Helping leaders of Muslim background fellowships live peacefully in a stressful world

It is great to hear of house churches or, as I would prefer to call them, "Kingdom Communities" beginning to emerge in different parts of the Muslim World. But it is also easy to observe that many of the emerging leaders are battered by demonic attacks, false accusations in the wider community and physical threats sometimes leading to bodily harm or imprisonment. How can we help them? Jesus said, ***"I will give you rest....."*.** (Mt. 11:28)

The Bible is full of people who were in highly stressful situations. The Bible is also full of God's loving and compassionate words directed to such people. Tell your friends the Lord Jesus warned us to expect pressure (tribulation). ***"In the world you will have tribulation…."*** (Jn. 16:33) There is a scientific specialty, called tribology (part of material science). In this discipline you subject mainly metals to tensions – stresses (being pulled out), crushing and shearing (being twisted) to see under what pressure the metal fractures or exhibits "metal fatigue".

Strain, stress and tension are so characteristic of the life of any Muslim background believer. Yet there are many rich promises of "heart-rest" – of serenity. ***"Do not be anxious"*** (Mt. 6:25-34) means do not be anxious! If we believe and obey, we **can** live peacefully. This isn't passivity. Heb. 4 says, ***"Strive to enter into rest"***. (Heb. 4:11)

Some definitions

1. Tension is the state of being strained to tautness. In our spiritual warfare it is ***"girding up our loins"*** (Eph. 6:14) – i.e. getting ready for battle – physical, mental and spiritual alertness. This sort of tension isn't harmful. It is designed to put us on a wartime footing. Like a violin string, we work much better when there is the correct tension. It is always when all our faculties are harnessed to fulfilling a purpose that our highest achievements are reached. Jesus said, ***"What tension I suffer until it is all over"***. (Lk. 12:50)

So tension is the response of the body/mind/spirit to any demand that is put upon it and this can lead to feelings of joy, achievement and fulfilment.

2. Stress is caused by prolonged or too frequent tension. It is characterised by:

- Over-engagement
- The emotions becoming over reactive
- Obvious signs of physical damage
- Symptoms of exhaustion due to hyperactivity
- Mental disintegration
- An obvious lack of fuel and energy
- A physiological reaction by the body to protect itself and conserve energy
- Possible panic and phobia and anxiety type disorders

It is a known fact that stress may kill you prematurely.

My candle burns at both its ends,
It will not last the night.
But, ah, my foes and oh, my friends
It gives a wondrous light.

But don't be a foolish virgin!

Stress comes from outside of us provoking our bodies to either a "fight" or "flight" response. The body is on a "red alert" response. Both fight and flight are equally healthy. It is just the adrenalin kicking in. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to know when we should stand and fight or when we should retreat.

So there can be 'honourable coping' – pressing on in a very difficult situation. This is usually for a limited time. We need to learn at a fast rate! We will need extra sleep. (Was this what Peter was doing in prison in Acts 12:6 – learning to "rest" in a highly stressful situation?)

But there is also 'honourable escape' – a growing sense that this is not my place at this time. Paul allowed himself to be let down in a basket from the walls of Damascus. (Acts 9:24-25) Check if this is what the Holy Spirit is saying. Such a decision should never be rushed and you need the advice of many. The plough of God has many handles and sometimes we need to change handles.

There are many different over-strong reactions to stress. The stress may result from:

- Sudden environmental insecurity
- Having pre-set personal alarm systems that have been conditioned by past crises
- A direct threat to the family
- Poor support systems

So the decision in a stressful situation is: **Do I fight or do I flee?** But the pathway of selection depends on other factors. This is overly simplistic, but people are divided into **Type A people** and **Type B people**. So the choice is somewhat dependent on personality structure as well as early learning patterns. One factor is the discipline to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and strength and "coolness" in highly stressful situations.

Type A people are on an adrenalin addiction. They are "driven" people. They enjoy high-energy programmes. You can get addicted to stress. This personality type is "high" on controlling people and making complex decisions rapidly. They live 'in the fast lane'. Their problem is that they usually fight 'in the flesh' or there is a flight into illness.

Type B people are much more people-oriented. They are much more vulnerable to being overly stressed. Flight is easier – not because of fear, but because it seems the compassionate response to a group of people who are stressed.

3. Burnout involves deep depression. It is emotional exhaustion and severe "compassion fatigue". It is a defence mechanism characterised by disengagement – i.e. flight.

- The emotions are blunted and the person is emotionally damaged.
- It affects one's motivation and drive leading to demoralisation.
- It can be caused by grief – often engendered by the loss of ideals and hope.
- It is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.
- It includes depersonalisation and detachment. Life may not seem worth living.

Both Type A and Type B people experience burnout.

