



Burning Out in Ministry

Research Insights from the Flourishing in Ministry Project

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Burnout: A Hidden Threat to Flourishing in Ministry

Imagine a vibrant party taking place around a roaring bonfire. The people are full of energy and joy. The party is a celebration of love and life and goodness. The flames of the fire are dancing, creating a nurturing halo of warmth, cocooning the people against the dark of the night and the encroaching cold. It seems as if the party and the fire could go on forever.

For some pastors, burnout is like the downpour of rain on the roaring fire of a passion for ministry.

Now, imagine a downpour of rain. The fire, the joy, the party are all extinguished. Everyone seems surprised that the fire is suddenly out but, in fact, no one had paid

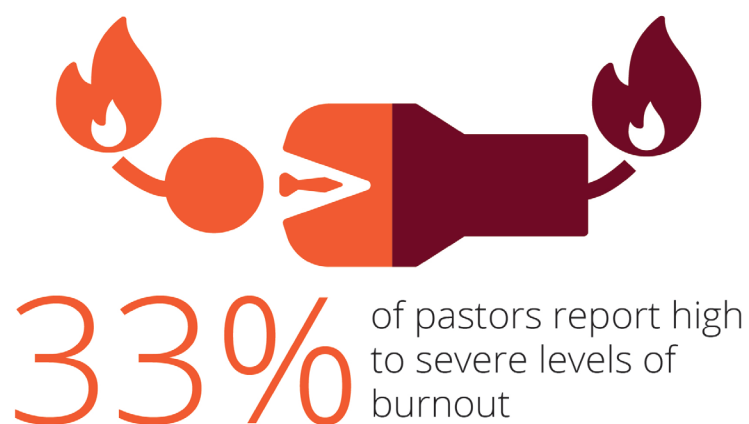
attention to the clouds slowly moving over the sky, to the low rumbles of thunder or the sprinkles of water or even the first drops of rain that were all harbingers of the downpour to come.

Pastors who were once vibrant and vital in their ministry find themselves exhausted, challenged to muster the motivation and energy for ministry work. Like the downpour, burnout usually creeps up on pastors. They never see it coming. These pastors find themselves suddenly and inexplicably sapped of energy and strength. They “hit the wall” as one pastor we interviewed put it. The shock and surprise often catapult these pastors into a crisis. We have heard about deep depression, dramatic health declines, or a sudden collapse of ministry effectiveness that resulted from the seemingly sudden onset of

burnout. Often pastors react by committing even more strongly to the frenetic, overwhelming pace of ministry that got them into burnout in the first place.

For these slow-erosion pastors, burnout undermines their sense of effectiveness, darkens their daily moods and makes them more emotionally-brittle. Over time, it also undermines their capacities to respond to problems, stunts their ability to adapt or change, and begins to damage their pastoral identity. Many of these slow-erosion pastors finally collapse from exhaustion. Notions of sacrifice can become misshapen as pastors try harder to swim their way out of burnout.

We have heard stories of burnout



For other pastors, burnout slowly wears away their wellbeing and ministry effectiveness, the way water can erode stone.

from many pastors. A consistent theme in those stories was that pastors never saw it coming. Whether it seemed to suddenly burst into their life or crept slowly upon them, pastors consistently told us they thought they could carry on longer. This is just one of the many pieces of evidence we found that indicate most pastors are not aware of when they are burning out. One key insight, then, is that efforts to alert pastors when

they have started sliding into burnout are important so these pastors can take action early, before the downpour or final collapse. Another key insight is that preventing burnout is more effective than waiting to treat

it. Once burnout has hit, treating it can take many months and often requires extensive separation from work. Burnout may cause long-term damage. Some pastor may never fully recover from its long-term effects.

