

# Is clergy burnout really a crisis?

By [Rachel Hackenberg](#)

January 24, 2012

Is the crisis *whether*  
we burn out ... or *how* we burn out?

Since this past Advent season when I watched the sanctuary fill with lights -- lights on the Advent wreath, candelabra alongside the pews, and "Silent Night" by candlelight -- I have been toying with the image of the pastor as a candle. The simple purpose of a candle is to burn and shine. When it functions as it should, the candle necessarily changes and dwindles. The candle's purpose actually requires its erosion; the flame for which the candle has been made is necessarily its undoing.

The candle is not unlike the clergyperson. In a congregational call, the minister as a priest comes into the presence of the Holy Fire and holds out that Fire for her faith community. The minister as a prophet witnesses to the Fire's searing and dares to feel the Fire on her own tongue. The minister as a pastor welcomes persons to the Fire to warm themselves and have their own fires ignited.

In other words, the minister handles Fire. It is her purpose as a clergyperson to burn and shine with the Divine Fire of her calling. Naturally, such intentional proximity to the Fire changes her. It melts her down, it burns her, it undoes her with awe, it reshapes her, it puts her at risk, it forbids her from getting comfortable (although she will try -- *ha!*). The Fire uses her and burns her out.

The Fire uses me, burns me out.

But is burnout the problem? It seems to me that burnout is part of the job, part of being a candle ... and if that's the case, then the actual problem is *how clergy respond* to their burnout.

In 2010, reports of clergy burnout were all the rage in the news and in social media. (The Alban Institute had a good [summary](#) of the reports and reactions.) Yet a close reading of the material -- I haven't read all of the articles nor all of the recommended books -- reveals that the majority of reports lump burnout together with poor mind/body/spirit health and behavioral/relational dysfunction. There is only the barest of distinctions in much of the writing between *burning out* and *handling burnout*. Burnout is unilaterally assumed to be negative and to be the result of bad clergy care habits and/or unhealthy congregational dynamics. An un-panicked consideration of burnout as a realistic dynamic of ministry seems to be lacking.

Perhaps I am buying into the "culture of burnout." After all, I'm into multi-media and multi-tasking. My BlackBerry is on 24/7. (Verizon had to tell me that it wears down the phone's battery when I never ever turn it off.) I'm a facebooker and blogger. Constant access.

Perhaps I have acquiesced to the unrealistic expectations of the church, which many clergy cite (rightly so) in their departures from ministry. But if the church has unrealistic expectations for me, well, so do I ... for myself and for the church.

Perhaps I'm just trying to defend myself from all of the self-care hype (*ROFL!*).

Perhaps.

Basically, however, I just think that ministry is hard. Ministry is dicey. *Hello, handling Holy Fire in community??!* Of course we're going to burn out -- pastors are candles!

Yes, all of the books and studies are correct that clergy and congregations need to make healthier decisions and continually choose to support their covenants to one another. Those things need to be done so that clergy can handle burnout as it comes ... because it *does* come, multiple times, like clockwork, even in the best of ministries and church-pastor relationships. Being in this relationship takes work as any relationship does (including the work of self-care and maintaining "outside" friendships and knowing one's boundaries, for starters). Pastoral ministry takes work, and the nature of this work changes us.

Bottom line: the so-called crisis of clergy burnout isn't in the burning, I believe (although we don't need to pretend that the burning is easy or pleasant all the time). The work *is* burning.

The crisis comes when we respond to the burning by taking it out on others and/or ourselves, or when we refuse to be changed by the Fire, or when we resist and resent being candles.

*Originally posted at [Faith and Water](#).*