Volunteer Burnout: The Cost of Caring

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Approved by Rev. Canon Dr Jody Clarke,

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

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Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Jody Clarke
Student Investigator	Rick Gunn

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

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Dated this 3rd day of April, 2020 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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Abstract

Using the Grounded Theory approach to qualitative research, the experience of emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual fatigue or burnout in four Christian volunteers was studied. The participants were interviewed together in a focus group. The data gathered illumined what it was like for these people to become fatigued in the face of slow change or no perceivable change in the volunteer work where they hoped to see a positive impact. Their experiences showed that burnout or fatigue occurred through a four-step process: 1) an initial motivation to become engaged as volunteers; 2) when positive impacts and effectiveness were not perceived, a decrease in motivation and effectiveness occurred as well as an increase in repetitive, isolating, ineffective behaviours; 3) a period of burnout when the volunteer could no longer engage at all with the tasks, and this burnout impacted other areas of their lives; and 4) an acceptance that involvement in the volunteer work must cease in order to recover. The results showed that burnout might be avoided if volunteers are well-supported by leaders and colleagues, if they learn not to repeat ineffective behaviours, and if they can let go of responsibilities before reaching the burnout stage.

Introduction

The original title of this study was "Battle Fatigue on the Big Issues: The Cost of Caring". When recruiting participants, all who came forward stated that they resonated with volunteer "battle fatigue" as described in the Letter of Invitation, but only one person could be categorized as being involved in a "big issue" or systemic societal situation with a large scope. Whereas the experience of burnout or fatigue in volunteers who identify as Christian is the area of interest, regardless of the scope of their volunteer engagement, the study title was changed to "Volunteer Burnout: The Cost of Caring".

As a minister in the United Church of Canada, it is incredibly important to effectively recruit, engage, nurture, train, and support volunteers. Their well-being is paramount to the well-being of the church. Many of our church's volunteers are also part of committees and projects outside the ecclesial sphere as they seek to live out their desire to bring positive change to the areas of work and challenge that draw their gifts and passion. Whether a volunteer gives their time and talent to work within the church or outside, there can be burnout and fatigue which prevents them from continuning engagement in the role they once cared deeply about. This study explores how Christian volunteers feel motivated to begin volunteering in the first place, how burnout happens, what it feels like, and how they coped with the experience.

In a review of literature of and around this field of professional and volunteer burnout, the terms burnout and compassion fatigue are often used interchangeably (for more discussion of the issue, see Appendix A). Some studies state that they are not the same phenomenon but have overlapping characteristics. A simple definition of compassion

fatigue is the emotional toll of caring for others.[1] A simple definition of burnout is the accumulation of stressors resulting from one's work and/or volunteering which takes away from one's ability to contribute to the workplace or volunteer initiative.[2] For the purposes of this study, the terms will be used interchangeably.

The literature review revealed a gap in the research field. Most studies focus on burnout of professionals in their field or compassion fatigue of volunteers who respond to natural disasters or large-scale human emergencies like earthquakes and hurricanes without reference to their spiritual worldview or religion. Studies that looked at volunteer burnout in non-crisis situations similarly did not focus on their participants' religious orientation as a factor in the data. This study on Christian volunteer burnout opens the door to new learnings on an issue that is not only important for churches to consider but for all volunteer organizations, for one's spiritual self-understanding is an important part of the volunteer profile.

Christianity itself seems to have the potential to be inherently fatiguing for followers of Christ. Christian narrative and doctrine invites disciples to be co-active with God in bringing about God's vision where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up (Luke 1:52), and where death, mourning, and crying will be no more (Revelation 21:4). To live with one's heart, mind, and body oriented to a holy vision that does not yet exist fully or at all, to see the troubles of society all around, and to experience the seemingly endless, hard work of helping others according to what one feels is the will

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[1] Suzanne Slocum-Gori, David Hemsworth, Winnie Wy Chan, Anna Carson, and Arminee Kazanjian, "Understanding Compassion Satisfaction, Compassion Fatigue and Burnout: A Survey of the Hospice Palliative Care Workforce," *Palliative Medicine* 27, no. 2 (February 2013): 173.

[2] Paul C. Gorski, "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout: Causes of Activist Burnout in US Racial Justice Activists," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 42, no. 5 (April 2019): 667.

of their God must bring spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical tension. Where there is tension there can be fatigue; a wearing down, a potentiality of depletion of inner resources of strength, commitment, clarity of mind, and hope. In "Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion", James Crenshaw says that it is simply a theological reality that the promise always exceeds the fulfillment.[3]

Research Question

Christian lay people are often inspired to engage their time, talent, and energy towards a large scale cause individually or as part of an organization for change. This study will examine what it is like for these people when they become fatigued in the face of slow change or no perceivable change in the issue. Research will seek to uncover how their commitment was first created, how and why it began to diminish, what it is like to feel helpless or hopeless in the face of such work, and what wisdom fatigued people have to offer those who hope to engage people in the volunteer sector.

Methodology

Grounded Theory was the most appropriate method for this study because a particular situation that occurs within individuals in society was explored. The research seeks understanding about how the fatigue has developed, what it is like for participants, and possible ramifications for them and the wider community. A focus group of four people was assembled to gather data. This allowed the sharing of personal stories of fatigue and its experience, which allowed the researcher to observe how the participants responded to

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[3] James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 29.

each other. Such sharing may have helped participants articulate their interior experience differently and more effectively.

The focus group took place in-person in Bedford, Nova Scotia. It was audio recorded on the researcher's phone and laptop as backup source should one fail. The interview took one hour and 45 minutes. Participants answered questions in self-selected orders. A pattern of clockwise responding did emerge initially, but with good humour, a participant switched it up and moved the order to counter-clockwise. Though this circular pattern of responding did emerge, each participant exhibited that they felt free to interject and respond a second time to the question at hand as new aspects of their experience came to mind; often related to what another participant had shared.

