

## Review

Kate Middleton, *Refuel: How to Balance Work, Life, Faith and Church without Burning Out*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015, 242 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-0-232-53160-2, £9.97.

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Kate Middleton is a psychologist, church leader and Director of the Christian mental health charity “Mind and Soul”. She offers this book to busy people who know they are stressed, want to do something about it, but do not have time to read a book on stress. The book also largely presupposes that readers’ Christian commitment and levels of church involvement will be significant stressors in their lives. It is a book aimed at people who are passionate, energetic and committed, but who perhaps need to develop better ways of caring for themselves and managing their stress.

Part one of the book analyses what stress is and how it impacts upon us. In this Middleton’s approach is realistic and practical, drawing on insights from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Stress can be defined as any change which requires us to respond. As such it is inescapable in modern life and often a force for good, part of what drives us to perform well and develop. It also needs to be managed, however, and Middleton gives succinct and helpful analysis of how the negative impact of stress can be heightened, for example, by our tendency to anticipate the future (so that stress responses become a constant and chronic state rather than a temporary reaction) and, by our own interpretations of and emotional reactions to whatever is going on around us. She is realistic and reassuring too about how involvement in church life can add to the stress in people’s lives, and that stress and its effects are perfectly normal for the Christian and not any sign of inadequate faith. At each step of this analysis attention is turned back towards the reader, each chapter ending with a questionnaire encouraging us to apply the insights of the chapter to our own lives.

Part two of the book then offers a practical guide to looking after ourselves and dealing with the effects of stress in our lives, working from the viewpoint that God is unlikely to heal us just so that we can continue to

circumvent our own basic needs. There follows simple, practical and wise advice about sleep, eating, being mindful, relaxing, planning for stressful times and dealing with anger and anxiety, again with the opportunity at the end of each chapter for readers to evaluate their own situation.

If I am honest, this is a book which I would probably not have read had I not been asked to review it. Superficially it could give the impression that it is going to solve the problems of stress and burn-out and reconcile the demands of work, life and faith, all in 242 easy-to-read pages, and so appear to be somewhat simplistic. It is also quite clearly aimed at a readership with a particular theological stance: one which requires any valid argument to have a biblical story to justify it (even when this can seem a little tenuous at times) and from which the author seems to anticipate a degree of antagonism towards “secular” therapies such as CBT or towards practices rooted in other spiritual traditions, such as mindfulness.

Not to have read this book would have been my loss however, for it is full of gentle, practical and well-informed wisdom about caring for ourselves and managing stress. It makes clear that seeking medical help, engaging with psychological models and, yes, even practising mindfulness all have a role to play in this. On a spiritual level it urges readers to understand that our minds, personality types and all the ways we have of reacting to the world are simply part of our God-given nature and as such are worthy of compassion, understanding and self-care, to help us to work with them rather than battle against them.

As a mental health chaplain, I suspect there may not be many people to whom I would recommend this book in its entirety, just because it presupposes a degree of biblical literacy and Christian commitment which not many of our service users will have. I will certainly be turning back to it, however, to draw on many of its illustrations, images and insights in order to care for myself and to encourage others to do so too.