

## SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

### **GÁL JOZSEF: BURNOUT IN THE PRIEST'S CAREER AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF PREVENTION**

BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA

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My encounter with the professional affections that affect pastors happened in the field of practice by realizing that although being at the beginning of my career I am unprepared for many difficulties encountered in the field of daily pastoral work. I was also surprised by the fact, that the weaponry of faith also proved to be ineffective against them. I often had difficulties even with identifying the opponent. Who did I have to fight against? The church members, living in their mere world, my wife, our growing children, even God, or - myself?

First of all, I tried to make up for my own professional shortcomings by learning more about how humans encounter and cope different situations. My desire to help my colleagues prompted me to join the HISZ team, a group born to support Reformed Transylvanian pastors regarding their vocational, work-related issues. I equipped myself with psychotherapy specific tools, avoiding to get caught empty handed.

My therapeutic tools have been taken from the following areas:

- Bioenergetic analysis (individual) - analyzes the difficulties of life in their context, taking into account the effects of mental events on the physical level, using this link and healing (e.g. the importance of different physical symptoms; increasing the level of stress management through exercise)
- Brief therapy (short analytical psychotherapy, individual) - Therapeutic procedure of 20-25 meetings with emphasis on deep psychological contexts
- Positive psychotherapy (individual) - a therapeutic approach that mobilizes positive personality reserves
- Mediation - a method used to resolve specific conflicts in personal relationships.

The last station on the road in writing this dissertation was designed in the spirit of prevention. The advanced training courses organized within the National Council for Pastoral Care have created the possibility of including practical courses in the ministry of pastors, in addition to traditional theological

lectures. Between 2017 and 2021, we organized five continuous training sessions in the two reformed dioceses in Romania with the participation of two more fellow trainers.

The topicality of the subject of burnout in the pastoral career is ensured, on the one hand, by the traditional pathogenic character of some of the circumstances, determining the work of a priest. The idealization of pastoral work by novice pastors, the lack of competence resulting from the structure of theological training that leaves many areas of practice uncovered, priests entering without means into a diverse system of expectations are further such causes.

On the other hand, the extremely rapid socio-political changes of the last three decades in Romania have added new challenges to the traditionally existing “pastoral package”. The changes in the framework that have been felt so far, the simultaneous appearance of contradictory roles and the lack of available models make navigation difficult and often results in overlapping of crises.

The aim of my thesis is to bring the topic of burnout closer to all those who may be affected, even to potentially interested, drawing attention to the dangers of burnout, highlighting the aspects can be applied during individual life and at different institutional levels.

This dissertation deals only with the topic of burnout in the pastoral field, the phenomenon of burnout not being studied so far among the clergy of the Transylvanian Reformed Church.

The research was conducted with the participation of Reformed pastors I came in contact with during the sessions described above. As a research method the type of structured interview has been chosen, this method allowing a more detailed elaboration of the causal relationships in relation with each participant.

We used American works mainly as a scientific basis for the burnout phenomenon. German-language literature, rooted in the life of German and Swiss churches, brings us closer to the center of the dissertation, the issue of the risk of clergy burnout. In my approach, the processing of Hungarian literature has been secondary. I relied mainly on the work of Gábor Hézszer, who made the most comprehensive summary of burnout and mobbing available in Hungarian in connection with auxiliary occupations. In addition, the sections dealing with general stress processing, occupational health and working conditions were those in which the Hungarian language literature served as a guide in writing the thesis.

The different sciences that deal with the phenomenon of burnout allow us to understand the syndrome through the multitude of perspectives approached.

Burnout is not considered a disease by medicine, although its description is accepted. In order to be classified and treated in the health system, a person affected by burnout must be (also) given other

diagnoses. Psychology shows us that burnout pushes an overworked individual through stress towards loss of performance, physical and mental symptoms.

Various key figures in the Old Testament draw our attention to a few important elements in the development of the syndrome: Samson's case highlights the danger of losing balance in the service, Saul's shows the risk of capping and the inability to grow. The lives of Isaiah and Jeremiah, on the other hand, are positive examples of steadfastness and coping, despite the many difficulties they encountered.