Participants were recruited by the researcher asking local church ministers and priests to identity and approach congregation members they suspect were experiencing this fatigue and by the researcher placing a request for participation on his own Facebook page. Individuals would then contact the researcher directly about their possible involvement. Though requests for participation were made in United Church of Canada and Anglican communities, only participants from the United Church expressed an interest in participating. Religious denomination was not a factor that was explored. The participants only needed to self-identify as Christian.

Data Analysis

After analyzing the data, an overarching theme emerged, namely that compassion fatigue is a journey. Compassion fatigue or burnout is an experience and phenomenon unto itself but in terms of understanding it, the steps leading to this state of being are inextricably

tied to it. Compassion fatigue can render one unable to care for volunteer projects and tasks and even greatly reduces one's capacity to show and share attentiveness and love with others. It is a state of reduced humanity from which one must heal, recover, and gain new skills to avoid repeating the process. To explore volunteer burnout as a journey keeps a caring eye towards providing clergy and other volunteer coordinators with wisdom and direction as to how to help volunteers avoid such burnout. To carry out the mission of Christ, disciples need to have health and strength in body, mind, and spirit.

Embedding the steps in the language of the participants, the journey of volunteer fatigue can be broken down into this four-step process:

- Step 1: A dream of making a difference.
- Step 2: The downward spiral.
- Step 3: I am burnt out.
- Step 4: Letting go of the dream.

Step one: Dream of making a difference.

The four participants are people of hope and action, dreamers and doers. They are highly organized and strongly value using resources of time, energy and money well. They see a need in the world and have a long vision for the steps necessary to make the dream come true. One captured a quality that is shared by all four: "I'm the kind of person who has everything in order; to keep all the ducks in a row." Organizing, setting goals and achieving them are important characteristics of effective volunteering for change and improvement of a societal situation. These characteristics in and of themselves do not inevitably lead to burnout, but strict adherence to these gifts and values sets the stakes

higher when the work towards the dream becomes ineffective. One said, "I'm my own worst enemy," demonstrating an awareness that the very gifts of strong volunteering can become factors in the journey towards burnout.

The participants got involved in volunteering because there was important work to be done and there was reason to believe things could change for the better. They did not look at the work and imagine it to be impossible and doomed to fail. The participants have a view of themselves as very capable people. One said with utter confidence, "I can look at the world and say that needs to be fixed and I'll fix it." We will see that when projects start to falter and cease to move forward, each participant seeks to engage their strong organizational and management skills to problem solve in such a way that loses creativity, an increased attachment to being effective for its own sake, and giving up on engaging others to help because they feel their skills and care can pick up all the pieces.

Where did this desire to volunteer outside of the workplace come from? They all had a way of expressing that faith and spirituality was involved. One said that volunteering gives him purpose outside of work. He had a job that he enjoyed for a long time, but his life's purpose extended to using his time and energy beyond that. When asked why volunteer at all, another participant said, "To help. To give to my church. To see if I could make a difference." She believes, like all the others, in her own capacity to give of her time and talents; to be useful. These are Christian values: loving your neighbour, doing good things for the least of these, making the world a better place. For these four Christians, the values of community service are embedded in their way of being in the world. One shared how she decided to be part of volunteering projects, "I'm a very spiritual person. I grew up in a Christian community. All that is there. But when I do work it's not because I pick

up the Bible and say it's written in there and so I have to do it. It's just like a helping nature is part of my nature." Only one person hesitated on connecting their call to volunteering to faith, "I'm going to say no. Well, I guess I'll say yes-no because it's my spirit that wants to help." There is something about their inner spiritual lives, their relationship with the church (for three of them), and their self-understanding as doers and helpers that moved them to volunteer.

The stories shared by two participants raised an important variance in how one is moved to volunteer on a project which later burns them out. One immigrated to Canada from a country with significant poverty and hunger. She did not expect to find those realities here. She said, "When I came here I saw panhandling. I was shocked beyond my words. To understand that that stuff happened in a first world country was beyond my comprehension. And so food security was a thing inside my head." She never experienced hunger herself but as she said, "When I see something that really strikes my heart I do it. It just comes." She started a community garden to help with local food security and ran it mostly by herself for four years. That is a responsive, active compassion. Another began her volunteer work not because of something she witnessed but because of something she experienced herself. She had a major health crisis which caused her to lose her sight. She said, "I didn't know what blindness was and now I'm a blind person. That motivated me. I want to make sure others don't feel alone because I felt really alone." She founded a very unique provincial program to help people who went through what she did.

Though both participants had their hearts moved with compassion and acted empathetically, there are emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual layers that will play out differently for them as they journey to fatigue.

Step 2: The Downward Spiral

The literature defines compassion satisfaction as the feeling one gets when one experiences their actions of caring and support of others as effective.[4] Compassion satisfaction energizes, motivates, uplifts the spirit, and sustains energy for additional actions of caring. The participants in this study did not experience compassion satisfaction which contributed to their journey to burnout. Their efforts to make a difference for the good of society in their varied ways were not effective because of working with teams of people who did not share equal commitment or reliability in task completion, lacked good interpersonal skills, passion, shared vision, and where good conflict resolution skills were absent. These factors played in different measures for each participant but all were present. This brings an increase in pressure that starts to diminish the hope for the dream in the volunteer and their ability to be effective. One said, "I think the essence of hope is that things might change, but when they don't, you're disillusioned." Another said, "So when those objectives are not met, the fatigue comes. When goals are not met I feel dejected. If I say I'm doing this, I have to do it." Another said, "This was supposed to be successful, so I wasn't feeling successful at all." The groundwork of organization and goal-setting they had invested in the work was not paying off. The changes they hoped to see were not forthcoming and their spirits started to sink.