When we ask pastors survey questions about burnout, their answers indicate that many are experiencing high levels of burnout. As we have noted, however, many of these pastors may be unaware of their precarious condition. In our surveys of over 7,500 pastors across more than twenty denominations spanning Mainline, Evangelical and Pentecostal religious traditions, between one-quarter to one-third of pastors are experiencing high to severe levels of burnout. These pastors are in the danger zone. Pastors who are experiencing severe levels of burnout should seek professional health care immediately. This level of burnout is likely to have serious negative impact on their ministry effectiveness and it may be causing serious deficiencies to their wellbeing and health. Pastors who are experiencing high levels of burnout would benefit immensely from the practices we outline in

the “Responding to Preventing Burnout” section below. Dealing effectively with high burnout requires a team effort, one that includes effective self-care by pastors and significant support from others. There is much that local churches, judicatories, and denominations can do to help minimize or prevent burnout among pastors.

Another ten to twenty percent of pastors report they are in the early stages of burnout, putting them at-risk for moving into the danger



zone. These pastors can reverse the downward trend through some of the practices we describe in the “Burnout Self-Care” section. Local churches and denominations can take action by addressing the major causes of burnout that we describe below. Finally, access to

practices like those we describe in the “Responding to Preventing Burnout” section would also help reverse the downward trend of burnout among these pastors.

We also find some evidence of higher levels of burnout among pastors over 40, female clergy, and clergy of color. Women and pastors of color often face more significant ministry challenges. These may include, for example, local churches who are reluctant or even hostile to female pastors and clergy of color. We also find that women are more likely to be placed at smaller and rural churches. These churches have fewer resources and their more remote locations may isolate pastors from important sources

of social support. This year we will launch special research studies to explore these challenges.

The possible higher incidence of burnout among pastors over 40 is perplexing given that, among the general U.S. population burnout levels decrease with age. The older most people get, the less burnout they experience. This age-related effect may related to tenure in ministry: second career pastors over 40 do not show the same propensity toward higher levels of burnout. We note, however, that we have comparatively fewer younger pastors in our study and so we need to explore further how age and tenure might effect burnout.

The Three Characteristics of Burnout:

- Mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion
- Reduced ministry effectiveness and diminished capacity to adapt & change
- Cynicism or despondency toward ministry, and toward life in general

The Reality of Burnout

The term burnout is commonly used, but often misunderstood.

Many pastors
are not aware
that they are
experiencing
burnout.

The terms stress and burnout tend to be used interchangeably, but they are very different experiences. Stress is to burnout like a common cold is to a debilitating disease. Stress is an episodic experience, it comes and goes. Burnout is chronic. It is a much more serious condition. When people say they are “stressed out at work” chances are they are experiencing some level of burnout. When burnout is caught in its early stages, remedial action can turn things around quickly. But left unaddressed too long, burnout can require significant long-term support and help to overcome.

Burnout has three principle components. First, emotional exhaustion, the state of being emotionally overextended and overwhelmed. Emotional exhaustion is being drained and used up, without any source of restoration or recovery. It is the chronic, unstoppable feeling that you cannot face another day of ministry work. The second component is despondency, a depleted call to ministry, or cynicism, a loss of inspiration for ministry. Burnout can show up as feeling chronically negative about your work, your congregation, and yourself. Pastors who are burning out may feel unable to muster compassion anymore. They feel calloused or excessively detached from others. Much to their alarm, they say they increasingly find it hard to care for people. The third component is reduced effectiveness, a decline in one's sense of competency and productivity in ministry work. This is especially noticeable in the areas of ministry pastors once felt they could perform well. As one pastor described it, “I found that I could no longer preach. I used to love preaching. Now, I find it almost impossible to write a sermon much less climb back into the pulpit.”

Major Causes of Burnout

Research on burnout indicates there are six major causes of burnout. Most of these causes begin by creating work stress and, left unaddressed for very long, they precipitate burnout. We note that all of these are directly impacted by the decisions of local church and denominational leaders. As we noted, preventing and responding to burnout requires a team effort.

