

PASTORAL BURNOUT

An illustration on a textured yellow background. Two hands are shown lighting a match. The match is lit, with a bright flame and a trail of smoke rising. The background is filled with white radiating lines, suggesting light or energy. The overall style is graphic and symbolic.

Learning What It Takes to
Become a Healthy Leader

by Wayde Goodall

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INTRODUCTION

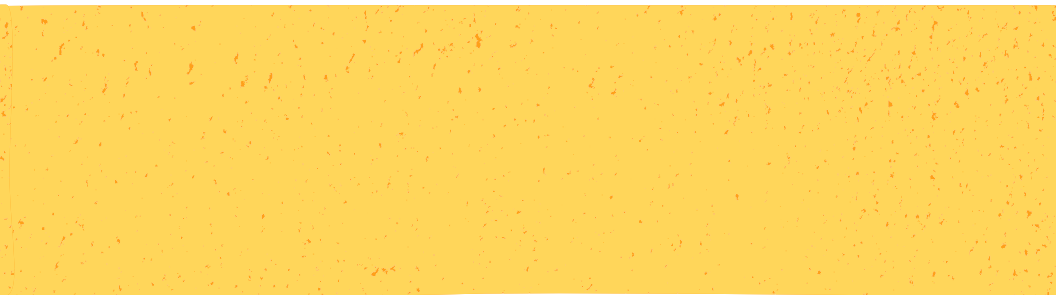
“I think my wife and children would be better off without me. I’ll give them everything I have and find a place to be alone and survive.”

That was my thinking when I hit bottom. Misery and depression had gripped me tightly. My love for them was not in question. I felt that I couldn’t be the husband and father they deserved, so in my disordered thoughts, I figured they would be better off without me. What I expected from them was a kind of pity or sympathy. What I received instead, shocked me a bit.

My wife cheerfully told me, “You’ve got to be kidding! We’re all going to get through this together. The kids and I are sticking with you no matter what!”

The counselor I had started to see, told me, “Wayde, you’re messed up because your priorities are way out of order. I believe that you’re burned out. Together we’ll work on how you can do life in a healthier way going forward. You need to reprioritize how you think. You need to build in some margins, and do ministry in an improved way. It will take time and effort, but I know you’ll get through this.”

In that moment I didn’t care whether I lived or simply wasted away. How in the world was I going to overcome burnout? Night terrors, sleeplessness, crushing anxiety, and panic attacks became frequent.



I had no hope of feeling well again. All I wanted to do was run and hide. I frequently questioned myself. For goodness sakes, I have degrees in counseling! How could I find myself in this situation where I couldn't even help myself, much less anyone else?

Through the ups and downs, the sleepless nights, and the wrestling with my fears, my wife was a constant river of life to me. We'd talk together and she would listen to me and offer timely wisdom. She knew when I was getting tired or feeling overwhelmed or down, and she would encourage me, help me rest, and try to lighten my load or my mood. She helped me watch my schedule and my nourishment. She has the patience of a saint.

Over the next two years I consistently met with my psychologist, faithfully took the antidepressants he prescribed, and followed his advice regularly. His presence was a gift from God, without which, I don't think I would be where I am today. He listened to my sometimes crazy fears and lamenting. I felt as though I was not another counselee, but rather I felt prioritized under his care and counsel.

One of the best things he did for me was to help me construct a rhythm for my life (*See my rhythm chart in the appendix. Please feel free to adapt it to fit your ministry.*) Antidepressants alone wouldn't be able to cure what plagued me. I had to build habits and margins that breathed new life into my daily prayers and ministry. Over the

course of a year, I learned how to schedule times of rest, exercise, and sleep. I learned how to delegate tasks—something that pastors and leaders need to learn to do regularly!

Old habits die hard. As those in charge over God’s people, we must be diligent about replacing our unhealthy habits with life-giving habits. We have to train our bodies—not unlike training our minds—with healthy alternatives to what many of us constantly choose. Both in our choices of food and activities, we must learn to care for the bodies that God has given us.

My burnout happened about three decades ago. Since then, I’ve spoken on burnout at numerous events, listened to hundreds of pastors and leaders, and observed people in ministry. I’ve noticed that many pastors and leaders aren’t taking care of themselves. Burnout, depression, unhealthy eating, relentless stress, and an out-of-control lifestyle are common. This often leads to unhappiness both in their calling as a pastor and in their life at home.

I’ve listened to pastors for years. Their struggles are real and their desire to walk away from the ministry is understandable, but there’s hope for you if you’re feeling that way. You don’t have to lead alone.

Responding to every “urgent” need, failing to schedule times of rest and times with your family, and living with the guilt of not measuring up to others’ expectations are all part of the cycle that can lead to burnout. The terrible feeling of not being able to rest, relax, or enjoy life is common with so many Christian leaders. Many don’t know what to do. There’s always someone or something that could use their time and energy. They want help, but don’t know who to trust or where to go. We hope this book will offer some practical tools to help you avoid burnout and cultivate healthy ministry practices.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

1

Burnout can be described as a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you begin to feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands, as often happens in pastoral ministry. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to take on ministry in the first place.

Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

The “Wellbeing Project” at Notre Dame found that, “Burnout occurs when people experience chronic emotional and physical exhaustion plus a growing sense of depersonalization in work. Burnout is accompanied by reduced work effectiveness, difficulty in making decisions, decreased creativity, and increasing difficulty in adjusting to changes.”

George Barna’s research discovered that, “more than one-third of pastors are at high or medium risk of burnout, and three-quarters know at least one fellow pastor whose ministry ended due to stress.”¹

1. See, [Barna.com/burnout-breakdown-barna-risk-metric/pastors/](https://www.barna.com/burnout-breakdown-barna-risk-metric/pastors/)

“For pastors with higher scores, burnout is one of the most detrimental factors to their overall level of flourishing. Burnout seems to be an insidious factor: it sneaks up on us, quietly tearing away at our well-being.”²

Burnout is not something pastors can take lightly. If you’re on your way to burnout, there are tools that can help you avoid hitting rock bottom. You may be tempted to fight through it, to just keep going forward, and tough it out. That won’t work. It will continue getting worse. To get well, you must seek healing and take action by looking at your priorities, talking to a wise counselor, and changing the way you’re doing life and ministry.

If you need help getting started down this road of healing, our support line for pastors and their families features fellow pastors and trained counselors who frequently support those in church and ministry roles. These pastoral care specialists can provide an understanding heart, a word of advice, a timely referral, or a simple prayer. We know leadership is not easy, and we’re eager to come alongside pastors and their loved ones to help meet their needs. Give us a call at 844-4Pastor to schedule a consultation.

Awhile back, I received a call from a pastor friend and was somewhat taken back when he said that he was addicted to cocaine. “Tell me how this happened,” I quietly asked him.

I’ve been exhausted, tired all the time, and was getting many comments from people in the church that they thought I was a different person, with no energy. They even accused me of losing the anointing! Many even thought that I should leave the church.

About a year ago, I was able to acquire some cocaine. I thought it would give me energy to beat the tired feeling I always had. I took the cocaine early on a Sunday morning. I certainly did feel energy! I preached strong, and the people responded! Several even told me how great the message was.

I tried it again the next Sunday and many more people encouraged me to keep preaching this way. I felt confident when I used the drug and began taking it more often and became addicted. The ironic thing is that the congregation thought I had the anointing when I was on the drugs!

He continued, “My depression and burnout were so overwhelming that I didn’t feel I could make it. I did something that was so wrong, but out of my desperation I only made it worse and became addicted to drugs.”

“Dr. Goodall, I’m in trouble! Can you help me?”