In the development of the syndrome, the characteristics of the personality structure, life events and their impressions, nature and quality of training, current life situation and quality of supporting relationships, adequate work schedule and structure, overwork and mobbing at workplace, exposure to various expectations and lack of rest, all play a role.

In discussing the themes of the first chapter, the novelty consists in broadening the biblical foundations of the Old Testament and elaborating the effects of the burnout stages on spirituality and spiritual life. These effects largely determine the pastors concerned in many ways: as individuals and in their role as pastor-leaders.

The traditional ecclesiastical approach places many problems, which can be described by the concepts of stress, trauma, crisis, as well as the phenomena of anxiety, anger and aggression in the perspective of sin and sometimes lack of faith. Proximity to sin and the connection with it make its mark on the whole phenomenon: most of those listed fall into the category of unwanted, repressed, or avoidable content.

However, the range of stress-related phenomena is becoming increasingly acceptable in the "civilian approach", and scientific studies that capture and describe the phenomenon in detail play a significant role in this regard.

In the world of church employees, therefore pastors as well, the above approaches are both present and influential. The chapter aims to nuance the perspective of traditional attitudes through a scientific approach to the phenomenon, that is also found in the church.

The first chapter presents the possible stages of recognition and change in terms of stress generation and treatment modalities. The definitions section describes the phenomena of stress, crisis and trauma. These concepts are used in connection with the development of burnout in the church to explore intrapsychic processes. The role of internal spiritual laws in the burning work of both the auxiliary and pastoral professions is often overlooked, and interest is focused almost exclusively on the factors arising from the specific situation.

The purpose of the second chapter is to provide a description of the process from a conceptual point of view, using concepts of the psychological literature (such as stress and stress-related phenomena). In this chapter, we also look for the answer if whether or not stress variables can be controlled. To counteract the unilateral negative perception of stress, we also take stock of its positive effects, mentioning its physiological effects and external consequences. At the end of the chapter, we examine the phenomena of stress optimization and post-traumatic development as opportunities to maintain or regain balance.

The hypothesis based on this chapter is the following: The constantly changing circumstances result in tasks to be solved, which in the absence of available solutions, increase the risk of burnout.

Summarizing this chapter, we can make the following statements:

- In addition to stress prevention as an avoidance strategy, it is necessary to emphasize the need to regulate stress variables, which can cause burnout. These variables can be of external or internal origin.
- Blocking affect and restraint increases anxiety and worsens the situation. The statement also applies to the church approach (sin, unbelief).
- Unlike the general approach, which focuses primarily on negativity, stress also has obvious positive benefits: it can be seen as a source of energy, it can increase the sense of belonging by producing oxytocin, it supports development, learning, via dopamine production, supports activity and creativity by increasing the level of serotonin, strengthens the experience of positive emotions, helps to discover the meaning of life.
- The ultimate way to deal with stress is to optimize it.
- Identifying critical people for effective treatment is of paramount importance.
- Processes that can be classified as harmful (also) can produce positive results through post-traumatic developmental processes.
- Rest, distance and exercise are effective tools for managing stress.

In addition to the initial hypothesis (Constantly changing circumstances resulting in tasks to be solved, which in the absence of available solutions, increase the risk of burnout.) It is necessary to make the following addition: The situation is not hopeless even when harmful consequences, diseases, traumas following lost battles: their further processing and integration allows learning based on painful experience: post-traumatic development.

The basic assumption of the research is the hypothesis that all the interviewees started on the path of the priesthood guided by ideals. These, by their nature, are in many cases idealistic, schematic, unrelated to practical realities, inspired rather by projections, or identification processes. However, despite their origins, their impact can be very real and strong.

During theological studies, these idealistic ideas, sometimes naive, are already undergoing some change, but the real effects come from the direction of practical priestly life, constituting the point of conflict between the field of theory and practice. From this moment, the events provide feedback on how the environment sees the person, the activity and the efforts of the priest in question. These feedbacks, together with the inevitable conflict situations, change the initial reference system and also result in a change in the overall picture. The pastor in question enters a state of internal cognitive dissonance, or external-internal conflict and crisis. If there is not too much resistance in the correction process, the conflict will be acceptable and the crisis will surface. It then becomes clear that the methods, tools and skills used are not enough to handle the situation properly. We need change, taking risks, the ability to learn new things, to restructure. The reward of the process is to develop a new balance with the help of newly acquired skills. If not, the consequences can be characterized by resignation, continued exposure to stressors, feelings of helplessness and victimization, exhaustion and illness.

