



December 2019

On behalf of the staff of the Office of the General Assembly, I want to wish you and your family a very Merry Christmas and a happy New Year. I hope you're able to take some time this month to reflect—to reflect on all of God's blessings to you and your church in 2019.

Yet I also know that this time of year can be especially stressful. The calendar seems to get more and more compressed every year. And when you are involved in church work, whether as a pastor, church staff member, or lay leader, the demands on your time do not seem to decrease—especially this month.

I've been doing a good bit of reading lately on stress. One recent study reported that 65 percent of adults cite their work as their number-one source of significant stress, and more than one in three felt an increase in stress in the workplace over the past year. This study described eight common stress factors, and I think several apply directly to us as church leaders.

First, you are working long hours with tight deadlines. The last I checked, Sunday still comes every week, so I imagine you can relate to this one.

Second, longer hours are causing you to neglect important personal commitments and relationships. I've been in ministry for more than 40 years, and what I was told in seminary is even more true today: the demands of ministry can take a toll on your family if you let them.

Third, your organization is likely undergoing a significant transformation. I wish it weren't true, but many churches are in decline. Yet growth brings its own level of stress too. Either way, your church is not likely to be the same in three years as it is today. That reality can be stressful!

A fourth factor is related: you could be facing uncertainty about your church's future. And this applies even—and perhaps especially—if you are a solo pastor or serving your church bivocationally.

In addition to pinpointing factors that can lead to increased stress, this study identified three types of stress: Normal, Training, and Excessive.



Normal Stress is what we experience in regular day-to-day life, things like your daily commute. Of course, I know for some of you that can be the most stressful part of your day.

Training Stress is what happens when we intentionally deviate from that normal routine, such as starting a new job, learning a language, or taking on a long-term project. In our churches, this could be a capital campaign or building project.

The third type of stress is Excessive Stress. This is unintentional deviation from the norm, like an unexpected major financial setback or a major health issue. I experienced this firsthand earlier this year when my wife, Cindy, suffered a stroke on Palm Sunday.

I am very thankful to report that she has enjoyed a good (if not complete) recovery to date. God used that event—and the months afterwards—to show me that I needed to adjust a few things in my own life. I'll talk about that in a moment.

But first, a final note about the stress study I read recently. I do not know if the company that did it has a Christian foundation. It approached the topic from a business perspective. But I think their conclusion of how to manage stress is practical and relevant. Especially to those of us who minister in Jesus' name in an increasingly antagonistic culture.

Their answer was "resiliency." That is, acquiring the ability to recover, to adapt, and to even grow from stress. It's the recovery aspect that got my attention in the aftermath of Cindy's stroke. It was very easy for me to take a spiritual approach to my situation and claim the promise of Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

I did that. I did that a lot! And God did provide peace in those uncertain early days last April. But as Cindy's health situation continued, it also causes significant ongoing stress. Not long afterward, I had my annual physical. Perhaps unsurprising, my doctor told me that I needed to make some major changes related to diet and exercise.

This is the point I hope you will take to heart: when—not if—when ministry gets stressful, I hope you will take a holistic approach to embracing resiliency. Yes, apply the truths of Philippians 4:6. But do not neglect the physical and emotional components of your life as you recover, as you rest. I promise, they are important!



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So in closing, I pray that this Christmas you will celebrate and experience the reality of Jesus in this season and in the coming year like never before. I also hope that you'll celebrate your family, your friends, and your congregation. But most importantly, celebrate the amazing gift our Heavenly Father gave to us: His only Son—Immanuel.

Thank you, God bless you, and remember: to you, a Son is given! Merry Christmas!