End of the story: I did get him help at a wonderful Christian clinics and he’s back in the ministry today.

As a pastor myself, I’ve seen the worst of the worst, but there is hope. We don’t have to live a lifestyle that is out of control—seeking the next great high. We can live as healthy pastors, knowing that the peace of Christ rules in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). Trust the God who called you into ministry. He is faithful to finish what He has started. When you feel crushed by the anxieties of this world, the stress of running a small church with few staff, or the worries of a prodigal child, lean into Christ and He will renew your strength.

PREVENTING BURNOUT

If you recognize the warning signs of impending burnout in yourself, remember that it will only get worse if you leave it alone. Below are some steps to get your life back into balance so that you can prevent burnout from becoming a full-blown breakdown.

Begin the Day with a Calming Habit.

While studying the scriptures, I've observed the life of King David and the godly people of the Bible who prayed. I've also watched many spiritually healthy people live disciplined lives. All this has encouraged me to develop many disciplines in my own life that have served me well.

- *Rising up early and finding a quiet place to read the Scripture*
- *Asking God to reveal what the passages mean*
- *Listening to the Holy Spirit*
- *Finding solitude and calm to provide rest and focus*

Seldom do I miss a day doing these things. My Bible study could be 30 minutes or a couple of hours, depending on my schedule. My solitude could include a walk in the park, or parking my car and looking at water or nature. Sometimes I take my lunch and sit by a beautiful spot to relax and take a mental break—and maybe even a short nap. I love to go out in my boat. During these times, I pray for my family, my daily activities, the people I'm scheduled to meet with, and a list of people that I care about. Listening to the Holy Spirit and remaining calm gives me energy, wisdom, and control as I walk into whatever the day brings.

Take Care of Your Body.

Years ago, I lost 60 pounds in 6 months. I had become obese, tired, short of breath, and low on energy. When writing one of my books,

The Fruit of the Spirit, I felt convicted that I didn't have self-control when eating, exercising, or getting enough sleep. I prayed and wept because I knew that my eating habits were out of control.

Doing a Daniel fast for the first 21 days helped me develop discipline in eating, and I lost 20 pounds. Over the next 5-6 months, I ate smaller portions, avoided most carbs, drank a lot of water, developed an exercise plan of walking and jogging, and scheduled times of rest into my life. When the 60 pounds were gone, I felt better and had more energy. My thinking became sharper and I felt more confident and in control. I could comfortably walk or run up the stairs. It is now over 30 years later, and I've been able to keep off between 50-60 pounds.

Create Ways to Live in Your Rhythm.

If we're constantly saying Yes to everyone who needs a "little" time or adding more activities to our work responsibilities (our job), the burden will become overwhelming. Saying No is a good habit to develop. There are many ways to graciously say No or to delegate. Most people understand that we can't say Yes to everything all the time. Saying No helps you say Yes to those things you feel are important.

Take a Break from Technology.

Do you have the ability to turn off your phone, not do emails, and not use technological tools for a day? How about an hour? Completely disconnecting from your phone, emails, and computers for a period of time is healthy. We own these tools; they shouldn't own us. We tell them what to do; they shouldn't tell us what to do. You need a break from these so you can think, process, plan, and be creative. I only answer emails twice a day. Building healthy margins into your daily schedule will help you be calmer and think more clearly.

Understand That You Have a Creative Side.

When I was burned out, I lacked the time and energy to be creative. I needed time to think, meditate, process, and just enjoy being calm. I also needed to find a hobby, project, or other activity that was enjoyable. Learning to have fun became a priority. I started fishing, restored a couple of old cars, exercised, read a bunch of Grisham novels, and scheduled quality time with my wife and children. Creativity, laughter, and fun are powerful antidotes to burnout.

Control Stress. Don't Let it Control You.

Stress increases when we're living an unbalanced life. When we're too tired, sensing burnout, and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, we feel helpless. At those times, stress builds up and puts more pressure on us, and we can get to a point that we react inappropriately. Control your time and your life habits. Delegate, rest, pace yourself, and give it time . . . the stress will be controllable, and a sense of calm and peace will replace it.

HOW CAN I RECOVER FROM BURNOUT?

Ministry leaders are not immune from doing too much. We're often pulled in several different directions with the needs of those in our congregations as well as those in our own families. We're likely headed towards disappointment when we're trying to do too much, too quickly. Over the years we may have accelerated our pace instead of building in times of Sabbath rest, leading us to spiral down the road that leads to ministry failure and burnout.

Americans Aren't Taking Half Of Their Vacation Days

The average employee takes about half of his or her vacation time, and only a quarter of employees take all of their eligible time off.

Most do some work or think about work even when they're on vacation (66% according to the 2014 Glassdoor survey). They can also be reached anywhere in the world.

Many are afraid to leave for vacation because they might be voted out or fired before they get back; they hate to leave their colleagues overwhelmed, or they want to take their accrued vacation time as a cash payout to cushion any future job loss.

It is imperative that we find ways to slow down and have time away from the ministry to restore our energy. As busy pastors, how do we do that? How do we pull ourselves away from all the pressing needs that are coming from every direction? Below are a few ways that have helped me through the years.

Find People Who Will Help You.

When I was burned out, I wanted to hide. This is a common tendency. We are down on energy. Conversations can be exhausting and cause further anxiety. I felt that if I could spend some time alone, I could have enough energy to make it—but Christ made us for community. If you have a mature Christian spouse and mature Christian friends, they want to be with you and will be honored that you trust them. When you're feeling burned out, turn to those who know you best and let them be an oasis in your parched life.

Think About and Organize Your Priorities.

Something is missing when we're in deep burnout. What important person, thing, activity, or experience is missing? Why are you rushing everywhere, doing so much, feeling guilty for not accomplishing more? Take a day to think about God's call on your life. What has He called you to that you have intentionally left out because of your busyness? Is there an area that you feel led to grow, but because of your disordered priorities you have neglected it?

Our burnout can be a gift that helps us reevaluate what God's real definition of success means in our own life. This includes reflecting Christ to others, having a healthy marriage, being a healthy parent and pastor, as well as cultivating healthy habits which can lead to a healthy ministry.

Ask Yourself, “What loss, rejection, or disappointment have I experienced?”

You may feel rejection from your congregation or an unhealthy board. A significant percentage of pastors who have been voted out of the pulpit or fired do not return to full time ministry. Why? Many do not want to risk being hurt again. Maybe you have suffered from the loss of a family member, or a divorce, a financial setback, or some other disappointment. The list of losses can be endless. All loss brings some level of disappointment, emotional pain, and loss of energy. This feeling can absolutely drain your energy. All loss is painful, and the demand on our emotional and physical energy can be monumental. When we feel any kind of loss, we need to understand that it's important to grieve, lament, reflect, and process. Different losses take different lengths of time for healing. This is normal. Taking time to recognize this and giving it time is critical. Talking to a friend or a professional also helps.

Clinical psychologist Susan Dunn has observed that people who are resilient and have the faith to bounce back after failure and confront new obstacles without losing their nerve generally do these essential things:

- *Learn from experience. Resilient people reflect on what happens to them – good and bad – so they can move forward without illusion.*
- *Accept setbacks and losses. You've got to face the reality of what happens in order to get past it.*
- *Recognize emotions. Resilient people don't hide from their feelings. They identify what they're feeling and express their emotions appropriately.*
- *Keep time in perspective. Past, present and future are separate. For example, don't mix them up by letting what happened in the past determine your choices in the here and now.*

- *Think creatively and flexibly. Look for new ways to solve problems and face challenges.*
- *Take care of yourself. Resilience is based on good physical and mental health. Get enough rest, eat sensibly and spend time with people who support you.*
- *Ask for help. Resilient people don't try to do everything themselves. Accept that you'll need to ask others for assistance, and learn how to do so graciously and effectively.*

When I was experiencing burnout, I knew that I needed to quit doing what I was doing to myself and, instead, do something different. My priorities needed to change. This could have meant changing what I did for a living, finding a healthier ministry/work environment, or finding a healthier method of going about my work.

