

Fireproof... burnout in the ministry!

Marianne Dyrud Kolkmann

‘Jesus himself often replenished his bucket. He set boundaries. He didn't heal every sick person. He didn't teach at every opportunity. When He got hungry He ate. When He got sleepy, He slept. When He needed to admonish He did. When He needed to show compassion He did. To replenish, He often withdrew to spend time alone with His heavenly Father. Once ministry got so hectic He told His disciples to 'Come with me by your selves to a quiet place and get some rest.' Even in the Great Commandment Jesus compels us to love your neighbor as yourself.' Unless we replenish, we can't love others as we should because we haven't loved ourselves.’¹

There are many models of ministry, and Charles Stone in his book ‘5 Ministry Killers and How to Defeat Them’ is referring to the optimal one of balance, how Jesus did his ministry.

‘Burnout’ is common, not only in the secular working world, but also among pastors working in the church. Dealing with people can be a daunting task, and in the current 24/7 fully accessible society of the pastoral world, with e-mails, cell-phones, internet, and high expectations both internal and external, there is a high risk of burnout for the pastor, being in a ‘people handling job’.

- What are the underlying factors for pastoral burnout?
- How do pastors experience burnout?
- What are the preventive factors for pastoral burnout?

Charles Stone found in his research,

‘Clergy health is the issue at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If we in leadership can model healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual formation - Jesus wins, His church wins, His followers win, and we live abundantly in His joy!’²

¹ Charles Stone, *5 Ministry Killers and How To Defeat Them* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2010), p. 163.

² Stone, p. 41.

What is burnout?

John Sanford in his book 'Ministry Burnout' describes the concept of burnout as the following:

'Burnout: difficulty in sleeping; somatic complaints such as weight loss, lack of interest in food, and headaches and gastro-intestinal disturbances; a chronic tiredness of the sort that is not repaired by sleep or ordinary rest and only temporary alleviated by vacations; low-grade, persistent depression; and a nagging boredom.'³

Or, as one of the interviewees in this study described his situation of how it felt to be on a sick leave while experiencing burnout:

'Like a medical doctor who has more and more patients in his waiting room, as he had to 'ignore' 60% of his patients. The patients he had to 'turn away' didn't go away, however. He experienced total failure and lack of coping with his situation. He tried cutting in his office work, felt that he did not have the resources to do more.'
(Appendix C)

The second interviewee in this study describes his experience of burnout as the following:

'... he felt depressed and the wife noticed a change in his personality. He found it difficult to write new sermons and he was not happy. He thought that a long vacation would help, but when November came around that year, it became very hard for him to function. He went on like this for several years and finally went to his doctor.'
(Appendix B)

The observations from one of the Seventh-day Adventist pastors indicate that there could be more feedback from leadership and better communication, mentoring and follow up. When it comes to the interviewees own experience of expectations and boundary issues, the interviewee states that

'he did not feel that his problem was noticed in the local church or in the leadership, and had a growing feeling of not doing enough. | As he has tried to come back to pastoral work, he could not handle the pressure of his own expectations. He wanted to do more, but couldn't, as pastor or as a lay member. There was a loss of energy, and every time he tried doing something, he ended up sick (nauseated and totally void of energy). The pastor says that he can look away from his own problems and focus on others, and deny his own needs. He feels that he cannot turn away when other people are suffering.'

³ John A. Sanford, *Ministry Burnout* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 1.

Boundary issues and expectations: The expectation of ‘the urgency of people’s needs’ is according to Paul Vitello an important issue in his article ‘Taking a break from the Lord’s work’ in New York Times,

‘Clergy health studies say that many clerics have “boundary issues” — defined as being too easily overtaken by the urgency of other people’s needs’.⁴

‘Boundary issues’ seems to be an important factor of being healthy or not in the pastoral work. Looking at what Vitello’s and Dr. J. Robert Clinton has to say on this, it can be found that setting boundaries as well as having a clear knowledge of what pastoral ministry is, has a preventive effect on pastoral burnout.

Clinton adds that setting boundaries is a part of the maturing process of a pastor: ‘Ministering within the realm of being and not doing’ as described in his book ‘The Making of a leader’.⁵ Clinton holds up the inner development of a pastor as crucial. One question one could ask in this case would be: What pastoral praxis is being modeled presently in pastoral ministry? Is the current pastoral praxis focused on doing or being?

Looking at the dynamics of burnout, the question asked by Vitello is to whose agenda the pastor is working for: God’s or people? Further research might indicate that here can be found a link of the focus of pastoral praxis and the pattern of burnout. Robert Wicks in his book ‘Bounce, Living The Resilient Life’ provides an extended list of causes for burnout on a general level.

‘Causes for Burnout:

- Inadequate quiet time, physical rest, cultural diversion, education, and personal psychological replenishment.
- Vague criteria for success or inadequate positive feedback on efforts made.
- Guilt over failures, and over taking out time to nurture oneself properly to deal with anger or other interpersonal tensions.