4. Meltdown: Stress and burnout are recoverable with time and counselling and the warm affirmation of friends. Meltdown is nearly always irreversible except by a miracle!

The Bad News

- Stress contributes to 90% of all diseases.
- Half of all visits to doctors in the UK are stress related.
- "Anxiety reduction" is one of the biggest businesses in the Western World.
- Doctors, lawyers and leaders (in business, politics etc.) have the most problems in the population with alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide.
- In the UK, 75% of parish ministers reported that severe stress was causing them anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear and alienation.

So why is Christian work so stressful?

These are reasons given by many. Not all will be relevant to your Muslim background leader.

- The disparity between idealistic expectations and hard reality
- The lack of clear boundaries so tasks are never completely done leading to work alcoholism
- The feeling of incompetence in leading many volunteers
- The conflict of being a leader and having a servant heart at the same time
- The intangibility of the task – how do you know if you are getting somewhere
- Confusion with role identity and self-image – Christian leaders derive too much self-esteem from what they do
- Time management problems
- The paucity of "perks" and rewards for jobs well done
- The multiplicity of roles – i.e. having to be a 'jack of all trades'
- An inability to produce "win-win" conflict resolutions
- The difficulty in managing interruptions
- The tendency to be too serious and to find it difficult to be spontaneous
- A preoccupation with "playing it safe" to avoid offending financially powerful supporters
- Administrative overload – too much energy expended in areas of low reward
- The loneliness of leaders – they often don't have close friends
- Poor personal relationships with others
- Lack of finances
- Marriage problems
- Worry over children's education and well-being

The symptoms of stress

Our bodies are designed to give warning signs of stress overload.

- Insomnia or disturbed sleep – the consequence of an outraged nervous system taking its revenge on us for submitting it to excess tension
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Low energy
- Chronic tiredness
- Psychosomatic illness
- Muscle tension
- High blood pressure

So the energy that could be directed towards constructive ends is wastefully dissipated. The symptoms are often seen by the victim as **obstacles** to the performance and success that he/she wants. Seldom does the disease of stress slow the victim down until an ulcer, a stroke, a heart attack or a breakdown occurs. Someone has said, *"The only advantage of living successfully is that you get to meet your Lord sooner!"*

The causes of stress – identifying stressors

There are four categories of stressors:

- **Bio-ecological factors**
    - Not enough sleep – we need sleep to reconstitute our brain proteins. Part of cultural adaptation is learning to fit into cultural patterns of sleep.

- Poor diet – too much caffeine, too much salt, too much junk food, not enough fibre and not enough water
- Poor exercise – walking is better than jogging
- Too much air pollution – the dangers of passive smoking
- Too much noise
- Medical precautions – parasitic problems and their consequences can be very stressful
- Mental stagnation – keep up with what is happening in the world. Read widely – include local thinkers. Read history. Ask, read, look, hear, develop a hobby, try extension courses on the Internet.

➢ **Vocational factors**

- Career or employment uncertainties
- Role ambiguity – a lack of clearly defined and mutually agreed functions
- Role conflict – between personal expectations for your role and the expectations of others
- Role overload – too many real or imaginary expectations
- Lack of opportunities to "de-role" and be yourself for a change – local believers usually can't take holidays and get away
- Loneliness – no peers as friends
- A sense of the adequacy – a lack of self-worth
  - ✓ This is a haunting consciousness of a lack of spiritual resources, intellectual ability and sheer knowledge – perhaps due to lack of training for the task entrusted to us
  - ✓ This is a prolific cause because it is usually true! Who is adequate? If you feel you are, you are probably proud!
  - ✓ The problem is that we are conscious of our deficiency, but instead of allowing God to be to us all that He is, we try and make up for the deficiency by ourselves.
  - ✓ The more acute the sense of inadequacy, the more acute the stress and the more probable the breakdown
- An attitude of anxiety
  - ✓ This is the habit of worrying over things beyond our power to control. This can paralyse us in the part of the world we live in.
  - ✓ It sets up dangerous inner tensions. It is like a cancer; you know it is futile and incapacitating to worry, but you are powerless to break the pattern that has become part of you through long indulgence.
  - ✓ Your health, work and relationships with family and others are all sources of anxious care that distract the mind and cause a constant state of agitation.

Psychological factors

These stressors relate to **change**. We have pre-set personal alarm systems that our background and upbringing have given us. These alarms go off at certain times. You need to know what sets off your own alarms and also those of your spouse, your wider family, other believers etc.

Culture-stressors are very real for those of us who are expatriates. These include language learning, unfamiliar surroundings and customs, missing friends and family (often true of local believers), getting your needs met in unfamiliar ways, adjusting to new expectations of hospitality as a leader.

