

Why Do I Feel So Hopeless?

By Rev. Dr. Chi Eng Yuan

In the last forty years burnout among pastors has become epidemic. And research reveals a cause-and-effect relationship between burnout and leaving the ministry. Gary McIntosh, in *It Only Hurts on Monday*, cites the results of a survey of pastors who had recently left the ministry and concluded that 40 percent experienced a form of burnout. Berkeley professor Christina Maslach, in *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual*, identified three major indicators of burnout (italics mine): “*Emotional exhaustion* was recognized as fatigue caused by extensive interaction with others, *depersonalization* was characterized by development of an uncaring and cynical attitude toward others, and *lack of personal accomplishment* was indicated by deterioration in self-confidence and decreased personal satisfaction with one’s achievement.” Basing my definition on Maslach’s, I define pastoral burnout as a state or process of fatigue or frustration brought on by keeping at a distance from God, others, and ourselves, which can be measured as increased emotional exhaustion, progressive depersonalization of the congregation, and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment.

Burnout takes place over a year or so and can be accompanied by a range of adverse physical and psychosomatic symptoms. A recent internal survey by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America found that 69 percent of ministers reported being overweight, 64 percent had high blood pressure, and 13 percent were taking antidepressants. Burnout is a serious problem not only among American pastors but also among pastors in other parts of the world. According to a 1999 survey, Hong Kong, one of the most crowded cities in the world with a population of seven million, had churches with 2,862 pastors and 756 vacancies. One third of these active pastors had moved from one church to another within the previous two years. Daniel Wu, the general director of the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, in *From Moving Out to Matching Ministry*, comments:

Pastors in Hong Kong churches find themselves facing higher and higher expectations from their congregations. Because fewer lay leaders are involved in the work of the ministry, full-time clergy feel increasing pressure, and in turn more full-time clergy are hired to meet congregational needs. However, some churches do have strong lay leaders in key administrative roles; unfortunately this dynamic results in a revolving door for the pastoral position.

The survey revealed that 439 pastors moved out within one year of ministry and that many Hong Kong pastors burn out toward the end of their second year.

From this overview of burnout in the West among North American pastors and in the East among Hong Kong pastors, we must recognize that all pastors are at risk. All face the possibility of potential burnout.

As a Chinese pastor of Hong Kong Evangelical Free churches, I am especially interested in the causes of burnout among pastors. In a survey conducted between 2006 and 2007 among The Association of North American Chinese Evangelical Free Churches (ANACEFC), nearly 40 percent of responding pastors named unrealistic expectations for pastoral performance as the main factor contributing to burnout. Comparison with other key factors revealed: congregational politics or powerful individuals (21 percent), spiritual dryness (17 percent), lack of friendship (17 percent), being unfit or staying too long (17 percent), and incompatibility (11 percent). Once a pastor begins to experience fatigue and frustration, he (for smoothness of reading, I’m using just the male pronoun, but all this applies to female pastors

too) may well go on to exhaustion or burnout. To quote one pastor I interviewed from ANACEFC in 2007: "I just can't hold it together anymore. I'm disappointed with a lot of things that happened in the church."

When pastors exhibit symptoms of burnout, they become even more exhausted as they discover that their influence is waning and they find themselves with no direction. They lose their spiritual enthusiasm for the kingdom of God, and as a result the church suffers. Well stated by MacIntosh in *It Only Hurts on Monday*: A burned-out pastor eventually loses vision, disengages from even primary duties and tasks, and becomes unproductive.

Burnout can produce a profound and lasting depression. The pastor physically experiences a long, sustained period of exhaustion. Archibald D. Hart, in *Coping with Depression in Ministry and Other Helping Professions*, writes:

Under continued pressure the protective and regulatory mechanisms become disturbed and the emergency system of the body uses up its reserves. Consequently, the person becomes less flexible, more guarded and sensitive, and depression ensues. In such cases the depression is both a protective mechanism and a reaction to the increased possibility of loss that comes from a diminished physical capacity for coping with life and work.

Pastors who start careers caring about others can become preoccupied with themselves, and the longer a pastor experiences burnout, the greater the likelihood that emotional exhaustion will cloud the pastor's perspective, causing him to view everything through a filter of negativity. Healthy psychological function shuts down, and this leads to apathy. At this point, the pastor either drops out or moves to another church or ministry.

