

Counting the Cost

Pamela Evans invited a group of Christian doctors to ask their families: 'What is the cost to you of my professional and church commitments?' and then to listen carefully to their response . . .

The nervous laughter which followed led me to suspect some found the idea extremely threatening and were unlikely to translate it into action. One GP even asked me what he should do if his wife's answer was wrong! Highlighting the cost of professional and Christian commitments is not intended to provoke anxiety or shame. Pursuing any cause or activity will have a cost, even if it only means less time, energy or other resources to devote elsewhere. If we are willing to count the cost, here are some questions to consider:

Am I fully aware what my commitments cost others as well as what they cost me?

A pressurised lifestyle often leads to impoverished communication with those around us - colleagues as well as family. If 'How are you?' is asked with a hand on the door handle or an eye on the clock, we are unlikely to be told all we need to hear. The busier we are, the easier it is to neglect others' concerns until they reach boiling point. If anxieties about our health or sanity are expressed only in the context of the heated rows which disrupt our schedule or ruin what little free time we have, we may dismiss them as the product of ragged emotions instead of taking them seriously. Jesus was clear that discipleship had a cost, and urged the crowds who followed him to give it serious thought. Today's followers are also required to make informed choices.

Have others agreed to their part of the cost...or are they making unacknowledged and/or unwilling sacrifices?

Many families are willing to put themselves out to support members in the frontline professionally and/or spiritually. However, if the sacrifices seem never-ending, and good intentions and promises about taking time off are seldom fulfilled, the supporting family members may feel powerless against the juggernaut of someone else's commitment. In addition, if colleagues feel they are always being pressurised into swapping duties to accommodate church commitments, working relationships may suffer.

Is the cost a consequence of following God's call...or a result of being driven beyond it?

Some who suffer the physical or relational consequences of drivenness feel a sense of pride, seeing themselves as 'honourably wounded' in the course of duty. Yet I believe we do our fellow Christians a disservice if we allow such an attitude to pass unquestioned. Christians must expect suffering to come their way, but it does not follow that all suffering which afflicts Christians is a consequence of their faithfulness to God. We are fallen human beings; we sometimes misunderstand what God is asking of us, and when we do understand we sometimes disobey. When Christians have told me the breakdown of their

relationships or health was part of the sacrifice God was calling them to make, I have often felt uneasy. Were they responding to God's call, or did they find it easier to risk their family or their health than to lay down any of their cherished positions of responsibility?

Have friends or colleagues commented on the pace we set ourselves? - or are they all engaged in the same headlong rush?

We need to be willing to hear and ask the sorts of questions which keep us honest about the extent to which God controls the pace and direction of our lives. We also need to scrutinise our motives. Are we really serving others out of an overflowing compassion? Or are we driven by a need to be needed, a thirst for significance, an overwhelming desire to be the one who sorts everything out?

If we are permanently tired yet unable to sleep, with nerves like razor wire and a memory like a sieve, are we willing to spend a few minutes asking God if this is how he intends us to be? If our prayer times are a shopping list of concerns, often including a request for relief from a chronic headache or a dodgy digestion, how about practising the discipline of listening to God, so he can speak into our situation? If this feels too difficult, why not use the question with which I began? God can speak to us through those around us, if we're willing to listen.

In Matthew 11: 28-30, Jesus invites all those who are weary to come to him. *The Message* version adds poignancy to the familiar passage:

'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'

As healthcare professionals we sometimes need to encourage patients to reflect on the pace and direction of their lives as part of promoting good health, and we do well to practise what we preach! We must make sure we are modelling healthy service and discipleship, walking in step with Jesus and watching how he does it, rather than leading fellow lemmings over the cliff to burnout and family breakdown.

Pamela Evans worked as a GP and then in epidemiology. Currently engaged in writing and pastoral work, her book *Driven Beyond the Call of God* is published by The Bible Reading Fellowship in March, price £7.99.

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