

Stress in Pastoral Ministry: Stressors, Coping Strategies and Clergy Health

The High Cost of Stress in Pastoral Ministry

In 1991, the Fuller Institute of Church Growth conducted a survey of 1000 pastors which showed that "50% of respondents had considered leaving the pastoral vocation during the previous three months [and] 70% had a lower self-image than when they began their professions" (cited in Ronald S. Beebe, "Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy," *Journal of Career Assessment* 15:2 (2007): 257-265)

It is also clear from a number of recent studies that as a result of these and other factors related to pastoral stress that the average length of service in congregational ministry has dramatically decreased over the last two decades. See M. Jinkins, "Great Expectations, Sobering Realities," *Congregations* 28:3 (2002): 11-13,24-27.

We Often Misunderstand How Stress Works

When we think of stress and burnout, our initial picture is of various things that are obvious and identifiable and have a known weight pressing down upon one.

- The assumption, for example, is that if I work 10% more hours, I will be 10% more tired and this will be true not only for me, but for anyone else.

This is actually not a true or helpful way of thinking about how stress and burnout actually occur within pastoral ministry.

It may be more helpful to identify

- some issues that are potential sources of stress;
- motivation and perceptions of identity as calling as a mediating factor (buffer one against the negative effects of stress);
- positive and negative coping strategies and their impact on individuals and families;
- broader issues in self-care relevant to physical and emotional health.

Stress and its effects are thus dependent upon a number of different individual factors that are peculiar to an individual at a particular point in time.

Stress and burnout among clergy cannot be effectively predicted by

- demographic factors (e.g., "white males age 35-40 are likely to...") or
- working conditions (e.g. average hours worked per week).
- For further discussion, see Leslie J. Francis, Peter Hills, and Peter Kaldor, "The Oswald Clergy Burnout Scale: Reliability, Factor Structure and Preliminary Application among Australian Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology* 57 (2009): 243-252).

Four Principal Sources of Stress (Potential Stressors) in Pastoral Ministry

To give an example of why a single criterion (such as working conditions) does not in itself determine perceived stress or burnout, let's look at **hours worked** as a factor in stress and burnout.

- Recent studies that clergy employed full-time in a church in the USA currently work an average of just over 52 hours per week.
- Clergy who worked less than 50 hours a week had a 20%-30% higher rate of having their employment terminated.
- Clergy who regularly worked more than 55 hours week do consistently report higher rates of stress and burnout, but this appears to be principally related to factors other than hours worked (e.g. decreased global marital satisfaction, which may or may not be an effect of increased hours worked).

Thus, it is quite possible for two members of the clergy to perform the same tasks for the same number hours per week and yet experience different impacts with respect to stress and burnout.

An even more important stressor (which again is not determinative in and of itself of outcomes of perceived stress and burnout) is **role ambiguity**. We'll discuss this in more detail when we look at burnout. For the moment, it is enough to point that at the present time there is often a great deal of ambiguity and disagreement about

- who or what a pastor is;
- what he or she is or is supposed to do (or is not supposed to do);
- how the pastor will be evaluated, by whom, and with respect to what criteria.
 - American congregations have a high degree of individualism and voluntarism, which often leads to a significant number of individuals in the congregation (who may or may not be emotionally or spiritually mature) loudly voicing their opinions as consumers and expecting to be heard and placated.
 - This leads to there being
 - little felt need for agreement and
 - limited substantive continuity in values over time or across different areas of church life ,

which means that there is a great deal of flux and perceived arbitrariness in the social processes at work in the church.

- Perceptions of a "leadership vacuum" in the church often lead assertive people with strong feelings to assert themselves and begin to enact various initiatives, apart from (and sometimes

contrary to) the clergy or institutionally recognized lay leadership of the church.

