

Prioritizing Emotional Wellness

Study after study confirms it: ministry is an emotionally hazardous profession. One-third of clergy report feeling burned out within the first five years of ministry,¹ and 70% have lower self-esteem since they became clergy.² Nearly 40% of clergy surveyed were actively experiencing significant levels of emotional exhaustion.³

The sources of emotional challenges for pastors are incredibly varied, driven in part by the sacred calling of clergy and the highly personal and emotional nature of leading the church.

There are the congregants that do not share or are not motivated by your vision, as well as the members who lack an appreciation for how criticism of your leadership can cut so deeply. There is the holy nature of shepherding God's people that encourages you to "dream big" in your ministry, making it difficult at times to reconcile the very human nature of ourselves and our flocks. There are challenges of leading a church staff and a group of lay volunteers, with the personnel and personality issues that come with managing people. There is the emotional burden of always being "the pastor" in the eyes of other, regardless of whether you are "on the clock" or not. Pastor James Emery White insightfully noted, "There are the day-in, day-out realities of serving in a church that is very real, very flawed and very challenging. ... We are shepherds, and sheep are messy. Unruly. Cantankerous. Smelly. They are a chore to care for. And they can hurt you more than you can imagine."⁴

Interestingly, research indicates that clergy experience a wider range of emotions (both stronger positive and deeper negative feelings) than the average healthy American.⁵ Researcher Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and pastor Jason Byassee comment, "It seems that clergy can hold it all – the good and the bad, the joy and the grief – and they can feel it all."⁶ Let's face it – ministry is a unique cauldron of emotions and emotional challenges. So what can you do to help process these challenges constructively and not let them derail your emotional wellness or your ministry? Let me offer three thoughts to consider.

First, one key contributor to emotional wellness is the ability to differentiate between yourself and your role, based on Murray Bowen's work with family systems. While ministry is not alone among professions with differentiation challenges (as a business executive, I constantly struggled with this), there is a tendency for clergy to "become the job" and to increasingly define themselves based on their pastoral roles. Research among pastors demonstrates that higher differentiation between self and role is linked to less emotional exhaustion, lower burnout, lower conflict, and higher satisfaction levels.⁷ In addition, lower differentiation has been shown to narrow the range of conflict management techniques that pastors use when they are faced with conflict (tending to make pastors even more conflict avoidant and less collaborative than normal).⁸ It is critical that we remember that we are NOT the job and instead fully embrace our primary identity as Children of God, first and foremost (John 1:12).



Secondly, self-kindness and self-compassion have also been shown to be key contributors to ongoing emotional wellness, as research indicates that higher levels of self-compassion among pastors is correlated to feeling more inspired about their ministry, having greater satisfaction about life and ministry, and having lower levels of emotional exhaustion. The contrary has also been proven true: pastors who are more self-critical are more likely to feel anxious, guilty or inadequate when they perceive they have “failed” at something.⁹ Additional research has identified three critical components of self-compassion that protect against clergy burnout: (1) offering kindness, patience and understanding to oneself during times of failure and disappointment; (2) recognizing that others go through similar experiences and drawing a connection to this fact during times of pain; and (3) neither ignoring nor ruminating on personal shortcomings.¹⁰

Third, as we look to strengthen emotional health, it is also critical that we recognize and embrace our emotions. God created us to experience a wide range of feelings, and Scripture is full of instances where God and Jesus regularly felt and experienced emotions. Society consistently pushes us to restrain or ignore our emotions, and this bias is potentially even more pronounced for leaders, in general, and for pastors, in particular. The importance of emotional self-awareness (or EQ) is well documented, as well as the risk of “stuffing our emotions”. Terry Linhart notes that our emotions are also often indicators of other things going on within us, including our expectations, motivations (including our shadows), desires and values – as well as the Ignatian concept of emotions as a sign of God’s active work in our lives.¹¹ Peter Scazzero takes this a step further and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and embracing emotions as an avenue for God to connect with us.¹²

Each of these concepts require us taking the time to stop and notice – to recognize, embrace and then name what we are feeling. To try to understand what is going on within us and what is driving our contributing to our emotion. And then to consider our emotions in the context of our humanness, God’s love for us, and His communication with us.

Finally, it is important for us to proactively build emotional “radar systems”, margin and support systems in our lives. Each of us have tell-tale signs that we are becoming emotionally drained (e.g., shortness with others, emotional outbursts, lack of patience, increased sensitivity to criticism). Recognizing these warning signs is a critical element of proactive emotional self-care. Similarly, proactively taking steps to build emotional margin is essential. This can include a regular routine of spiritual practices, time invested in hobbies and activities that provide renewal, engagements with valued friends, or focus on your physical wellness (including exercise, nutrition, rest). Lastly, it is also appropriate to recognize when each of us may benefit from professional support to provide perspective and help us get back on-track emotionally, and to not hesitate to seek help when we need it.

The emotional demands of pastoring are just too heavy and ongoing to leave your emotional wellness to chance. Make your emotional self-care a priority for your life and for your ministry.



Reflection Questions:

- How do you feel your level of differentiation between your “self” and your “role” is currently? How might you keep your self-definition and self-worth separate from the job you are doing?
- What derailers of self-compassion and self-kindness do you experience? What strategies might you consider to short-circuit negative self-talk?
- Where do you go for emotional support? What actions might you consider to strengthen your emotional support base?

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as “The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health” through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

Notes

- ¹Maxwell, C. (2020). *Health and Wellness for Church Leaders: Counseling the Counselor*. Building Church Leaders, Christianity Today.
- ²Beebe, R. (2007). Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 15(2).
- ³Briggs, D. (2019, December 4). Study Finds That Self-Compassion Helps Prevent Clergy Burnout. *Christian Century*, 16.
- ⁴White, J. E. (2011). *What They Didn't Teach You In Seminary: 25 Lessons for Successful Ministry in Your Church*. Baker Books. 18-19.
- ⁵Study conducted by James Stewart-Sicking among Episcopal priests and referenced in Proeschold-Bell, R. J., & Byassee, J. (2018). *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis*. Baker Academic. 106.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Beebe, R. (2007).
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Briggs, D. (2019, December 4).
- ¹⁰Barnard, L. K., & Curry, J. F. (2012). The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion and Other Personality Dimensions. *Pastoral Psychology*, 61, 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0377-0>. Reference to Neff, “The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion”, 2003.
- ¹¹Linhart, T. (2017). *The Self-Aware Leader: Discovering Your Blind Spots to Reach Your Ministry Potential*. InterVarsity Press. 99-100.
- ¹²Scazzero, P. (2006). *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*. Thomas Nelson. 46-48.



Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about emotional wellness and self-care, I recommend the following resources:

- *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Baker Academic) by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee.
- *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to be Spiritually Mature While Remaining Emotionally Immature* (Zondervan) by Peter Scazzero.
- *What They Didn't Teach You in Seminary: 25 Lessons for Successful Ministry in Your Church* (Baker Books) by James Emery White.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including emotional wellness and relational self-care. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in joining a pastoral self-care cohort or in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your ability to set and manage expectations or to strengthen other leadership and management skills, please contact Chris Clark of Northern Elm Mentoring Group (email to ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

