exhaustion, and ulcers. As I number the casualties, I often wonder, “Is disaster inevitable?”

British evangelist Christmas Evans once declared, “It is better to burn out than to rust out!” I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burnt-outs and the almost burnt-outs who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. I see pain and waste and unfinished service. Is there not a third alternative to either burning out or rusting out? In Acts 20:24 Paul stated, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” Herein, lies the model I choose to follow. I want neither to burn out nor rust out. I want to finish out the race.”

It is my intention in presenting this paper to help each of us do just that which James Berkley intended to do—neither burn out or rust out but finish the race.

For generations parents told their children: “Nobody ever died from hard work!” But that is no longer necessarily true.

What is this malady called “burnout” that we have been hearing so much about in recent years? The expression itself comes from those same wonderful people who gave us “identity crisis”, “generation gap”, and “male menopause”, and is well on its way to becoming a household word.

Burnout in a mechanical sense is familiar to all of us. There’s the “poof-pop” of a light bulb burning out and leaving us in the dark. It may be a power drill that all of a sudden emits a shower of sparks and quits running just when we need it the most. Or it may be the motor on the wash machine that starts smoking and then grinds to a halt. To burn out mechanically is to wear out or become inoperative because of friction, overloading, or overheating. In the aerospace industry, the term denotes the termination of jet-engine or rocket operation because of fuel exhaustion or cut-off. In still another sense, “burnout” presents for us the picture of the charred shell of a building that has been gutted by fire.

Behavioral scientists are now using the term to describe people. Burnout is what happens when a person works too hard under too much stress for too long a period of time so that he loses his equilibrium.

It can happen to nearly anyone but especially vulnerable are those who work in the “people-helping” professions. And that includes you and me. Would it surprise you to hear that nearly one in five parish pastors is physically and/or emotionally burned out?

According to Herbert J. Freudenberger, a New York Psychoanalyst, certain personality types are prone to burnout:

1. The person who needs to succeed and to feel successful.
2. The overcommitted individual.
3. The extremely competent individual.

The burned out person will usually show physical symptoms. Weariness is one of the most prominent. He is tired all the time. He goes to bed tired. He gets up tired. He runs tired all day long.

He may also suffer from one or more of the following: headaches, gastrointestinal problems, weight fluctuation (generally loss but may be the opposite), insomnia, hypertension, even chest pains, He doesn’t imagine these symptoms! They are very real and, like the engine that has exhausted its fuel, the individual rapidly exhausts his resources.

A second cluster of symptoms has to do with emotions and personality. The out-going, extroverted person becomes quiet, sullen and withdrawn. At home, where he used to have energy for romps with the kids and household chores, he now sits listless and lethargic. He has lost interest. The person who had been an “under control” individual becomes irritable and often hostile. He may tend to be rigid and want to make no changes. He interprets questions as challenges and suggestions as insubordination.

The spiritual life is also often affected. The burnout victim feels that God has become remote, disinterested and withdrawn. He often loses interest in the Bible outside of necessary reading for class or sermon preparation. His prayer life suffers.

There seem to be basically four stages in the cycle toward burnout. (1) Challenge, (2) Commitment, (3) Containment, and (4) Collapse. The first two are not dangerous, the last two are.

At first the potential burnout candidate is excited about the possibilities before him. He is full of idealism and eager to pour himself into the task. As time goes on he silently enters into the second phase, which is generally productive. He is still committed, building and achieving. Life has not lost its glamour and adventure but it is tending to become a bit routine and less exciting.

The third phase, containment, is the dangerous one. Then the person is no longer pursuing his goal—his goal is pursuing him. He is “driven”. Although a workaholic, he feels unappreciated. His perspective becomes warped. He develops a martyr complex. He becomes indifferent. One morning he says to himself: “Is this all there is to life? It isn’t worth it!” *Collapse*. He walks out. Quits. He is overwhelmed and wants to escape. In the case of ministers, the escape can be in one of two ways. Either he accepts a call to another field or he leaves the ministry entirely and starts selling insurance or whatever. For the one who has accepted another call, the process may repeat itself again unless care is taken to avoid the burnout experience in the next calling.

One thing that must be remembered is that, although burnout is a relatively new term as applied by behavioral scientists, the malady is not new. Perhaps no scriptural figure illustrates burnout so clearly as does Elijah, who, as James reminds us, was a man with feelings just like ours.

Burnout frequently occurs after intense “peak” experiences such as Elijah had in his triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. What an experience it must have been for him to see the fire of God fall and consume the sacrifice, wood, stones, and even the water in the trench! But just a short time later, the prophet Elijah was also consumed—by burnout!

The account in I Kings 19 reveals some of the distinct characteristics of burnout. First Elijah by traveling a day’s journey into the wilderness shows an attitude of distancing or detachment. Of course we really can’t fault him for getting out of Jezreel especially since Jezebel had vowed to kill him within 24 hours. But he even leaves his servants behind in Beersheba. He wanted to get away not only from the wicked queen but from everyone else as well. The effort to get away from people can be a sign of burnout.

As Elijah sits under a broom tree asking to die, he manifests some of the advanced stages of burnout: depression and despair. He minces no words: “I have had enough Lord, take my life.” Elijah here proves a classic example of Freudenberg’s description: “It’s the letdown that comes in between crises or directly after ‘mission accomplished’. Frequently after a triumph, high achievers suffer periods of deep melancholia somewhat akin to the postpartum depression some women experience after giving birth.” (p. 110).

The man who had displayed such great energy in outrunning Ahab's chariot now is completely exhausted, not just physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually. He sleeps, gets up just long enough to eat food provided by an angel, and then goes back to sleep again.

In his subsequent dialogues with God at Mt. Horeb, Elijah shows a few other signs of burnout. He reminds God of his zeal in his service, perhaps showing a bitterness at the level of appreciation the people are showing. And he reveals the burnout's typical feeling of indispensability—that he alone is serving God.

