

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION & THE MANAGEMENT OF STRESS

By Alistair Ross

The scenario is uncomfortably familiar. The doorbell that doesn't stop ringing, the incessant sound of the telephone, the mounting piles of paper on the study floor, the rushed devotions ('If Billy Graham can manage on five minutes prayer, so can I'), the awareness of the unmet needs of hurting people, the steady and wounding flow of criticism and the constant fight to meet the deadlines of preparing for worship services each week. Is it any wonder that people engaged in ministry, whether ordained or not, full or part-time, suffer from stress? Not the helpful stress that motivates and challenges us but the stress that gnaws away at the fabric of our personality and over a period corrodes our effectiveness in ministry.

There is a sign in my doctor's surgery that says 'I'm too busy to have a nervous breakdown'. We often feel like that. Whilst in the middle of preaching a sermon I began to experience a variety of strange sensations. My heart began to beat quickly, my stomach seemed to be churning over and I began to tremble. While all this was happening I was thinking 'I am experiencing symptoms of stress; that cannot be right - I know too much about it!' No matter how experienced we are in our ministries or how broad our knowledge of psychological issues, we are still human beings and subject to stress and strain, so what do we do with it?

When I raised this issue with a trainer who specialises in stress counselling, he suggested that it is quite simple to deal with unwanted stress. The answer lies in deciding our priorities. Once these have been settled, we are able to say 'no'. We need to learn that the urgent need is not always the most important need, even if the person concerned is convinced that it is. When I started working in a new team ministry, my colleague was shocked when what he thought was an urgent pastoral problem blew up and I didn't rush round to sort it out. I explained to him that, if a person has been struggling with a particular issue for some time, a day will make little difference to him or her. It does make a difference to me, however, in that by delaying, I can be free to respond

spiritually and mentally prepared. I am not under the pressure of having to make an immediate response. Obviously there are exceptions to this approach, but without a clear understanding of our priorities, we will not be able to distinguish them when necessary.

One important way of establishing the priorities of our particular ministry, is to engage in a process of theological reflection. Theological reflection is not what happens when we are monotonously driving along or just falling asleep and we receive a sudden idea or brainwave, which we immediately try to build into a sermon! Theological reflection is a term used particularly by pastoral theologians to describe how theology engages with the contemporary world in which our ministry is based. For example, M. Taylor and S. Pattison develop the idea of theological reflection as a critical conversation between the biblical tradition, the persons understanding of faith and the modern.³⁶ One of the values of theological reflection to those in ministry is that it helps us determine our priorities. I have developed a simple model of theological reflection consisting of five stages: making space; clarifying the issue; expanding thinking; exploring feelings; and determining action.

Making Space

Creating the opportunity to stand back or move away from all that is going on around is a crucial skill needed by all in ministry. A strategic overview of a situation is one hallmark of a successful manager. However, many of us in ministry have become, slowly but surely, addicted to the 'buzz' of action, of being wanted, of being thought of as caring because we are always available. These are related more to satisfying our inner needs, than to our effectiveness. A medical analogy may help: for the sake of our patient, we need to encourage others to be paramedics rushing to the scene of the accident, while we are more usefully employed in managing the resources that facilitate emergency response, appropriate treatment and a period of rehabilitation. The best managers will, however, have had 'hands-on' experience, understand the problems, and be in a position to do something creative with the particular set of problems and personalities.

³⁶ S. Pattison, 'Some straw for the bricks: a basic introduction to theological reflection', *Contact* 99 (1989) 2-9.

Making space takes time - away from the home, study, office or church. Stepping aside to do our theological reflection removes us from the familiar reminders of demanding needs. Finding a place where we can relax and let our emotions catch up with us is important. For several years I used to travel to Oxford every month to see an academic supervisor. They were days I looked forward to, whether my supervisor liked the work I had produced, or not. Travelling on the coach allowed the demands to recede, then walking to the College and across the park, gave me feelings of freedom and space. It was at these times I re-discovered my emotions. I learned to listen to what I was actually feeling, which the demands of ministerial life had repressed. It was often during these days that my awareness of God and my ability to listen to Him were repaired. Allowing time and space for a physical separation from our tasks, allowing emotional feedback and spiritual renewal, is a vital starting point in our theological reflection.

