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Clergy Stress, Causes and Suggested Coping Strategies

Alan G Palmer

Clergy are Abandoning the Ministry at an Alarming Rate

The 'world scene' appears to give conclusive backing to this assertion. In Australia there are 10,000 ex-pastors.¹ A survey of these men and women disclosed that only 2,500 (25 per cent) of them left, 'without hurt, conflict, loss of health etc'.²

In the United States the situation is little better. David McKenna writes, '...the ministerial profession looks like a desert over which a cowboy has ridden and moved on, leaving the debris of burned-out pastors on the trail'.³

The British scene, although better than Australia and the United States, is still a picture of a Church haemorrhaging men and women from the pastoral ministry. A former principal of Spurgeon's College London writes that out of 406 students who were trained for the Baptist ministry in the period 1955-85, over 100 (25 per cent) have left the ministry altogether.⁴

Many Reasons for this Exodus

There are a variety of reasons which may be put forward to explain this exodus. For some clergy it is the discovery that they have neither the gifts nor the temperament to cope with the demands of traditional ministry. For others it is either the lack of security (for denominations without a clergy freehold), loneliness, financial difficulties, family or marital problems, personality conflicts with superiors or members of the congregation, or perhaps an overwhelming sense of disillusionment.

Sadly, for some members of the clergy their resignation is uninvited and involuntary. They are asked to resign perhaps because of sheer incompetence or some inappropriate sexual activity.

Interdisciplinary by Nature

Investigating the causes and possible cures for clergy stress is likely to be

1 P Beasley-Murray ed *A Call to Excellence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1995) p 1

2 R Crowcher 'Why Clergy are leaving the Church' *Ministry Today* 1 (1994) pp 40-51

3 D L McKenna 'Recycling Pastors' *Leadership* 1 (Fall 1980) pp 18-19

4 P Beasley-Murray *Call to Excellence* p 2

something of an interdisciplinary venture.⁵ We are bound to blur the boundaries between at least two academic disciplines. The two we have in mind are psychology and theology. For as Mary Anne Coate writes: 'any attempt at bridging the gap between the disciplines inevitably involves a loss of tidiness and purity, though this is not intended as a "cop-out" apology in advance for sloppy thinking'.⁶ This article concentrates on some of the helpful insights that psychological research has brought to bear on the issue.

Stress, a Growing Factor

A brief survey of the books being written about pastoral ministry gives ample evidence that, for these writers at least, stress is one of the biggest factors in a person leaving the ordained ministry.⁷

This assertion that stress is becoming an unmanageable problem for clergy does not go unchallenged however. Heather Snidle writes: 'Clergy, like other caring professionals are prone to stress/burnout. However, stress/burnout may not be as prevalent as popularly suggested.' She continues, 'Fichter conducted research into 4,660 priests at the request of the United States Catholic Bishops and found only 6.2% reported being overworked and experiencing emotional stress, which indicates that they may be potential stress/burnout candidates.'⁸

However, there is other research available, conducted among American Presbyterians that would suggest that the number of persons at risk in that denomination is higher than among the Catholic clergy.⁹ Also it needs to be taken into account that even though Snidle disputes the size of the problem, in her article she goes on to demonstrate that the numbers of clergy experiencing stress/burnout *is* significant.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is evidence that seems to point to large numbers of clergy experiencing periods of unmanageable stress, yet remaining in the ministry. They are not able to function effectively but are on what has been called 'continuous maintenance mode'.¹¹

Stress and Burnout Defined

As is commonly known, a certain amount of stress is required for life itself to

5 See W Carr *The Pastor as Theologian* (London: SPCK 1989) p 7

6 M A Coate *Clergy Stress. The Hidden Conflicts in Ministry* (London: SPCK 1989) p 5

7 See T Marshall *Understanding Leadership* (Chichester: Sovereign World 1991) pp 114-29; D Spriggs *Christian Leadership* (Swindon: Bible Society 1993) pp 130-42; Andrew R Irvine *Between Two Worlds. Understanding and Managing Clergy Stress* (London: Mowbray 1997) pp 15-45