As pastors it seems that we are limited to what we can change, because we don't have other job opportunities, or we have little control of our circumstances. We can still do something that will bring health to how we feel and how we think. Here are a few things that helped me build a healthy ministry:

Look Your Problem in the Eye.

Look at your occupation, life situation, and stress level as an opportunity to grow. Talk to your supervisor, board, spouse, or mature Christian friend (of the same sex) about your needs. Making the decision to be active in changing your situation is a great first step.

Think Intentionally About Your Priorities.

- *Write what you understand your ministry requirements to be. Look at your job description and think about what is actually required.*
- *Add things that you do that are not part of the job description (E.g. lead the seniors, play the piano during services, serve on the finance committee, etc.).*
- *Make an appointment with your employer, pastor, or board leader for a definition of what he or she sees as your job description.*
- *Inform this person (or people) that you have been doing many more things that are not part of your job description. Diplomatically let them know that you have been working long hours to accomplish over and above your job description.*

Consider Changing Your Daily Routines.

If you have been doing the same ministry responsibilities for a long time, a change in assignments might be helpful. Trying new types of ministry, taking on a different role, working at a different location, or even changing your career can be a good decision. Remember that when a person is on the spectrum of burnout, the tendency to yield to temptation can be significant. During this time of making healthy changes remember the need to walk close to the Lord. Our emotional emptiness depletes the energy we need to fight temptations.

Over the years, I've talked to a lot of Christian leaders who fell into the trap of the enemy. When I discussed with them their feelings of depression, loneliness, or burnout, many said that they felt too weak to fight the temptation and submitting to it made them feel better—for a time. The enemy is observant and knows when we're tired. He looks for the best opportunity to bring unique temptations to

our lives in order to trap and destroy us. Reading or listening to the Scripture, worshipping even when we don't feel like it, going to church, and staying close to godly people are all necessary in our lives.

Get Rest.

When you're experiencing burnout or you feel that you're close to burnout, take some time off. Pastors often miss taking their day off, going on vacation, or simply getting enough sleep. Studies tell us that it's critical that we get 7-9 hours of sleep. We also need to find ways to get away, to rest, and to do something different from our routine. These things restore our energy, our body, and our focus. Often, we have vacation days that aren't used, sick days that aren't taken, or a sabbatical that has been postponed.

Watch Who You Spend Time With During This Time.

There are people who give us energy and people who take our energy. There are jobs that give us energy and jobs that take our energy. Pace yourself and find a balance between spending time with the givers and the takers. Prioritize your life to live as much as you can with the people and responsibilities that restore your energy.

We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients [parishioners]. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor, and hope. We tire. We aren't sick, but we aren't ourselves.

C. Figley (1995) ³

3. <https://thecompasscenter.org/2020/06/26/there-are-hard-things-happening-in-the-world-do-you-have-compassion-fatigue/>.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

2

Compassion Fatigue, also called vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatization is the emotional residue or strain of exposure that comes from working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. It differs from burnout but can co-exist. Compassion Fatigue can occur due to exposure to a single case or can be due to a “cumulative” level of trauma. ⁴

In ministry we care about people: their spiritual condition, their marriages and families, and their health (physically and psychologically). Caring for so many can wear us out. People who experience compassion fatigue and burnout are often people who care, including both chaplains and pastors.

Even Mother Teresa understood what compassion fatigue does to a caring person. She developed a mandatory requirement for her nuns that included taking a year off from their duties every 4-5 years to allow them to heal. ⁵

Whether we are in burnout or are experiencing compassion fatigue, we feel that our self-image has tanked. Emotionally and mentally we are worn out. Mentally, we feel alone, disconnected and isolated from others. Some choose to become isolated and hide. Many don't even experience happiness when they accomplish something important to them or others.

4. Figley, 1995. *Stress.org, The American Institute of Stress, 220 Adams Drive, Suite 280 - #224, Weatherford, TS.*

5. *Laura Downs, Caregiver Exchange, Web: www.compassionfatigue.org, www.facebook.com/compassion-fatigue.*

Dr. F. Oshberg wrote in his book, *When Helping Hurts*, “First, you should understand that it’s a process. It’s not a matter of one day you’re living your life with a great deal of energy and enjoyment, and the next, you wake up exhausted and devoid of any energy—both physical and emotional. Compassion fatigue develops over time—taking weeks, sometimes years to surface. Basically, it’s a low level, chronic clouding of caring and concern for others in your life—whether you work in or outside the home. Over time, your ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of your skills of compassion. You also might experience an emotional blunting—whereby you react to situations differently than one would normally expect.”⁶

Our burnout and even compassion fatigue are in large part the result of decisions we’ve made. (The church board or congregation may also be somewhat to blame.) We’ve made choices along the way that have been unhealthy and we haven’t paid attention to our health. I made the decision to overwork, push myself, and disobey healthy principles of balance in my life. Putting most of the blame on those we live with or work with is a huge mistake. We are responsible for our words, behavior, and attitude.

Some feel that they only need to move, change their job, buy a sports car—or crazy things like becoming involved in another relationship and walking away from their family. I’ve witnessed many Christian leaders who have resorted to drugs, alcohol, or the abuse of prescription drugs.

Pastor, please think of your health needs and practice self-care. What is healthy for you? What are you interested in doing for relaxation, fun, or a hobby? Are you pacing your life and responsibilities? Are you caring for your marriage and family—only second to serving Jesus? The Scripture informs us that we “love others as we love ourselves” (Matthew 22:39). Husbands are to “love their wives as they love themselves” (Ephesians 5:25).

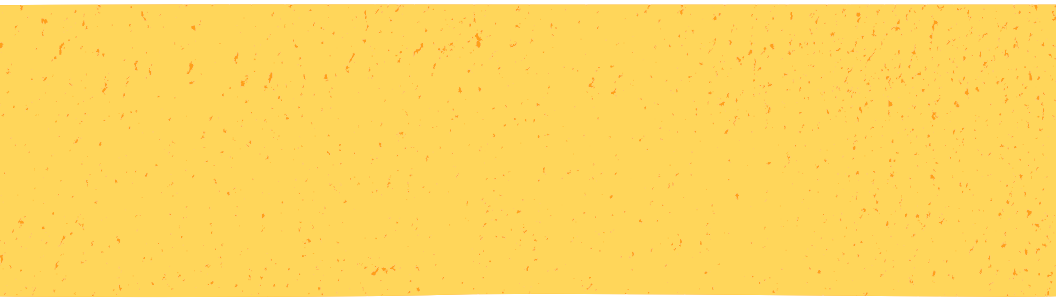
If we do not love and care for ourselves, we will not love others as we should. A lot of anger, rejection, and feelings of disappointment come out of us when we don't love and care for ourselves.

Personality Affects Burnout.

Some of our personality traits and habits can bring on depression and burnout. If we're perfectionists, we often feel that nothing is good enough. If we're pessimists, we think of life in negative ways, see the glass half empty, or describe ourselves and our abilities negatively (E.g. I'm not smart enough. This will never happen for me or my family. It's impossible. I give up!).

If we feel that we're the only one we trust, and that no one can do the job as well as us, then we will wear ourselves out. Delegation to others is necessary throughout life. Jesus is the best example of this as he delegated his authority and responsibilities to His disciples. The pastors' job is to train up (equip) the people to do the ministry (Ephesians 4:12-13). One person simply cannot do it all. Some have the so-called "Type A" personality that pushes them to drive themselves, take on too many jobs and responsibilities, and seldom relax.