Clarifying Issues

One way in which we are able to stem the tide of overwhelming stressful demands is to identify what seems to be the crucial issue for us at that moment. How we do this will vary, as our personalities vary. One contribution of the ideas of Myers and Briggs has been the recognition that there is more than one way of going about tasks, including theological reflection.³⁷ A person with a more inward looking nature prefers to reflect, to be still and to use written words as means of clarifying issues, while a person with a more outward looking nature enjoys activity, sound, discussion and interaction with others. For the latter, theological reflection may take place in a group gathered for such a purpose or over a meal with a friend. I find I need both, as I become more extrovert in public, whilst remaining more introvert in private. I was immeasurably helped in theological reflection by meeting with a group of church leaders every week for lunch and then going away alone for a day every three months. This enabled a balance of stimulating interaction and quiet reflection. The ability to focus may be more easily acquired by some than by others and it may be

³⁷ L. & D. Osborn, *God's Diverse People* (DLT: London, 1991) and B. Duncan, *Pray Your Way* (DLT, London, 1993).

disabled by significant stress. We may feel de-skilled if we are normally clear-thinking but cannot seem to find a way through.

At some stage, as early as possible in the start of a new job or in a new church, it is important that we as church leaders talk with other church leaders about what we do and why we do it, what hours are required to fulfil particular tasks, what resources will be made available to do these tasks and what support they will provide. Rowland Croucher in his seminar organised by RBIM talked about the importance of each person in a leadership team having a job description (that fitted onto one side of A4 paper), agreed by both leadership and the whole church. This enables prioritising to be carried out and owned by all those in the church. Making space and taking time allows us to consider whether the current issues with which we are in touch are those which we have identified as priorities, or whether undue stress is being generated because these issues are working against our priorities. For example, when a church undertakes a major building programme, the time demands on a leader may not be recognised. An adjustment in people's expectations is needed - it cannot simply be 'fitted in' along with everything else.

Expanding Thinking

Making space and clarifying issues prepare for a necessary process of theological reflection. It may be stating the obvious to say that theological reflection requires the presence of some theology in the first place! To underline this please answer the following question, 'What was the last serious theological book that you read and when did you read it?' Answer honestly and note I did not say, 'What was the last serious theological book that you bought?!' It could still be sitting on your bookshelf waiting alongside several others. Much of our theology was probably learned at theological college and it may be that we draw unconsciously on this without having owned or incarnated it for ourselves. Stress is caused by trying to shape our current pastoral or ministerial situation to a theology that does not fit rather than: building on our knowledge; broadening our thinking by reading recent theology; engaging with others at fraternals and chapter meetings; and discovering the dynamism there is in God and what he has revealed of himself. Unfortunately our churches will often reflect back to us the paucity of our own theology and our own fresh discoveries about God. For example, at the 'fast-food' end of theology I am finding it

fascinating to read my way through *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* ³⁸ with its 'bite-sized' chunks, while at the 'five course meal' end I am just beginning to explore the works of von Balthasar.

Nor should this expanding of thinking be confined simply to theology. I find the Christian magazine *Third Way* stimulating and also try to read something from the world of psychotherapy (my other main interest). We all need something to act as a counter-point to theology, but which in turn illuminates and reflects on theology. A dynamic interplay of special and general forms of revelation can enable a reflection about theology that leads to a new valuing of what God is doing in us, through us, and at times, despite us.