8 H Snidle 'Burnout and Ministry: Reflection on a case' *Contact* 116(1995) p 23

9 E B Bratcher *The Walk-on-Water Syndrome* (Waco: Word 1984) p 9

10 H Snidle 'Burnout and Ministry' pp 25-30

11 A Pratt and A Galer *Stress in the Ministry* (London: United Reform Church Pub 1987) p 4

continue. Without stress we would not keep to deadlines or keep appointments etc. However, when we become overwhelmed by a task, a deadline or a commitment, we can move from *stress* to *di-stress*.¹² The United Reform Church Committee on Health and Healing describes *di-stress* as, 'resulting from exhaustion, frustration and repeated disappointment. It occurs when someone has worked too hard, too long under pressure and feels drained at all levels – physically, emotionally and spiritually'.¹³

'Burnout', a word that often occurs in American literature on stress management, needs to be defined. It is used to describe the end results of prolonged stress in a person's life. John Sandford uses the word in this way. He says that a person who is 'burned-out' is like a building that has been gutted by fire, or an electric circuit that has been overloaded and consequently burned-out. He also compares a burned-out person to a forest that has been totally destroyed by fire.¹⁴ While the use of these powerful similes may be helpful in some cases, they may not suit all cases and all symptoms.¹⁵

Some of the Symptoms of Stress

Cooper, Cooper and Eaker go to the Latin word from which our English word 'stress' is derived to begin their description of symptoms. They state that, 'Stress is a word derived from the Latin *stringere*, meaning "to draw tight".¹⁶ This is a helpful place to begin. For stressed/di-stressed people do appear to be 'up-tight'. They are too 'wound up' and 'over-stretched' to function properly. Sandford lists some of the common symptoms:

Difficulty in sleeping, somatic complaints such as weight loss, loss of interest in food, headaches and gastro-intestinal disturbances, a chronic tiredness of the sort which is not repaired by sleep or ordinary rest and only temporarily alleviated by medications. Low grade persistent depression and nagging boredom.¹⁷

John Davey notes that in severe cases the person experiencing stress will manifest the following; the pupils of the eyes will dilate, breathing becomes faster, the heart will beat more rapidly, nausea and vomiting or diarrhoea may be experienced, and sweating and shaking.¹⁸ These physical symptoms emerge because in times of stress our bodies go into what is known as 'the fight or flight mode'.¹⁹

12 A Pratt and A Galer *Stress in the Ministry* p 7

13 A Pratt and A Galer *Stress in the Ministry* p 4

14 J Sandford *Ministry Burnout* (London: Arthur James 1982) pp 2-3

15 P Beasley-Murray(ed) *Pastors under Pressure* (Eastbourne: Kingsway 1989) p 42

16 G Cooper, L Cooper and R D Eaker *Living with Stress* (London: Penguin 1988) pp 9-19

17 J Sandford *Ministry Burnout* p1

18 J Davey *Burnout: Stress in Ministry* (Leominster: Gracewing 1995) pp 6-7

19 J Davey *Burnout* pp 4-6

Stress and the General Population

It has been well documented that Western life results in a number of *stressors* being brought to bear on the individual. Stress is recognized as a serious threat to the individual, sometimes resulting in death!²⁰ It is also recognized to be a huge drain on national productivity. The Department of Health estimates that 80,000,000 working days are lost per annum due to stress-related illnesses.

Is 'Clergy Stress' a Special Case?

To say that a particular occupation is more prone to stress than others may be interpreted as 'pleading a special cause'. So is there anything distinctive about pastoral ministry which leaves members of the clergy particularly open to excessive amounts of stress? Dr Gary Collins believes that there is. He argues the case for a particular form of stress which he calls 'religious stress'.²¹

We believe it can be argued that, alongside the common stressors experienced by everyone in this 'hurry up world',²² there is a form of stress especially related to pastoral ministry. The very nature of this work of 'care-giving' brings its own particular variety of demands. Consider the following:

1 The clergy face a continuous onslaught of services, holy-day celebrations, sick people to visit and sermons to write.²³ They can suffer from what Sandford calls the 'Sisyphus Complex'. In Greek mythology it was Sisyphus' fate to have to push a great stone up a mountain only to have it roll down just before reaching the top. Sandford writes: 'that never quite reaching the "top of the mountain" can leave a ministering person exhausted'.²⁴

2 The work of ministry is also difficult to assess. How can a pastor really tell how successful his ministry is or has been?

