

Practising Healthy Ministry

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DEANE MEATHERINGHAM

INTRODUCTION

How do we manage stress and its consequences of tiredness, depression and anxiety? These states are recognized as large detrimental contributors to our general health. Will we finish well?

I will draw on some of the material made available by Arch Hart, Senior Professor of Psychology and Dean Emeritus Graduate School of Psychology Fuller Theological Seminary.

God made us whole human beings not compartmentalized beings, Genesis 2:7. We are prone to divide our lives into two or even three compartments. One compartment is our spiritual life and the other is our outer physical life. This is what is called dualism. In contrast, the Gospel of God sees our lives as one whole. God created the seen and unseen and structured us to live in relation to him, each other and the earth. Thus, when Christ heals, he makes men and women whole and unafraid of the contributions of medical science towards our healing and well-being.

Scripture Matthew 11:25-30

THE HEAVY YOKE

It is heavy because the Pharisees devised many rules to avoid wholehearted obedience to God. Many rules make lots of work in the keeping of them and they can become a burden to the yoke wearer, Matt. 23:4. This yoke becomes heavier because of the interminable guilt it breeds and accumulates.

Many who are involved in ministry, lay or ordained, are weary and tired. A rich tiredness comes from work, a job in progress or from the satisfaction of completing a task. Another tiredness is linked with depression. Women more often feel depression than men do, whereas men may deny they are depressed but show it in being irritable, grumpy and angry. Grief and loss are a cause of depression. Many rural congregations have experienced loss and grief through the shrinking of their community and congregation, from the drought, and from the powerlessness to do anything about it.

I wish to give more attention to the depression that comes from stress. The engine of our bodies is jammed on full throttle. For example, you leave it until 5:00pm Saturday to begin preparing for Sunday Service and remember that the service is combined with the Anglicans, and the priest is most probably going to be a worshipper. Things do not come together. You grow impatient, then angry. This is stress!

Stress not only comes from difficulties, conflict or disappointments. Stress can be triggered by anything that creates a state of arousal. Stress comes from the things we enjoy. We get pleasure from success and in proving ourselves. We keep working, even telling ourselves that it is in the service of God. To meet the need set up by stress our bodies produce adrenalin, which creates a heightened state of arousal. Increased adrenalin gives a heightened sense of well being, increased energy, excitement and a reduced need for sleep. The result is we keep seeking pleasure from this source. There is never enough pleasure to satisfy the brain (example: rats).

Under stress cortisol production increases to such an extent that it forms a barrier to our pleasure receptors. This is when we experience let down or depression. Anxiety may set in. More and more common is the experience of anhedonia. Over stimulation of the brain's pleasure center leaves us unable to experience pleasure (anhedonia) with our loved ones or with God. In the Western world, this condition is becoming epidemic and is the experience of a growing number of people engaged in Christian ministry.

We find that we are wearing a heavy yoke. The gods always make us work. There is no rest here, only disillusionment and an inability to hear God.

CHRIST'S EASY YOKE

Christ's yoke is his relationship with God as his heavenly Father, Matt. 11:27. In communion with God, Jesus does not initiate anything of his own. Jesus finds obedience to God easy and light, as he tells us elsewhere "it is my meat and drink to do my Father's will".

Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves and to live in the same communion he has with the Father. He will take off our weighted load and give us his yoke of rest. What rest is this? It is the same as the Sabbath rest, Gen. 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11; Hebrews 4:3, 9. When Christ frees us from the tyranny of constant stimulation, he frees us to obey the Lord and have a day where we desist from working and learn to relax.

The rest of Christ frees us to seek medical assistance for clinical depression and anxiety attacks. Medical science provides great help, but having received that help we need to alter our lifestyle and manage our adrenalin.

Changing yokes is a form of conversion that we desperately need. Should our congregations be Christian workhouses or should we be living examples of God's rest where creativity may flow and we are able to minister in Christ's indwelling life and authority.