When these self-described Type-A personalities see plans, details, and goals being neglected and, therefore, for them, the dream of success fading away, each participant responded similarly in their unique circumstances by assuming sole responsibility for doing

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[4] Eleanor Pardess, Mario Mikulincer, Rachel Dekel, and Phillip R. Shaver, "Dispositional Attachment Orientations, Contextual Variations in Attachment Security, and Compassion Fatigue Among Volunteers Working with Traumatized Individuals," *Journal of Personality* 82, no. 5 (October 2014): 355.

the neglected work themselves. It was more important to see the vision through than re-inventing how to do the work with others or shifting the vision to be smaller and more manageable as a solo endeavour.

The theme of increasing isolation was not an immediate burden for all. One participant admitted to fully accepting that she would be alone in her volunteer tasks and resolved to doing so with a positive attitude: "I got everything planned and ran that small place for four years. I didn't need anybody's help. But for me it was like I enjoyed being in that place. I enjoyed the time to sit and pray and have a quiet time." Fully running a community garden eventually began compromising her home life and her energy became depleted. Shortly thereafter she gave the project up. Isolation for others, however, was a heavy burden and involved great frustrations with a lack of openness from others and power struggles within the organization. One said, "No matter what I tried with my team, my situation wasn't going to get any better. Anger – when I looked at the grand scheme of things, it just snowballed." Another said, "My burnout or frustration was working and volunteering in any environment where I had to ask, 'would somebody just listen and let's try to make it better!' People being the system tend not to want to listen." Isolation can be experienced when one is left literally alone to complete the work and it can be experienced in the presence of others whom the participant had deemed ineffective and somehow problematic for seeing the dream through in a positive and life-giving way. This increases a feeling of being trapped by one's own determination to be effective despite the challenging environment.

It is here in the process towards burnout that the participants began to repeat ineffective efforts at productivity as they grasped at the dwindling reality of satisfying their

compassion. One said, "I do rather than feel. If things are not going well, rather than feeling it, I just do more stuff. I put myself in that hamster wheel. More, more, more, more." Each said in their own way that the experience was like running in circles. When things started to falter or not improve they all talked about putting more and more effort into the work to save it, to bring it back on track, to start to see results.

They all spoke of a deep frustration at this point in the process and that played negatively on their psychology. "I didn't have that energy left to be effective and that causes more of that guilt. I do this for whatever purpose and if I'm not effective at that – all that downward spiral." Another said, "All these thoughts keep playing in your head." Another wondered, "Could I have said it better? Could I have done it better? It would play on my emotions. My husband would say 'I hear you saying the same thing ten times'." Lastly, "And again it kept beating me down and beating me down. Burnout sort of gradually came on, you could just feel it – the weight."

No one talked about the experience of downward spiraling as something that happened with other people. There were no stories of how they found comraderie or shared experience within their volunteer situation as they fell to fatigue. The experience of these increasing factors that led to burnout was increasingly isolating in this way as well. The bottom of the spiral was a lonely place to be.

Step 3: I am burnt out.

We are now at the heart of the journey; the lowest point. The energy and the passion for getting all those ducks in a row is gone. The compassion in the heart that stirred the body and mind to action is now fatigued. The mind is no longer stuck in cycles of

ineffectiveness. It is too tired to cycle. One said, "Fatigue was physical but also a mental drain. My reserves were out. General fatigue, anxiety, and just that brain fog. I couldn't focus. I was so tired." She shared with the focus group that her health crisis leading to blindness greatly exacerbated her fatigue. From the beginning of her advocacy work, she was in a unique situation. Her resources were already compromised.

For the participants, burnout was not a state of being where they could explore new methods and approaches that would lighten the workload or increase effectiveness. They experienced a loss of perspective. All such thinking and efforts happened on the way down the spiral. The characteristics of burnout include feelings of frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, guilt about abandoning work efforts, and even relief that a decision has been made and the pressure is released. One poignantly described that she lost her self-worth when she hit burnout. She realized she was defining her self-worth by the hoped for effectiveness of her volunteer work and when this failed, she felt like a failure.

The burnout of the participant with a health crisis and already depleted inner resources was deeper and more profoundly impactful on all aspects of her life. "Blame of self and other because I was angry. People were not doing their job but were interfering in my role. I blame myself a lot. I lost my faith. I was unstable. I couldn't see anything positive anymore. Everything is negative. My friends would say, 'Make lemonade out of this.' What did I learn from this? There was no silver lining." When she said she could not see anything positive anymore, she meant anything: "An example? My grandchildren were born. I was like, why are we putting children in this world?"

This leads into an almost uniform experience among the group. The burnout had wider effects beyond what they felt within themselves. Burnout not only meant that the participants could no longer function well or at all in the volunteer sphere but its effects spread beyond it. It impacted their relationships with loved ones and their effectiveness in other areas of life. When asked if fatigue impacted other areas, one laughed and said, "Ask my husband, my children. My mother." The mental fatigue took three of the four participants out of being able to do anything effective at work and/or in any volunteer field. They consistently used language about having to step back, retreat, to get further and further away from engagement of any kind. One said, "I just could not handle that which was going on at the time. That took all the focus just to survive and then there was nothing left." The term burnout seems rich and appropriate here. For fire to burn there must be fuel. When these four landed in burnout, there was little or no fuel left to sustain any kind of fire or motivation for caring for themselves or others. They all talked about patterns of being unable to be present to their families at home. Wherever they were physically, their minds were elsewhere.

Again illustrating that her burnout may have gone deeper and wider than the others, the participant who had suffered a health crisis said, "It affects my whole life: my health, my physical health, my mental health, my relationship with my partner, my relationship with my friends because they say I'm a very negative person; a very angry person." Only one participant said there were no wider effects in her experience of fatigue, "I don't think it affected anything because I know I compartmentalize things. So I don't let one area overlap with another."

