



Stress and the Christian worker

TN67 Training Notes series: Leadership

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These notes have not been prepared by a medical expert, although I have learned much by reading and listening to medics on this topic. Instead, they have been written by someone who observes and analyses people in Christian ministry; someone who gets over-stressed himself at times!

They have been published here in the belief that some understanding of what is a normal aspect of all work can help us take corrective action before we find ourselves in trouble.

Ignorance is far from being bliss on this particular topic.

These notes take the form of a range of checklists. But before we wade into the topic of stress, it is important to note that this is not exactly the topic we need to beware of.

Stress itself does no one any harm. We need a certain level of stress simply to function effectively. Our physical bodies are made to work under certain stresses every time we move a muscle. We need to have heightened stress levels in positions of danger to help us escape. Our whole being needs a certain level of stress to help us to make decisions. Life and stress go together.

The subject we really need to address is not 'stress', but 'distress'. That is a degree of pressure that goes beyond the optimum level for effective output and causes us physical, mental and spiritual problems. We feel we cannot cope with the demands and expectations placed upon us. Stress is good for us – up until the point when it becomes distress. Then things start to fall apart.

So, whether you are a Minister, a member of a church staff team, a mission worker or, for that matter, anyone, consider these lists to see which might have something to help you.

Ten reasons why Christian ministry can be distressful

All work is stressful, but there are special features of some Christian ministry that mean that people engaged in it may be put in a particularly pressured position. Not all these may apply to you, but check out which ones do and add others you are aware of.

- 1 **Open-ended opportunities**
Perhaps you never feel you complete the work you could do. There are no neat boundaries so that you can tick the task as finished. An Anglican Minister may have the cure of souls for at least 10,000 people. A medical mission worker's vision may be the elimination of disease in the Third World.
- 2 **High levels of emotion**
All leadership is stressful, but especially so if you are regularly up-front, if you spend your days counselling bereaved families, if you have to take tough decisions about people's employment or if you are working in places of dire poverty.
- 3 **Dysfunctional people**
Leading a church or mission may mean having to cope with people who target you for particular spite, who seek to undermine your authority, who send you anonymous letters or who make it their mission to cause disruption when they disagree with you.
- 4 **Secular environment**
Christians in some parts of the world are well used to the stresses of persecution. Here in the UK it may be anti-social behaviour on a problem estate or an increasingly secular culture attacking the Church.
- 5 **Solo working with no escape**
Many Christian workers are not in close-knit teams, some work from home rather than shared space and some will also be single. In addition church workers often find that work, home and worship are all in the same location – with no escape at 5 pm. or at the weekends.
- 6 **Long hours and financial pressures**
Many in church work are unhelpfully driven by the spiritual nature of the task, and others find themselves regularly working 60 or more hours a week, sometimes for a level of salary or stipend that causes some measure of hardship.
- 7 **High expectations**
If clergy slip up, the media are on to them at once. If there are problems with the kids that others can see, you may feel guilty. Living in a goldfish bowl means you cannot relax. But sometimes the expectations are self-imposed on a 'justification by busyness' basis.
- 8 **An environment of failure**
With church numbers falling, with secularists advancing, with increasing pressure from those 'above' you to display 'success' or to raise necessary funds, many leaders and workers are dispirited.
- 9 **Poor management**
Sadly, the Church and Christian world are not known for their exemplary management or care for workers. Too often there is an expectation for everyone to be a self-starter without need for support and development.

10 Comparisons with others

This may be true in every area of work, but some people find one level of stress an enjoyable thrill, while others under equivalent pressure crumple. You may work with someone in the former category who demands the same of you.

Five factors that affect stress levels**1 Choices**

We see this in life (food shopping used to be so much more straightforward) but also in church ministry (every church in a particular denomination used to have one basic style of worship).

2 Change

Life used to carry on year by year, but now we need to adapt to new demands, new technology and new ideas in our rapidly changing culture. Covid was a massive disruption.

3 Profile

Some leaders may yearn for days when they were followers; being up-front or placed on any kind of pedestal brings its own pressures.

4 Relationships

Not only are we dealing with a population full of mixed-up, passing and complicated human relationships, we may have problems of our own in this area to face too.

5 Ourselves

We are complex people and our specific personality, experience, health, mind and spirituality will all affect us.

Consider also your partnership with others in the above, your control over each of them, and the timing or multiplicity of such factors. 'Holmes and Rahe' stress scales (Google them) score different stressors (from death of a spouse and divorce through to Christmas and vacations). The point is that when you have to cope with several, isolated pressures all at the same time (affecting yourself, your family and your work), the sum of those stressors can distress you.