A third potential stressor includes **family processes** and perceptions of identity, value and intimacy within family systems. This can encompass both

- (1) issues connected with one's family of origin (negative parental images; dysfunction, anxiety or fear arising from childhood losses, neglect, abuse, unmet needs, etc.)
- (2) the processes at work in one's current family (expressions of intimacy; value ascribed to clergy role by spouse/children; expression by clergy spouse in family setting of anger/aggression/frustration arising from church-based conflicts or work dissatisfaction; congregational expectations regarding the roles, tasks and character of the pastor's spouse; perceptions of family's financial situation, etc.).
- (3) erratic or incompatible work schedules of pastor and spouse, plus feeling that congregation competes with spouse/family for time and that one does not have choice or flexibility about time away from church. See Frank J. Stalfa, Jr., "Protestant Clergy Marriage in the Congregational Context: A Report from the Field," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 62:3 (Fall 2008): 249-259.
- (4) increasing tendency away from intimacy and trust toward (a) emotional isolation (so that one may not have even a single close friend or trusted pastor/mentor/confidante and may lose openness to others and interest in dialogue) and (b) increase ownership/control of task-based work (feel obliged to "do all the jobs" oneself).
- (5) With this increasing need to find power through control and work (publicly showing and justifying a false, performance-based self), "self is destroyed by seeking to save it" (Stephen Muse, "Clergy in Crisis: When Human Power Isn't Enough," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 61:3 [Fall 2007]: 188; see diagram handout). This results in increasing levels of depression and reactive behavior (e.g. anger, bitterness, resentment, fear and hatred as motivations for action). At this point, what is needed is a dying to one's false self, but the thought of this (and the discontinuities and discomfort/pain they would cause) is something one is increasingly unable to bear. "God can save the sinners we are but not the saints we pretend to be" (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh in Muse, 194).
- (6) Attempting to care for and mentor others without having received this in a real and healthy way oneself is a mistake.
- (7) Perceived unmet need for appreciation/honor/meaningful support will also create dangerous distortions in one's marriage and family life.

The fourth potential stressor is the **decline in physical health** in oneself or one's loved one (either as an increasingly restrictive limitation or as an unexpected or catastrophic event).

- (1) diet, limited regular exercise, and related health issues (obesity, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack or stroke, etc.);
- (2) family history of depression (biologically-based depression as a mental health issue arising from pre-existing physical conditions);
- (3) sleep disorders (poor sleep quality, interruptions in sleep, sleep apnea, sleep quality affected by cycle of stressful night events at church and occasional pastoral emergencies at night, etc.);
- (4) events related to aging from midlife onward (arthritis, inflammatory disease, adult-onset diabetes, decreased energy/physical stamina, etc.).

Decline in physical health can lead to perceived decrease in effectiveness in ministry tasks, criticism of clergy performance, assertive people moving into perceived "vacuum," etc.

Clergy salaries are also a significant source of emotional and somatic (bodily) stress, reflecting a downward trend in which clergy, unlike other highly educated professionals, find that they and their families are no longer able to maintain a middle-class lifestyle; cf. Matthew J. Price, "Fear of Falling: Male Clergy in Economic Crisis," *Christian Century* (Aug. 15-22, 2001): 18-21. Salaries have been relatively flat for two decades, representing a large decrease in purchasing power.

Clergy also face a decreasing status within the broader community and decreasing value of denominational benefits (e.g. educational assistance for their children, resources to fund retreats and sabbaticals).

One result of the above trends is that clergy also increasingly lack access to adequate health care benefits, which is itself a source of emotional and financial stress and can limit one's ability to address ongoing health issues. See Collin Hansen, "Blessed Insurance," *Christianity Today* (Aug. 2008): 14-15; Daniel Burke, "Churches Pinched by Health Care Costs," *Christian Century* (Feb. 26, 2008): 18; Lindsay Perna, "Many Clergy Vulnerable to Health Insurance Loss," *Christian Century* (Aug. 25, 2009): 16; "Mennonite Health Care Plan Sets January Launch," *Christian Century* (Nov. 17, 2009): 16.

For Personal Reflection:

In your experience of ministry (including discussing ministry with others and watching others minister), where have you seen one or more of these potential stress factors at work?

- Hours worked

- Role ambiguity
- Family processes (either family of origin or one's own family)
- Decline in physical health

Stressors Operative at the Individual Level

(Complete pie-plate chart of stressors that affect you as an individual; see attached handout)