It is common for the burnout victim to feel mistreated, and persecuted. He becomes increasingly suspicious of his environment as he tries to project his difficulties outside himself onto circumstances and people.

Elijah had been a very faithful and affective prophet of the Lord. The sad part of clergy burnout today is that many of the pastors who burn out are among our most dedicated and committed clergy. The hopeful part is that pastoral burnout can be avoided, and, if caught in time, can usually be remedied.

Having now set the stage by this description of burnout let's look more closely at why pastors burn out today.

II.

Do you remember the old pressure cooker that used to be in use in your mother's kitchen? Did you ever try to clean beef stew off the kitchen ceiling? I had that experience once. My mother was cooking beef stew and a bang and scream from the kitchen brought me running. The pressure cooker had blown up and what was supposed to be in the cooker was all over the ceiling. It had a safety valve that was supposed to let off excess steam, but somehow the safety valve became plugged and the pressure inside built up until the little rubber plug let go with a bang and the pot emptied itself through a quarter inch hole.

There are times when we like the stew in the pressure cooker. The pressure builds up inside us so much that we feel we will blow apart. Often the case is that our release valve has malfunctioned so that we can't let off the steam and we look for a safe place to blow apart in secret. More often than not we find ourselves "all stressed up and no place to blow". We try to devise something that will quiet the tensions and remove the pressures—perhaps we quickly make vacation plans or find some other type of relaxation, or we submerge ourselves in more work often with disastrous results.

Burnout comes as the result of chronic stress. However, not all stress is bad. Everything we do causes some stress. Just getting out of bed in the morning requires some stress (more some mornings than others!). Hans Selye, of the International Institute of Stress in Montreal, defines stress in terms of the response your body makes to any demand on it. He separates stress into "eustress" (good stress, such as you might feel with joy, fulfillment or satisfaction) and "distress" (excessive levels of damaging stress). A certain amount of stress or tension is necessary for renewal and growth. It can help to build our integrity and keep us motivated to pursue goals. (Think of the butterflies in your stomach before preaching to the congregation. That is "eustress". Don't worry about it. Worry when you don't have them!).

The trouble comes when there is an overload of stress and the coping mechanisms of our human system are incapable of handling them. It's like the fuse box in your house. If you overload the wiring, the fuse is going to blow. For the individual, this fuse blowing may mean that his performance is going to be crippled for a time but he will be able to reset the circuit

breaker and once again work as usual. For others, too much damage has been done and a crisis develops.

Since the underlying problem with burnout is the stresses that fill the life of the minister, we need to identify the stresses if we are going to deal with them successfully and counter them with positive responses.

Lucille Lavender, in the preface to her book *They Cry Too*, hits upon many of the stresses which fill the pastor's life with these words:

Ministers are people, too, I think. Ministers are made very special by their Maker, who issues them their special call.

They come in varied shapes and sizes like anyone else but, according to most people, they have a special look. I don't know what it is, but I think this is so because often people exude such surprise: "You don't look like a minister!"

They have outstanding talents in every conceivable field of endeavor imaginable. Administration, writing, public speaking, diplomacy, psychology, economics, medicine, good bedside manners, building, maintenance, teaching, counseling, comforting, conciliation, coordination, and creating.

Ministers have anatomical characteristics that others don't have. They are built not to wear out as easily as normal creatures. They are more resistant to sleep and relaxation, so they can work a sixteen-hour-a-day, seven-day week. And, if they are wakened in the middle of the night by the telephone and they can't get back to sleep, they work on a Sunday sermon.

There is something unusual about their flesh, too. Their skin is extra thick and tough, so they can be roasted for dinner with a minimum of discomfort. And this helps them withstand possessive, particular, and peeved people.

Under this thick skin is a special cushion of insulation that keeps them immune to feelings other earth people have—like never getting angry, despondent, disgusted, or discouraged. It also insulates them against needing love, acceptance, praise, encouragement, and raises in salary.

Ministers are also all-knowing, all-wise, all-comforting, all-controlled, all-put-together, and always there.

Do you know any ministers like that? I don't! And I ought to know...I live with one.

The first of the stress factors that I am going to deal with in more detail is that of *money*. This is a topic which most ministers don't care to talk about—at least not in an honest way. We have all read conference papers and handbooks for ministers that remind us again and again that we didn't enter the ministry to become rich, that we dare not be lovers of money and that we must firmly trust in the Lord that He will provide for all of our needs. I do not have any argument with any of those statements, but if that is all we are going to say about money, we have left a lot unsaid.

Someone has estimated that 95% of the clergy who minister to the well being of our nation's people are grossly underpaid. The old adage, "Lord, you keep him humble and we'll keep him poor" may still be in the consciousness of many church members. It's high time that congregations realize that a contributing factor in the burnout of many a minister has been the worry over money to care for himself and his family. Most clergymen will not admit it is a factor, but it is.

A survey that was done a few years back of clergy from over 40 denominations revealed some startling information about pastors' salaries. A middle to low income average prevails with one exception where the salary jumps to a figure almost double the average. That is the salary quoted by the Jewish Conference of Rabbis (housing and retirement are additional benefits). These people are still looking for their Messiah!

A pamphlet prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor ranks clergymen 316 of the 432 occupations listed. Clergy rank with the lowest, paid occupations and with unskilled labor—teacher's aides, waiters and waitresses, cooks, farm laborers and library attendants. Though they rank next to the bottom economically, they rank with the top 10 earning occupations educationally—doctors, dentists, judges, scientists and engineers. Most of those below their ranking in earnings did not graduate from high school. Many did not get beyond the 8th grade.

Most pastors are quite satisfied with their work. A recent poll in *Leadership* found that over 60% of pastors said they did not feel they have been financially deprived. However, response to the survey also indicates many ministers are uncomfortable acknowledging finances are a problem. They feel they should be above such worldly concerns.

It is still true that financial pressures put a great deal of strain on the minister and his family, but it is only one of many stresses.