3 The work of ministry is open to unrealistic expectations. These include unrealistic ideas, on the part of both the clergy and the congregation, about 'what a minister is supposed to do'²⁵ and how many hours a minister is expected to work.²⁶

4 The work of ministry can continue with the same difficult people year after year. One discouraged pastor said that 'the "trouble makers" never

20 J Davey *Burnout* p 6

21 G Collins *Spotlight on Stress* (Santa Ana: Vision House 1977) pp 143-58

22 A Hart *Adrenaline and Stress* (Waco: Word 1986) p 11

23 J Sandford *Ministry Burnout* p 5

24 J Sandford *Ministry Burnout* p 6

25 H Snidle 'Burnout and Ministry' p 23

26 P Beasley-Murray *Pastors under Pressure* p 20

seem to leave and the helpful, co-operative people never seem to stay’.

5 The work of ministry is often under-rewarded financially. Snidle speaks of a pastor taking on a task which ‘becomes a low paid prison’.²⁷

6 The minister’s family often lives in what has been termed a ‘goldfish bowl’. The perception is often that his/her marriage has to appear to be ‘perfect’. The family can take on the unrealistic aura of ‘the holy family’. This form of clergy stress has been brilliantly explored by Lee and Balswick.²⁸

7 Sexuality may be a form of stress. John Davey speaks of what he calls ‘Gender Stress’. This may be experienced by female clergy working within a denomination where women’s ordination is still a contentious issue. Or it might be experienced by homosexual clergy who fear discovery.²⁹

8 The minister conducts his work in a world of change. Society has changed. The clergy person is no longer called to play the same role as he/she did in the past. The Welfare State has taken over many areas that before were seen as the responsibility of the clergy and the Church. This has led to some clergy experiencing what has been called ‘role ambiguity’.

Results

Of course, not all clergy will respond to these stressors in the same way. However, for those who are overwhelmed by the requirements of their calling, a state of ‘di-stress’ or of ‘burnout’ may result. This can leave those afflicted in this way incapable physically, emotionally, practically and spiritually, of fulfilling their role.³⁰

Exploring Personality

Surely the nature of the pastoral role cannot be the complete reason for so much clergy stress? What other avenues might we then explore? One direction we can pursue is to investigate the type of personality exhibited by those who offer themselves for the ordained ministry. Gaius Davies makes much of this in his writing on the subject.³¹

Mary Anne Coate believes that stress can occur in a clergy person’s life

27 H Snidle ‘Burnout and Ministry’ p23

28 C Lee and J Balswick *Life in a Glass House: The Minister’s family in its unique social context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1989)

29 J Davey *Burnout* pp 42-7

30 See M Coate *Clergy Stress: The Hidden Conflicts in Ministry* (London: SPCK 1989) p 8; S Horseman *Living with Stress: A Guide for Ministers and Church Leaders* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press 1989) pp 1-3

31 G Davies *Stress: The Challenge to Christian Caring* (Eastbourne: Kingsway 1991) pp 110-20

because of the 'emotional baggage' brought by them into the ministry.³² Also Kirk and Leary pick up a similar idea and apply it to 'clergy marriages'.³³

Lesley Frances and Raymond Roger have produced some helpful insights into this whole area in their article entitled 'The Personality of Anglican Clergymen'.³⁴ They recognize that 'personality theory' is not without its difficulties, not least 'the significant disagreements within psychology regarding what are to count as the major dimensions of personality and how such dimensions are to be assessed or measured'.³⁵ Frances and Roger do not hide the difficulty of trying to integrate the 'findings of those studies which attempted to research the personality of clergy since many different definitions and models have been employed'.³⁶ There are also further difficulties in trying to apply findings generated in the United States to the situation in the United Kingdom, and from clergy of one denomination to clergy of another.

However, having noted these difficulties, Francis and Roger are drawn toward using 'Eysenk's dimensional model of personality'. This they believe to be a helpful tool in the quest for accurate personality typing.

