



Under pressure?

The Revd Sandy Gunn brings timely advice to those who are feeling the strain

The publication in 1982 of Sanford's *Ministry Burnout* has been followed by several studies on the pressure experienced by Christian ministers.

This is indeed a vital area for pastoral concern, but there is the possible danger that the basis for the discussion is sociological, or psychological, rather than theological. It is good if there are psychological insights, financial advice, and training in management skills. But however excellent are additional disciplines, and however important it is that they play their role when necessary, it is vital that we are aware: (a) that this very issue is expressed in the Bible and (b) that tackling it is integral to the very nature of the Gospel itself.

(a) Problem of pressure

The problem of pressure in the ministry is openly expressed by Paul in many places (e.g. Rom. 7:15ff.; I Cor. 4:10ff.; II Cor. 4:7ff., 6:4ff., 11:24ff. and 12:8-10), where he follows the pattern of the Psalmist in opening himself to God who knows and understands him anyway, the various aspects clarifying as he expresses them – physical, emotional, ethical, devotional, etc.

Further consideration of the very nature of the Gospel shows that this is something to be expected! Just as the God of reason and logic is under attack by the powers of evil, and so trouble in the world appears to be unreasonable and illogical, so, too, the spiritual battleground includes particularly those who are involved in his service (cf. II Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:10ff.). Far from being thrown by pressure, we should be trained to anticipate the tortuous twists which seek to warp and defeat us (II Cor. 2:11). For it is:

(b) An integral part of God's plan

Therefore instead of trying to preserve a veneer, Paul is completely open about the spiritual battle going on, and sets the problem alongside the plan of God, e.g.:

We are under pressure, but not cornered,
at our wits' end but not at our hope's end pushed
down by man,
but never let down by God,
knocked down, but not knocked out (II Cor. 4:7f.).

This general approach may be seen worked out in detail in (i) the so-called unanswered prayer of Paul for health (II Cor. 12:8-10); (ii) the apparent disaster of imprisonment (Phil. 1:12-14), when Paul accepts that God can trump the tricks of the devil, as he depends on the power of a God who is greater than circumstances to enable him (Phil. 4:11-13).

So much of the practical parts of Paul's letters are based on the prayers of praise which are virtually condensed doctrine (Eph. 1:3-23); Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20). But too often the mistake is made of compartmentalising the Christian faith, failing to realise for example:

1. . . . that it is the God of Creation who is also the God of Salvation.

The consequence:

(a) in the popular mind is that the Christian faith is an additional burden to be squeezed into an already busy diary, or optional extra for those who like that sort of thing, instead of being integrally related, the maker of the universe coming to remake us to be the kind of people and world we were always meant to be. But

(b) in the academic mind it led to an alienation between psychology and theology, and so when Christian people are suffering from stress there is a failure to acknowledge the correct inter-relationship between the two.

2. . . . that the God of the individual is also the God of history

In contrast to a society which judges by individual success and conformity to the current 'with-it' image, the Bible sees Christians in the light of God's plan for eternity made known in Jesus Christ. Therefore it is not a case of assessment – whether by others or self-assessment – in the light of success, but rather assessment by God in the light of our faithfulness to him, who wants to work through us as channels of his eternal purpose (I Cor. 3:5-9).

3. . . . that doctrine and pastoral care are both embodied in Jesus.

Too often the two are separated, especially in dealing with our own problems! Jesus wants to deal with us, not just doctrinally, but as people, not just for a narrowly understood salvation, but for our whole wellbeing.

If, then, helping folk under pressure is integral to the gospel we seek to proclaim, far from being something suspicious, alien, or below par, it should be a natural part of a Christian fellowship. It may be thought that all this is old hat! Of course it is! But it is realising the full implications of the simple message that is so important for us when we are on overload. Recent surveys suggest that one in three ministers suffer some kind of burnout so, before our fuse blows, let us consider some of the aspects of the problem.

PRESENTING FEATURES

These may vary considerably, but often include

- (i) over-involvement in conferences or committee work to avoid the main task of the congregation/parish. Or, alternatively, a total isolation from any contact with other ministers;
- (ii) a 'persecution complex';
- (iii) a move to a new parish being escapism, the crunch coming on finding that one has not escaped from oneself;
- (iv) hang-ups or personality change following physical illness or accident;

(v) vulnerable time being after a bereavement, domestic or emotional difficulty.

Early awareness of these problems is difficult in the very nature of the normal ministry, and therefore the seeds of any problems should be noticed while students are still in the supportive atmosphere of college.