The job of the minister is never finished. There are Sunday services each week, weddings, funerals, crises, counseling sessions, religious holidays, the sick and shut-in to visit, classes to teach and administrative tasks. Seldom can the minister stand back and say "There, now my work is finished." As a result, the pastor is never really free from his job. Peoples' needs don't operate on a timetable. You can't punch a timecard at 5 p.m. and say, "Well, that's all for today." We are almost like Sisyphus in Greek mythology whose fate it was to push a huge stone up a mountain only to have it roll down again just before reaching the top. This feeling that the job is endless and that you never will quite reach the top of the mountain no matter how hard you try, can lead to exhaustion.

Because the minister works with people in need, there is a particularly great drain on his energy. Mentally and spiritually one can become depleted. While in many occupations you can leave your work behind and go home to a relaxing and stable home situation, not so for the pastor. Leaving the work behind is almost impossible. The ministry is with us wherever we go. And it's tiring when you are dealing with sin. You can't just yank out the root of the problem. You need the skill of a surgeon to cut it away without damaging the people involved. Pastors who put distance between themselves and their people can't be effective; they have to be involved. And being involved means they become more susceptible to emotional and spiritual stress. It's like having a small but constant loss of blood. How many blood transfusions a day can you give to people?

The minister cannot always tell if his work is having any results. You can work for months or years and not be sure you are really accomplishing anything. That is because the nature of the work is primarily devoted to spiritual nourishment of people. Of course there are exceptions to that. The minister could get caught up with a numbers mentality. If my

congregation shows a growth this year over last, I must be doing my job adequately. But numbers can be (and often are) misleading. Numbers can be increasing but the minister may really not be working that faithfully. On the other hand, he may be working most faithfully while his numbers are decreasing. And there is also the building program where one can stand back and see results taking shape. Maybe that's one reason why building programs are so popular among clergy.

The work of the minister is repetitive. Not only is the work never finished, it continually repeats itself. Christmas comes over and over, the services must be repeated, the Christmas sermon prepared with one more attempt to present the message in an original way. The confirmation classes come over and over. Vacation Bible School must be cranked up again in the summer. One sick person recovers or dies only to be replaced by another. And so it goes on in what may seem like an endlessly repetitive cycle. Like Ixion was bound to a wheel that revolved endlessly through the heavens, so also we seem to be caught in that same trap. And repetitive work can lose its creativity and become a cause of stress.

The minister is constantly dealing with people's expectations. Perhaps in no other profession (except politics) is a person facing so many expectations from so many people. To make matters worse, those expectations often vary enormously. The minister's "corporation" is expected to show growth and balance the budget or the parishioners will begin to question his leadership. He is to be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. He is not to scold or admonish too much. He is expected to be above reproach in word and deed. Even though he is only human, church members will pass lightly over their own faults while holding the pastor rigidly accountable for his. Consequently the minister often functions a great deal of time on his "persona". The persona is a mask we assume to meet and relate to the world of other people. It has a double function it helps us project ourselves to the world and also helps protect us from the world. For example, imagine that you are very tired but a wedding is to take place. You would much rather go to the beach with your family but you know that you have to pull yourself together to perform the ceremony. To do this you put on a good front with the help of your persona. It helps you do your job but you keep your inward self hidden. Someone might say: "How are you this afternoon?" Instead of saying "I'm worn out; I wish I weren't here", you probably say: "I'm fine. Looks like this will be a beautiful wedding."

Ideally speaking I suppose we should always be genuine under all circumstances. But the ministry involves a lot of gear shifting (the wedding at 2 and the funeral at 3) and this too can cause stress.

Pressures placed upon the minister's wife and family also cause stress. Often the minister's wife is expected to be an "assistant pastor". This is evidenced by the fact that some people look upon her and address her as "Mrs. Pastor".

There are a number of areas in which the minister's wife must walk a fine line. One is in regard to friendships. She is wary of developing close friendships. If she misjudges and shares her feelings, it could lead to disaster. Coming from others what is confided might produce a ripple. Coming from the pastor's wife it could cause a tidal wave. So she limits herself to a few friends and doesn't really let them get to know her. Realizing that her faults and weaknesses may not be accepted, she draws back for fear of discovery. In the midst of a busy, demanding life, she is lonely. In a survey of ministers' wives, one of the most frequent complaints wives had was that they missed having special friends that they as a couple could enjoy themselves without feeling that they were leaving others out.

Although the stress factors of the pastor are way beyond those of other professional occupations, the stresses may be even greater for his wife. The pastor is there, at the “front”, while she stands by quietly and accepts whatever comes his way, be it good, happy, unpleasant, wearying or emotional strain. They bottle it up. They smile at the person they would like to throw bricks at, who seem to be happiest when making trouble for their husbands. They say “Good Morning” when they would like to poke someone in the nose. They would often much rather take the criticism upon themselves, or even their children, than to let someone criticize their husband, who is giving far more of himself to everybody else than he is to them.

And then, of course, there are the children. The congregation tends to idolize them when they are little and cute, but as they grow up and do the things that other children do, they are singled out. A dozen kids in parents’ arms may come in the door but it is only the pastor’s kids who are asked: “Are you going to be a good boy (girl) in church today?” The pastor’s kids seem to be louder, run more, or whatever, when they are just being kids. Some pastor’s kids have been turned off completely, many never to return to the faith they once had, as they witness the insensitivity and critical spirit of the people of the congregation.

The pressures on the minister and his family cannot be ignored. They don’t go away. Somewhere there has to be a release. They too are often “All Stressed Up with No Place to Blow”—except at home. And all of a sudden the parsonage becomes an armed fortress. One partner or the other may blow up at something said, when they both know it was not the remark but the pressure build up of days, weeks or months. Could clergy stress and burnout also be a contributing factor to the rising rate of divorce among the clergy?

Ironically, one of the pastor’s wife’s greatest needs is for a pastor. Her husband may be the most wonderful pastor in the world, but he cannot be a pastor to his wife. The wife (and children) of the pastor have no pastor.

