

Self-care essential to avoid ministerial burnout

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People in helping professions of all kinds risk experiencing compassion fatigue and burnout, but ministers face an additional issue, clinical psychologist Don Corley of Waco asserted.

"They feel the weight of carrying the spiritual pain of others," he said. "Ministers care for others' spiritual well-being."

Scott Floyd, director of counseling programs at B.H. Carroll Theological Seminary, identified conditions that contribute to burnout:

- Unrealistic job demands.
- Unclear job expectations.
- Conflict.
- Dealing with individuals in distress.
- Feeling that tasks are never completed.
- Lack of recognition for accomplishments.
- Feeling second-guessed or criticized.

"If I work with groups of ministers, read through that list and ask how many of them experience one or more of those, they usually just laugh, because they experience so many of those all the time," he said.

Isolation can contribute to burnout, he noted. Ministers may not have friends outside the church in whom they can confide. If they have close friends in the church, sometimes they face criticism for "playing favorite," he added.

Ministers often work long hours dealing with high-stress situations that

naturally create fatigue, but Floyd distinguishes between weariness, exhaustion and burnout.

Weary ministers need a couple of days away from work and a good night's sleep to rejuvenate, he noted. Exhausted ministers may require an extended vacation or a long-term sabbatical to rest.

Burnout, on the other hand, takes a deeper biological and emotional toll, he said.

"A pastor or minister can get into a cycle where you're tired, so you don't exercise, you don't take care of your own spiritual needs, you don't eat healthily. And so, it becomes part of cycle that moves downward," Floyd said.

Warning signs

Early warning signs that may indicate a minister is approaching burnout include physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, high blood pressure, tight neck muscles and difficulty sleeping.

"There is full-scale burnout that a person experiences, but there are a lot of ministers who seem to exist at a sub-level right under that," Floyd said. "Some are functioning in the midst of burnout, but there's another big group who are walking right along the edge."

Ministers may find themselves emotionally numb—not experiencing expected joy or sorrow. Others may observe changes in their personality or uncharacteristic impatience.

A minister may also notice his or her mind wandering, lack of productivity at work and "replaying conversations over and over," Floyd said.

Under normal circumstances, the burdens of ministry can take a toll. But in

recent years, additional factors—namely political polarization and a global pandemic—have contributed to ministerial burnout, Floyd observed.

Both in society at large and in the church, he observed a tendency of people to “identify my tribe and the other tribe, and to locate you so quickly and so completely into one of those categories.”

He pointed to the challenge of “conversation and behavior monitoring” on the part of some in the church. Those individuals are quick to relegate a minister to “the other tribe” on the basis of a single word or phrase, or on the minister’s perceived failure to “go far enough” in taking a stand on a particular issue, he noted.

The time surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic—and its aftermath—led to a significant increase in burnout, he added.

Ministers faced criticism for “doing too much” or “not doing enough” in terms of protecting the congregation, he observed.

After the pandemic, some pastors also faced the reality of smaller congregations, smaller budgets and smaller staffs, he noted.

“I think congregations’ expectations of pastors sometimes can be so extreme that even if the pastor has less help and less budget, it probably doesn’t lower the expectations of what the pastor can or should do,” Floyd said. “Self-expectation and congregant expectations add a lot of pressure.”

Taking steps to prevent burnout

Congregations can help by designating individuals on a rotating basis to cover night and weekend calls, so the pastor is not always the first person who has to respond to emergencies, Floyd suggested.

“I think ministry staff can work with congregations to help them identify

what realistic expectations of ministry are,” he said.

Corley agreed ministry is inherently stressful, but “stress is not the problem,” he asserted.

In fact, stress can be energizing and motivating if it is perceived positively, he said. The problem is an inability to handle stress in healthy ways.

Corley believes overworked ministers should add one more thing to their “to-do” list if they want to avoid burnout.

“Mitigate stress by adding activities that are uplifting,” he said.

He particularly suggested activities that foster relationships, such as coffee with a friend, dinner with a spouse or simply taking a walk with someone and having a conversation.

Corley believes ministers often fail to consider two key words in Jesus’ command to love your neighbor: “as yourself.”

“The standard of love we have for others is how we care for ourselves,” he said. “It’s circular, not linear. Love ourselves while also loving others. Love others while loving ourselves. One begets the other. They’re all wrapped up in one.

“If you don’t take care of yourself, you cannot care for others.”

At the recent “[Leadership for the Long Haul](#)” conference at Baylor University, Corley participated in a public conversation about resilience in ministry with Charlie Dates, who simultaneously serves as pastor of two Chicago churches—Salem Baptist Church and Progressive Baptist Church.

Dates emphasized the importance of servant leadership, noting the need for ministers to be present to provide comfort in times of loss or bereavement.

However, he also emphasized the need for pastors to build in times for rest on a regular basis, to care for themselves and to delegate some responsibilities to others.

"I do my best to observe a sabbath during the week," he said. "I'm not going to die for the church. Jesus already died for it."

Biblical picture of a crash and burn

An incident in the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah offers an instructive "picture of ministerial burnout," Floyd said.

After the trial by fire on Mount Carmel, where Elijah triumphed over the prophets of Baal in dramatic fashion, Queen Jezebel threatened Elijah's life. He fled to the wilderness, where he sat under a tree, praying God would take his life.

"That was a big-time crash, and it comes right after a huge spiritual victory," Floyd said. "He goes from a huge spiritual accomplishment to despair."

When God sent an angel to Elijah, he first touched the prophet. Then the angel gave him food to eat and water to drink. The angel let Elijah take a nap and then gave him more food and water before taking him on a 40-day journey to Mount Horeb.

Once Elijah arrived at Mount Horeb, God asked him, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah responded with "a grievance story—a rehearsed summary of how he feels he had been wounded," Floyd said. Elijah told God what he had done for him, only to be forsaken.

"I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away," Elijah told

God.

After sending an earthquake and fire, God again asked Elijah, "What are you doing here?"

"Of course, God doesn't ask questions because God needs information," Floyd said. "I think he's asking the question because Elijah needs to realize something about himself.

"There are times when God asks questions, and they're not for God's sake. They are for our sake."

Recovery from burnout is a process—a "journey"—that takes time for healing, renewal and rejuvenation, Floyd asserted.

"It is through a whole process. It's through touch and water and food and journey and mystery and struggle and question and wrestling," he said.

"It seems there's a lot there, if we can figure out how we take care of people physically, how we take care of them emotionally, how we let their bodies rest and their minds rest.

"My experience is that Baptist life is not conducive to rest. It really lends itself to busyness."