Crisis stressors wear us down – like legal problems, expulsion from home and village. There is the political situation in many countries. Then there is terrorism, war, kidnapping (dangers to yourself and your family).

Historical stressors like troubling dreams or concern about elderly parents. There could be:

- Recurring fears not based on reality
- Early childhood trauma that has not been processed through as an adult
- Powerful memories that keep interrupting your thoughts during the day
- Feelings that you are getting too emotional
- Struggling with feelings of shame
- Difficulty controlling your anger – whether expressed or not
- Dreams full of nameless fears causing difficulty in sleeping

Fear stressors – like fear of new responsibilities leading to a refusal to try out new tasks since they produce an agony of apprehension. There is fear of failure producing a situation that seeks to avoid all risk with any change. Then there is the fear of people. Sometimes this arises out of a wrong attitude to others. Past inner resentments have been harboured – sometimes back to childhood. These produce envy, jealousy, ill will and hatred. These destructive emotions need to be "put off".

Forgiving people who have hurt you is a serious business. It is a major pathway to reducing an overload of negative emotions. It is also an area that many leaders struggle with. A possible way to help them is to go through this little exercise:

a. **How did they hurt you?** Write it down. Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of anyone who has hurt you.

b. **Why did they hurt you?** Try and understand their problem. Why did they dump their anger and frustration etc. on you?

c. **Prepare to forgive them.** Get in a quiet place. Write out all the sins against you from that person and then nail that piece of paper to a cross. (You can either get two pieces of wood or paint/draw a cross on the ground.)

d. **Forgive them freely** because of what God has done for you – freely forgiving you. You won't lose the memory, but you will lose the pain.

Spiritual stressors

These include:

- Sexual temptations – struggling with shame or guilt over sinful thoughts
- Despair that the church is not growing and there appears to be no spiritual fruit
- Jealousy concerning the success of others
- Anxiety over financial problems
- Feeling a lack of spiritual direction
- Feeling that the overwhelming workload is interfering with personal devotional time
- Struggling with not experiencing the reality of God in daily life
- Feeling abandoned or rejected by God

I hope you will have many profitable hours going through these four categories of "stressors" with your leaders. They will probably be more "holistic" than you and run the four into each other.

Burnout is emotional exhaustion – compassion fatigue.

Type B people are more prone to burnout.

Symptoms of burnout:

- Helplessness and hopelessness
- Demoralisation – believing you can no longer be effective
- De-personalisation – having a negative self-concept and treating yourself impersonally
- Detachment – withdrawing from responsibilities
- Distancing – avoiding social and interpersonal contact
- Defeatism – a feeling of being beaten
- Decreased energy – chronic fatigue
- A desire to quit and go home – "It's hopeless!"
- No sense of the affirmation of God
- An inability to see any solutions
- Cynicism and negativity about the ministry.

Different people with different personalities, attitudes and backgrounds may increase or decrease the propensity to burnout. Certain factors influence this such as:

- The pressure to succeed
- Sensitivity to taking on other people's hurts
- Vulnerability to criticism
- Feeling like a victim and being under assertive
- Carrying too much shame about your humanness

It is very easy to develop facades or masks for various occasions to hide the symptoms of burnout. Other indicators are:

- Perfectionists
- The overly conscientious
- Those who develop one part of their ministry disproportionately
- Those so associated with 'success' in the ministry that when things fall apart – so do they!

The prevention and cure of stress and burnout

Some general principles

Periodically take a personal audit of yourself.

1. Understand that the Lord will get His work done.

In practice this is often hard to believe! There is enough time in every day to do graciously and without stress everything God wants you to do. Rarely will there be enough time to do everything you want to do and never will there be enough time to do what everyone else wants you to do.

2. Plan for rest times

"Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. Even during the ploughing season and harvest you must rest." (Ex. 34:21) We need to plan rest days.

3. Anticipate the need for rest

In the beginning, learning to ***"rest in the Lord"*** seems harder work than what we do normally. Anticipate with joy the real benefits of being in the Lord's presence and just relaxing.

4. Accept the discipline of rest and worship (quiet or noisy) alone with God, because this is what we are commanded to do. Rest is as important as work. So consider ways that you can build rest to your busy diary.

