

Factors Involved in Clergy Burnout

Criteria from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (as Adapted for Clergy)

Burnout=a decreased sense of personal accomplishment and increased sense of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization

Primary Criteria Assessed

- Emotional Exhaustion= “I feel fatigued in the morning when I get up and have to face another day in congregational ministry” and “Tired and irritated much of the time”
 - unable to function (e.g., think clearly) or carry on (e.g. act coherently, no energy, even the smallest task is stressful)
 - constant or recurring anxiety, often no longer proportionate to the demands actually put on one
 - increasing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
 - Increasing feeling of alienation from pastoral role and it is increasingly exhausting to project and maintain a public persona as pastor
- Depersonalization= “I don’t really care what happens to some of my parishioners” and “I find it difficult to listen to what some parishioners are really saying to me” (people are emotionally and spiritually “shut down”; increasing inability to engage with difficult people/interpersonal conflict; cynical about attenders; spending less time with church members; withdrawn and detached; fixed and rigid with church members)
- Personal Accomplishment=“I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my congregational ministry” (vs. “Frustrated in accomplishing personal tasks”) and “I feel exhilarated after working closely with members of my congregation” (vs. “Loss of enthusiasm for my job” and “Feel guilty much of the time”)
 - Intuitives and feelers recorded higher scores on satisfaction in ministry (Francis et al., 2008)
 - Francis and Turton (2004b) showed that clergy who regularly consult with a supervisor to practice reflective personal ministry (not just for work-related tasks) have a significantly higher sense of personal accomplishment in ministry.

Secondary Criteria Assessed

- Extraversion vs. Introversion=“Do you like mixing with people?” and “Are you a talkative person?”
 - Extraverts recorded higher scores in terms of satisfaction with ministry and lower scores in terms of emotional exhaustion in ministry (Francis et al., 2008)
- Thinking vs. Feeling

- Thinkers recorded higher scores on emotional exhaustion in ministry
- Neuroticism="Are your feelings easily hurt?" and "Does your mood often go up and down?"
 - The way this last criterion is structured seems to be oriented toward increased anxiety in social situations, particularly in regard to how one imagines oneself to be perceived or how one imagines others to have evaluated (or be evaluating) one's performance.

A rule of prayer was associated with higher level of personal accomplishment and lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Participation in clergy prayer groups and retreats was also observed to have similar effects.

- **Clarity vs. Ambiguity Concerning Pastoral Role**

Positive

- A clear and persistent sense of internal call to the ministry
- Clear sense of nature, responsibilities and boundaries of pastoral office and role expectations
 - a sense of being called to this work by God
 - greater self-integration

Negative

- Weakly internal orientation to role/office of ministry
- Role anomie (ambiguity/lack of clarity about role, authority and responsibility of the pastor→lack clarity regarding the expectations and evaluations of role performance) or conflict of beliefs/expectations regarding clergy role/authority (clergy vs. congregation members)
- Declining status/authority of clergy due to secularization and consumerization-→poor value congruence between pastor's values and values of congregation members as part of the broader secular society, combined with pastor's perception that the church is declining and losing influence and has lost its way and has an uncertain future
 - Accelerates perception of isolation/loneliness
- Boundaries/responsibilities unclear →unrealistic expectations/excessive workload/persistent criticism of pastor's performance→feeling overworked and underappreciated, while some of their skills are overlooked and underused
- Perception that there are too few qualified lay leaders to take over significant leadership roles in the church (teaching, evangelization, visitation of the sick, administrative tasks, financial/budgeting/fundraising roles, etc.), so the pastor feels he/she must do them himself/herself or believes that the congregation expects him/her to do all these things.

- Lack of regular (at least annual) evaluation by sympathetic, supportive lay leadership based on agreed criteria that represent reasonable expectations of the pastor and are largely continuous with the expectations stated when the pastor was first employed.
- Emotional Ability to Differentiate Self from Clergy Role in a Healthy Way
(Especially ability to distinguish between
 - goal setting with reference to one's congregational ministries and
 - goal setting in one's personal life)
 - One is more than what one does
 - One has intrinsic value apart from other's evaluations of one's performance
 - One can
 - more easily value and cope with a collaborative style of planning, leadership and conflict management (leading to lowered perceptions of role overload and ambiguity, which are important contributors to burnout)
 - have a greater openness to change and more appropriate styles of conflict management (avoiding more destructive forms of interpersonal conflict)
- The Way an Individual Pastor's Personality Fits with Their Situation
 - Burnout has less to do with external factors (congregation size, congregation growth, congregation history, etc.) than with the individual pastor's ability to process, respond to and cope with these individual external factors.
- Nature of Coping Strategies Routinely Employed

Negative

 - Self-isolation and concealment of struggles/faults/mistakes
 - Decreased attention to self-care (lack of exercise, unhealthy eating patterns, weight gain, discontinuing Bible reading and prayer apart from what is strictly required by one's professional responsibilities)
 - Negative reactivity: Alternating between venting, disengagement and self-blame
 - This pattern leads on to greater emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (overwhelmed by the perceived demands of others → emotional cutoff,

increasingly impersonal treatment of parishioners, often accompanied by thoughts of leaving the congregation/ministry altogether)

- Lack of access to formal support mechanisms (e.g. access to affordable, confidential counseling and spiritual direction)

Positive

- Ability to positively reframe disappointments/failures in light of God's broader purposes, which makes it possible to acknowledge and accept them in light of the Gospel
 - This presupposes a regular, substantive and continuing devotional reading of Scripture and time for prayer apart from sermon preparation and one's clerical responsibilities (50-60 minutes a day or more).
 - Greater emotional investment in spouse/marriage
- **Chronological Age (Not Years in Ministry) is Negatively Correlated with the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization Subscales of Burnout** (Byrne 1991, McCarthy 1985, van der Ploeg et al. 1990, Randall, 2007)
 - Younger clergy may need greater care and support and may need help in identifying unreasonable expectations in ministry
 - The current seminary system should be revised to promote greater enrollment of called and gifted persons who are 35-45 years old at entrance to the formal training program.