#### Research hypotheses

1. Maintaining a healthy functioning is not without conflict. At the same time, I assume that success (coping) is more important than a change in initial ideals and the presence or absence of difficulties or conflicts that arise during the service.
2. The triad must be present during prevention and coping: education and continuing education - spirituality - familial and institutional support.

Examining the process, I hypothesized that the change in initial ideals occurred mainly in connection with major conflicts and crises affecting the subjects.

External and internal resources, as well as the factors that contributed to the outcome of the fight, were taken into account throughout the process. The intention to occasionally identify incomplete help, training or support / lack is not only to draw lessons, but also to identify a way forward.

#### Method

As a research method we chose the genre of in-depth structured interview, which allows exploring the events belonging to the examined topic and the psychological processes related to them. In terms of form, the in-depth interview is most likely to explore the diversity of events relevant to the topic and the system

of connections experienced by the interviewees. At the same time, the chosen type of interview provided an opportunity to use the investigative questions to emerge a hidden pattern beneath the surface of individual stories.

It was not my intention in the practical part of this dissertation to conduct a representative survey of the Romanian Reformed Church regarding burnout. Rather, I wanted to explore the issue of burnout, its prevention, to deal **with interview** difficulties, in an effort to provide enough free space for the intervention system and the human and professional faces of the interviewed pastors to emerge. In accordance with the need for objectivity, the interviews were conducted on the basis of pre-planned questions. At the same time, I have tried to make sure that the need for objectivity is not a barrier to the development of the problem. The in-depth interview, in my opinion, made it possible to pursue this goal from a formal point of view, even if the dynamics of the conversation seemed to strain from time to time the structured nature of the interviews.

#### Study population

The subjects of the interviews - eight - are all Reformed pastors living in Romania, aged between thirty and fifty. They are all married, living in a family. They have children with one exception. On average, it occupies its third parish, already having the experience of several jobs. They have enough experience to evaluate things from several perspectives or congregations of different sizes and also to sketch the way forward. Half of the respondents (Adam and Eve, respectively Zsigmond and Matild) are couples of priests.

Two of the interviewees began their careers working under guidance, being later moved to own parishes. Seven of the eight interviewees participated in pastoral training courses that we organized and conducted at the National Council for Pastoral Formation (OLTT), where we addressed the topic of loss processing, as well as how to optimize priestly performance. Prior to the interviews, the subjects did not receive any prior preparation, except for outlining the topic and defining the purpose of the interview.

#### The results of the study

Each of the eight subjects developed an ideal image of the priesthood. In five cases, this ideal image was associated with excessive expectations. According to the maximalistic nature of expectations they were exclusively goal-oriented, taking into account neither the individual abilities of the person concerned nor the actual environmental conditions.

All the initial ideas have undergone transformations over the years, with the integration of insights gained over time in most cases. In two cases, the results were unsatisfactory.

In three cases, the presence of the shortcomings was the result of family problems, involving a person from the priest's parents or in-laws.

However, the main causes of emerging crises can be attributed to the professional life of priests. These are:

- Lack of adequate staff (three mentions)
- Conflict with the previous priest
- Lack of communication with colleague (priest)
- Lack of professional guidance / limitations
- Contempt for colleagues, exclusion, lack of principles
- Misunderstanding, needs and differences of values among church members
- Excessive self-compliance at work
- Prohibition, deactivation of feelings, especially negative affects
- Deficiencies in work organization
- Conflict avoidance
- Disagreements encountered by church members
- Lack of time

The consequences of the crisis are divergent. Following the conflicts, the interviewees endured physical problems of varying severity, and one of them tried to commit suicide. The lack of feedback from the parishioners results in loss of motivation, their own sensibilities (divorce) also effecting his work (moving young people is perceived as betrayal); the inability to organize one's own life causes the micro-management of subordinates' tasks in the name of order; the priest involved in a rivalry with his predecessor changes his job in the hope that his troubles will be solved, but instead even the relationship with the new boss becomes unbearable.

On the list of events that cause difficulties, some are related to age (emotional difficulties with children growing up), lack of time or lack of available staff.