Eysenk's Model

Simply put, Eysenk's dimensional model of personality proposes three key constructs, 'neuroticism, 'extroversion' and 'psychoticism'. It functions in this way:

* Eysenk's *Neuroticism Scales* measure 'emotional liability and over-reaction'. The opposite of neuroticism, according to Eysenk's model is 'emotional stability'.³⁷ For us it is important to note that those who score highly on the neuroticism scale are characterized as 'anxious, worried individuals, who are moody and frequently depressed'.³⁸ Low scores on the scale are characterized by the absence of the negative traits above.

* Eysenk's *Extroversion Scales* measure sociability and impulsivity. The opposite to extroversion is introversion. High scorers on this scale tend to be outgoing, friendly, sociable and enjoy attending parties. Eysenk characterizes the high scorers as extrovert. Those who achieve lower

32 M A Coate *Clergy Stress* pp 50-69

33 M Kirk and T Leary *Holy Matrimony? An Exploration of Marriage and Ministry* (Oxford: Lynx 1994) pp 52-74

34 L Francis and R Roger 'The Personality of Anglican Clergymen' *Contact* 113 (1994) pp 27-32

35 Francis and Roger p 27

36 Francis and Roger p 27

37 Francis and Roger p 27

38 Francis and Roger p 27

scores, however, tend to be more shy, withdrawn and introvert.

* Eysenk's *Psychoticism Scales* identify the underlying personality traits which at one extreme define psychotic mental disorders.³⁹ The opposite of psychoticism is 'normal personality'. The high scorer on the psychoticism scale is characterized by Eysenk as being 'cold, impersonal, hostile, lacking sympathy, unemotional and paranoid'. Certain traits stand out in these personality types: feelings of guilt, lack of sensitivity to other's feelings etc. The low scorers are 'empathetic, unselfish, altruistic, warm, peaceful and generally more pleasant, although possibly less socially decisive individuals'.

Francis and Roger admit that the six studies which employ Eysenk's model of personality among male clergy and ordinands in England, fail to produce agreement.⁴⁰ However they were able, using data gathered in the diocese of Lincoln, to offer further insights into the personality of Anglican clergymen. On the basis of such information they state, 'that clear predictions can be made regarding the specific area of ministry from which individual clergy may derive special satisfaction or in which they experience special stress'.⁴¹

Francis and Roger suggest that in regard to Eysenk's model and others similar to it, further research is (now) needed to refine such theories and to establish their predictive value by empirical means. They conclude their article by helpfully commenting that:

...such research should lead to two key areas of practical benefit. First, recognition of the implications of clergy personality for shaping styles of ministry should enable an effective deployment of clergy, with consequent reduction in dissatisfaction, stress and burnout. Secondly, the informed use of personality theory within programmes of continuing ministerial education should promote healthy personal and professional development, highlighting both areas of strength and weakness.⁴²

Towards a Possible Coping Strategy

We recognize immediately that the task of stress prevention among the clergy is a huge, if not impossible one! However, we can make some tentative suggestions towards helping both the clergy themselves and their 'employer', the Church at large.

39 Francis and Roger p 28

40 Francis and Roger p 28

41 Francis and Roger pp 21-31

42 Francis and Roger p 32

Looking at the Issue of Vocation

Firstly, we believe that those who are considering the ordained ministry need to examine carefully their understanding of the nature of 'calling'. They need to ask the basic question, 'What exactly is God calling me to do?' The subject of 'calling' is far wider than simply entering the ordained ministry. An individual's personality, natural and God-given gifts, all need to be a big part of the picture. Ordinands need to ask themselves what particular part of the ministry God has equipped them for. An early resolve needs to be made by the prospective clergy person to 'play to their strengths' and to be willing to delegate to others within the church areas in which they cannot function (see Exodus 18 'the Jethro management model').