It was her who, after listening to the blind participant's story, made the observation about a possible reason why she hit such a low and she did not, "Your volunteer work is very important for you. You have experienced something and you want to make a difference. It mattered to you because you had a personal thing into it. It really, really matters to you and that is why you can't take it easy like I can." This observation may indicate a phenomenon worth exploring in future studies: if one has experienced something that has a profound impact on their personal lives and well-being, their ability to cope with ineffective advocacy in that field may lead to a higher chance of compassion fatigue.

Stage Four: Letting Go of the Dream

The burnout for my participants happened while still involved in the very thing that brought it on. They shared that they had some awareness of the wisdom of stepping out of the stressful situations but all but one remained in the role and burnt out there. One said, "It's been in the back of my mind and I finally did it. Enough is enough. I said let it be. Let's see what happens when I step back." The one participant who did not leave the volunteer situation that caused her fatigue coped by seeking to have a good attitude and clung to faith: "I tried to look at the glass half-full. Always. And my faith, and trying to bring myself back to that. I knew there was an end in sight then I just settled in."

Whereas she settled in because she could foresee that the circumstances that caused her fatigue would be ending, for the others, letting go and fully stepping back was the answer to survival. They all said letting go of their volunteer commitments and vision of a dream of making a difference was not easy. One said, "That was really hard. Allowing yourself to step back and let go; then that's release." She stepped out of her role as president

of the organization but served as a mentor. There was still something left to give. She did not totally let go. But it was huge for her.

Others coped in the letting go stage by moving to a new town to escape all connections to the burnout source, seeking medical support from a family doctor, and by trusting in their faith: "I focused on the God of the sparrow and it was just going to be ok. Prayer was definitely the main grounder. Somewhere down the line it was going to work out." One spoke of turning to spiritual practice but leaving her faith community: "I'm not really going to church, which is interesting. But I am spiritual: prayer, mediation. The Universe. Opening to it." As she said this, she extended her arms wide above her head. The blind participant needed more than prayer. She had to be very thorough and intentional: "I looked at every part of my life – everything. I changed my food, meds, supplements, personal counseling. I did partner counseling. Avoiding news and social media which is a lot of negativeness. I walk my dog in the woods. So, I could find something that was positive: sunset, sunset, sunset!"

For two of them, part of the healing and recovery is a discovery of new things to do: "Giving up something you are passionate about is a hard thing to do but knowing there are other passions helps get through it." The other said, "It's just a matter of regeneration and then being open to the new thing."

Implications for the Church and Secular Volunteer Organizations

One of the closing interview questions sought any advice the participants might offer the church based upon their experience of burnout. To the individual considering volunteering one said, "Do your research before signing up. Make sure you know what

you're signing up for." Each of them spoke to a shared experience of feeling eager to become involved in a volunteer role and having an understanding of what that role entailed only to find out later that the reality of the role did not match the expectation. They also spoke of the importance of being emotionally mature and grounded. In working with others, it is important to be able to focus on the work without taking things personally when there were challenges and conflicts. One called this the capacity of "emotional security". A person with this capacity and good conflict resolution skills can stick to the tasks at hand while managing relationships well and protecting one's own mental well-being if relations with colleagues and directors became difficult.

All of them believed volunteers are supposed to get something out of the experience themselves. There should be some level of enjoyment in the activity: "If you feel you're not getting benefits then it's time to pause." They believed that compassion satisfaction is an important factor.

The second piece of wisdom they offered the church was to the leadership: "When you are in a leadership position, you should understand how your words, your actions, your decisions are going to affect other volunteers who work with you. You can either motivate them; you can use your skills to bring up the project or you can break them down." These insights emerged in connection to the experiences of power struggles in a hierarchical way within the volunteer organization.

They talked at length about how showing appreciation to volunteers is very important. How this appreciation is shown can happen in many ways, but appreciation has the energy to bolster and sustain commitment and compassion. They collectively shared

also that one should volunteer humbly and selflessly and not expect the reward of appreciation but that without it, one can feel unseen. "Just say 'thank you'. No one's looking for a pat on the back; we're all here." Another said, "For me, when I volunteer it's just part of me. For others I have noticed it [receiving appreciation] does make a difference."

Lastly, on this question of advice for the church, they reflected on community. Where people come together to do anything, for any length of time, that is a community, according to a participant. One advises us to look at a "V" of geese: "They always have a way. When leaders are fatigued the geese stay with them. The geese have got it." Moving together in one direction over long distances. The leader of the "V" can slip back into the less strenuous part of the formation and another will move forward to lead for a time. Such an approach reduces the downward spiraling of energy, inner resources, and effectiveness by opposing isolation and burnout. Where people must work together, solidarity and shared commitment can resist the journey to burnout.

During the question and answer period following my public presentation of this research at the Atlantic School of Theology, an audience member raised the question of why the participants focused so apparently fervently on effectiveness. The data raised for her a general curiosty about the cultural values of achievement and effectiveness and their possibly inherent tendency in our context to dominate how we define good volunteering. From where does the attachment to achievement come from? How does the hope of success overcome compassion for ourselves? Her pondering raises an implication for clergy. When clergy with lay volunteers have a dream of making a difference, or have discerned God's "dream" for a community, a balance between getting the work done and offering

compassion and care for each other as the dream is worked on should be sought. If the cost of caring is burnout, is it worth it? If the well-being of our volunteers is not more important than achievement, we may have lost the Christian way.

Compassion can run dry despite efforts to be positive, faithful, and effective. Burnout itself leaves one feeling isolated, unable and/or unwilling to connect with the cause anymore, full of self-doubt, anger, frustration, and hopelessness. And often the way to survive it is to let go, step back, and regenerate.