There are also positive solutions. The collegial relationship provides emotional support, and after changing roles, unmotivated and initially unmotivated church members become more and more involved, as the priest

gives them a role in making decisions, excessive pressure diminishes when the priest decides to move to a smaller parish.

Five of the eight priests mentioned the support of his wife or family - all men. The family system thus becomes the most frequently mentioned resource, providing effective support even in the event of major shocks. The truth of the statement is also confirmed from the opposite direction: the lack of expected support from the partner worsens the effects of the negative forces, causing further conflicts. In addition to the support provided by the partner, the words of gratitude from the difficult period were those that had the greatest emotional impact on the respondents. At the same time, the availability of an older, experienced colleague, the presence of smaller groups (mostly Bible study groups) and the presence of good staff support are the basis for support.

In the case of six interviewees, the area of spirituality plays a decisive role. In many cases, the spiritual dimension is the starting point of the professional practice ("I know I am in a place approved by God"). In other cases, although it is the starting point of her career, the dynamism seems to have been lost. So a spiritual beginning in itself cannot be considered sufficient. Half of the respondents reported regular spiritual practice during the interview. In addition to regular Bible reading, prayer, quotations, and Bible verses used in daily life for guidance, the notion of relationship and crying marked the path of spirituality.

Only the two pastors who have attended mental health and self-knowledge sessions over the years have explicitly stated that they do not lack and do not require special attention from the church leadership. They also reported that help is always available to them. It is true that it is necessary to research who can and wants to help, but from their experience help is always available to them. A complement to one of them: Church leadership does its best to provide support, but "we need to get personally involved." The same two priests were the ones who, despite the many negative events on them, did not let themselves be outdone, and declared that they did not intend to abandon their vocation. In their case, both the regularity of family support and the practice of spiritual practices were constantly realized and present.

Two other male pastors reported mild physical symptoms and fatigue. Leaving their jobs was no option in their case either, seeking support and rest were mentioned as a solution to the situation. One of them sees reading the Bible as a resource, that can give him spiritual support and strength.

However, half of the respondents, two men and two women, were already at greater risk of exhaustion. Three of them had physical symptoms, one person has struggled with depression in previous years.

The next female member of the group considers that she is at moderate risk for burnout. She sees her commitment springing from her calling experience. Although is looking for opportunities to relax and

recharge, she does not have a constant spiritual practice. The priesthood is perceived by her as an endless struggle.

The priest, who bears the burden of family life, is in a state of resignation in the presence of a whole range of bodily symptoms. Nor is he involved in the work of any support group, or any spiritual practice. His condition does not allow him to fight effectively: he lacks the necessary strength and determination. He can't ask for help from his colleagues either: he considers that this gesture would be a weakness, a betrayal of his own way of being.

The last member of the at-risk group has already covered many of the issues listed. In his case, the effect of a toxic work environment is most obvious. In two consecutive parishes he struggled with his own limitations in an environment defined by his predecessor, and then by a colleague. Despite the support of his wife and family, he reached the brink of despair, making concrete plans to take his own life. In addition to his relationship with God, he now has outside supporters, and the light at the end of the tunnel can also be seen: the possibility of getting out of a toxic work environment has become a reality.

#### Confirmation and modification of hypotheses

In the light of the above, we can only agree with the first hypothesis: maintaining a healthy functioning in the context of burnout is not the consequence of a conflict-free lifestyle. None of the interviewees lived a life without external and internal conflicts. Conflicts and crises are opportunities for lifelong learning, a "school of life". Following the graduation of this school, the importance of self-knowledge and of others, as well as adaptation to environmental conditions cannot be neglected.

The second hypothesis, according to which the triad of continuing education - family and institutional support - spirituality must also be present to avoid burnout seems to be validated on the basis of case studies. Two priests, both male, appear to meet the above threefold criteria, Ákos and Miklós. After completing self-knowledge and mental hygiene courses, the two declare themselves satisfied with the family and institutional support. In terms of lifestyle, although there have been both personal and professional events that have affected them in many ways (suicide of the father, parenting problems, coercion, pressure to conform, misunderstandings from church members) their approach remained dynamic.