Helpful Hints

- Find fresh spiritual disciplines. Read books on the spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster's book **Celebration of Discipline** is very helpful. Work on developing contemplative prayer and 'practising His presence'. God understands when we fall asleep in our meditations, but try not to make a habit of it!
- Jesus promised us troubles. So when you find life difficult measure your problems against those of Joseph in Genesis. Give what he went through a '10' then measure your problems against his! [I have never got beyond a three!] If you have a low score, you will feel better and the problem will seem less daunting. Perspective helps us realise that we actually have 'a storm in a teacup'.
- Take regular time off. We shouldn't work harder than Our Creator! Take short breaks during the day to 'have a cup of tea with Jesus'. If you are tense, imagine you are holding all your stressors in your hand. Turn your hand over and open your fingers and all the stressors will fall out. Then turn your now empty, open hands upwards and allow God to pour into them His affirmation, His grace, His wisdom and His power.
- Take holidays and get away. You need at least four weeks in a year.
- Find time for a two-week study break each year. If you think of yourself as indispensable, you will soon be exhausted! Remember Jethro's advice to Moses (Ex. 18). He used a cultural pattern and pointed out to Moses that the best thing was to train younger people. The secret of less stress is planned delegation. C.H. Spurgeon said, **"Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep is to the body…. If we do not rest, we will break down. Even the fields have to lie fallow … and so must we."** Adrenalin rushes reduce your need for sleep. But this is a trap. We generally need 7 to 8 hours sleep a night.
- Get proper exercise regularly – walk, swim and play tennis. We need aerobic exercise three to four times a week.
- Have a few periods of relaxation every day – even if it is only for 20 minutes. We need to be free from the tyranny of "things present". You can do this mentally by slowly reviewing memorised Scripture passages like Psalm 23. You can do it physically by tightening your muscles set by set and then relaxing them set by set from your face muscles to your toes.
- Guard your relationships with people.
  With your **spouse** discuss your individual needs. This may be hard for your local leader but stress the importance of it anyway. Talk often with your **children** and **colleagues** – helping to sort out their problems and doing your bit in ***"Filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ"*** (Col. 1:24).
- Develop a peer group for prayer support. These folk may hold you accountable, but they also need to be your true friends. Read the same books and discuss them together. Following James 5:16, we need to confess our sins to each other. Sometimes it is better to have someone outside your own immediate circle. Luther said that every leader ought to have a "Father in God".
- Restructure your cognitive thinking.
  - ✓ Reassess your personal goals.
  - ✓ Are you improving your self-attitudes by receiving affirmation from God?
  - ✓ Are you learning healthy assertiveness and to say "No" sometimes?

- ✓ Are you developing your spiritual gifts and abilities?
- ✓ Do you know your limits?
- ✓ Face your fears. Don't avoid them by pretence or bury them in an addiction.
- ✓ Avoid states of helplessness like the plague. (Phil. 4:13)
- ✓ Take time to develop a coping strategy for upcoming difficult situations.
- ✓ Learn not to make a catastrophe out of an ordinary event.
- ✓ Above all, learn more about God.
- ✓ Don't 'wear' points-of-view just because you are used to them. Like old clothes, they may be ill-fitting after a while.
- ✓ It is wonderful that when we die we don't carry anything with us to heaven – not even a carry on! So de-clutter your life as much as you can now – especially throw away bitterness, jealousy etc.

- Have lots of fun. To belong to the Kingdom you have to be like little children. Little children aren't bothered about piles of e-mails or running the world! They often get so absorbed in having fun that they forget everything else! John Stott's hobby was bird watching and he got George Verwer doing it! Get a hobby*! "Don't take life too seriously; you will never get out of it alive!"*

- Organise – especially for change. Unexpected changes trigger stress alarms in people. How does God organise? He develops patterns – e.g. In Acts 6 the apostles appointed seven people to deal with a feeding problem. This prevented stagnation of administration. But God is also very flexible in His patterns. None of the seven deacons seem to have stayed in that position. People can move on. A great example of God's flexibility with pattern is seen in biology. Think of the pentadactyl limb and the enormous variety of the same pattern.

  We need to remain humble. You are only indispensable as long as you don't seek out good, trainable young people. How do you handle people whose gifts you can't use in the present structure? Don't open up a new department for them – i.e. a new structure. Give them room to develop their ministry as a sort of minister-at-large.

  It is only the changes to which we have no answer that lead to harmful stress.

- Develop plans for handling alarms and emergencies. Develop contingency plans for various emergencies. Remember to upgrade such policies regularly. It isn't a bad idea to put an expiry date on all policies in order to review them regularly. Everyone must know the current emergency procedures. Do you have funds available for a crisis?

- Have some escape clauses in your procedures and policies. This avoids a situation where people are trapped and you are in a confrontation situation. In an emergency allow choice as much as possible.

- Determine to keep on learning. Avoid the 'carpet slipper' attitude – i.e. early retirement. Some appear to 'retire' at 40, but they are still working with old the wine skins.

"***But our citizenship is in heaven and from there we await a Saviour – The Lord Jesus Christ –who will transform our lowly bodies*** (including our stressed minds) ***to be like His glorious body by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself."*** (Phil. 3:21-22)

That includes you – your will, your mind, your affections, your imagination, your whole body and your mind – dedicated to the service of God and under ***"the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself".***