⁴ Paul Vitello, ‘Evidence Grows of Problem of Clergy Burnout - NYTimes.com’, 2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?_r=1> [accessed 24th of January 2011].

⁵ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), p. 13.

- Unrealistic ideals that is threatening rather than motivating.
- Inability to deal with anger or other interpersonal tensions.
- Extreme need to be liked by others, prompting unrealistic involvement with others.
- Poor community life or unrealistic expectations and needs surrounding the support and love of others for us.
- Working with people (peers, superiors, those coming for help) who are burned out.
- Extreme powerlessness to effect needed change or being overwhelmed by paperwork and administrative tasks.
- A serious lack of appreciation by our superiors, colleagues, or those whom we are trying to serve.
- Sexism, ageism, racism, or other prejudice experienced directly in our lives and work.
- High incidence of conflict in the family, home, work, or living environment.
- A serious lack of charity and respect among those with whom we must live and work.
- Extreme change during times in life when maturational crises and adjustments are also occurring
- Seeing money wasted on projects that seem to have no relation to helping people.
- Not having the freedom or power to deal with or remove oneself from having regularly occurring stressful events.
- The "savior complex" - an inability to recognize what we can and cannot do.
- Overstimulation or isolation and alienation.⁶

While Wicks here presents the general causes for burnout, Daniel Sherman adds to this list of burnout by explaining the dynamics of inner pastoral expectations,

‘At first, confidence leads us to some great expectations. But those very expectations are the seeds of our own downfall. Why is it that we develop such an idealistic portrait of ministry and our own abilities?’⁷

One of the interviewees in this study, referred to his experience of expectations in that the local church expectations have changed through the years he has been in the pastoral ministry: From the pastor telling the church what to do, to the church telling the pastor what to do. He also mentioned that there are different expectations from the leadership now than it has been before to the pastoral role.

As expectations is one factor to be considered in asking ‘why is this happening’, another one to ask, would be of what impact does the development of close relationships have in the life of the pastor? Steve Arterburn found that

⁶ Robert J. Wicks, *Bounce, Living the Resilient Life* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 29.

⁷ Sherman, Daniel, ‘Pastor Burnout’ <<http://www.pastorburnout.com/>> [accessed 24th of January 2011].

'Most people in ministry do not have close personal friendships and consequently are alarmingly lonely and dangerously vulnerable'. | 'The men in the church who are least likely to have friend connections are pastors.'⁸

What prohibits a lot of pastors from forming and keeping deep friendships? Is it the frequent moves? Does the pastor have a problem forming close friendships?

Rolemodels and what to do to prevent burnout?

Where do we find the ethical role model? May we look at the Bible in this part of the study and ask? How did Jesus manage his ministry? What is the 'call of a pastor'? Gary Collins points to how Jesus managed his ministry in his book, 'The Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers':

'Jesus lived a disciplined life. If we read carefully through the Gospels, we see Jesus taking time for worship, prayer, communication with the Father, rest, ministry, and interaction with His critics. His life was disciplined, but there is no evidence that He was uptight, rule-dominated, or rigid.'⁹

Collins found that Jesus obviously knew how to live a balanced life of rest, in communication with the Father, as well as taking time to lead and minister to his disciples and the other people around him. Looking at his example, we can see that he spent most of his time developing and leading a few, not dealing with the crowds all the time. There was a sense of flexibility in him, of sensing when to stop and take time for a special moment of meeting people that were not necessary included on his 'agenda' that day.

Wilson and Hoffmann indicate in their research that the call of a pastor comes from Jesus, and is maintained and sustained by the pastor's personal relationship with him. This is where the calling to ministry comes from, first in the context of a relationship, then by observation of ministry and last by being a minister. They stress the inner calling of a minister in their book, 'Preventing Ministry Failure':

⁸ Stone, p. 110.

⁹ Gary R. Collins, *The Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993), p. 240.

‘Nothing is more essential as ministers than our vibrant personal relationship with the One who both called us and sustains us. Without it, we have nothing to offer of any real value to anyone.’¹⁰

Further questions would be: How is pastoral burnout prevented? In what way does the leadership, the local church, or the pastor him/herself deal with burnout when it happens? What would be ‘good practice’ in this matter?

When it comes to suggestions to preventive measures of pastoral burnout, Hoge and Wenger found in their book ‘Pastors in Transition’ that pastors need follow up, mentoring and practical advice. They found that these factors had an impact on whether the pastor would stay and flourish in the ministry or not.

‘I say that everybody who goes into ministry needs to have three people in their lives before they start: they need a therapist, a mentor, and a pastor, so that there is a therapist that they can go to in confidence with the issues related to personal life, growth type things. They need a mentor. | And you need a pastor, somebody that you can go to as your spiritual advisor. Clergy don’t have that and they are not taught how to have that. They’re taught the mechanics of theology, but not the practical application of translating what they’ve learned into what’s the reality of parish life like.’¹¹

Networking is an important factor of retaining pastors in the ministry as well as preventing pastoral burnout. Charles Stone found the following,

‘In our studies of leaders, we can clearly conclude with few exceptions that those who experienced anointed ministry and finished well had a significant network of meaningful relationships that inspired, challenged, listened, pursued, developed, and held one another accountable. Those who failed to reach full maturity and finish well did not have it, or cut all or part of it off at some point.’¹²

¹⁰ Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), p. 43.