Stress comes in all sizes and shapes, but at the risk of oversimplifying, let’s say that it starts from three major factors.

1. Life change stress factors: death of a spouse or child, divorce, separation, personal injury or illness, marriage, all the way down to such simple things as getting ready for Christmas or Easter or being handed a traffic ticket.
2. Work related stress factors: like those mentioned on the previous pages.
3. Environmental stress factors: neighborhood problems such as noise, crime, pollution, tension with neighbors, coworkers, family problems, or such nitty-gritty things as leaky pipes in the parsonage or church.

In and of themselves these stressful situations may do no harm to the individual. But being constantly overstressed is not only destructive to the minister as a person but it also robs him of his effectiveness and commitment in the ministry. So what’s the answer? How do we avoid burnout? How do we care for those who have become or are becoming victims of burnout?

III.

One person’s irritation is another person’s bleeding ulcer. We don’t all respond to stress in the same way. Each of us has a different stress threshold—a different point where stress ceases to be eustress and becomes distress. The secret is to find your stress threshold, and when you think you are close to it, back off and change your pace. Here are some of the common warning signs for a person who has gotten in “over his head”.

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

2. Loss of options. Your mental horizons close in on you and you have difficulty seeing alternative courses of action for any given situation.
3. Regression. Stress overload can make us act childish. While it's fine to hide your head or break things as a child as an adult these childish responses can be self-destructive.
4. Inability to change harmful patterns. The person who is under stress often finds it difficult to say "no" to additional demands. It's easier to heap on more and more commitments. There's some truth to the old line—if you want something done, give it to the busiest person.
5. Fatigue. When you are under excessive stress, your body craves more rest and sleep than usual. Don't ignore this warning signal.
6. Depression. This is usually related to some change in life circumstances or the loss of someone or something close to you without taking the time to grieve over your loss. Stress can precipitate depression.
7. Physical illness. Stress upsets your whole glandular system, raises your blood pressure, keeps your body systems in a fight/flight state of tension. This constant state makes you more vulnerable to colds and viruses, muscular aches, ulcers, heart disease and strokes.

All of the above are signals of gathering stress, which, if allowed to become chronic, will almost inevitably bring on the much more debilitating state of burnout. One psychologist, Christine Maslach, has defined burnout as "a state of physical, emotional helplessness and hopelessness, and by development of a negative self concept and negative attitudes toward work, life and other people." Burnout signs are:

1. Decreased energy—just keeping up becomes increasingly difficult.
2. Feelings of failure.
3. Reduced sense of reward in return for pouring so much of yourself into your job.
4. Sense of helplessness and inability to see your way out of problems.
5. Cynicism and negativism about yourself, others, your work and the world in general.

Studies have shown that pastors tend to go through a classic cycle on the way to burnout. They begin with enthusiasm and perhaps unrealistic expectations for achievement, combined with over-identification with their role. This stage is followed by stagnation, as the mundane realities of personal, financial and career requirements begin to press. Then comes frustration, a sense of being inadequate to accomplish what needs to be done and serious doubts about whether it's worth the effort.

The point of frustration can be the turning point for the pastor. Either he returns positively to the enthusiasm stage and becomes effective again through re-channeling his energies or he passes into the fourth stage of apathy and indifference that marks complete burnout.

It has often been said that most of the stress associated with the ministry comes from two sources: the pastor, who expects too much of himself and the congregation (and we might also add Synod) which expects too much from the pastor. All must work together to prevent the pastor's becoming entangled in the web of continual stress.

What can the pastor do for himself? First of all, I will repeat what I said above—the pastor must know his limits. He had to know what his stress threshold is and then adjust the load. We often put ourselves under pressure because we haven't related the work to what we are able to perform. Knowing our limits, we must then make effective use of the first safety valve: *Rest*.

God created the world in six days and on the 7th day he rested. The world which he created teaches us the importance of rest and restoration. Periods of rest always follow periods of harvest. Fall and winter follow spring and summer. It's God's way to allow the land to renew itself. Constant production without restoration depletes the natural resources and diminishes the quality of what is being produced.

You too must learn to take time off for rest and recuperation. Jesus went apart from the crowds to rest frequently. After sending his disciples out two by two to minister to the needs of people, when they returned he said to them: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." He was telling them they needed rest. He took them out into a desert place, even though needs were unmet, the multitudes were not healed and the masses were still unconverted. Can you think of anything more gratifying than telling people the good news of the Messiah? Of healing the sick and blind and lame? Yet as gratifying as that was, the Lord called them away and said, "You need rest." You need diversion. He recognized that they couldn't continue without interruption—even in that glorious gospel ministry—without coming apart.

We enter the ministry not for just a few years, but with the expectation of serving the Lord for a lifetime. We have to find a way to work at a pace that can be maintained for a long period of time. "It's better to burn out than to rust out", many say, and I suppose they are right. But that is choosing the lesser of two evils. God prefers that we neither burn out or rust out. We have to learn to be like the marathon runner who knows he has 26 miles to run and can't afford to exhaust himself by running the first part of the race faster than a pace he can maintain.

It's important that the day off (or better yet, two days off) be kept sacred, with none of the usual tasks performed so that we can be renewed or rested. If the day is broken by some official task, you haven't taken the day off. A few hours here and there do not renew us sufficiently because we then do not become separated from our work long enough to become relaxed.

Ministers are notoriously poor about keeping even one day of the week sacred for themselves and their families. It's remarkable how many things all of a sudden become much more important than our own souls, our families and our own renewal. No wonder many a pastor's kid look upon daddy as someone who eats, sleeps, showers, and shaves at home but nothing more. Remember also that we have a responsibility to God in the 5th commandment to take care of ourselves. Stop neglecting your health. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Start taking care of it with proper rest, relaxation, exercise, and diet.