Where do you find yourself?



8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

*2 Corinthians 1:8-9*⁷

STRESS AND BURNOUT

3

The Bible not only speaks to us about our compassionate and caring God, but it informs us of miracles that are beyond human description. It gives powerful lessons about how to live a healthy life and unashamedly speaks to us about the sickening failures, sins, and bad decisions that many godly people made. The Bible speaks of heroes and ordinary people with normal life challenges. I identify with the people of the Bible who have difficulties, feelings of stress, and sometimes despair. I have learned from them how to cope with the perplexities of life.

The apostle Paul gives us critical understanding of the stress he was under while ministering in modern day Turkey on the Aegean Sea, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death” (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). We don’t know the details, but the stress was overwhelming. They felt despair, depression, and a sense of hopelessness like many of us.

Have you felt hopeless, stressed, and depressed? Are you there now?

Research has told us that 23% of pastors indicated they had battled a mental illness of some kind on a personal level, including 12% who said it was formally diagnosed. These findings are confirmed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and have similar numbers within the general population. Depression is likely the second-leading cause of global medical disability.

Pastor Larry Stockdale's Four principles of R.E.S.T.

R – Relax in who you are.

E – Examine your heart.

S – Surrender to the will of God.

T – Timing is critical.

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves too much—too many pressures that demand too much of us physically and psychologically. Stressed people can still imagine, though, that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better.⁸

When I served on the Pulpit and Pew interdenominational research project at Duke Divinity School, we asked challenging questions such as, “Why do so many men and women in the clergy leave the ministry? Why do so few young people accept the challenge of going into the ministry?” We discovered that conflict and stress were the top reasons why people quit and why so many people don't want to serve in the ministry.

A pastor's life, and the lives of their spouse and children, can be full of unique stressors. Often a minister's spouse has an additional job to help pay the bills.⁹ Antagonistic Christians, finances, and toxic staff or board members can bring tremendous pressures on the lives of a clergy family. Many choose to walk away from the ministry.

When people struggle to cope with finances, relationships, work, the environment, etc., they often feel stress. It's also stressful when someone senses something that may be a threat to their well-being.

8. Dianne Hales, *Personal Stress Management, Surviving to Thriving*, Cengage Learning, 2016, p. 221.

9. According to the 2015 Faith Communities Today survey, fewer than two-thirds (62.2 percent) of U.S. churches have a full-time pastor. That's down from 71.4 percent in 2010. (Click here for more info from Facts & Trends.)

The word stress is also used to mean an anxious, nervous, fearful, or overwhelmed feeling.¹⁰

Stress is the body's natural defense against real or imagined danger. It floods the body with hormones to prepare our systems to confront or evade danger. This is what we call a "fight, flight, or freeze" response.

The body is an intelligent operating system, but it has a hard time differentiating between external events that are life threatening, and those that are simply stressful. The body often reacts in a similar way to both, and produces quantities of adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol.

Research has determined that there are three different types stress—acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress. The three types of stress each have their own characteristics, symptoms, duration, and treatment approaches.

Acute Stress

Acute stress is usually short-term. It's the most common and frequent presentation. It could be caused by a traffic jam, an argument with your child or spouse, and the water heater breaking down.

The individuals who frequently suffer acute stress often live a life of chaos and crisis. They are always in a rush or feel pressured. They have trouble concentrating. They take on many responsibilities, and usually cannot stay organized with so many time demands. These individuals are perpetually in the grips of acute stress overload. They need to practice self-care and add margins to their lives.

10. *The Pulpit and Pew Interdenominational Committee conducted a nationwide survey of pastors that was the largest survey of its type ever conducted.*

Episodic Acute Stress

When one experiences acute stress continually, professional help is likely the best way to examine what's going on and what to do about it. The majority of pastors take on too much; they put pressure on themselves and many times sense external demands from others or from general ministry needs. Ministers can become angry, say things they typically wouldn't say, magnify normal stress to the chronic level, and, as a result, become depressed.

Intervention with a trained professional counselor is highly recommended. Long term counseling will be helpful as personality characteristics and lifestyle habits will be addressed. *See Focus on the Family Counseling Line.* The person who struggles with episodic stress can tend to blame others for their problems rather than acknowledging that they have the problem. Burnout and depression can be the result unless this person changes.

When I experienced my burnout, I needed to reprioritize my life, learn how to relax, slow down, and pace myself. Also, I had a theological problem where I felt that I needed to work extremely hard (often not taking a day off) to prove my loyalty to God. Without noticing it, I had developed a “works” mentality versus walking in God's grace. I had been forgiven so much that I felt that I needed to repay God. This type of thinking will certainly cause havoc in our lives. If it wasn't for my Christian psychologist, Sig, and my incredible wife—I feel that my life would have been a disaster. God used these wonderful people to help me.

Chronic Stress

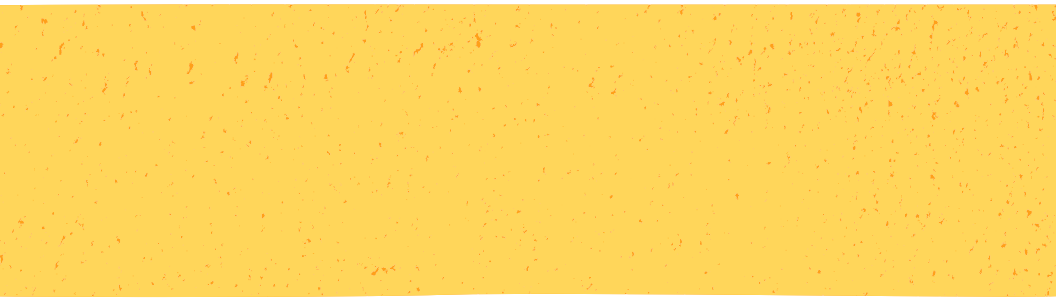
Chronic stress lasts long term (perhaps years). Chronic stress can include an accumulation of stressors, i.e., financial difficulties, difficult church or ministry challenges, dysfunctional marriage, rebellious teenager, COVID—all added to normal life challenges.

Chronic stress has been a concern of mine when working with pastors and Christian leaders. Ministry can be overwhelming. Most ministers don't receive a lot of pats on their back, and it's difficult to measure how well we're doing. Without balance or having a small group of trusted supporters or an accountability partner one can feel isolated and the enemy can bring discouragement into our lives.

This is a time to seek some great godly counseling.

Chronic stress happens when a person can't see a way out of a miserable situation, feels the anxiety of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time. With no hope, the individual gives up searching for solutions. This type of stress wears people down day after day, year after year. Chronic stress destroys lives, bodies, and minds. It wreaks havoc through long-term attrition. It's the stress of poverty, dysfunctional families, violence, abuse, trauma, despised job, ethnic rivalry, and war.

Stress, pressure, antagonism, spiritual warfare, and even physical persecution have always been part of the ministry. When we examine the lives of the prophets, the apostles, and other godly leaders throughout Christian history—stress and conflict have always been a companion of ministry. It seems that the number of pastors who have burnout challenges has grown significantly.



When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

*John 8:12*¹¹

STRESS AND THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

4

Jesus had tremendous pressure and stress. The majority of people rejected what He said—even His family (Luke 4:28). Many of his followers walked away from Him (John 6:66). Many times, the apostles didn't understand what He was saying until His resurrection (Mark 8:31).

