

## Setting & Managing Expectations: A Critical Skill for Clergy

The data is consistent: ministry is a demanding profession with heavy expectations on those who are called as clergy. A 2015 survey found that over half (54%) of pastors find the role to be frequently overwhelming while 48% feel the job demands are more than they can handle.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, unrealistic expectations has been consistently identified as one of the key drivers of forced pastoral exits.<sup>2</sup> While expectations (your own and others' expectations of you) go hand-in-hand with any leadership role, the breadth of the roles clergy fill (ranging from traditional pastoral responsibilities to the leadership of a volunteer-based non-profit organization) create a unique level of challenge. As researcher Rae-Jean Proeschold-Bell and pastor Jason Byassee note, "the wide range of different responsibilities and skill sets required of pastors opens them up to more expectations and to more criticism."<sup>3</sup>



Expectations can be healthy for a leader and for an organization. They help to define "success". They help to motivate and create confidence. They help to get us to think creatively. But expectations can quickly become unhealthy when they are unrealistic, when they are motivated from a foundation of ego or selfishness, or when they are not commonly shared. As Peter Scazzero notes, "the problem with most expectations is that they are unconscious, unrealistic, unspoken and unagreed upon."<sup>4</sup>

Expectations can come from virtually anywhere and attach themselves to virtually any element of your ministry or of your life. There are external expectations that come from your congregation, your denomination, your family, your spouse, and your community. There are internal expectations that we call carry regarding what we do, how we engage with others, and the impact we have. Expectations are often particularly challenging for clergy given the sacred nature of your work and calling, the difficulty to measure the effectiveness of many ministry efforts, the "fishbowl" environment that pastors and their families often find themselves in, and many other factors. Moreover, expectations can be both deeply personal and internalized yet also highly public (particularly for pastors). As such, their negative impacts can be extremely painful and can leave a deep emotional toll.

Any reflection on expectations needs to also consider the unique factors within each of us that magnify our internal expectations. Our shadows often drive, influence or magnify the expectations we carry of ourselves and others, as well as how we internalize or respond to others' expectations of us. In my case, I tend to carry a latent over-developed desire for recognition or a desire to achieve or succeed. Or we may consistently be tying our identity to what we do as opposed to "whose we are". We may be operating from a core of wanting too much to "please" others or being unable or unwilling to say "no". Or we may have a foundational fear of conflict and want to avoid confrontations whenever possible. Actively reflecting on how our shadow might be engaging is a critical step to ensuring expectations are healthy and not destructive.

If expectations are a natural outcome of leadership and the unique nature of ministry can exacerbate many negative elements of expectations, what can we do to help steer the expectations game in a positive and healthy direction? Here are a few thoughts or suggestions to consider:

- **Apply a healthy coating of grace.** When facing unhealthy demands or expectations, we can remember WHO we are and WHOSE we are. We can also personally claim God’s loving grace that can heal and protect us from the physical, emotional, relational and spiritual damage of unrealistic expectations.
- **Acknowledge our strengths, weaknesses and limits.** How do expectations of us (by others and ourselves) line up with what we do best? If we fail to meet expectations, can we embrace this as an opportunity to accept our humanness and limitations and demonstrate our humanness to others?
- **Proactively engage to clarify or align on expectations.** Unspoken or misaligned expectations can be particularly dangerous because they are the source of expectation gaps. Even if the discussion may be difficult or uncomfortable, it is important to not automatically internalize expectations but instead to engage in a process to discern (and discuss) if they are healthy and appropriate. As Peter Scazzero notes, “expectations are only valid when they have been mutually agreed upon”.<sup>5</sup>
- **Be particularly proactive in aligning on role definition and role expectations.** Many pastors do not have written job descriptions that outline the expectations of their role, while many others have descriptions that are outdated or incomplete. Role ambiguity is almost always unhealthy. Proactively discussing what your role is, what it isn’t and what it should be (as well as what others’ role is, isn’t and should be) is often time very well spent. Aligning on boundaries, time expectations (including work hours, time off and Sabbath days), top priorities, and “what defines success” are also critical discussions for clergy, their families and lay leadership.

While some of these reflections and discussions may not be easy or comfortable, ensuring expectations are visible, spoken and aligned is essential to ensure both a healthy pastorate and a healthy church.

## Reflection Questions:

- What unhealthy expectations do you feel in your life and in your ministry? What types of expectations cause you the most stress and concern?
- What factors might be contributing to or magnifying these expectations or influencing your response to them?
- What areas of your ministry/life would benefit from proactively engaging in a dialogue with others to clarify or align expectations? How might you go about doing that?

## 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](http://www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>2015 Lifeway Research Study referenced by Hall, H. (2016, March). Hard Job, High Calling. *Christianity Today Pastors*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=132964>.

<sup>2</sup>Barfoot, D. S., Winston, B. E., & Wickman, C. (2007). Forced Pastoral Exits: An Exploratory Study. *Pastor in Residence.org*. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Proeschold-Bell, R. J., & Byassee, J. (2018). *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis*. Baker Academic. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Scazzero, P. (2006). *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*. Thomas Nelson. 183.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

## Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about setting and managing healthy expectations, I recommend the following resources:

- *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Baker Academic) by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee.
- *Fail: Finding Hope in the Midst of Ministry Failure* (InterVarsity Press) by J.R. Briggs.
- *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How to Become An Effective Leader by Confronting Potential Failures* (Baker Books) by Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima.

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 setting and managing expectations. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen ([gallen@silverbay.org](mailto:gallen@silverbay.org)) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn ([btamlyn@silverbay.org](mailto: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](mailto: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.