Another safety valve is that of *prayer*. Prayer can have a great therapeutic value. What better listener is there than God? James Berkley in his article relates the incident of a conversation he had with a pastoral colleague regarding his calm and composure in the midst of extreme difficulties. The man explained: "I consider myself a warehouseman, not a warehouse. I only handle each burden long enough to unload it in the warehouse. God is in the warehouse. I am the warehouseman." Wise words indeed!

Our Lord in praying set an example for us to turn all of our burdens, cares and concerns over to the Lord. In so doing, we relieve ourselves of built up pressures. One of our biggest problems is that even we, as pastors, allow this safety valve to become plugged. We may talk to someone else about our problems, but we don't talk to the source of all strength, in whose arms there is relief and rest. And because our communication with God is cut off, our pressures mount.

If we are a warehouseman and not the warehouse, we will not be crushed before we finish the race. We might get a bit weary from shuffling the loads around. There may be more

deliveries than we care to handle, but we won't be crushed if we carry one load at a time just long enough to deposit it in God's warehouse.

We also need the safety valve of *setting priorities, planning ahead and delegating responsibilities*. One of our great needs, if we are to keep from pressure, is to learn to arrange our work, plan our schedule and budget our time. The difference between the one who can turn out vast amounts of work and the one who only turns out a little isn't so much in the person's physical strength and mental acumen, but in his ability to organize and discipline himself to get the job done. This is one area where we often fail and put ourselves under pressure. For example, if you find that you always seem to be writing your sermon on Saturday, the reason you are under that pressure is because you have not properly set your priorities and managed your sermon preparation time earlier in the week. It isn't the amount of work that we have to do but the pressures that result from our attitude toward that work and the lack of planning to get that work done.

But what are we going to do if there is just too much work to do? Whose fault is it that you have too much to do? Probably one of the hardest words for the minister to say is "no", but it is a word that we have to have as part of our vocabulary if we are going to prevent an overload.

You have to evaluate your ministry and work in the Lord's vineyard not in the light of the opportunities or invitations that come, but in the light of your gifts. And if you step outside the bounds within which God has given you gifts, you can expect pressure as a result. All of us have probably had numerous practical experiences of this in our own lives. Perhaps you tried to fix the kitchen plumbing and save the expense of a plumber. You were out of your realm of expertise and ended up with more problems than you had in the first place. Next time you will not be so foolish. You will call the plumber right away. How come we don't always recognize our limitations in the ministry? A lot of the pressures we have are there because we have failed to say "no" and have accepted responsibilities in areas where we aren't really qualified to serve effectively. Learn to say "no".

And hand in hand with saying "no" also goes learning to delegate responsibility. Passing the baton to others is also part of our "survival formula". Recall the story of Moses in Exodus 18. Jethro, his father-in-law, was watching Moses doing his day's work. "Moses", he says (pardon my paraphrasing), "what are you doing? Why are you making all these nice people waste a whole day waiting for you to decide their disputes?"

"Because they are there," Moses replies.

Then Jethro gives him some sound fatherly advice. "What you are doing is not good. You and these people are only wearing yourselves out. You can't do all this alone. Select capable men, appoint them as judges and let them handle the simpler cases."

There are few things that I can do well that someone cannot do equally as well. I think we pastors actually enjoy playing Moses—busy, important, overburned—but we finally do get tired.

According to Paul, we are to pass along our skills and understanding to others who will do the same. The minister is to be the coach, teaching the rest of the congregation how to play the game and perform the tasks of the ministry. Why run alone when you can find someone else to run with you? You can help each other finish the race!

You can train your people to make sick and shut-in calls, evangelism calls, and delinquent calls. You can help to make your people more aware of the time demands on the minister and find out where they think the major portions of your time might be spent. That can be a real eye opener for both pastor and laity. Lucille Lavender in her book *The Cry Too* includes what she calls a Pastor's Responsibility/Awareness Quiz. It is intended to be distributed

to the congregation and they are to fill in the number of hours per week that they feel you are or should be spending on each task. (An adapted copy of the quiz is part of the appendix of this paper). Total the hours and you will likely find that the sum is greater than the number of hours in the week. If you never eat, sleep, relax or spend time with your family, you will still have insufficient time for everything they expect of you.

That means that some of those responsibilities have to be delegated to others or neglected. It may mean that some tasks will remain undone. Perhaps we have to cultivate the fine skill of consecrated negligence. Mere negligence will never do. But once we have set our priorities through much prayer and wisdom, we have to learn to live with those priorities and not feel guilty because we have done so. It may mean that we have to miss a committee meeting or ladies' meeting to attend a pastoral conference or make a sick call. So be it. We have chosen where we will be negligent and have to live with it. Consecrated negligence tells me not to run in every race if I intend to finish the race I consider most important.

Another important safety valve for us as ministers is *laughter*. We have to learn to laugh at things and even at ourselves. Did you know that your body will not let you laugh and develop an ulcer at the same time? It's true. Laughter has tremendous healing power. It can release tension. (Think of the lighthearted comment during a serious discussion which helps to clear the air and release the tension). Of course, it has to be a sanctified sense of humor. There are times when I wince a bit at some of the malice and bitterness that are often passed off as humor. Insensitive humor also can only make matters worse. To enter the hospital room of a critical kidney patient with the snappy "How's the plumbing today?" invites instant rejection. But well placed humor can help to lighten difficult situations.

Sometimes, of course, we become the object of the laughter. If we make a faux pas or end up with egg all over our faces, we should be able to laugh at ourselves instead of agonizing over our failings. I will never forget the time that I had prepared an object lesson for the Sunday School opening devotion which was going to portray the mess that Adam and Eve made of their lives by sin. To picture the fall into sin and the resulting mess, an egg was to be dropped from the height of three feet into a bowl so that it would smash to smithereens. At the appropriate point I dropped the egg, and, much to my dismay, it fell smack into the bottom of the bowl and continued right on up the side of the bowl and out onto the floor. It took five minutes to calm the kids and adults down, and obviously the object lesson lost its impact—even though I had made one absolute mess. But I could not help but laugh along with them, until the time came to clean up the mess. Laughter can be an important safety valve. We need to remember to have fun. God hasn't called us to walk around with a perpetual frown on our faces. That is counterproductive to the message which we preach!