¹¹ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 203.

¹² Stone, p. 126.

Response to burnout:

A norm of response to the issue of burnout could indicate the importance of developing and retaining strong relationships as a part of coping mechanisms in a person. This was indicated in several resources as being a vital part of preventing burnout. Another norm of response was of the resilience to stress that was found to be different from person to person.

Atle Roness describes in his book on boundaries ‘*Deg og ditt liv*’ (You and your life) the fact that resilience varies in different people. The interviews conducted for this paper have found the same factor to be accurate in dealing with the subject of burnout. Stress is handled differently from person to person.

‘Your coping mechanism is also influencing whether or not you burn out. Some people are active in their coping mechanisms during the hard times they encounter. They look their problems in the eye and try to solve them. They do something about what can be changed and accept what cannot. Other people are more passive in their way of dealing with problems. They resign and give up faster, and they get more defensive in their way of coping with stress. Those who can handle stress active, have better chances than those who deal with stress on a more passive or indirect way.’¹³

Further response to ‘what should be going on’ was found in setting healthy boundaries. Paul Vitello found in his research,

Dr. Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, a family physician who is married to a Lutheran minister and who wrote a 2004 book raising the alarm about clergy health (“The Right Road: Life Choices for Clergy”), described the problem as a misperception about serving God. “They think that taking care of themselves is selfish, and that serving God means never saying no,” she said.¹⁴

Osmer also adds to this, by pointing out the fact that churches have changed, and that ‘clergy are no longer the only people who provide guidance in congregations’.¹⁵ The pastor is not the only one with wisdom and guidance in the church. One of good practice and in part answering

¹³ Atle Roness, *Deg Og Ditt Liv* (Oslo: Genesis, 1998), p. 83.

¹⁴ Vitello.

¹⁵ Osmer, p. 25.

the question: 'what should be going on' would be the practice of: 'delegate, delegate, delegate'.

Strategies of action' that will influence how the pastor, the church employer and the local church can reach an optimal and desirable way of dealing with the issue of burnout. This task will open a reflective path where there will be evaluations of what has been done and what can be done better.

The study shows that a 'strategy of action' which would influence how the pastor deals with stress, is team work. Atle Roness in his book 'Utbrent? Arbeidstress Og Psykiske Lidelser Hos Mennesker I Utsatte Yrker' (Burnt-out? Work pressure and psychological problems in people who work in challenging professions) does say,

'It is very important for a pastor that he has regularly contact with his colleagues, both for spiritual and theological inspiration. Isolation gives both depression and theological stagnation. Every pastor should have a network of colleagues around himself, where he can have the necessary feedback and support. He needs to be up to date both theological and in society. Further education should be obligatory for pastors. More education and leave of absence are also important factors to hinder burnout and psychological problems.'¹⁶

Most pastors within the Seventh-day Adventist church in Scandinavia do not work in a team. When asking the leadership in the church, they confirmed that there are pastoral meetings twice a year and a follow up from the conference or union president. But is this enough? What can be the strategies of action here for the leadership, local pastor and church?

A 'strategy of action' that Atle Roness is indicating, is that networking is essential to well being. The reflective question asked in the present reality of the Seventh-day Adventist church would be: How is this practically done in a work force spread out quite thin geographically?

¹⁶ Atle Roness, *Utbrent? Arbeidstress Og Psykiske Lidelser Hos Mennesker I Utsatte Yrker* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1996), p. 245.

Another 'strategy of action' would mean that there needs to be healthy evaluations of one self. Accepting ones limitations is important according to Bronsberg and Vestlund, as this actually implies an insight into self and a level of maturity.

'Good self-confidence means to accept and realize that you have limitations.'¹⁷

The resource material for this study indicates that there needs to be clear boundaries if pastors will be able to last more than a few years. Wicks refers to Albert Schweitzer's quote in his book referring not only to pastors, but anyone who is in the 'business to serve',

Albert Schweitzer once said, 'I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.' And we can only serve others and society well if we can cultivate the resilient life.¹⁸

The study in 'how might we respond' has indicated that there needs to be a response on the subject of clarity of expectations from the church and clear vision and formulated goals of ministry, both from the leadership and the pastor.

Good role modeling and healthy boundaries will have a positive and preventive impact, and make resilience towards pastoral burnout. Clear expectations both from leadership and in the pastor are important. Mentoring, coaching and deep friendships will have a preventive effect, as well as further education and a deep spiritual relationship with Jesus.

¹⁷ Barbro Bronsberg and Nina Vestlund, *Brenn Deg Ikke Ut!* (Oslo: J.W. Cappelen, 1998), p. 117.

¹⁸ Wicks, p. 85.

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