

“Burnout is terrible for clergy”



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The first I really knew of burnout was when I started a new role, and I could not for the life of me enjoy it. We had moved to Victoria, and I wanted to go back home (to either Brisbane or the UK) and even though I could see that the move South was good for other family members, I could not make sense of the work I was doing.

I would get up in the morning, work hard — seemingly harder than I had ever worked in the past — and return home around 5pm or 6 pm, feeling exhausted, flat, emptied. Upon returning home, I would sometimes go straight to my office and sit in a huddle behind a chair as if I were six years old. It was a mystery to me and distressing for my wife, Frances, and our children.

What was more difficult was that for the new people I was meeting, this was simply the John they had appointed. They had not (yet) met the more creative or happy me that I had once been. I suspect I was something of a mystery for those who had selected or appointed me. As I had no language for what I was experiencing, I did not know what to tell them — so I hid it.

I put what I was feeling down to just being overtired and that all I needed was a good break. Sadly, days off were not refreshing because we either stayed at home or went out, and either way I was exceedingly bad company.

My weight increased and my asthma got worse. It felt like the end of the world to me.

After about a year, and with some encouragement, a parishioner and I started running about 1km weekly in order to lose weight. It was the first time any activity had broken the dismal pall. I ended up seeing my GP and enquired about medication for depression. He was reluctant to diagnose or prescribe, but he did enquire about running and encouraged me to do more of it (this decision was based on my individual medical circumstances — people should always consult with their medical practitioner about their specific treatment plan). This led to me trying “parkrun”, which is a series of weekly 5km runs that take place all around the world.

I later spoke with my wardens about taking two hours off at lunchtimes to go swimming, which they thought a good idea. Running and swimming helped, and both activities brought me in contact with new people who turned out to be curious about the life and work I professed.

It took me years to come to terms with what I had experienced. Burnout is terrible for clergy. I found I was unable to be thankful for almost anything. Burnout robbed me of the very essence of my calling. I even felt like a fraud celebrating the Eucharist. I am grateful, beyond what I can easily express, to the folk who cared for me, some of whom I think knew better than me what was happening.

If I could give myself one piece of advice back then, it would have been to attend to the things that bring energy and joy.