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Appendix A: Literature Review

Originally submitted October 21, 2019

In searching for scholarly literature that studies and describes individual compassion fatigue for volunteer, Christian activists involved in large scale social movements or "big issues", I found that most research is around the edges of this topic. Predominantly the literature focuses on what fatigue or burnout look like when one's occupation is activism, and professional sectors where individuals were involved in offering various kinds of care, therapy, and psychological support to people who were experiencing times of crisis or trauma. Where studies focused on volunteer fatigue, these rarely looked at the experience of Christian volunteers. Much can be learned, however, about volunteer, Christian fatigue on "big issues" by reviewing the literature around its edges. This literature review will explore the nature of volunteer involvement in social movements; definitions of compassion fatigue and burnout; characteristics and causes of those human experiences; and reflections on the literature gap in relation to my study.

Volunteer activism and informal participation in social movements points to an inherent human behavioural system which Meneghini, Mikulincer, and Shaver, in their article summarizing four studies on volunteering-related motives, costs, and benefits, call "caregiving".[5] A person's natural inclination to help others has psychological and emotional effects when the caregiving is positive (experienced as succeeding in helping others) and negative when it is experienced as failing to be effective. Their study looks at volunteerism which they define as "sustained prosocial activity".[6] Volunteerism also has

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[5] Anna M. Meneghini, Mario Mikulincer, and Phillip R. Shaver, "The Contribution of Caregiving Orientations to Volunteering-related Motives, Costs, and Benefits," *Personal Relationships* 25, no. 4 (December 2018): 518.
[6] Ibid., 519.

the unique caregiving characteristic of helping other people with whom the volunteer has no personal relationship. These actions are ideally helpful, empathic, and planned. Volunteerism can also be for the benefit of non-human realities such as non-human animals, climate, and ecological environments. Humans may care for these things because of their connectedness to human life and society or upon their own right to exist in a healthy, natural state. I came across no studies that examined differences between caregiving for humans directly and non-human entities.

What motivates one to become an activist is often the impact of being negatively affected by the issue in which one engages, or the understanding that one's loved ones and descendants will be negatively affected in the future. Gorski's study on racial justice activists in the United States says that most of these activists became involved because they have suffered under racism themselves, which adds dynamics of stress, anxiety, and racial battle fatigue.[7] Vaccaro and Mena's study "It's Not Burnout, It's More: Queer College Activists of Color and Mental Health" describes activists who commit to the cause because of experienced racism and heterosexism.[8] As explored in Pihkala's study on eco-anxiety, climate change activists understand their own lives to be negatively impacted by climate change and also carry angst, grief, and helplessness as they imagine the threatened well-being of the youngest members of their family and generations to come.[9] If one identifies as Christian, such a volunteer can have a "transcendent orientation" which means, because of one's relationship with God, one recognizes a

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[7] Paul C. Gorski, "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout: Causes of Activist Burnout in US Racial Justice Activists," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 42, no. 5 (April 2019): 670.

[8] Annemarie Vaccaro, and Jasmine A. Mena, "It's Not Burnout, It's More: Queer College Activists of Color and Mental Health," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 15, no. 4 (October 2011): 339.

[9] Panu Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," *Zygon* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 552.

discord in the wellness of humanity and earth for which they feel responsible because of their faith.[10] Gorski's racial justice article says the nature of activism requires sustained, deep awareness of systemic oppression which most people are unwilling to address, rather than responding to immediate, individual suffering.[11] One's volunteerism in seeking to help large scale movements of change often begins not only with hope that things can and will improve but also with levels of social isolation, oppression, anxiety, and fear. The seeds for fatigue and burnout are planted early.

Across the literature, compassion fatigue and burnout are sometimes distinct from each other, have overlapping characteristics, or claim that compassion fatigue is an extension of burnout. A simple definition of compassion fatigue is the emotional toll of caring for others.[12] A simple definition of burnout is the accumulation of stressors resulting from one's work, volunteering, and activism which takes away from one's ability to contribute to the workplace or social movement.[13] In their article "Burnout in Christian Perspective", Frederick, Dunbar, and Thai claim that burnout and compassion fatigue are not the same phenomena but make them synonymous for the purpose of their study because they are very closely related.[14] Two articles (Frederick, Dunbar, and Thai and Slocum-Gori, Hemsworth, Chan, Carson and Kazanjian) explain the difference as the focus in compassion fatigue being psychological whereas in burnout the focus is the

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Gorski, "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout," 669.
[12] Suzanne Slocum-Gori, David Hemsworth, Winnie Wy Chan, Anna Carson, and Arminee Kazanjian, "Understanding Compassion Satisfaction, Compassion Fatigue and Burnout: A Survey of the Hospice Palliative Care Workforce," *Palliative Medicine* 27, no. 2 (February 2013): 173.
[13] Gorski, "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout," 667.
[14] Thomas V. Frederick, Scott Dunbar, and Yvonne Thai, "Burnout in Christian Perspective," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 3 (June 2018): 268.

workplace environment.[15] [16] Vaccaro and Mena say that the emotional and psychological

distress and deterioration of compassion fatigue goes beyond burnout and reduces a

person's capacity to bear the suffering of others.[17] Pardess, Mikulincer, Dekel, and

Shaver reference the often-referenced work of C. R. Figley saying that compassion

fatigue is a phenomena with several dimensions which includes burnout (defined as a

sense of exhaustion with a decreased sense of accomplishment), secondary traumatic

stress (the absorption of the psychological and emotional pain of those being worked

with), and a decrease in compassion satisfaction (which is the positive experience of the

efforts of compassion).[18] Gorski and Lopresti-Goodman's study on the causes of burnout

in American animal rights activists do not mention compassion fatigue as a subject term

but only to burnout which includes emotional and psychological factors.[19] There is not

uniformity in the literature around the definitions, application of, and relationship

between compassion fatigue and burnout when studying professional or volunteer human

service providers and activists.

