

## MAJOR THREATS TO CHURCH WORKER WELL-BEING

In his excellent book *Holding Up the Prophet's Hand* (Concordia Publishing House, 2011) Dr. Bruce Hartung has done a great service to the church, the church's workers, and the congregations, schools, and other ministries served by those workers. I highly recommend Dr. Hartung's book. It is rich with spiritual depth, professional expertise, pastoral wisdom, and practical advice.

Among many other important and helpful things, Dr. Hartung defines four major threats to church worker well-being. I have paraphrased some of his comments below and have added some of my own *in italics* (in some cases echoing Dr. Hartung). Most of my observations relate to pastors since that's the ministry that I know best.

1. **Spiritual Attack.** The devil hates God, the Word of God, and the messengers of God's Word. The congregation's call to the workers places the workers in greater danger of spiritual attack than if they were not doing ministry. The congregation must support their workers in this spiritual battle. *[Some kinds of spiritual attack: relational strife; moral failure; sense of unworthiness and shame; hopelessness; spiritual arrogance]*
  - *Questions to ask about dealing with spiritual attack: Are we in regular and faithful prayer for our pastor and other workers? Do we encourage and honor our pastor's personal devotional time as part of the work week? Do we provide for regular times of retreat and refreshment that are not his vacation days? Do we encourage his participation in small group Bible study and prayer as part of the work week?*
2. **Burnout.** Our most dedicated workers are the most vulnerable to burnout. To burn out, you had to be on fire at one time. Those who were never on fire will not burn out. Burnout can be caused when hopes and dreams come up against the realities of ministry. *[Burnout results from chronic disappointment with oneself or one's ministry. It causes people to go on autopilot, to "phone it in" or to "read from cue cards" instead of working creatively and personally. People in burnout may seem distant and uncaring.]*
  - *Questions to ask about preventing burnout : How are expectations defined, and who defines them? What happens when expectations are not being met? What happens when a member complains to a lay leader that the pastor is not meeting his/her ministry needs?*
3. **Excessive Stress.** We need the right amount of stress in our lives, not too much or too little. Good stress is healthy and makes us more productive. Keep stress in a range that is healthy for you and moves you toward wholeness. When stress is not managed properly, the body and mind stay in stress response mode and bad things start to happen. Congregations want their workers to be in stressful situations as they minister to people in situations such as marital conflict, illness, accident, life crisis, reaching the lost, dealing with parents of students, etc.). Good workers are often in such situations because they care for people and are faithful in ministry. *[People who are stressed out are often frantic and unfocused. They always seem to be in a hurry, with no time to spare. "Stress-out" can lead to declining competence in ministry and disengagement from authentic relationships.]*
  - *Questions to ask about managing stress: Do we insist that the pastor take his day(s) off every week and tell him he must take a break from pastoral duties except in cases of true emergency?*

*Do we encourage and support his regular and faithful involvement in physical exercise? Is his compensation package a stress reliever or a stress inducer?*

**4. Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS).** Our best workers are the most vulnerable because they care the most deeply for people. The more compassionate the worker, the more vulnerable the worker is to STS. STS is cumulative. Over time, secondary traumatic stress builds up. It can become problematic and even disabling. It can lead to burnout, the inability to care. How can we help our workers to talk to people about their own STS, and how can we slow the growth of STS?

- *Questions to ask about STS: Do we provide for our pastor's regular consultation with a mental health professional? Do we allow for extra time off after a particularly stressful event, such as a sudden death of a member, a community crisis, Holy Week and Easter, etc.?)*

**5. And I will add one more.** St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:28 – “Besides everything else, I face the daily pressure of my concern for all the churches.” (For parish pastors, it might read “the daily pressure of my concern for all the members of the congregation and those close to them.”) This verse describes *the spiritual pressure of pastoral ministry – the God-given responsibility for the care of souls*. It's always there, whether you realize it or not. It's part of the call. It comes with the territory. It's a different kind of stress, a stress of the spirit. I think the best way to deal with it is to follow the advice that a much older pastor gave me early in my ministry: “Stay close to Jesus. He's your best Friend.” Amen to that!