These issues need to be faced up to if stress, for both clergy and congregation, is to be avoided. There are a number of useful books available that may help guide the reader through the labyrinth of 'vocational issues'.⁴³

Looking at Selection

As we have noted, 'personality profiling' can be a great help prior to selection. Here both the candidate's strengths and weaknesses can be discovered. Myers-Briggs, which comes from a Jungian psychological framework, is used by some Anglican training courses for clergy candidates. Among the Roman Catholic fraternity the 'Enneagram System' serves much the same purpose. Neither of these systems is without its critics. It is important however, to continue to look for methods of personality profiling that are accurate and reliable. If such a system can be made available, it may well become a useful tool in the selection process. In the light of a personality profile, a selection committee may be able to steer a candidate in a particular ministerial direction where they can best use their gifts and also avoid unnecessary levels of stress.⁴⁴

Looking at Training

We suggest that alongside the traditional theology and pastoral training received at theological college a number of contributions, that we shall call 'stress preventors', be made available, which may include such subjects as *Time Management* and *Interpersonal Skills*. Perhaps some training in *Relaxation Techniques* might be in order.⁴⁵ *Assertiveness Training*⁴⁶ would

43 Paul Beasley-Murray ed *Anyone for Ordination* (Tunbridge Wells: Marc 1993); Francis Dewar *Called or Collared. An Alternative approach to Vocation* (London: SPCK 1991); Louis McBurney *Every Pastor Needs a Pastor* (Colorado: Marble Retreat 1977) particularly pp 17-28; G Oden *The New Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1990)

44 A Pratt and A Galer *Stress in Ministry* pp 15-17

45 See T Hansel's book *When I Relax I Feel Guilty* (Elgin, ILL: David Cook Pub 1979)

46 See M Smith's *When I Say No I Feel Guilty* (New York: Bantam Books 1981)

also be useful and learning how to use *Theological Reflection*⁴⁷ in order to manage stress has proved helpful.

Looking at Clergy Post Ordination Care

Theological college cannot prepare the clergy for the rest of their ministerial life. There is a definite need for ongoing training and supervision by way of ministerial assessment.⁴⁸ There may be a need for counselling for those who have brought damaged emotions with them into ministry. When it comes to handling stress there is a need for the individual to be given all the help that can be provided, including so-called 'secular psychiatric' help.⁴⁹ Before we leave the subject of Post Ordination Care let us consider one more psychological tool that is available to us. Dr Louis McBurney uses Erickson's 'Epigenetic Model' to help those who are experiencing ministerial burnout. This model traces human development through eight critical stages from 'basic trust versus mistrust' to 'ego integrity versus despair'. This model is helpful in that it clarifies the impact that past events can have on an individual's present personality and demeanour.⁵⁰

Re-educating the Church

The situation for clergy may only change when we begin to see ourselves as 'receivers' as well as 'givers'.⁵¹ In this regard our understanding of the role of the clergy may have to be radically re-evaluated. However, there is more at issue here. If the clergy need to learn to become receivers as well as givers, then equally the laity need to become 'givers' as well as 'receivers' in the area of ministry. There needs to be a spirit of interaction and collaboration if this issue of stress is to be dealt with. After all, a 'distressed' clergy-person cannot deliver adequate care for members of the church community. It is in our own interest to ensure the mental as well as physical and spiritual health of those who serve the community as pastors.

A Final Word

Clergy need to understand themselves more fully, ie their personality type, their gifts, strengths and weaknesses. When they are more fully 'self-informed' they can begin to concentrate on working within their strengths. This would greatly limit the amount of frustration and stress that they might encounter. The churches also have a part to play in reducing pastoral

47 See Alistair Ross's article 'Theological Reflection and the Management of Stress' *Ministry Today* No 5 (1995)

48 M Jacobs *Holding in Trust. The Appraisal of Ministry* (London: SPCK 1991) pp 23-33

49 E T Welch 'A Discussion Among Clergy: Pastoral Counselling Talks with Secular Counselling' *The Journal of Biblical Counselling* 13 (1995) pp 23-33

50 L McBurney 'A Psychiatrist looks at Troubled Pastors' *Leadership* Spring Quarter (1993) pp 91-103

51 Michael Walker 'Human and Spiritual Development' in *Spirituality and Human Wholeness* (London: British Council of Churches 1986) pp 49-776

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stress. Perhaps if congregations began to see their pastor as a facilitator rather than an 'omni-competent clergy-person', then tensions on both sides could be reduced.

Whatever it takes to decrease clergy casualties to stress is worth trying!

ALAN PALMER is the Director of Oak Hill College Open Learning Centre. In the light of the issue of 'clergy stress' the Open Learning Centre has produced a new course intended to help clergy cope. It is entitled *Liberating the Leadership*. For more information please call 0181 449 0467.