  Five articles name the characteristics of burnout as being overwhelmingly

exhausted physically and emotionally, having increased cynicism towards the social

movement, a sense of ineffectiveness, losing one's persistence in their activism, or totally

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Slocum-Gori, Hemsworth, Chan, Carson, and Kazanjian, "Understanding Compassion Satisfaction," 173.

[17] Vaccaro and Mena, "It's Not Burnout, It's More," 358.

[18] Eleanor Pardess, Mario Mikulincer, Rachel Dekel, and Phillip R. Shaver, "Dispositional Attachment Orientations, Contextual Variations in Attachment Security, and Compassion Fatigue Among Volunteers Working with Traumatized Individuals," *Journal of Personality* 82, no. 5 (October 2014): 355.

[19] Paul Gorski, Stacy Lopresti-Goodman, and Dallas Rising, "'Nobody's Paying Me to Cry': The Causes of Activist Burnout in United States Animal Rights Activists," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 3 (May 2019): 364.

disengaging from it.[20] [21] [22] [23] [24] Two articles describe compassion fatigue as potentially

including depression and stress-related illnesses.[25] [26] Slocum-Gori et al. claim that

compassion fatigue can emerge suddenly without warning and brings feelings of

helplessness, confusion, and isolation.[27] Meneghini et al. claim that this fatigue can lead

to negative changes in the quality of close relationships.[28] In his study on eco-anxiety,

Pihkala says it is difficult to separate the challenging emotional and mental states

associated with eco-anxiety (caring greatly about climate change and its social movement,

and fear and distress about changes in the climate and/or the ineffectiveness of human

action or lack thereof) from other anxieties of life outside of the environmental concern.[29]

Vaccaro and Mena's study on burnout amongst activists names that activists and

volunteers do not exist in a vacuum but rather their activism is part of an already busy,

full life of school, other extra-curricular activities, and personal relationships.[30]

Sometimes having multiple demands has positive effects on one's activism but burnout

can also be linked to having too many demands on one's self and the emotional

responsibility they feel for others.

　　　　An intriguing area that needs more study is the question of apathy or paralyzed

empathy. Frederick et al. claim that in a state of compassion fatigue or burnout,

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[20] Frederick, Dunbar, and Thai, "Burnout in Christian Perspective," 268.

[21] Gorski, "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout," 667.

[22] Vaccaro and Mena, "It's Not Burnout, It's More," 358.

[23] Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising, "'Nobody's Paying Me to Cry',"364.

[24] Paul Gorski, "Relieving Burnout and the 'Martyr Syndrome' Among Social Justice Education Activists: The Implications and Effects of Mindfulness," *Urban Review* 47, no. 4 (November 2015): 696.

[25] Meneghini, Mikulincer, and Shaver, "The Contribution of Caregiving Orientations," 521.

[26] Slocum-Gori, Hemsworth, Chan, Carson, and Kazanjian, "Understanding Compassion Satisfaction," 173.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Meneghini, Mikulincer, and Shaver, "The Contribution of Caregiving Orientations," 521.

[29] Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope," 546.

[30] Vaccaro and Mena, "It's Not Burnout, It's More," 357.

"stagnation or lack of caring takes hold."[31] Vaccaro and Mena say that when suffering

from fatigue, one's capacity for empathy is depleted; they become apathetic.[32] Pihkala

gathers some research saying this lack of empathy is a myth and, in fact, once-active

people in social movements may actually care too much and would like to be able to

continue to act but find themselves, in a sense, paralyzed.[33] If one is fatigued or burnt

out, do they have reduced or absent empathy or are they immobilized in a state of caring?

All the literature reviewed recognizes that learning to prevent or minimize fatigue and

burnout and learning how to help people cope and recover from it is in the best interests

of sustaining social movements and individual health.

It is clear from this literature review that studies of human service providers in

professional sectors who work with victims of disaster, trauma, and crisis predominate the

field. The literature about volunteer activists is predominantly about secular activists

(animal rights, queer and racial justice, and climate change). My study will offer a small

but needed glimpse into the experience of Christian people who involve themselves

formally or informally in social movements and the qualities of and reasons for their

compassion fatigue and burnout.

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[31] Frederick, Dunbar, and Thai, "Burnout in Christian Perspective," 269.
[32] Vaccaro and Mena, "It's Not Burnout, It's More," 358.
[33] Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope," 548.

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    15, no. 4 (October 2011): 339–67.

<u>Appendix B: Theological Framework</u>

Originally Submitted November 21, 2019

"Battle Fatigue on the Big Issues: The Cost of Caring" is a qualitative research project with abundant theological background and implication. To begin with, the participants who will be invited to share their stories of battle fatigue after directing their compassion, time, energy, and other resources to large-scale societal issues will be Christian. The big issues in which the participants have been involved, however, need not be organized or directed by Christian groups or initiatives. My curiosity resides in the experience of Christian individuals who identified a need in the world, were moved in some way (internally by God, self-motivation, or both; or externally by public platform or other social engagement; or some combination of internal and external) to become involved in bringing about change, and as a result feel tired, helpless, hopeless, fatigued, or burnt out. How the participants understand their faith to have been involved at any point may vary amongst them and will be revealed in the interview.

The Christian story is one of humans caring about and being co-active with God in bringing about God's vision where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up (Luke 1:52), and where death, mourning, and crying will be no more (Revelation 21:4). The many and varied understandings of such visions and its imminence are beyond the scope of this essay, but there is space for a glancing look at how the biblical prophetic tradition and the Christian vision of the kingdom or shalom provide theological background and implications relating to battle fatigue.

