

Ministry Stress and Burnout

By Bob Young

According to a New York Times op-ed article (www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html, "Congregations Gone Wild") written by G. Jeffrey MacDonald, United Church of Christ minister and author of *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul*, U.S. clergy are suffering from stress and burnout from an unlikely source. Yes, ministers work long hours and fail to take vacations, but a more frequent problem is congregational pressure to do things that may not contribute to genuine ministry.

Most ministers see ministry as an opportunity to help people through life's crises, to encourage spiritual growth, and to help people become more compassionate and Christ-like. Such ministers want to bring both church and unchurched people closer to Jesus. In fact, one survey done by this author suggested that a major cause of clergy dropout was the distractions and lack of opportunity to do the very thing that attracted survey respondents to ministry in the first place—reaching souls for Jesus and making a difference in the spiritual lives of people. These goals are often at odds with the increasing desire of church attendees for entertainment and enjoyment, with nothing challenging or upsetting. Increasingly, the result of such desires is worship services with entertaining videos, movie-style narratives and short stories, requests that sermons be shorter, Bible classes that deal with topics and current events more than the message of God revealed in Scripture, and self-centered mission trips that are more focused on the experiences of the U.S. participants than the real needs of the mission point. The problem is also seen in the tendency of churches to hire ministry staff to meet the needs of the congregants, with ministry focused internally rather than externally. Ministers may spend much of their time working with the needs and desires of church members, recognizing that meeting the expectations of the members is a major factor in keeping their jobs. Along the way, however, many ministers feel that personal integrity is sacrificed. Surveys show that as church life becomes more and more consumer-oriented, many ministers experience increased stress, health problems, chronic fatigue, and eventual burnout.

Consumerism is seen in the increasing tendency to choose churches based on whether church programs meet personal or family needs. Another evidence of consumerism is the tendency toward "people-following" so that people choose churches based on whether they like the minister and leave when the minister leaves. The result of such dynamics has been a rewrite of ministry job descriptions. The primary expectations of ministers no longer center in biblical sermons that admonish and encourage life change, the ability to teach or evangelize, spiritual leadership evidenced by prayer and God's presence, and pastoral counseling that provides help and strength in times of spiritual difficulty.

One result of these changing expectations is a generation of ministers who are not able to do those things that are a part of Biblical ministry, things that have been a part of Christian ministry for twenty centuries. I know ministers who do not know the Bible and do not read it to become acquainted with it. I listen to ministers who cannot preach or teach effectively, and have no idea how to teach an unbeliever about Jesus. Many ministers have never visited a shelter, prison, or nursing home. They cannot lead a congregation in such ministries because they have never gone themselves. As a result, no genuinely holy community is formed because too few are interested in living a "set apart" life devoted to unselfish causes greater than our own personal needs and wants.

I have been a minister for over 40 years. I have continued in both good and difficult days because in ministry I find a meaning and a purpose that integrates my existence. The church exists, as it always has, to save souls. Ministers are blessed by church members who want to be challenged and to grow spiritually in their walk with God and interactions with the lost. Ministers need church members who want personal challenges in such areas as spirituality and outreach. There is a joy in ministering among people who share a common purpose. Such churches light a fire in the soul of their preacher—a fire that doesn't burn out but burns on ever more brightly.