Exploring Feelings

Theological reflection ignores feelings at its peril. Our faith is an incarnate, embodied, experiential faith that often relies on feelings to tell us what is going on in us. Stress is felt not just experienced intellectually. Often part of the protective professionalism adopted by ministers includes a neglect of feelings. And this is especially true of male clergy. Many of the men I work with in a therapeutic capacity and many of those whom I encounter in a pastoral context have little or no emotional vocabulary. I am writing this after returning from a ministers' fraternal which I was attending for the first time. As a new person I often hide my own feelings of anxiety about joining a new group by becoming an analytic observer, and what I noticed today was the strength of feelings expressed in the language and words used in theological debate, and yet the lack of recognition or acknowledgement of these feelings. We often need both space and secure boundaries (a holy place, a quiet room, a safe relationship) in order to discover again the emotional well-spring of our being and allow feelings - lost feelings, submerged feelings, suppressed feelings, to emerge from the darkness.

Determining Action

Once we have been through this process of reflection and discovery, the time comes to plan the next move. It may be a re-assertion of our commitment to agreed work patterns and goals. It

³⁸ Edited by D. Atkinson & D. Field (IVP, Leicester, 1995).

is amazing to discover how many ministers and church leaders allow themselves to be bullied, manipulated, and even abused by the church. It is not only women who need self-assertion classes where they can learn to value themselves as people! Such assertion enables moulds to be broken, and can halt the perpetual cycle of spiritual abuse in which church leaders, feeling abused themselves may abuse others.³⁹ Stress paralyses and hinders decision making. Our plan also needs to be checked out with others whom we trust, not only for their approval (which is always nice) but also because we are not always realistic about what we can do. Life events also take their toll. Moving recently to another part of the country has heightened for me the length of time major life adjustments take. If we perceive our value is based on our doing, then stress is created because we need to do in order to prove ourselves in a new situation while we are still adjusting, facing loss, letting go of the past, embracing the future and being excited by the new. It may lead, not to life in the fast lane, but to a visit to the garage after we have blown the engine up!

The process of theological reflection is available to prevent this situation and move us on to a healthier status, not stress free, but stress enabling. These decisions and actions are grounded in: the ability to make space - physically in another place, spiritually in allowing time for the Spirit of God to ground us in truth, being and belonging; a clarifying of issues which informs us as to what is the most important item on our agenda at this time; room to expand and take on board the ideas of others that can jolt us out of our comfortable, secure intellectual ghettos; an exploration of feelings which alerts and points us to the source of both our creativity and our pain; and a fresh ability to determine action, where we now go from here. Such a process has helped me to use stress in creative ways rather than being disabled by it, and it is offered here by a practical pastor as a practical way of coping, growing, developing, reflecting and moving on so that God can continue to use us as part of his kingdom.

³⁹ See Patricia Fouque, 'Abuse in Ministry', *Ministry Today* 10 (Summer 1997).

Further Reading

M. Kirk & T. Leary, *Holy Matrimony. An exploration of marriage and ministry* (Lynx, Oxford, 1994)

E. Warren & C. Toll, *The Stress Workbook* (Nicholas Brealey, London, 1993)

R. Parker, *Free to Fail* (Triangle/SPCK: London, 1992)

The Rev Alistair Ross 's profile is in *Ministry Today* 1..

CREATING A 'LEARNING COMMUNITY' IN YOUR CHURCH

By Rob Mackintosh

Why is it that a team of committed church leaders with individual IQs above 120 has a collective IQ of 63?

A frequent mistake of organisations is to assume that the team will naturally perform up to its capacity and achieve its goals. Common experience shows again and again that this is not so. As Peter Drucker says, all boards have one thing in common: *they do not function.* ⁴⁰

Boards, whether the PCC (Parochial Church Council) or the 'elders and deacons' or the 'governing body', often range between two extremes, being either too passive or too controlling. Either way, effective teamwork does not happen, crucial decisions about the future direction of the church's ministry are not made, and key learning experiences are missed.

Yet from the outset, the Christian church has been a 'learning community'. Jesus exhorted his disciples *to learn* - 'take my yoke... and learn' (Matt 11:29). The Greek word *to learn* (*manthano*) is used twenty five times in the New Testament, leaving us no doubt that learning of the love of the Lord, the will of God, the needs of

⁴⁰ Peter F Drucker, *Management Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (Harper & Row, New York 1974) 628.