He was constantly under pressure. There were demands on His time. He was alone, however, He rarely had privacy. He was constantly interrupted, people misunderstood Him, people criticized Him, and leaders tried to kill Him.

Like us, He could only live one day at a time and be in one location at a time. He traveled from one city to the next healing and preaching the Kingdom of God while continually moving to the next city, knowing that He was leaving people behind who needed healing and ministry (Matthew 13:58).

As He endured tremendous mental, spiritual and physical pressure, He remained at peace. How did Jesus maintain peace?

Jesus Knew Himself, His Unique Personality and Gifts, and How to Define Himself.

When asking the question; “Who are you?” many respond by their job description, marital status, where they live, and what they like to do. While these responses are accurate, they don't describe who they are.

Many describe themselves by how others see them. They've accepted the definitions of who others say they are, and the labels others have given them. While there are those who are lovingly sincere and want to encourage us, there are also people in our lives who have been troubling to us.

Psychologists help people define and understand themselves by asking questions about their values, talents, interests, daily activities, important goals, strengths, people who have influenced them (past and present), positive and negative experiences, and unique gifts and talents. All of these areas are important, but do they define the real you?

The most important opinion of who we are is how our Heavenly Father describes us—how he has uniquely formed us, given us our personalities, skills, and the wonderful gifts we have. What promises has He given you? God's opinion of you is absolute love.

Jesus knew who He was and what His Father had called Him to do. He knew his purpose, why He existed, and what He was to accomplish in His life. When we understand who we are, we have a sense of balance and understand how to prioritize our lives according to our Father's "success" standards. We can live a life of peace and contentment and can understand His rest. Difficulties such as stress, conflict, and the challenges of life are not going to overwhelm or bring burnout to us, but we can take heart at the example and life of Christ Himself.

Jesus knew who He was. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness for they have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Numerous times Jesus said “I am:”

“I am the bread of life.” (John 6:48)

“I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”
(John 7:29)

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will
never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
(John 8:12)

“You are from below; I am from above. You are of this
world; I am not of this world.” (John 8:23)

“I am the light of the world.” (John 9:5)

“Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.”
(John 10:7)

“I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:11)

“I am God’s Son” (John 10:36)

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes
in me will live, even though they die;” (John 11:25)

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that
is what I am.” (John 13:13)

“I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it
does happen you will believe that I am who I am.”
(John 13:19)

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to
the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

“I am in the Father and the Father is in me. (John 14:11)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.
(John 15:1)

“They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.”
(John 17:16)

“I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” (John 18:8)

It certainly would be easier to handle stress and pressure if we understood God’s loving opinion of us and who He created us to be. Believe me, if you don’t understand who you really are—many will try to tell you who they think you are! People can try to manipulate you into being someone that you’re not. A great amount of stress, internal pressure, and mental anguish comes from being someone that somebody else has described you to be. We wear a mask; we’re not honest with ourselves and we live double lives. Being who God says we are is the real you!

You are God’s child, and you’re forgiven. There are no accusations against you. You have the mind of Christ, are a temple of the Holy Spirit, and are DEEPLY loved by God! You are significant and if you discover who you are in Christ, you will never be the same.

Author Gretchen Rubin, said that her “first commandment is to ‘Be Gretchen’—yet it’s very hard to know myself. I get so distracted by the way I wish I were, or the way I assume I am, that I lose sight of what’s actually true.”

The continual concern of Jesus was to please His heavenly Father—not people. His life goals were determined by his Father. You can’t please everybody; you can only be your best for Jesus and trust him to help you accomplish what He has called you to do.

Jesus Knew What His Goal in Life Was.

“Jesus answered, ‘Even if I testify on My own behalf, My testimony is valid. I know where I came from and I know where I’m going’ (John 8:4). Jesus knew when it was the right time to move forward, delay, pause, or stop. Jesus was patient until it was the right time. His timing was perfect. People tried to interrupt Jesus.

They constantly tried to get Him away from His plan. They tried to get him to focus on other things.

At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for Him and when they came to Him, they tried to keep Him from leaving . . . But He said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also because that’s why I was sent.” And He kept right on preaching in the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:42, 44). He knew what His mission was.

Jesus Understood Delegation.

As Christian leaders we are to disciple and delegate the work of the ministry to other qualified and wise Christian people. Jesus delegated his authority to His disciples. So many are overwhelmed and stressed because they feel that it all depends on them. Not so! God will help us accomplish all that He has called us to do and he will point out people who can be trained and given authority to do the work (see Ephesians 4:12-16).

Jesus went up into the hills, and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him. He appointed twelve, and designated them apostles that they might be with Him and that he might send them out to preach. ~ Mark 3:13-14

Jesus Understood the Power of Having an Ongoing Prayer Life.

Prayer is a tremendous stress reliever. It’s a God-given tool for releasing our anxieties to the Lord. No matter how busy Jesus got, He made it a practice to spend time alone with His heavenly Father.

I love to start my days by finding a quiet place to pray and meditate on the Scriptures. Most of the time I rise early and spend 45-90 minutes in prayer, Bible reading, and quieting myself so that I can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. I ask Him to open my eyes to what He has for me and what He’d like me to do, and I ask Him to give me creative ideas.

Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went out to a solitary place where He prayed.

~ Mark 1:35

Jesus Knew How to Rest.

He knew that the body and mind could only take so much. He practiced balance in his life and didn't burn out or become stressed with His daily activities.

Have you found your balance between work and relaxation? What does a day off look like to you? What do you do on vacation? What do you and your spouse like to do when you get away? We all need to find some way to free our minds from the pressures of what we do. We're wired to take breaks, to have margins in our schedules, and even to take longer vacations.

Finding a balance between rest and work produces energy. Rest will help us do more in less time, and balance is the key to stress management. We need time off to rest, to practice getting away from work and ministry, and to be with family and friends.

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then because so many people were coming and going and they didn't even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. ~ Mark 6:30

Jesus is the stress reliever. He will give you peace when you depend on Him. He's the one who will help you manage the pressures of life. Jesus will transform your life from one of dependence on ourselves and others to dependence on Him.

Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls for My yoke is easy and My burden is light. ~ Matthew 11:28

CONFLICT AND MINISTRY LEADERSHIP

5

Conflict can kill a minister—and a church.

While conflict is certainly normal in every church, organization, marriage, and family (and even within ourselves), ongoing severe conflict can be overwhelming. Serious conflict within the church is a tremendous challenge and distraction. It's disruptive to the unity that the Lord desires for every church. When a pastor is serving a church that has been and is involved in serious conflict, grave damage can come to his or her personal life, marriage, and family. Research shows that 25% of pastors quit because of conflict, 19% quit because of burnout.

Most new ministers are surprised and even shocked by the intensity of the conflict they face when trying to serve the people they love and have been called to. Many walk away from ministry within their first 5 years because of feeling burned out, overwhelmed, concerned about their mental and emotional health, and concerned about the stress upon their marriage and family.

I've heard wonderful pastors say, "I'd rather work for Walmart and start a Bible study than try to work with this kind of tension and aggressive, serious conflict."

A recent survey asked ministry leaders why they left the ministry before retirement age and the results were interesting, to say the least:

1. They found “another calling” either out of that pulpit or out of the ministry altogether (40%).
2. They were driven out because of conflict in the church (25%).
3. They left because of burnout (19%).

Many felt they had come to their post as a pastor unprepared for the extreme demands of dealing with church boards and counseling and were soon overcome by the lack of support.