Another safety valve we might use is that of *asking for help*. Clergymen are notoriously reticent about asking for help. Some feel uneasy because they aren't sure what kind of response they will get from the one whom they are turning to for help. Others feel inadequate if they are unable to solve their own problem. There is a lingering aura of religious self-sufficiency around clergymen and their families, an aura that somehow clergymen have the power to minister to themselves and their families in all of their human needs.

It may be that in spite of one's best efforts and the help received from God there will come a time when the pastor will need to obtain professional help with his depression and burnout. It, of course, will not be inexpensive, but if it means the difference between ineffective ministry and vital, healthful ministry, can the pastor afford not to seek such professional help? (We are assuming of course that the therapist is going to be Christian.)

One last item that can be an important safety valve (if not the most important) is *trusting God*. When we are given a responsibility and work is pressed on us, as God's children, we can trust in the Lord to enable us to do the work He expects of us. Pressures come because we take the responsibility from his hands and stagger under the weight. We take the burden from the Lord's shoulders and wonder why it crushes us. Whatever God has given us to do can put pressure on us unless we are trusting his strength and faithfulness to perform the task.

"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on eagles' wings; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Is. 40:31). Trusting doesn't always come easily. We often prefer to depend on the tangible rather than on that which we cannot see or feel. Often our trust in God only extends to a certain point and then we seek our own devices. Our actions betray our lack of trust.

Stop trying to play God. Stop trying to take the place he has reserved for himself. Pressure is not relieved by getting out of work but by leaning on Him for strength to do the work. Keep setting aside time in your busy schedule for personal study of the scriptures and prayer. It is there that we find encouragement, strength and hope.

These are a few of the things that we as pastors can do to help avoid burnout. There are more, I'm sure. But let's move along to what the congregation and Synod can do to help with the problem and its avoidance.

One of the things that has somewhat bothered me about the topic of clergy stress and burnout is the apparent tendency on the part of some laymen, pastors and synod officials to try and "pooh, pooh" the whole subject of burnout. I think that attitude may be changing, especially as we see more and more pastors and teachers who are resigning "for personal reasons". While we are not always privy to the reasons for these resignations, could it be that some of them are actually cases of burnout? When Roy Oswald, project director of the Alban Institute in Washington, DC, states that one out of six and perhaps as many as one out of four clergymen is suffering from burnout, I think that is a real possibility.

In my own discussions with laymen, and pastors on the topic I have heard such remarks as: "It's something you brought on yourself", or "If you trusted in God more you wouldn't have that problem", or "Burnout can happen to anyone, not just ministers". Each of those statements might indeed be true, but none of them provide one bit of help or encouragement for the victim. Instead they merely add more stress and more feelings of failure.

It would be unfair to suggest that other occupations and professions don't have their share of stress, but they have been explored and discussed at length before the public. They have spokesmen to help them solve some of their problems. There are associations for doctors and lawyers, lobbyists for nearly any group, unions for the trades people. There are riots, sit-ins, stand-ins, lie-ins, strikes, demonstrations and civil disobedience for other minorities. But there have been only a few isolated voices crying in the wilderness for consideration of some of the problems of the clergy, and little or no attention has been given to them.

One area in which our congregations can do a great deal to help alleviate the stresses and feelings of overwork which often accompany the call into the ministry is to realize that the laity are just as responsible for God's ministry as are the clergy. That may seem like such a simple statement but it is foreign to the ears of many a layman. The common attitude is that the clergy are paid to do the visiting, the evangelism, the socializing—in short to do all that Christ has commanded each Christian to do. This "religion by proxy" attitude has to be eliminated in our congregations if we ever hope to unburden our pastors. The pastor's role as administrator, counselor, receptionist, custodian, complaint department manager, moderator, writer, lecturer,

visitor, enlister and socializer needs to be shared with others so that the most important aspects of the ministry can be carried out. Not only does the pastor need to learn to delegate responsibility but the congregation also has to be willing to assume the responsibilities and pursue training to enable them to develop their skills.

“I wouldn’t be a minister if you paid me a million dollars”, is a comment every clergyman has heard with or without variations. Those who say it or think it react in several ways. One person, at odds with himself, his job, and his home, is always on the lookout for trouble, and if he or she can’t find any, makes some. He picks, pouts, and criticizes everything that he thinks is wrong with the church and the pastor. Of course he wouldn’t be a minister for a million dollars. He couldn’t stand a member like himself.

There is another reaction to this attitude (and it includes the majority). Generally they are sympathetic but shrug off any responsibility for making the pastor’s work easier. Many don’t get involved in the “where-it’s-at” life of the church. They attend Sunday morning worship if there is nothing else to do that day, but that is the extent of their participation.

Then there are those few jewels who say, “I don’t see how you do it Pastor. I just couldn’t do what you do and take what you have to take.” But—and this is a big one—they stand by in the wings, ready to serve the minister, his family and the church in whatever way they can. They aren’t beneath painting the church, ushering, cooking, or helping in any way. Because of these people, the pastor regains a renewed sense of dignity and worth.

The pastor is only human. Human beings make mistakes. Human beings have needs. What are some of the pastor’s needs?

His needs are no different from those of every person born. He gets hungry and tired. He feels pain, discouragement, inadequacy, fear, doubt, jealousy, neglect, anger, and at times feels unloved, lonely and unappreciated. He cries, too!

One of his basic needs is for understanding. He needs prayer. He needs to know that somebody besides God loves him. He needs appreciation and praise. No one can constantly put out without taking in. Many expect the pastor to know by osmosis that he is appreciated. Some people praise their pastor readily to others but he needs to know it too. Praise and words of appreciation can help a great deal to encourage the pastor. I have actually had people come up to me and say: “Is it alright if I say that I appreciated your sermon?”—almost as if compliments paid to a pastor are out of place. Believe me, they aren’t. They are music to the pastor’s ears, not because he is seeking to enlarge his hat size but rather because he knows that what he is saying is reaching someone.