The other six participants do not meet the above criteria and their results are not so clear. They have all approached exhaustion at some point and have fewer tools to deal with problems optimally, than their previously mentioned colleagues.

The basic trend seems obvious: continuous formation, complemented by a dynamic balance life achieved inclusively by spiritual practices, as well as the presence of support from the family and environment are

essential elements both in the prophylaxis of burnout, in the process of dealing with its results, or even the road of rehabilitation.

## Conclusions

The burnout syndrome, although it has become a common concept in Western countries, has failed to gain independent diagnostic status in medicine. Psychological sciences highlight the syndromic nature of the phenomenon, thus emphasizing the complexity indicated by the concept.

In the following, I will formulate some new aspects that can be added to the description of the burnout process, and then I will discuss the insights gathered during the writing of the dissertation in the order of the hypotheses formulated in the chapters.

In a number of biblical examples from the Old Testament, burnout syndrome is most eloquently emphasized in the case of the prophet Elijah. In the theological part of my dissertation, I add some aspects to this generally accepted approach. Samson, the judge, Saul, the first chosen king of the Israelites in the Old Testament, the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, are all servants of God by accepting their calling. Their service affects not only their daily lives, but their destiny and death as well. Two of them proved unworthy of service: Samson breaks his nazir vow, and Saul wants foresee the future, ignoring God's explicit denial in this matter. Their failure is in stark contrast to the glorious moments in the lives of Jeremiah and Isaiah.

These prophets, although they often faced daily difficulties and could not avoid tragedies that affected them in their person, maintained the coherence of their actions in accordance with the task they had received from God. Their example highlights the importance of the setting in which life events are interpreted. The existence of purpose in life, the presence and the quality of the spiritual approach involved are closely related to the way life events gets evaluated, including their effects. The examination of our own life events, in the light of the intermittent burnout process, can make us aware of our own vulnerability even in the presence of God.

The first hypothesis formulated in the dissertation is the following: Idealistic expectations regarding pastoral service, if not solved favorably, lead to crisis situations, which increase the danger of burnout.

Due to its nature, the vocation of the pastor is associated with a lot of idealistic ideas. Most candidates for priesthood are building on such ideas, thus career choices are also affected. After completing their studies, the confrontation with the realities of life can result in a phase in which divergences cannot be overlooked. Thus, it becomes obvious that some of the initial expectations may not be met, and idealistic conceptions need to be adjusted. Changes often occur during conflicts and can lead to disappointments of varying magnitude. In formulating our Christian ideals, we can be helped by the examples of various New

Testament actors who, in their own time and in their own circumstances, endured to the end, assuming all the consequences. Their lives have become one with the task that they have recognized and assumed, becoming examples to follow, but idealized by their nature. Their example cannot, for this reason, be a pattern, which can be taken over, copied and applied without change. It cannot be the task of any given pastor to complete the work of salvation of Jesus Christ. The one, who takes on tasks exceeding his or her capacity or boundaries, becomes imputable of God-complex. In addition to the example of Jesus Christ, the lives of the disciples and the apostle Paul are marked by a God-given task. Their situation is unique, both in terms of the of the church history and the history of salvation. At the beginning, in the starting period of the Christian Church, their example was to help possible attendees in decision making, to support church members to remain steadfast in faith, to motivate, and help many believers in various life situations. Therefore, although their example is meant to be followed, the area of personal abilities and of the circumstances depending on the environmental factors cannot be ignored.

The interviewees mentioned the pastors of their own congregation on five occasions as the formative example of their own ideals, and listed characteristics related to pastoral vocation as a source of their own vocational inspiration in three cases. Two times the image was motivated by a relationship: the quality of the relationship between a couple of pastors, a tutor and a pastor respectively. In five of the eight cases examined, idealistic images became a source of exaggerated expectations, followed by emerging conflicts. In the process, these expectations have been transformed and, excepting two cases, become integrated. In case of two improperly crafted ideals, on the other hand, the process seems to get interrupted. The pastors in question were disappointed with their ideals, they gave up their intention to achieve them, but they could not replace them with other ideals or goals. The two can be considered to be in danger of burnout, thus fulfilling the conditions of the first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis: The ever-changing circumstances result in situations and tasks to be solved, which, in the absence of available solutions, increases the risk of burnout.