- *48% of the former pastors said the church was not accurately described to them before they arrived.*
- *27% said their churches had no list of counselors for referrals.*
- *22% never spelled out exactly what they expected of their pastor.*
- *12% had no sabbatical plan for the pastor.*
- *8% had no support group for the pastor’s family.*
- *48% say their church had none of these.*

Soon there was trouble:

- *56% said there were clashes over changes they proposed.*
- *54% said they experienced a significant personal attack.*
- *48% said their training didn’t prepare them to handle the people side of ministry.*

The latest edition of the American Congregations studies by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research says that conflict is a killer of churches. ¹² “Serious conflict crushes growth,” said the report’s author, David Roozen. He found that congregations that had only a little or no conflict were more than 50% likely to have shown growth in worship attendance in the last five years. Among congregations that reported serious conflict, only 29% showed growth. ¹³

Research found that 63% of ministers who left said they had spent more than 10 years in ministry before these crucial elements drove them to leave a church. “Almost half of those who left the pastorate said their church wasn’t doing any of the kinds of things that would help,” said Ed Stetzer. ¹⁴ “Having clear documents, offering a sabbatical rest, and having people to help with weighty counseling cases are key things experts tell us ought to be in place.”

The study also indicates that troubles began even before the pastors arrived at their congregations. Conflict, ongoing stress, and burnout were the result of a pastor trying to fix these deeply imbedded challenges.

Is this kind of conflict normal? No!

Is conflict normal? Yes!

Are there ways to address conflict, understand the nature of the conflict, and the wisdom to manage it? Yes.

Years ago, I was in a very challenging situation in a church. Unhealthy conflict had been a challenge for several pastors in a row. The pastor who served before me lasted about 18 months. He saw the battle and decided that he didn’t have enough time to beat it.

12. *The 2015 report, (Jan. 12, 2019), is based on reporting by clergy or senior staff at more than 4,000 congregations Lifeway.*

13. <https://www.charismanews.com/culture/54406-the-top-3-reasons-pastors-quit>.

14. <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/pastors.are.leaving.ministry.early.heres.why/76477.htm>.

My wife and I had similar thoughts, however, we decided to stay, pray, and seek God's wisdom in order to break the cycle of tension and control that some continued to arrogantly display. The Titus 3:10 principle that Paul gave to the church regarding warning a divisive person was never even contemplated in that church.

For a long time, some power hungry people decided that they would call the shots in the church. I experienced threats on my life, attempts to buy me off, and occasionally being yelled at by various leaders, etc. Acts of intimidation from some were common. Likely over 90% of the large congregation were not aware of the challenges and wretched situation that we were facing day in and day out. I knew that if a vote of confidence was called—well over 90% would support me, but the antagonistic few made the position of pastor most miserable.

During this time, to my amazement, a publishing house asked my wife and me to write a seminary course on the topic of Conflict Management for Church Leaders! I said, “We’re in the middle of trying to manage terrible conflict and don’t feel that qualified.” They said; “All the more reason why you should write the course! You know first hand what it can be like!”

We wrote the course and it has helped a lot of leaders because we were coming from a place of experience. We knew how others in our situation felt and we now had the tools to reach out to them with a helping hand.

The Bible is full of examples of situations where conflict was involved. Even great spiritual leaders can have conflict that appears to be divisive, however, can be used for good. Paul and Barnabas were great friends but, “They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company” (Acts 15:39). Both of them wanted to do the will of God, however they had different opinions about the details that were involved in doing it.

On the other hand, there is divisive conflict that only stirs up problems, causes disunity, feeds on gossip and murmuring within the congregation. James even says there is an earthly wisdom that is demonic (James 3). This kind of conflict destroys the pastor's ability to lead, and can split the church. In this kind of situation, Paul tells us to warn a person two times then if they don't change their behavior, remove them from the church (Titus 3:10).

How to Respond to Conflict:

Conflict is a normal part of life, and there are healthy ways to deal with it. We can respond in ways that will calm the storm and address the issue, or we can respond inappropriately and make it worse. Most conflict is not disruptive; it's helpful and can assist us in coming to the right conclusion. It's good to have different opinions (Proverbs 11:14, 15:22, and 24:6) when we have two or more people who want to do the right thing. Some kinds of conflict give us energy, and solutions, while others drain energy and cause disunity. Some kinds are in our lives because God often uses conflict to help us grow.

The Scripture tells us that Isaac had good relationships with his neighbors, however his home was dysfunctional. Unhealthy conflict is certainly part of dysfunction. Their son Esau married two heathen wives who caused a lot of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. He later married a third heathen wife—seemingly because he wanted to upset his parents (see Genesis 26).

Isaac and Rebekah remained faithful and trusted God. Even though there was the challenge of Esau's decisions, they kept their focus on the God who gave them favor and blessings. Notice that the blessings were found after they experienced great conflict. We need to experience difficulties, challenges, and conflict so that God can enlarge us for the larger places He prepares for us.

Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

~ Psalm 4:1

Suffering is a large part of how we grow and are prepared for a larger place in God's blessings, responsibility, and wisdom. They come to us in God's timing. As leaders we can help ourselves by:

- *Handling conflict appropriately.*
- *Knowing how to prevent conflict from overwhelming us.*
- *Understanding that conflict is normal in the average organization and church.*

Large organizations and churches have unique challenges as they not only have normal conflict within the congregation but can have unhealthy conflict even within the staff.

- *Understanding where most conflicts come from can help us have wisdom during the conflict.*

As a previous Dean of a College of Ministry, I quickly realized that often Bible and Theology, Pastoral Ministries, and Intercultural Studies (missions) programs don't even require courses in how to deal with people. They're focused on preaching, biblical languages, theology, etc., which are important, but so many pastors feel unprepared for the issues that people come with or cause. This is aggravated when a pastor is on the path toward burnout, because he or she is less likely to handle conflict well at that weak time, which can often create a worsening situation.

When having a difficult conversation that has two or more opinions, we can remain calm and tell ourselves that, there is always something within a person's thinking/argument that needs to be understood and discussed. The elephant in the room needs to be revealed so that we can understand why a person or group of people feel the way they do. Listening to a person or group is not only healthy for us, but helps the other person(s) feel heard.

There are Predictable times of Conflict

- *A pastoral change*
 - *When there are campaigns to grow the budget*
 - *When the church changes its physical location*
 - *When staff is added or when someone leaves the staff*
 - *When the leadership style changes*
 - *When the leader goes on vacation*
 - *When the church suffers a loss of key members*
 - *When the church undergoes rapid growth*
 - *When there's disloyalty among the leadership*
-

In every church or Christian organization, there will always be difficult people at all levels of leadership. Many have different opinions because they have been hurt or disappointed. Understand that some of the most educated, successful, and sophisticated people in the organization are very fragile. If I'm not sensitive to them, I won't be positioned to help them.

Discern between a member that offers valid criticism and one who is a destructive force in your organization. Understand the difference between an aggressive person and a divisive person. Realize that people who are secure offer some of the best ideas for the growth of the organization, but they can be aggressive.

You will never have 100% agreement across your leadership or your congregation, but you can influence the influencers. For certain, sometimes when we're criticized we need to let the water run off our backs, so to speak, and not let the criticism affect us. My responsibility as a shepherd for a local congregation is to do what God has called me to, not to attempt to change other people's behavior.