Burnout in the Bible

Although the word "burnout" is not a biblical term, the concept can be explored in the lives of Bible characters and in biblical teaching. The existential reality of burnout— as evidenced by chronic asthenia and fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and development of negative self-concept and negative attitudes toward all aspects of life— is obvious among certain leaders in the Bible. Understanding burnout as a state of existential distress permits us to examine prominent biblical leaders with a view to elucidating the causes of burnout among God's servants. A classical biblical example reflecting the symptoms of burnout is the prophet Elijah. Elijah's confronted the false worship of his time under King Ahab, standing against the power of hundreds of opponents (1 Kings 18:19). First Kings 19 then recounts Elijah's ensuing burnout experience. In spite of his position and great achievements in an uneven war through God's power, such a dramatic experience could only enhance the sense of fatigue Elijah must have felt. For two years he had been in hiding, with few companions other than a widow and her son (1 Kings 17:1-24). It is therefore no surprise that Elijah fled for his life to Horeb, fearing reprisal by Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-8).

At this time, Elijah experienced mental exhaustion and feelings of inferiority. His emotional exhaustion was expressed as hopelessness: he collapsed under a tree and told God that life was hopeless and that he wanted to die. Elijah's hope and expectations faded, and he became disillusioned and apathetic, which often characterizes the final stages of burnout.

Moses, another faithful man of God, had to cope with the stubborn demands of the Israelites over many years. While not explicitly described as such in Scripture, Moses experienced progressive emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of the Israelites under his care, as well as a decreased sense of personal accomplishment, because the Israelites complained so incessantly—despite God’s provision—and brought their complaints to Moses. Moses, experiencing the symptoms of burnout, ultimately resented the Israelites. He felt alone, without friends or support, and he wanted to abandon his responsibilities. Moses was honest about his emotional exhaustion and asked God to put him to death (Numbers 11:10-15).

Although Jeremiah was eager to serve the Lord, he appeared to feel that he did not receive enough affirmation or feedback and thus reacted negatively: “Should good be repaid with evil?” (Jeremiah 18:20-21). Jeremiah hoped that his flock would still like him after they were directly confronted by the word of God, but the text actually chronicles his path to burnout. He asks, “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” (Jeremiah 20:18).

Six Factors Contributing to Burnout

Six significant factors that frequently contribute to burnout for pastors all over the world are:

- Spiritual dryness
- Incompatibility with ministry
- Lack of a personal confidant
- Cultural clash
- Insufficient rest
- Conflict

Spiritual Dryness

Pastors are invariably at risk of “spiritual dryness.” Seeking life from sources other than God (Jeremiah 2:13) or Jesus Christ can be devastating to those called out of the “desert” to the “living water... welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10, 14). Jeremiah described such “spiritual dryness” in one who is avoiding God: He “will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives” (17:6). Spiritual dryness refers to when a pastor feels he has no time for, or spends less time in, devotions or being alone with God. The result is a minister who begins to feel like a plant without water. Comparing similar patterns throughout the course of church history, theologians such as Bruce Demarest and Charles Raup, in an article for *Criswell Theological Review*, “Recovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality,” warn that American Christianity suffers from excessive dependence on a self-determination, “intellectualism,” and “ethical achievements.”

Incompatibility with Ministry

Incompatibility with ministry may occur when an individual does not appreciate the true nature of the pastorate or the extent of his personal limitations and/ or gifts. When pastors believe themselves to be inferior and incapable of facing the challenges, it’s typically because (1) they have doubts about their callings; (2) the particular pastoral position comes with an overwhelming job description, and (3) lay leaders and congregations reinforce the natural tendency to put pastors on pedestals.

That is the time for the pastor to review God's calling, for He is the one who provides the strength for His servants to meet the needs of the sheep, and He never leaves a pastor without the resources he needs to fulfill his calling. The pastor also needs to wrestle with Jesus' call for His disciples to be "servants of the Lord"; spiritual authority and leadership come only through the path of suffering and sacrifice (Mark 10:38-39). For example, Paul did not abuse his leadership position but was humble enough to serve with those same status symbols (2 Corinthians 3:9; 11:26-29).