Problems can include

- (i) the difficulty of relating what is being absorbed in study to the situations in which the message is to be expressed;
- (ii) the realisation of the interplay between the human dimension of personalities and the spiritual principles of the message;
- (iii) the ability to provide leadership in a fellowship, when one's inexperience of administration leads to all kinds of unnecessary tension.

Sometimes problems do not surface in students because, while they may have had some involvement in Christian work,

- (i) if they are straight from school they have not had long-term responsibility for any aspect of Christian work, and
- (ii) if they come from other employment, it may take time for them (and their families) to be broken in to the pressures of being 'on call' for long periods, especially virtually every evening, being out most of Christmas and New Year's Day, etc.

Timothy and Titus had considerable 'on the job' experience with Paul, setting a pattern of actual involvement (with responsibility and demands of availability) as opposed to observation.

SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

A 65-item survey studying 547 missionaries concluded that 'those sources identified as producing the greatest amount of stress are all causes which can be, to some degree, alleviated by training'. Let us therefore consider some of the pressure points mentioned by Sanford and in other surveys.

Pressure sores come as a result of heavy pressure restricting circulation – let us see how the circulation of his loving Spirit can heal points where we find things heavy . . .

1. In contrast to the tendency to use statistics in church returns as a kind of football league to preserve 'our image', the Bible encourages frankness about problems we feel. A study of the passages mentioned earlier shows that true devotion, far from being morbid and introspective, is healthy and open, enabling the sharing of encouragement rather than the jealousy of comparisons.

2. While indeed we are 'never finished', yet because it is ultimately the eternal God who works in and through us and our fellow-Christians, and because our task includes the shaping of future generations, we are able to leave the final outcome to him. We are conditioned to instant coffee, results, etc., but ultimately it is God who assesses.

3. Because there is a battle on, we should recognise the spiritual dimension of our 'difficulties' and find our encouragement in Christ (John 16:33) rather than in superficial cosmetic gimmicks. It is this realisation that reminds us of the vital importance of our task in the battle for the minds and souls of individuals and society.

4. We are indeed involved in doing 'repetitive' things with the same people, but not only is each person different and precious

in God's sight, but people are experiencing different situations as they go through life. If our attention is focused, e.g., on going through the mechanics of services' then it is indeed repetitive, but our eyes can be focused on eternal issues, and our sensitivity on the deep dimension of what is making individuals 'tick'.

5. Instead of being conditioned by the 'expectations of others', we realise that we are not called to success but to faithfulness. This means that while we are the servants of the people, they are not our masters! This removes the horror of the 'goldfish-bowl syndrome'.

We remember, too, that the people do not pay the minister to be the Christian for them! The word Paul uses for the leader's task of 'equipping' (Eph. 4:11f) is the word for preparing a naval task force. Ministers are not alone in the front line – we may be at times, but ultimately all Christians are!

6. God has not promised that any servant is omniscient, but he has made promises to the church as a whole. To lose sight of this means that we ministers 'overload' ourselves and become an administrative bottleneck. We are part of God's team, involving and equipping them 'on the job' (Ex. 18:13ff.; Neh. 3:5; Acts 11:22-26; Eph. 4:11ff.; Tit. 1:5). It is often through inefficient administration and insensitive communication with others in the fellowship that misunderstandings give rise to personality confrontations which could have been pre-empted.

The vision of God's plan must be efficiently geared by leaders. There is nothing 'unspiritual' about efficient administration, provided that we do not imagine efficient administration does the work! It is God who does it through us. But if our administration is slipshod, then

- (a) people will look on us as unreliable, and this will transfer to the message;
- (b) people are less likely to trust us with confidences;
- (c) it places a strain on those who have to work with us, giving grounds for tension, and an opportunity for the devil to get access;
- (d) the work has still to be done, inefficiency increasing the strain on the memory, and uncertainty giving rise to all kinds of internal and domestic pressure.

Simple things like an internal mail letter rack which helps internal information between office-bearers to avoid the bottleneck at the minister's desk enables the administration of a fellowship to reflect the biblical picture of the body of Christ.

7. Similarly it is important that the question of 'authority' is clear. The authority is the message, but instead of this making ministers authoritarian, true authority points away from ourselves to God, and will show in a personal humility. When it is clear that we also are under the authority of Scripture, this avoids personality cults while things are 'going well', or depression when things are low.

PREVENTION

It is easier to prevent pressure sores in the first place! What is true in a hospital ward is also true of a minister feeling that he is 'under attack' or 'drying up'.

It is the very Gospel which challenges us with responsibility, the awesome accountability for the souls of men, which also provides us with the assurances of God's forgiveness, acceptance, restoration, renewal, and resources. To know that it is also he who understands us better than we understand ourselves, that 'our own completeness is only realised in him' (Col. 2:10, J. B.