Some Questions That are Helpful When Conflict Occurs:

- *What is the real issue? What are the details and where are the differences? Learn the details of both sides of the argument. This might take some time. We need to know what the different opinions are and a possible cause and solution so we can endeavor to bring peace.*
- *Who in my church has the most influence? When determining who that person is, try to go to him or her and discuss the challenge. However, don't challenge them; just listen and occasionally respond. There will likely be a time when you'll be able to address the challenge, but take your time.*
- *How can I support both the majority and the minority on any given issue? When working with people in a challenging situation, keep your focus on the supportive majority. In my former situation and in most that I've observed, there is no question that the majority of the congregation or organization supported us. Understanding this will be a great encouragement when dealing with one or a few people.*

Before Confronting a Person, Consider the Following Questions:

1. Is this issue worth standing up for? I frequently ask myself; “Is it a big enough hill to die on?”
 - *When morals or conscience are involved, there is no alternative. We always obey the Scriptures.*
 - *When there are two different opinions, we try to be flexible and evaluate the cost of both.*
2. Are there any unsettled personal issues with the dissenter toward us? Try to settle the personal issues before trying to resolve the other issue. It might be as simple as personality differences, a misunderstanding, or the need for an apology
3. Do I have a personal agenda? Do I want the best for the church or organization, or do I just want to win? It’s critical that we understand our own motives. Remember that Jesus said, “I did not come to be served, but to serve.” We can ask ourselves, **“Is my opinion so important that I need to have my way?”** Decide if you’re the only one who will be affected or if the organization will be affected. If it’s only you, consider the positive and negative aspects of the decision, and move on from there.

Have a positive attitude and assume the best motives concerning those who have different opinions. It’s my responsibility as a leader to show respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment. Part of the process is that I understand the various opinions.

When you understand the difference in opinion and have come to a resolution, put it behind you and try not to bring it up again. Never bring the issue up unless it reoccurs, or it can be used in some way to help people. If we have people that don’t want to follow our leadership, deal with one issue at a time. Ignore concerns that really aren’t that important and understand that some things are better left alone.

Understand that there are many gray areas when making decisions. We can't be paralyzed by what some "might think," but need to move forward and make the call. Listen, think and make the best decision possible with the information you have. During these times we act on our best instincts, leaning toward the side of grace and mercy, and being optimistic.

Do Not Confront People Alone.

If you do, remember that there might be two versions about what was said—yours and theirs. You can be misquoted, misinterpreted, and, if the person holds grudges against you, they can down right lie about what was said. When you have a wise, godly elder or other leader with you, you will have his or her support if there are any challenges to what was said and understood.

Conflict is a part of life. There's simply no getting away from this fact. As a pastor or leader in your church, you can be sure that you'll face relational conflicts. No leadership model exists that will totally eliminate disagreements or clashes of personality. In fact, the tension that comes from conflict can be healthy and beneficial to growth if dealt with correctly.

SELF-CARE

6

Burnout, stress, and conflict issues are understandably a concern with many pastors and Christian leaders. Understanding how to care for ourselves and our families is a key to our ability to live a balanced, healthy life. This understanding includes the knowledge that we have a soul that needs to be cared for. If we have a healthy soul, we will be able to pace ourselves, prioritize what and how we do what we do, avoid burnout, and not be overwhelmed by stress and serious conflict. Through a place of health, we can listen, think, and respond in healthy ways and not permit the pressures of ministry to get to us.

I have served in the ministry for over 4 decades, pastored 2 large churches in the U.S. and planted a successful international church in Europe. I have worked with thousands of ministers, and on numerous occasions have had the opportunity to speak on the topic of healthy leadership. I've come to the conclusion that a high percentage of people in the ministry become consumed with the tasks of ministry and slowly lose focus on their own soul. A healthy soul will help us do ministry in a healthy way.

When we're not focused on our soul, and don't understand that Jesus said His "yoke is easy" and His "burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). We can fall into the trap of hurry, busyness, fear, performance, and unhealthy goals. Soon we may do ministry and life in unhealthy ways.

At Oxford, the small band of Christians that John Wesley was mentoring shared his longing for holiness. They became known as the Holy Club. For Wesley and his friends, holiness included a complete yielding of one's life to God, a desire to become like Christ in heart and actions, acts of compassion for others, and a resolution to live one's life for God's glory.

Almost always, Wesley would open up the small group meetings with the question, "How is it with your soul?"

The Holy Club never exceeded twenty-five members, but many of those made significant contributions to our Christian heritage. In addition to John and Charles Wesley, several of the members of this group became denominational leaders, authors, hymn writers, evangelists, and leaders of great revivals. George Whitefield, who joined the club just before the Wesleys departed for Georgia, was associated both with the Great Awakening in America and the Evangelical Revival in England.

Caring for your soul is a discipline that should always be part of the spiritual leader's life. In fact, it should be the highest priority of every follower of Christ. Caring for our soul involves understanding that the Holy Spirit is working deeply within our soul to lead, heal, restore, and motivate us to become more Christlike. We will have a deeper understanding of God's love and grace and will be more loving and forgiving in the way we look at others.

Dallas Willard frequently addressed soul care. He understood that our soul is the hidden or "spiritual" side of us. It includes an individual's thoughts and feelings, along with the heart or will with its intents and choices. Dallas Willard knew what soul care looked like in the midst of busyness and the pressures of this world, knowing Christ through times away in solitude and silence will "let our joy be full" (see John 16:24). It will bring a pervasive sense of well-being over us, no matter what is happening around us. Hurry

and the loneliness of leadership will be eliminated. We can allow the peace of God to sink deeply into our lives and extend through our relationships to others (see Matthew 10:12-13).

Soul care is really caring about your spiritual life, caring about your relationship with the Lord. Your soul is who you are. If that is out of whack, it can become a downward spiral leading from one thing to the next—not prioritizing your relationship with the Lord, not having the right priorities in your life, overwork, etc.

The Scripture is very clear that we have a soul that is distinct from our physical bodies. It can function somewhat independently of our ordinary thought processes, and when we die, it's able to go on consciously acting and relating to God apart from our physical bodies. By concentrating on the condition of our souls, we can find contentment in God's presence, during current trials, and balance in our lives throughout eternity.

The book of Revelation reminds us that “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Revelation 6:9) “are in heaven and are able to cry out to God to bring justice on the earth” (Revelation 6:10, see also 20:4).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). The apostle Peter speaks of a pure soul; “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22, ESV). Jesus grew in all areas of his earthly life, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

The discipline of soul care includes growing in wisdom (emotions, thinking, decisions), stature (physically, emotionally), favor with God (spiritually, spiritual disciplines), and man (relationships, respecting that all humans have dignity as “the image of God.”

I believe that by far the majority of pastors and Christian leaders desire to have a healthy soul, to live a life of balance, and to serve the Lord without burning out or becoming stressed out. We don't like the thought of possibly reacting to stress inappropriately or letting ourselves become overwhelmed or burned out. We want to do ministry, love people, and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. We want to live a life of peace, contentment, and joy. We desire to have healthy marriages and families. However, to do this, we must focus on areas of our lives that need ongoing attention.

METHODS OF SOUL CARE FOR THE WEARY PASTOR

Find Ways to Make Life Simpler.

Eliminate unnecessary programs (the ones that don't work, anyway) and meetings at your church. Don't micro manage every single detail of every project your church is working through.

When I realized that some weeks I would be at church seven days a week doing "urgent" stuff, I decided to schedule all my evening meetings on Tuesdays. That way, I met with the church board one Tuesday a month, our rest home board another Tuesday, our Christian school board a third Tuesday, and various committees on the other one or two Tuesdays. Finally, I was available to watch my kids play sports, etc.

We had church services on Wednesday evenings, and I didn't want these meetings to be on Thursdays because my day off was Friday and I didn't want to go into my day off with all the information overload on my mind. I took Friday off instead of Monday because I found that I was too exhausted from the weekend even to go out and mow my lawn, etc. Also, I wanted to know the offering count, and to follow up with my staff and parishioners about any discussion items that had come up over the weekend.

I like to start the next Sunday's sermon prep on Mondays, also, because it makes for good continuity, especially when I'm doing a series, and because I'm still under the anointing. Once I found a reasonable rhythm that fit my life and responsibilities, I felt a lot more balanced. Try to simplify your life to add a sense of control and enjoyment.

