

ABSTRACT

It is hypothesized in this thesis that due to the impact of modernity and cultural expectations, pastors in Peninsular Malaysia tend to compromise the Sabbath rhythm, thereby leading to sustained stress and burnout. There are two principal areas of consideration: understanding ministerial stress and burnout in Peninsular Malaysia, and the theological perspective on Sabbath.

Historical, modernity and cultural factors, all of which affect the lifestyle and ministry of Malaysian pastors, making ministry particularly stressful, are studied. These factors form the context of pastoral ministry in Malaysia.

Research from the West indicates that there is a high level of stress and burnout among pastors in the West, and this affects their lives and ministry. Continual stress not only produces anxiety and fatigue, it also brings harm to the body, while burnout is an emotional exhaustion which blunts the capacity to relate to people and results in cynicism and feelings of disillusionment. The pastor's ability to minister effectively is drastically curbed by stress and burnout.

In order to understand the extent of stress and burnout among Malaysian pastors, a survey instrument was designed for this purpose, and the results indicate that a substantial number of them are experiencing a fairly high level of sustained stress, while a smaller number suffer from burnout. Although proportionally less than what

is found in the West, it is not an insignificant issue for Malaysian pastors. The survey also indicates there is a direct relationship between stress and burnout and the failure of pastors to observe the Sabbath rest. Owing to the busy lifestyle of pastors and the expectations placed on them, many pastors are unable to take the regular rest they need.

The issue of the Sabbath has been controversial throughout church history, and it is re-examined afresh here. In particular, its meaning and relevance for pastors today is reflected upon. The Sabbath is an external ordering of a rhythm of life which flows into the context of God's grace. This external ordering of life is premised upon an internal ordering of finding joy and delight in God, in His works of creation and salvation. The Sabbath is a gift of time for pastors to find rest in a God-ordered life rhythm. The principles of the Sabbath were not abrogated in the New Testament, but were affirmed and lived out by Jesus.

The Sabbath, as God's provision, is an antidote to stress and burnout. More than that, the Sabbath keeps pastor centrally focused on God, and on a lifestyle that is in keeping with the principles laid down by God. Keeping the Sabbath in the Malaysian context requires a substantial change of attitude and lifestyle on the pastors' part. Pastors need to learn to keep and teach the principles of the Sabbath, and synchronize his Sabbath rhythm with that of the congregation. The experience of the Sabbath rest and renewal can be a redeeming experience, and a foretaste of the future rest in eternity.