Ten distress signals from our bodies

Each one of us reacts in different ways to distress levels, but here are some of the common signs that our bodies give us when we are distressed. Note that there may also be other reasons why you display any of these symptoms. For example, high blood pressure which is not necessarily caused by high stress levels, may trigger the first one. So none of these in themselves is conclusive evidence. From the top down we have:

- 1 Tension headaches or migraines
- 2 Dry throat or neck pains
- 3 Chest tightness
- 4 Breathlessness / sweating
- 5 Rapid or erratic or forceful heartbeat
- 6 Muscle tension / back pain

- 7 Indigestion / wind
- 8 Changes in bowel movements
- 9 Frequent need to pass urine
- 10 Pins and needles in legs or arms

Ten behavioural reactions

But there are also other ways in which our bodies send out warning signals. The trouble is that distressed people may find it hard to accept that some of these are actually occurring. Work with someone who knows you well to determine whether any of these apply to you.

- 1 Feeling tired and drained
- 2 Not sleeping well
- 3 Feeling tense, frightened or tearful
- 4 Irritable or aggressive with mood swings
- 5 Indecisive and complaining
- 6 Feelings of failure and unnecessary worry
- 7 Change in appetite, libido or menstrual pattern
- 8 Increase in drinking, smoking, use of pills
- 9 Unable to concentrate for long or low energy
- 10 Poor work judgement or accident prone

Five spiritual reactions

For Christians, there are other tell-tale signs. These might include:

- 1 Lack of desire to pray or read the Bible for personal discipleship
- 2 Feelings of worthlessness and sinfulness with lack of self-belief
- 3 Feelings of guilt and hypocrisy as a Christian worker or leader
- 4 Wanting to avoid God, often by working harder to show you can cope
- 5 Wanting to hide from other Christians to avoid difficult questions

Ten corrective actions to take

A balanced life requires three types of break from normal, daily toil: outputs – to expend energy and offer challenge (good stress); rest and recovery (sleep and winding down); recreation (physical, intellectual, spiritual).

So if you find yourself slipping from good stress to bad distress, what can you do? Above all you need to remind yourself that God loves you and may expect less of you than the burdens you are placing upon yourself. Accept that you are not the answer to everything! Then:

- 1 **Identify your likely stressors**
Make time to identify and understand your stressors so that you can then write out a plan (it is wise to do this) for how to minimise their impact. These notes might form a good starting point.
- 2 **Take regular breaks from work**
The Sabbath principle is enshrined in creation. We all need to break the stresses on us each week and learn to relax – which may mean escaping the work environment.
- 3 **Follow a pattern of sleep and exercise**
Your body needs regular sleep so a reasonably fixed timetable may be as important as the number of hours in bed. Exercise allows you to replace mental stress for some good physical stress. Check your diet.
- 4 **Order your day**
Feeling out of diary control adds to stress, so a well-ordered daily programme with routines and fixed points may well help. Cut out as many engagements as you can. Celebrate every time you say 'no' to a request. Seek to avoid crises and multi-tasking.
- 5 **Improve the working environment**
Being unable to find papers or other items in a chaotic work-space may reflect a less than tidy way of working. Decluttering your area can have a positive impact.
- 6 **Put your spiritual life in good order**
When stress increases one thing to go may be regular times of prayer, meditation and study of the Scriptures. Putting them back as priorities will give a basis to each day.
- 7 **Take longer breaks**
The Sabbath principle needs to be extended to proper holidays away from base and, perhaps in some situations, an extended break for something different, even if related to your work, such as a research project or sabbatical.
- 8 **See your doctor**
If you are clearly distressed the sensible approach is to take professional advice from your medical expert. You are not necessarily looking to be signed off, though the doctor may do this, but to be examined and helped to see what action to take.
- 9 **Contact others**
If you work or live solo, seek to spend some time each day with others, whether in a work team, friends/family or in social activity. Join a club, train as part of a sports team, make time to be with others in any way that fits you.
- 10 **Take a 'planning retreat'**
Make time to consider the big picture of your life and work and take your eye off the detail for a day. Get everything in perspective. See Training Notes TN54 on this website for more on this idea.

Biblical case studies perhaps for group discussion

Consider the Gospels. What were the particular stressors that Jesus was living under during his years of ministry? What can you learn from how he handled these?

Take 2 Corinthians (especially chapters 4 & 11) and note the pressures that Paul was operating under and the way the gospel message shines through all this. What can you learn from this?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN67. See also Article A25, *Working from home*, and Training Notes TN7, *Ideas for how to make time for life*, TN24, *Church members can burn out too*, TN54, *Creating space for a Planning Retreat*, TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*, TN106, *Talk about taking time off*, and TN151, *Loss of leadership passion*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN67 under Leadership.

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