The congregation also needs to realize that the pastor and his family need privacy. Often the parsonage seems like it is a fish bowl. Members pop in unannounced and feel that since the congregation owns the house, they should have the run of the house. More guilt and stress for the pastor and his family if the dishes aren’t done and the kids have made a mess of the house. Call the pastor to see if you can stop by—and don’t force your way in if you are uninvited.

The pastor also needs confidence in his leadership. He needs to see the congregation’s love and support. There are few things that hurt a pastor more than knowing that certain members are going behind his back telling others what’s wrong with his ministry and the problems it might cause if he doesn’t change. Matthew 18 applies also to congregation members who feel that they have something against the pastor. The place to start is with the pastor, not with the elders or other member of the congregation.

The congregation can also help the pastor avoid burnout by encouraging his continuing education. It’s rather difficult for those of us out here in the frontiers of the Synod to make a

mass exodus to Mequon for the summer quarter each year, but perhaps more could be done by our congregations to periodically encourage the pastor to return for summer school—not as part of his vacation, but for continuing education purposes. Sometimes we almost seem to be apologizing for the money that must be included in our budgets for pastoral conferences and conventions, but these things do provide definite educational benefits to the pastor to assist him in his ministry.

There are also the areas of vacations and finances that could be discussed here. Could we offer our pastors longer vacation periods? Since most of us have families back in the midwest and airfares are not always in our financial reach, we have to drive for vacations. (Are trips to visit relatives really vacations?) When you have only two weeks vacation and it takes you a week just to drive back and forth, your actual vacation time is limited. Congregations could encourage their pastors to take some mid-week weekends—and not make them feel guilty for doing so. And of course, there is always the topic of finances. Since most of our Colonial North congregations are missions, they have no say over what the pastor will be paid. Mission code is the rule. But now is the time when these congregations should be educated about proper salary for the pastor, especially in view of the fact that these congregations will hopefully soon reach the point when they will be charged with determining what they will pay the pastor.

One of the recent issues of the *Northwestern Lutheran* contained an anonymous letter from what appeared to be a layman concerned with the problem of how a congregation talks a pastor into retiring. How often isn't it the case that some pastors continue working (even though they physically and mentally should retire) because they can't afford to retire? They have no house in which to live during retirement, can't afford to buy one, and probably can't afford to rent one on the meager Social Security and Synod Pension income they will receive. It's a problem—and one that our congregations need to be aware of. I understand that Synod in convention will be asked to consider establishing some type of equity allowance for pastors who live in church owned housing, but wouldn't it be more advisable and more economically sound to shore up our pension plan?

In some of these areas it is rather obvious that the Synod is going to have to assist with the education of the laity. I don't know of many pastors who feel comfortable talking to their congregations about clergy finances, clergy time management, vacations, etc. There is always the fear the people are going to misconstrue what you are saying as complaining about your circumstances, and none of us want to leave that sort of impression. Ideally, someone else should be the one speaking to the congregation about these items. Who should it be? The circuit pastor? The District Stewardship Board members? A neighboring pastor? There are many possibilities, but we should probably be doing more of this nitty-gritty education than we are doing. I think the reason that we have some of the problems of inadequate salaries and benefits, vacations, etc. is because our lay people don't really know all the details and have never really been personally asked to respond to some of these needs. They see a line item in the budget for pastor's salary and car allowance but don't really relate to it. They aren't even aware of the unique tax situation that clergymen find themselves in (some even think the clergy don't even pay taxes) and just don't understand the divine mathematics that is often needed on the part of the clergy to provide for their families.

Could the Synod perhaps, through the Seminary, offer our future pastors more intelligent financial planning advice than they do? I know that we have to have a balance and can't teach everything, but since finances often are a cause of extreme distress for the minister and his family, this might be a wise addition to the curriculum.

And why not let that course be taught by some of our laymen who have this expertise in the financial world? We permit Lutheran Brotherhood and AAL agents to feed off our seminary students, selling them loads of insurance that they probably don't need, making them insurance poor while they are in the ministry. Why can't we offer sound financial planning advice to help alleviate some of the distress this often causes to the minister? Most of you, if not all of you, received mailings from one of our WELS members in Florida who is willing to offer assistance to our WELS pastors and teachers (in the financial planning field. He became aware of the mess many of our pastors are in financially when he worked with the Reaching Out program and talked to many of our pastors. In a conversation that I had with him not long ago, he was dismayed that so few of our pastors bothered to respond to his mailings and ask for his advice. The advice is given free of charge and he is not pushing anyone to invest with the firm that he works with. Many of our pastors who are laboring under extreme financial pressures could find that there is away to relieve those stresses through wise financial planning and living within their means. Perhaps our Synod's Stewardship Board should offer more seminars to our pastors to help with these matters.

One last area where the Synod could perhaps do more to assist the pastors and teachers in avoiding burnout is through counseling. Of course, we are encouraged to turn to our circuit pastors with our problems. They are more than willing to help when asked to do so. But perhaps rather than waiting to be asked, they should be making periodic calls on the pastors and families under their care to listen to them and hear them tell of their joys and anguishes in the ministry. We need more support groups in the Wisconsin Synod, especially here in outlying areas where we don't have the close contact that we might have with our brethren. If the Circuit Pastor is really to be the pastor's pastor, then more than just an occasional phone call or five minute gab session at conference is needed. Remember that the family of the pastor needs a pastor too. I think we could make a lot more use of our circuit pastors in helping to stave off the growing problems of burnout. Waiting until the problem is full blown is like trying to apply a bandaid to a severed artery. The help is too little too late. Why not have an adequate program of pastoral care to nip the problem in the bud?