Lack of a Personal Confidant

A pastor needs a support system to help reestablish priorities, regain perspective, and find refuge in times of trouble. To find real friendship can be complicated, depending upon how the pastor views himself. If he views himself only in the terms of his vocation, a relational distance may separate him and the congregation. Finding the needed support is also compromised by a prevailing culture that promotes the values of individualism, intelligence, and self-sacrifice.

There are times when the need for a confidant in ministry is imperative. Even Our Lord needed a personal confidant, a trustworthy disciple to support him. Jesus asked his disciples, especially his core group—Peter, James and John—to accompany Him when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-38). Paul, too, needed a confidant. He described Timothy as "one soul, one spirit, and one mind" with him, to share friendship (Philippians 1:27, 2:20). Thus, Paul naturally requested Timothy to be with him near the end of his life (2 Timothy 1:16-18; 4:17). He also treasured those "true yoke-fellows, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel" (Philippians 4:3). In his friendship with the church of Philippi, he was bathed in spiritual prayer and material support.

Cultural Clash

Cultural clash results from conflicting expectations between pastors and their congregations or unrealistic expectations pastors might have of themselves. An individual may be exposed to multiple cultures from childhood, but these may clash significantly. Accepting a pastoral calling but failing to recognize the diverse cultural values one has absorbed may negatively impact one's ability to fulfill the pastoral role. Trying to meet all the various expectations associated with one's family, national, and racial values may create tension, anxiety, weariness, and depression, all of which contribute to burnout.

Pastors should present their whole lives to God as a sacrifice (Romans 12:1). However, when cultures clash, similarities and differences must be addressed to avoid confusion and conflict. Even when we belong to a new realm, a new culture from the Lord Jesus Christ, we must still resist the influence of the old realm. That is why Paul commanded us "not to be conformed to this world" but "be transformed by the renewing of your mind," a lifelong process of "approving the will of God," as pastors understand, agree with, and put into practice God's will by following the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2).

Insufficient Rest

Survey after survey has documented the contribution of insufficient rest to burnout among clergy. Excessive demands on time—fueled by the unrealistic expectations placed on pastors by both their congregations and the pastors themselves—and the attendant lack of sufficient rest have become the norm among pastors nowadays.

Burnout does not occur just because of the heavy workload but also because of inadequate time for Sabbath and rest. The association of Sabbath with creation is found in Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:11, which is part of the fourth commandment. Under normal circumstances a day other than Sunday is usually set aside for pastors to spend time with God, family, and others. That day is the pastor's Sabbath. By understanding the true meaning of the Sabbath, any time or day can become the pastor's Sabbath, because the same Resurrection that inaugurated our Lord's present reign in power and attested His deity has also transformed every day into His day.

Conflict

Conflict is another significant factor that may contribute to burnout. My research shows that a number of pastors are forced out as a direct result of conflict between themselves and powerful leaders or between the senior pastor and other pastoral staff. Since conflict in ministry is inevitable, and unresolved conflict likely contributes to burnout, it is critical for a pastor to manage conflict effectively, both with other pastoral staff and with the congregation.

While conflict can display the true character of a pastor, it can also push a pastor into imbalance and even progress to burnout. Paul's experience recorded in 2 Corinthians made him the perfect candidate for burnout. Paul loved the Corinthian church but encountered repeated challenges and even attacks from the body of Christ. Paul was at great risk for emotional exhaustion and withdrawal from those who attacked him, and it could well have caused him to evaluate himself negatively, particularly in regard to his ministry with the Corinthians. Tension between a godly pastor and a worldly church, resulting in emotional exhaustion or even burnout, can be due to longstanding conflict, just as in the church of Corinth in the first century.

Partnering to Combat Burnout

Perhaps the pastoral search committee and the entire congregation needs to be educated about the causes of pastoral burnout. Then, pastors and their congregations can put in place safeguards against those feelings of hopelessness, fatigue, alienation, and ultimate withdrawal from ministry. What those safeguards might be are beyond the scope of this article, but the investment a congregation makes in calling a pastor ought to motivate them to ensure his spiritual, physical, and emotional health, leading to a long ministry among them.