Phillips), avoids the stereotyped image and enables us to be ourselves.

We are indeed often drained of energy, especially when difficulties distract from essentials (cf. II Cor. 2:11-14), but the buck does not stop with us, the availability of power being integral to the message of power (I Cor. 15:58, Col. 1:29). It was precisely because Jesus knew earthly energy entropy that he took time to be with the Father, and encouraged the disciples to come apart and rest awhile. The disciples were called to be 'with him and to be sent out' (Mark 3:14). Therefore to avoid spiritual malnutrition we need time to be with God for our mental metabolism to work as we feed on the spiritual food of the bread of life contained in his Word.

But while it is important that ministers do take time off in the normal sense of the word, unfortunately the benefit of time off and time with God does not always circulate to the pressure point, and the value of conferences, etc., leaves one feeling one's own situation even more cold!

We deal with fluid situations and living people, and so there is no stereotype pattern in the Bible (I Cor. 9:19-27). But the underlying purpose of God is the same (cf. Acts 20: 27f) in the light of which detailed priorities will be reviewed regularly.

It is important, therefore, that we consider the pattern of II Cor. 4:7f. quoted above, where Paul sets his problems alongside the plan of God. Too often we fail to relate the two. A possible preventative pattern might be to set aside (except for a death or serious emergency) one complete day every 2-3 months as follows:

1. Start the day

(a) *by reading* a complete book of the Bible. If we are to be channels through whom God makes his appeal, it is important that the intake is not blocked. Too often our intake is too small: 'Lord, speak to me that I may speak'.

(b) In the light of this then *be completely open with God*, for the Spirit 'intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'. What a relief it is to know that we need not – and cannot – hide anything from God. Ask him to assess motives, intentions, priorities.

2. After coffee

Assess the situation, noting the needs of the parish/congregation and any individual in whose life you sense God is working. Paul speaks of declaring the 'whole counsel of God'. In assessing the situation, it is important to see that there is no imbalance creeping in, not deliberately, but because other activities are slowly squashing out some aspect.

The church is a fellowship of God's people, learning, caring, sharing, and praising. Consider what happens if any aspect is omitted:

(a) Suppose caring is omitted the message becomes impersonal information instead of transforming love, and the church becomes an institution of 'those and such as those', missing out folk in trouble and nosing the NT note of encouragement.

(b) Suppose learning is omitted there will be no equipping of people to show the impact of the gospel in contemporary society, and no training for growth of future leaders to ensure that a clear understanding of the message

is handed on to the next generation.

(c) Suppose sharing is omitted there is no outreach and the congregation becomes older until there are not enough left to care for those needing care.

(d) Suppose praising is omitted the fellowship become a club or religious ghetto doing things in our own strength, with the development of arguments 'Do it *my way*'. To focus on a biblical balance helps to set things in a perspective of God's purpose, rather than to get bogged down in the details that depress.

3. After lunch

comes the task of trying to gear the vision into action.

(a) Obviously some situations, e.g. a death, will action a minister, but we are dealing with the priorities in the use of time when one is not absolutely actioned by the situation. Efficient preparation will mean that we are then able to be more flexible, natural, and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is a great help to identify, specify, and aim, rather than just muddle through.

(b) One will bear in mind the need for efficient work-flow so that one is not swamped by work at particular times of the year, covering much preparation, stimulation, housebound visiting, door-to-door work, etc., during those months when things are traditionally 'lighter'. One of the things which makes a heavy workload viable is the variety of the work itself.

Earlier we saw that the word Paul used for the work of leaders was the word used for setting up a naval task force. Whatever our feeling about the Falklands operation, we would surely admit that the administrative task of remembering details anticipating requirements and was monumental. Among areas to be covered as we plan our equipping may be:

1. Outline of services for 3 months – themes/books being covered so that the organist has plenty of time to line up items/voluntaries.
2. Items of planning of administrative meetings with notes for appropriate clerk, leader, etc., so that he can be prepared.
3. A list of people whom you feel you would like to see, rather than of people who 'expect a show-the-flag', probably giving priority to those whom you wish to train.

This will probably take well into the evening. Try then to take time with wife/girlfriend to go for a walk, have a meal/chips, chat over things at a deep level so that you are 'at one', probably ending the day with prayer time together.

To have a vision without action is to be vague.

To have routine without vision is to become a drudge.

To have vision linked to routine is to be someone God can use:

This can happen when we set ourselves with all our pressures

In God's presence alongside His plan and power.