The Mission Board could also perhaps be more involved here too. Often the only contact with the mission board is through periodic reports and a once a year visit at District Convention. Of course, they are more than ready to visit you if you so request, but pastors are notoriously reticent about asking for help. We have our Mission board divided so I that there is representation for all areas. Why can't a regular program of visitation of the churches be maintained? A personal visit with discussion of the field and problems the missionary is facing would be beneficial. The missionary needs to know that the mission board is behind him even if his statistics have shown a downward trend for one reason or another.

I often wonder what practical purpose the statistical report of the Synod is. I cringe when I see call lists which include figures from the statistical report along with the description of the pastor. Do we really believe that numbers are a measure of a man's ministry? If so, brothers, let me assure you that you will be seeing my face for a long time out here in the Colonial North. If any District President includes statistics along side my name in a call list, there is no chance that I will be the man called, humanly speaking. St. Paul congregation, according to the 1983 Statistical Report showed 118 baptized souls and 72 communicants. The 1984 report shows 84 souls and 50 communicants. Any layman at a call meeting looking at those statistics will say: "Look out for him. If things keep going as they have been, St. Paul of Amherst will cease to exist in three years." Little would anyone know that the loss is the result of a new mission in Maine.

Hardly a loss at all! But numbers can be deceiving—and we dare not use them as a judge of a man's faithfulness in the ministry. I fear that all too often the message that is presented either intentionally or unintentionally by our mission boards is that of the numbers mentality. It's all too easy for pastors to be caught up with the numbers mentality without the mission board constantly encouraging the same. Of course, numbers provide visible results. We can't measure spiritual growth but we can count the number of warm bodies in the church on a given Sunday. We can't always see the effect of our preaching, but we know if giving has increased. A lot of needless stress can be placed on the pastor if he is led to believe that numbers are a measure of his ministry. He begins to think "Well, maybe I'm not doing enough. If only I would work harder and longer, maybe I would see results." If he has been a sluggard, that is probably true. But if he has been faithful in his ministry, wouldn't it be better to remind him that the Lord has called him to plant and water but he will provide the increase—at his time and in His way?

I suppose I could go on and on. The more I sit and think about this topic, the more I come up with ideas and suggestions. I have by no means exhausted the topic of burnout, either in its description or in its remedies. You may indeed have many other positive suggestions as to how we can help avoid burnout.

The problem is real. It is not imagined. It is a problem that we have to deal with in whatever ways we can.

Our lives have been given to us by God. Our lives are to be lived in God's service. We have to use our lives wisely, not hoarding or wasting them, but being wise stewards.

Most of you have probably been to or heard of a tractor pull. In agricultural areas, a tractor pull is a big event. The idea is to see which tractor can pull a weighted sled the greatest distance. The unlimited class boasts huge machines which resemble a tractor about as much as a dragster resembles a Volkswagen Beetle. These tractors catch the eye, make a lot of noise and pull a huge weight, but their moment of glory is brief. Sometimes in the midst of a pull, the massive engine will flame out from the strain placed on it. In one brief moment the huge machine is good only for a scrap heap.

On many a farm there is the beat up, old Ford tractor which has been doing farm work for thirty or more years. It still putters around doing work, mowing weeds, hauling manure, etc.

Thirty years from now I want to be like that Ford tractor. I may not make much noise or even accomplish the magnificent feats of the unlimited class tractor, but I want my motor running for the long haul. Spare me from the ecclesiastical junk pile. I don't want to burn out or rust out. I want to hold out and finish the race. How about you?

Test Your P.R.A.Q. (Pastor's Responsibility Awareness Quiz)

The following are some of the demands upon your pastor's time for a normal month. Please indicate the number of hours per week that you think your pastor should devote to these activities. Break down the hour into smaller segments if you feel it necessary. Commuting from place to place should be taken into consideration.

No. of hours
Per Week

- _____ Studying for personal, spiritual and intellectual growth
- _____ Preparing sermons
- _____ Preparing Sunday morning worship services; selecting Scripture, hymns, prayers, order of worship, etc.
- _____ Preparing new members for baptism or church membership
- _____ Working with church Sunday School leaders
- _____ Visiting inactive members
- _____ Visiting the sick in hospitals and in their homes
- _____ Evangelistic visits on prospective new members
- _____ Visiting the bereaved at the time of death or tragedy
- _____ Visiting the bereaved sometime after the death
- _____ Visiting active families of the church
- _____ Counseling church members with practical and emotional problems
- _____ Visiting time to soothe "hurt feelings" and members involved in relating to each other
- _____ Attending church committee and board meetings
- _____ Attending church social functions, parties, women's meetings, etc.
- _____ Counseling couples for marriage
- _____ Conducting weddings
- _____ Conducting funerals
- _____ Serving on boards and committees of church related groups, such as LWMS, Circuit, Youth Rally
- _____ Attending pastoral conferences and study clubs
- _____ Directing the administration of the entire church program
- _____ Promoting the entire church program
- _____ Writing letters and correspondence on behalf of the church
- _____ Writing personal letters to the sick and discouraged
- _____ Answering and returning telephone calls
- _____ Checking on the work of the church boards and committees
- _____ Planning and helping to organize special church projects
- _____ Enlisting lay help to teach and serve in various church tasks
- _____ Writing articles for the monthly newsletter
- _____ Writing articles for denominational publications when asked to do so
- _____ Filing reports with Mission Board
- _____ Reading books and periodicals to keep up with current events and the latest developments in church and theological affairs

_____ Planning and promoting the Vacation Bible School, training teachers, and assisting in the program.

_____ How much time for sleep and rest?

_____ How much time with his wife and family for their fun and social events

_____ Total (one week is 168 hours)

Please answer the following questions:

1. I feel the pastor should be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

_____ Yes _____ No

2. Should I feel free to call on the pastor at any hour of the day or night in case of extreme emergency?

_____ Yes _____ No

3. I feel the pastor should take time off regularly.

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, how much? _____

4. As a regularly employed lay person I have _____ days off per week. Total days per year apart from vacation _____.

I have _____ vacation time.

How many days off should my pastor have per week? _____

How much vacation time? _____

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