The process of encountering the unpleasant effects can be described in terms of the concept of stress and its consequences. Unlike the intuitive approach, which would suggest avoiding stressors, the effects of stress are clearly not just harmful or bad. The complete avoidance of stress is never beneficial, not even if experiencing it accompanied by the phenomena of aggression, anger and trauma, being often forbidden in the Christian tradition. One argument against forcing stress into a clearly wrong category is the notion of benefic stress, that allows coping, thus development. Following the constructive effect of stress, we can strengthen our self-confidence, acquire new skills and knowledge, and become more active and creative in coping processes, which aim to solve stressful situations. Stressful events can also help us to discover the meaning of our being. However, the inefficiencies encountered and the unavailability of solutions can lead

to fatigue as well as the predominance of negative affections. The solution can be brought by stress optimization, affection management, avoidance of stressful situations and providing opportunities for relaxation.

Although stressors increase the risk of burnout in the absence of available solutions, balancing the situation is not an impossible task, and burnout can be avoided. The condition of a balanced situation: the level of the required effort cannot exceed the amount of energy, which has to be invested in the long run.

Third hypothesis: In the field of professional life, the effectiveness of coping can be improved by taking into account one's own needs and obtaining adequate support and skills.

The circle of the pastoral family is the most important resource, but at the same time the most neglected area, according to the interviews and feedback of the pastors who attended the care and support sessions. The support received from family members makes it possible to cope with the task, sometimes even beyond a beneficial level. In male pastors' case, the helpful character of the wife is most prominent. Despite the fact that in most cases priest wives have a job, and they are not employed in the parishes run by their spouses, the support of priests is guaranteed. Thus, in addition to their own work, priest wives often perform what they perceive as tasks to be done, either voluntarily or under the pressure of circumstances. The reports also show, that the pastor's wife and family are forced to agree to be deprived of the priest's presence, of the time and energy needed, in order to perform his duties.

Regarding the female pastors, the situation is completely different. Although the external conditions allow their employment, they often seek their place in an environment defined by a predominantly male majority, assuming tasks could be defined as more masculine traditionally. They don't have many role models in this process. The situation often requires a new approach from the environment also, e.g. a church council meeting in a traditional and conservative rural congregation, where the dominantly male council members do not have any previous models for interacting with female pastors.

According to results, female pastors rated their husbands' support as lagging behind the help received from the wider environment. This fact highlights the increased vulnerability of women pastors to burnout. The situation can be explained by the fact, that women's assertivity level is lower, than that of men, and they tend to prioritize relationship needs more upon their personal needs.

Further, the importance of family support is highlighted by the wounds inflicted in this area: pastors who have been hurt in their own marriage have shifted their sensitivity to their work also, creating room for potential future disappointments. They could not ask for help, they felt that in their pastoral service the

discomfort created could not be diminished. Given their vulnerability, the instability of privacy seems to greatly increase the potential for professional imbalances.

In maintaining the own health and coping skills, it is vital for the pastor to be able to articulate and express his/her own needs. Expressing one's needs is often left behind by the priorities of the environment and superiors. When balancing needs, it is inevitable to pay attention to external tasks or responsibilities: do they hurt the pastor if they are or need to be automatically accepted?

During self-reflecting activity, it becomes possible to discover one's own involvement and sensitivity, in order to create a healthy level of expectations acceptable to all parties involved in the process.

Burnout can also be seen as a consequence of losing balance between different areas of life. The appearance of the imbalance can be traced using different balance models, which are simple to create: by tracing the areas we avoid, or where there are signs of overcompensation. The graphic representation allows visualization, thus awareness of the situation. This can decide whether or not it is possible to change the existing situation. An inventory of strengths and available resources can be followed by the development of a change strategy to address.

The long time ability to cope is called resilience in the literature. Resilience can be either improved spontaneously, or in a planned manner through so-called resilience training. Improving mental coping increases self-confidence. It would be advisable to organize such opportunities for church workers as team-building sessions, or activities that enhance the skills of leading abilities. Relaxation, the ability to distance oneself and the pursuit of a healthier lifestyle in a broader sense can also be the subject of the constructive process. By balancing the areas of life, the pastor's relationship with himself, with others, and in the professional area, the foundations of a healthy life can be created.