Put Yourself on a Schedule.

Determine when you want to (or should) get up, study, exercise, eat, go to bed, etc. Allow margins for the unexpected. Be sure that your marriage and family are high priorities in your day. Serving Jesus Christ, listening to Him, and being faithful and obedient to Him are our highest priority.

Prioritize Your Schedule and Keep Up With It.

Others will endeavor to become part of your schedule. When we think ahead of what is important for us to do (and put it on the calendar) we will own our schedule. When looking at your schedule, daily, weekly, monthly and annually place a high priority on finding places and times to have solitude. Being quiet, meditating, praying, and listening to the Lord should be a big part of our lives. Ensure that you take a Sabbath each week—a day or two off for personal time with your spouse, a hobby, friends, catching up with the “to do” list, etc.

I love to run. It gets lots of blood to my brain—fast. It gives me uninterrupted time to talk to the Lord and it helps me think clearly about what I need to do about the various situations or problems I'm working on. It's also a stress reliever. By the time I get home, I often know just what to do. I also love to ride bikes with my granddaughter. Most days when I'm in town, my wife and I go for a 30-90 minute walk, weather permitting. I like to mow my own lawn and wash my cars, too. It's hard to do any of these things with regularity, though, if I don't have control of my schedule.

Crave God's Presence.

I believe that a high majority of us know what the presence of God feels like and how peaceful it is. Find ways to practice the presence of God. Frequently, I like to do “spiritual walks” with no agenda. I just walk, think, and observe. Occasionally, I ask the Lord to help me in some way or to give me favor in a situation. During these times I try to sense God’s presence and His love and care for me. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve sensed a unique presence of the Lord when I’ve taken these walks. On a few occasions, I experienced a peace and comfort that is hard to describe. These times bring great confidence and strength.

Bill Hull writes of Henry Nouwen who gave us great insight by asking, “Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste God’s infinite goodness?”

Understand Your Limits.

In his book, *Margin, D.* Richard Swenson tells us; “When you reach the limits of your resources or abilities, you have no margin left. Yet, because we don’t even know what margin is, we don’t realize it’s gone. We know that something is not right, but we can’t solve the puzzle beyond that. Our pain is palpable, but our assailant remains unnamed.”

During my burnout and depression, I realized that I didn’t have margins in my life. It seemed that I constantly worked or was consumed with countless things that “needed” to be done. I tried to fake it and appear in control, but I was out of control. My priorities were wrong and, as a result, I crashed.

When people get close to burnout because of a lack of balance and wrong priorities, they often become irritable and hypersensitive and can magnify challenges when typically they would manage them well. They become restless, insensitive, and numb. They continually, even compulsively, feel the need to work. Men, especially, look for ways to hide or run, escaping into activities that can be harmful and at times disastrous.

Burned out leaders can easily become disconnected from their identity and calling, and become unable to attend to their human needs. They drift, and at times ignore their spiritual practices. As Christian leaders we need to remind ourselves that humans have limits. A life of balance is critical, and there are healthy priorities that we continually need to practice.

Ministry has increasingly taken on many of the characteristics of bureaucracies and big business. We live in such a fast paced world that it seems that workers (and business people) are in a constant rush, being pushed to accomplish more with less time. Those who constantly put in more hours are honored while those who try to have a normal life of balance might be passed over. It's no wonder pastors, Christian leaders, and missionaries are pushing themselves beyond their healthy limits. Many have interpreted God's work as being pushed to excel and to have the big numbers of parishioners, etc. Living within our limits is part of soulful leadership.

In his book, *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller reminds us that, "we are blessed by inner rhythms that tell us where we are, and where we're going. No matter, then, our fifty or sixty-hour work weeks, the refusal to stop for lunch, the bypassing sleep, and working deep into the darkness. If we stop, if we return to rest, our natural state reasserts itself. Our natural wisdom and balance come to aid, and we can find our way to what is good, necessary and true."

Many of us live in a dangerous downward cycle of busyness, hurry, and overload. This impacts our relationship with God as He becomes more marginalized in our lives. When the Lord is marginalized, our relationship with Him deteriorates. With a lack of God focus and study of His Word, we can become secularized and vulnerable to the opinions of the day which pressure us to conform to the culture of the world, not God's Kingdom. We pick up the pace of a complicated, confused lifestyle of always being busy, in a hurry, and feeling overwhelmed.

Practice being quiet or silent. Use less words.

When we're quiet, listen, and choose not to respond quickly, we can refine our speech patterns and become more aware of what we should say at the right time. In a world full of noise, complicated schedules, social networking, interruptions, and pressure, it takes discipline and courage to be silent.

Thomas Merton reminds us that, "Without courage we can never attain to true simplicity. Cowardice keeps us double minded." Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. It's not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard."

If we discipline ourselves to create silence and margins in our lives, we will be able to reflect on life, our relationship with the Lord, our marriage and family, and our ministry responsibilities. We spend valuable time when we meditate, study, pray, fast, and self-reflect. During these times we will find that our spirit becomes quiet, and we will frequently hear the soft voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us. Silent solitude is also a fruitful time in which to make decisions, especially those with significant consequences.

When talking to pastors, I frequently hear something like, “I don’t have time for extensive solitude and silence. I have too much to do. The truth is, we don’t have the time not to practice solitude and silence.

There’s no question in my mind that when we’re faithful and obedient to what God calls us to do and if we take care of ourselves versus running ourselves ragged, the Lord will supply the energy we need. Pushing ourselves beyond our limits is not the answer, depending on the energy that Christ gives will be more than enough. His favor, wisdom, sense of timing, and words are always there for us.

We live in a time of conflict, confusion, tension, and fear (for many), but this is the day our Heavenly Father brought us to. We get to be leaders in a time of tremendous need.

Complicated and surprising conflict and acute stress are all around us, and without appropriate care for ourselves and our marriage and family, we can quickly become overwhelmed by burnout and despair. What can you do when you’re beyond your ability to handle a situation?

Do all you can to live a balanced life, to take care of yourself. If we don’t care for ourselves, how can we care for others? Trust the God who raised Christ from the dead.

He is always faithful. There are numerous examples in the Bible of people who trusted God. You are a leader. God has selected you for this time. He will never ask you to do anything without giving you the ability to handle it and to lead with His anointing, presence, and wisdom.

RHYTHM OF LIFE

AREA OF LIFE	DAILY	WEEKLY	YEARLY	7 YEARS
Devotional:	1-hr. sabbath	(1) 24 hr. sabbath	52 sabbaths	sabbatical
Work:	8-10 hrs.	45-55 hrs.		
Personal Time:		1 day off	52 days off	
Marriage:		1 date	52 dates	extended time
Intimacy:		1-3 times	52-100+ times	
Fasting:		1 day	70 days <i>(Daniel fast 21 days)</i>	
Physical Health:	30-60 mins. exercise	200+ mins. exercise	complete physical	
Family:		1 family night	family vacation	extended time
Emergencies:				
Ministry:		study day	topics preparation	
Breaks:	15-30 mins.			
Budget:		2-3 hrs. family finances	family budget review	
Scheduling:	schedule next day	schedule next week	annual goals	life review
Sleep:	7-9 hrs.			
Accountability and Friendships:		1 get-together/meeting	2-3 day retreat	
Emotional Health and Counseling:	As needed for past issues, trauma, decisions. family, marriage, emotional health.			

The fruit of the spirit is...self-control... - Galatians 5:23
 The days that were ordained for me... - Psalm 139:16

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PASTORAL BURNOUT

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