



"GOD, I'M ANGRY WITH YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE!"

A story of burn out - honest reflections and hope for God's healing

I had been a "professional" minister for 15 years - seven as a lay pastor, two as a student minister and six as an ordained minister - and I was "burnt out". I had served in different types of churches in a variety of locations: beachside suburb, country towns near the coast and inland, outer suburban, and, lastly, in a fast developing community in the mountains within commuting distance of the city.

It was in this last place that things came to a head. I had begun ministry there part-time while I taught part-time at a Bible College and completed postgraduate studies. But the senior minister and church were so exciting to work with that when I was given the opportunity to teach full-time at the college, I declined, left teaching and became full-time in the church.

The senior minister had a great vision for the church and I was caught up in it with him. Many of the people shared his vision of a growing church centered on strong biblical life-related teaching and lay ministries. I delighted in the large opportunities for biblical teaching from the pulpit, pastoral care, management and outreach. You felt you were at the forefront of highly significant ministry. Lay involvement was at a high level and some of the people were so supportive as brothers and sisters in Christ that you felt at times you were in heaven already.

However the church was not unanimous in sharing the vision. The church had developed in a fresh direction from a fairly traditional church and many of the traditionalists remained. Moreover while the church was growing in leaps and bounds it was mainly through people moving into the area from the city - younger married folk looking for cheaper housing and retirees seeking the lifestyle of the mountains while still being close to the facilities of the city. These people brought with them their various understandings of what the church should be on about. Generally, most of the younger members shared the vision of the ministerial team with its emphasis on quality growth and lay ministries. But the retirees often came with strongly held traditional ideas of the church and its paid ministers' roles.

This led to a whole variety of expectations being placed upon the ministers and their leadership. If you pleased one group you displeased the other. It was a "no win" situation. I remember the time we came up with a recipe for a super-duper service which would incorporate just about everyone's expectations of what worship should be like. We thought we were on a winner. The elders adopted it. Before long we came to realize no-one was really satisfied. It was too contemporary for the traditionalists and too traditional for the *avant garde*.

Cracks appeared in the paid ministerial team and we realized that some had their own agendas. Also there were some retired clergy within the congregation, some of whom supported the vision but others of whom doggedly opposed it. Church meetings were sometimes tense as a result!

The time demands were great and I got used to living on adrenalin without realizing what I was doing. My family came a long second behind the church for my time and energy and to my shame there was a period of time when I hardly knew my children at formative stages in their lives and this has left its scars.

And then came the time when the senior minister became seriously ill, to the point of having to relinquish his leadership and eventually his ministry in the church. After a time of uncertainty for the people and myself, I sort of slid into the senior leadership role by default. But I was never really sure whether the people wanted me there or not. I always felt I was a



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second best option. I found it difficult to fulfill the previous leader's vision exactly as he had seen it, since everyone's vision has unique aspects to them.

The new leadership role only made the demands on my time and energy even greater and impossible to meet. But I tried. I lacked the self-confidence to be myself and tried to fulfill the expectations of others and when inevitably I failed and was criticized I began to find it difficult to cope at all. I remember talking to a wise pastor about this who reminded me that my life was like a pie and I was allowing others to slice it up rather than controlling how I used my time and energy myself. My mind understood but by then I was too far gone to make the necessary adjustments.

In the end I realized I couldn't continue this way. Depression was now a major factor in my emotional life. All in all I think it was the total situation that burnt me out over time rather than just any one aspect. I decided to leave, not only ministry in this congregation, but church ministry period, at least for a while. I would go and do further postgraduate study.

But this decision was not without its cost emotionally. It meant leaving a place which had been very exciting though exhausting, where at times you felt like you were in heaven, although at other times you felt like you were in hell. The college where I wanted to do postgraduate work was in another city in another state. We left behind extended family, dear friends and familiar places to go there. We had to begin all over again establishing roots, trusting that my wife would find work to support us while I studied.

I felt that God now owed me a peaceful break after expending myself so unstintingly in his service. Some of the people had let me down by their unthinking demands and criticisms. I did not expect God to let me down. But the peaceful break I anticipated did not ensue. My perspective on things had become skewed and my level of toleration of other people and life's inconveniences had become very low. I came to realize over time I was going through an extended period of post-adrenalin stress, having used up my reserves. I became angry not only with God's people whom I saw as having failed me, but with God himself, whom I felt was now failing me by not giving me an immediate recovery.

During this time of grief I spent some time doing up a house we had bought. The physical labour was a good change and somewhat therapeutic. We attended a friendly church whose pastor was careful not to make too many demands on us, knowing we needed time for healing. I was able to start on my research doctoral program in a fairly low key way. Things were working out OK financially. Our children were settling into life in a new city. And so God was being good to us but I was still angry with him because he was allowing certain nuisance things to happen and I found it difficult to cope with them.

It was about two years before I began to feel up to resuming ministry in a church once more. After two and a half years I returned to ministry part-time and then after a further 18 months, to full-time ministry. Since then I think the healing process has continued to go on.

Looking back I see that problems had arisen from a lack of self-esteem which led to trying to fulfill other people's expectations so they would affirm me. This meant I failed to establish appropriate boundaries around my life and ministry. Also I realize I had false expectations of what God should do in my life, such as that God should wonderfully give me a nice, peaceful, rapid healing after burn out. After all he owed it to me! But God was going to take his time. I had to learn to let God be God and call the shots in my life, even though it was painful to me and my family.

It is now almost 15 years since the experience I relate, and I am now in a very fulfilling teaching ministry in an ecumenical context where I can use my academic qualifications and teaching gift more fully. But the experience I relate has left its scars. On the positive side I can



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empathize more readily with others experiencing aspects of burnout, whether clergy or lay. In my teaching I seek to forewarn students and provide some coping mechanisms for those training for ministry. But on the down side I find it hard at times to trust God's people and even God himself. I've become a bit cynical and I'm afraid of getting hurt again, although I like to excuse myself by talking about being realistic and cautious! I have learnt that this is not an uncommon attitude for ministers who have been burnt out. While I have grown through the experience I suspect that there is still some healing to take place, some integration which needs to go on, but maybe not a lot more will happen on that score this side of heaven.

REFLECTION:

1. *Read I Kings chapters. 18-19. What factors led to Elijah's "burn out"? What helped him recover?*
2. *What boundaries did Jesus set around himself as he fulfilled his ministry? What are appropriate boundaries for Christian ministry?*
3. *What are the "tell-tale" signs of impending bum out? What actions can you take when you recognize these signs in yourself in order to prevent bum out occurring?*

RECOMMENDED READING:

Adrenalin & Stress; Arch Hart (Word)

Feeling Good; David Burns (Signet)

Unloading The Overload - Stress Management For Christians; Cliff Powell and Graham Barker (Strand Publishing Sydney)

(The writer is an ordained minister in one of the mainstream denominations within Australia and who, after about 20 years experience in pastoral ministry, now teaches theology at an ecumenical evangelical training college in Australia.)

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