In terms of skills, a discerning pastor needs to keep an eye on the world and identify areas where he or she needs additional training. It is desirable that the pastor be able to provide guidance in cases where the help of a qualified specialist is needed, by knowing the other auxiliary professions. In addition, knowing one's own limits of competence provides the sense of security that a pastor needs.

Fourth hypothesis: By implementing prevention and coping measures, a significant improvement in professional performance can be achieved, which is also accompanied by a reduction in the risk of burnout.

We can distinguish two distinct phases: before the start of the burnout process we talk about prevention, the fight being carried out against various specific factors and after its occurrence.

The time frame is fundamental during the coping process. Help should be available as soon as possible, even before the harmful effects extend to the environment of the pastor and family members.

An important aspect both in the prevention phase and in the coping phase is the participation in spiritual activities of a general maintenance nature. Assuming specific tasks, on the other hand, can be the task of consistent stress management. From time to time, it becomes important to reinterpret the situation in terms of both orientation and motivation.

With the right way of approach, the range of personal skills will expand, job satisfaction will increase, time will be used more usefully, endurance will increase, and available resources can be used as needed.

Fifth hypothesis: Avoidance of conflictual situations is not the way of keeping a healthy functioning upright.

The initial ideals of the pastoral career are largely idealistic by nature. In most cases, neither personal skills nor the specifics of environmental factors are taken into account. This initial ideal needs to be reviewed and adjusted during the collection of professional experiences. The need to adjust idealistic ideals is obvious. Long-term invariance can cause stagnation, and loss of dynamism. The processing of these ideals is linked to a series of conflicting situations, in the process of professional and personal crises, the waves of which often shake the entire existence of the pastor.

Crisis assessment has a double facet. On the one hand, they represent the difficult situation in which the usual coping mechanisms fail and no longer help to solve the problems that arise. On the other hand, crises increase the growth potential of the individual involved in solving problems by integrating the skills gained and the lessons learned during the process.

Constant conflict avoidance deprives those involved of the opportunity to meet challenges. Instead of avoiding it, it is definitely preferable to choose the coping path - in stages. It is important that the process of adaptation that can ensure development begins and remains manageable and sustainable every step.

The sixth hypothesis is that the triad of spirituality supported balanced life - education and training - family and institutional support - must be present to avoid burnout.

Preparation for pastoral work is largely duty and burden of theological training. The knowledge, skills and competencies that will be acquired during the training period will determine the starting point of the candidates regarding many problems they will encounter during their activity. The systematic foundation of theological identity must begin and materialize during the training period. The lack of practical guidance in theological studies can be attributed to the many difficulties that novice pastors face in the first phase of their ministry. Although training can never be up-to-date, all possibilities need to be explored to ensure

adequate practical training. In addition to communicating the content to be delivered, the task of theological training is to enable theological students to establish their own path in the period to come.

Study subjects who participated in self-knowledge or professionally related supporting activities after their initial training were able to demonstrate much better coping than their peers. Despite the fact that difficult events did not miss their personal nor professional life, they managed to move on without being targeted by burnout, their spiritual life was characterized by balance, maintaining a dynamic attitude towards the environment as well.

The results of the study highlighted the importance of ongoing environmental support and spiritual maintenance activities. The difference becomes obvious when comparing pastors on the two opposite poles of the spectrum.

Pastors, who participate in supporting activities or programs (mental health and self-knowledge sessions) and also enjoy the support of their families:

- do not require special attention from the church leadership, they are satisfied
- are convinced that help is always available to them when needed
- take responsibility, see their own contribution as necessary and important
- show no signs of exhaustion
- do not intend to leave the pastoral career
- are active in various spiritual practices

In contrast, pastors with the burden of family life did not receive institutional support

- showed various physical symptoms, severe ones as well
- are not active in spiritual practices
- show inefficient patterns of repetitive behavior
- lack the strength and determination to change
- cannot ask for collegial help: they perceive this as a weakness, emotionally inaccessible, a kind of betrayal against themselves

In the above relationship system, the role of the listed factors in terms of burnout is undeniable.

I hope that my work on this subject will be a point of reference accessible to all those who are interested, involved or able to offer help.

## KEY WORDS

burnout, prevention, clergy, reformed church, support

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