Biblical prophecy presupposes that God is a deity active in history, who cares about and is involved in the lives of humans and seeks to direct their societies and

political activities to living according to a vision or way of God. Prophets are intermediaries between God and the people of a given time and place.[34] A prophet can serve as God's "mouthpiece" for speaking a vision and hope of God to the people of which they might otherwise not be aware.[35] A distinct characteristic of prophets is that they feel called by God to prophesy.[36] Their special relationship with God causes them to envision what others do not, and they have a theological imperative to share what they see. The prophetic tradition that connects most to my study are those who are called Latter Prophets from Isaiah to Zechariah whose relatively affluent context began around the eighth century B.C.E. "They preached against social injustice and oppression, warned of imminent catastrophes and occasionally sought to change the community's attitudes."[37] These prophets also respond to international crises which involved aggressive military action against God's people Israel by Assyrians, Babylonians, Egypt, and others.[38] These are all big issues indeed.

The prophet seeks to be and believes they are a speaker of truth. They know their voice will cause discomfort and unease to those who hear it; whether the hearers are in power over others or they are among the powerless.[39] What is preached is change, reform, reversal, and upset; all of which encounter resistance and require believing what is prophesied, reorganization of people and resources, and usually a lot of time. Carolyn Sharp says prophets are idealists who call us all to align our practices with the more

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[34] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 5.
[35] Gert Kwakkel, "Prophetics and Prophetic Literature," in *The Lion Has Roared: Theological Themes in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament,* ed. H. G. L. Peels and S. D. Snyman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 2.
[36] Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed,* 14.
[37] Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1979), 7.
[38] Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today,* 3.
[39] Ibid., 4.

perfect vision they perceive in God's heart.[40] The biblical prophet is also a companion

who is intimately connected to their communities so that they suffer with them, go into

exile with them, and rejoice when God's blessing is at hand.[41]

James Crenshaw raises an excellent question: "…[W]as the prophet himself ever

certain of his own status, or did he walk the razor's edge between certitude and doubt all

his days?"[42] Can the true prophet become false and vice versa? As time goes on and

factors and information change in a situation, a once prophetic vision can become

misguided, irrelevant, or prejudiced. Prophets by nature position themselves in the

"liminal space between the sacred and profane".[43]   To live with one's heart and mind

oriented to a holy vision that does not yet exist, to see the waywardness of society all

around them, and to experience the hard work of helping others see what they feel is the

will of God brings spiritual, emotional, and psychological tension and dissonance into a

prophet's life. Such experiences must be fatiguing.

The biblical prophets in question do not predict a future which the Bible tells as

fulfilled, but rather they plead with their communities for generations for change they

never see.[44] Scripture tells us that though God empowers prophets with a holy vision,

people are free to ignore it. Prophets knew their social status and believability could be a

fickle thing, especially when no results were obvious. If prophetic validation is

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[40] Ibid., 16.
[41] Ibid., 17.
[42] Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict,* 14.
[43] Sharp, *Old Testament Prophets for Today,* 15.
[44] Ibid., 13.

fulfillment, it is not difficult to see why it is easy to reject the instruction of a prophet.[45]

A prophet does not always want to be a prophet.[46]

People whom I will interview may identify in some ways with being a prophet. Contemporary connotations of prophets may conjure images of the inspiring, passionate, grassroots advocate for justice with society's most vulnerable people; or images of the itinerant, irritating, rambling soapbox preacher who rants on street corners. They may struggle with being someone who carries an alternate vision that disrupts and disturbs the status quo and being someone who simply wants to live a normal life without such a heavy spiritual call.

The participants may identify less with a prophet like Jeremiah, however, and more with the people who heard his message and fell into despair and disappointment. Their despair was not because they did not believe in what Jeremiah preached but rather that they could not accept "the theological reality that the promise always exceeds the fulfillment".[47] My participants may be less like Moses who lead the people of Israel out of slavery but more like his grumbling followers eking out sustenance and survival in the wilderness with the promised land dangling like a distant, unreachable carrot (Exodus 16:2-3).

The Exodus stories of God providing food (Ex. 16:12) and water (Ex. 17:6) to the wandering Israelites describe not only the hardships of exile but draws attention to the lack of confidence the people had in the whole project of liberation and finding a new

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[45] James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 65.
[46] Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 40.
[47] Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict,* 29.

home.[48] Despite the rousing, liberating start to the exodus and all of the signs and wonders they witnessed, they were not consistently compelled to belief and remained skeptical of the whole endeavour. A good theological message for those who follow a prophet or a far off vision of wellness is that when God's children gripe and grumble God will provide. When life in the desert is tough and the waiting is long, crying out to God for help will get a response. Such faith may help sustain a fatiguing advocate for change or perhaps the nature of battle fatigue may mute even one's faith in God's providence.

Whereas the prophet is an individual in a community context seeking change, the Christian church often seeks to mobilize groups of people. It will be interesting to discover if the participants of my study feel like loners in their efforts, part of a unified group effort, or somewhere in between. The United Church of Canada has long sought to mobilize groups of lay people for work on issues of social justice and positive change for the present and future. A very helpful booklet for this essay was published by the United Church's Working Unit on Social Issues and Justice called "The Quest for the Shalom Kingdom: A Long and Faithful Journey" in 1982. Its opening page states: "Today…we feel a special urgency, born of our sense that for some years we have had within our reach powerful tools for doing good and for overcoming some of the worst human problems, yet the suffering goes on."[49] It speaks of a "fearful shadow side" of the tools Christians create to effect positive change on big issues and that it can take generations before the error of one's approaches show that the tools of change have enslaved rather than liberated (the residential school system for Canada's First Nations people, for example).

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[48] Donald L. Griggs and W. Eugene March, *Exodus from Scratch: The Old Testament for Beginners* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 30.
[49] Bonnie Greene, "The Quest for the Shalom Kingdom: A Long and Faithful March" (Toronto: The Division of Mission in Canada, The United Church of Canada, 1982), 1.

In the midst of the chaos of swirling political, religious, economic, and social views on what is best for humanity and creation, Christian community efforts and inter-disciplinary groups can cloud the horizon where we pray God's shalom waits, invites, and inbreaks.

Christians turn to Jesus to clear the fog of confusion and misdirection. He did more than preach about the kingdom or shalom of God; he walked in its light during his earthly life for he was part of the inbreaking of shalom itself.[50] Christian discipleship prescribes a life of following, of action, of service to the lowly and the least for the sake of the kingdom. The compassionate volunteer Christian activist is busy because it is the invitation of Christ. Persecution and being labeled a troublemaker in society is part of the work towards shalom. Matthew 5:11 – 12 says:

> Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.

To be a disciple is to be at odds with society as it is. It is a refusal to say that all is well with how humans relate to each other, that there is no more peace or well-being to be had, or that peace is not worth working on. Like the Hebrew prophet of old, the Christian lives in tension. They have a sense of the kingdom of God that is to come (however varied and broadly that is understood) and that being idle is not an option. In Luke 12:29 – 31 Jesus telling his followers not to worry about material things of this earthly life but to focus on the kingdom. Jesus promises rest for the weary and burdened ones in Matthew 11:28, but still the Christian path is one with one foot in this world and one hoping to step into God's full and just peace.

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[50] Ibid., 3.

Some big issues may feel so hopeless that Christian endurance seems it must inevitably flounder in the faith of those stumbling to be Christ-like. For example, the present climate crisis can bring a powerful existential and spiritual anxiety to Christians because the message of some climate change analysts is so grim that the human race itself is threatened.[51] How can God's shalom come if the human population and creation itself are so negatively impacted or even decimated?

There is hope, however. An article by Frederick, Dunbar, and Thai says that Christian human service workers (professionals not volunteers) who experience burnout as a lowered sense of personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, and apathy can reconnect with the "living, empowering spirit of God" through Christian spiritual practices like prayer and meditation.[52] If we can extend such good news to volunteers, we can find hope in the rejuvenating of Jesus followers for the good work of discipleship.

The Pentecost story in Acts 2 paints a strong picture of how to sustain oneself in being involved in big issues: do not do it alone. The Spirit rushes in to bless the disciples when they are all gathered together praying in one place (Acts 2:1). They are filled with the fire of Spirit and gifted with the ability to take word of God's deeds of power far and wide (2:11). The voice of the prophet Joel is recounted to inspire anew that sons and daughters shall prophesy along with any whom the Spirit blesses, and then shall come the "Lord's great and glorious day" (2:20). With Christ at our side we will not be shaken and our flesh will live in hope; our fires of passion for this work rekindled by the Spirit and by

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[51] Panu Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," *Zygon* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 552.

[52] Thomas V. Frederick, Scott Dunbar, and Yvonne Thai, "Burnout in Christian Perspective," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 3 (June 2018): 267.

being together (2:25-26). The promise of the kingdom is "for you, for your children, and for all who are far away" (2:39). This powerful chapter closes with:

> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (2:46-47).

Whether a Christian volunteer who committed significant energy to fighting for change on a big issue identifies in some ways as a prophet or a follower of a prophetic voice in society, the Christian faith directs us to activity and rest, personal conviction of a holy vision within the Spirit-blessed community, and the deepest hope that God's shalom, though at times feels far away, is present and inbreaking through them and despite them.

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Appendix C: Research Questions

1. From what "big issue" are you experiencing fatigue and why is this issue important to you?

2. Was your faith involved in your decision to engage this issue? How so?

3. Describe how you became fatigued.

4. What does it feel like?

5. How does your fatigue relate to other areas of your life?

6. What would help you cope and recover from this fatigue?

7. What advice would you give other people who are working on big issues?

8. What advice would you give the church when it tries to engage people on big issues?

9. Is there a question I have not asked that you would like to respond to?

Appendix D: Letter of Invitation to Participants

(Date)

Dear (name),

My name is Rick Gunn and I am in my final year at the Atlantic School of Theology where I am pursuing a Master of Divinty on the path to ordination in the United Church of Canada. As part of this degree, I have the opportunity to undertake a piece of research that has consequence for the church and my formation as a minister. My study will explore the experience of four to six Christians in the Halifax area who feel fatigued in their efforts to bring about positive change on a "big issue". A "big issue" for this study is defined as a situation that negatively effects all of Canada and/or the world. Big issues are systemic and require a long time to change for the better. Examples would be the climate crisis, addressing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with Indigenous Peoples, racism, or poverty. I am excited to explore this because I think as Christians and citizens we are called to use our gifts of time, talent, and energy to make our world better; and yet fatigue is a real phenomena which the church and action groups should better understand. If this sounds like part of your life's journey, I invite you to participate.

What would be asked of you? I will be facilitating a 2.5 hour focus group interview in the Halifax area in January 2020. In a safe, comfortable environment, I will ask a short list of questions and invite each participant to share their responses. The focus group will be video recorded so I may transcribe the responses and analyze them. Based on what I observe in the focus group and upon reviewing the recording, I will prepare a presentation to share at the university on Thursday March 19, 2020. Your name and image would be kept in the utmost confidence and would not be part of the presentation. If I were to quote you in the presentation, I would assign you a code name to protect your identity.

If you say yes to being involved, you may withdraw your participation at any time; even during the focus group.

If you would like to be part of my research project, please email me at richard.gunn@astheology.ns.ca by November 30. Thank you so much for considering this invitation and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

Rick Gunn

<u>Appendix E: Informed Consent</u>

Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, "Battle Fatigue on Big Issues: The Cost of Caring". I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process.

I am aware that my participation is confidential. An audio recording of the interview will be made and field notes may be taken. This recording along with the transcript of the interview and field notes will be destroyed following the completion of the research project. My name and any other personal identifiers will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____   Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.