1. High work demands including such things as heavy workload, unclear ministry responsibilities and insufficient resources for ministry work. Sometimes pastors take on more work than they can do. And some pastors do not ask for help when they need it. Likewise some local churches place extreme work demands on pastors or fail to provide the support and assistance



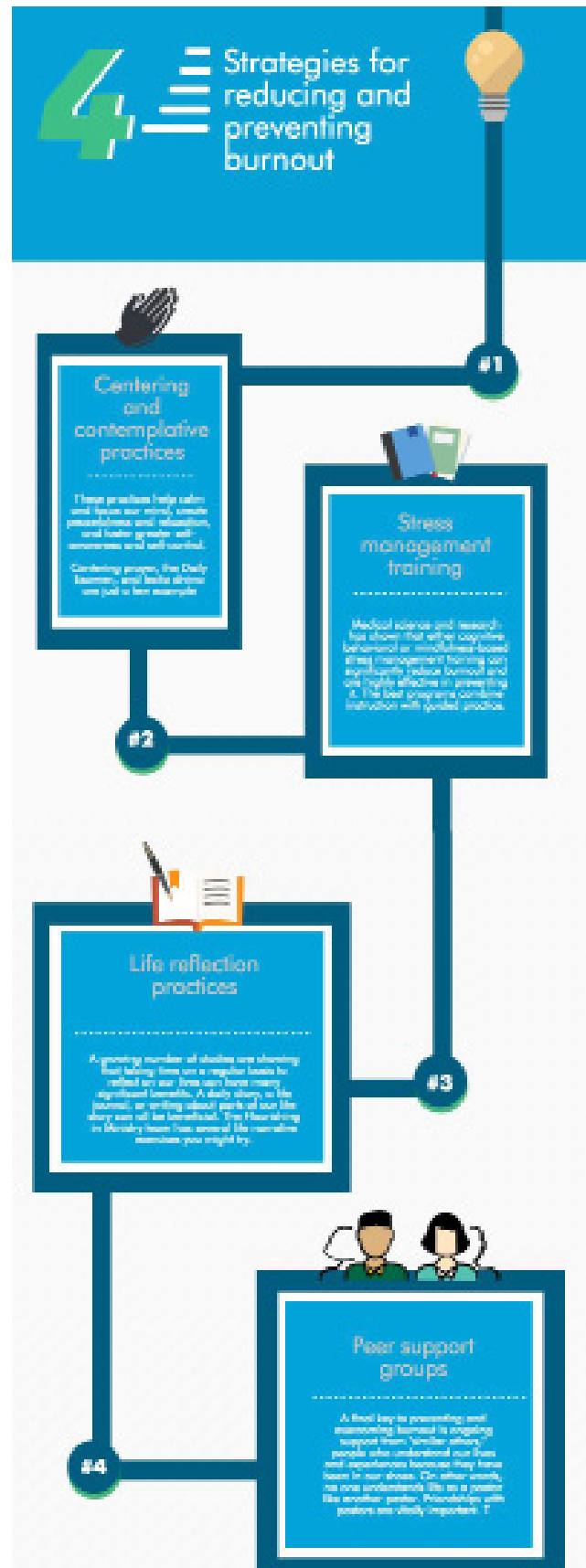
Work load and high work demands are major causes of clergy burnout

required for effective ministry. Our report *A Burden Too Heavy* provides more details about our research findings related to pastoral work demands.

2. Low control of work which might include micromanagement from lay or denominational leaders, insufficient empowerment or low influence over important ministry issues or accountability without power. Younger pastors seem to be particularly susceptible to being over-controlled or dis-empowered.
3. Poor or negative social relationships with parishioners, other clergy, or denominational leaders. This can include social isolation, high levels of conflict with parishioners or coworkers,

disrespectful treatment by others or high work-family strain.

4. Unfair treatment at work including discrimination, hyper-criticism of a pastor's work and disrespectful treatment. Female pastors and pastors of color report much higher incidences of mistreatment by their congregation and by leaders of their denomination.
5. Poor fit between the pastor and the local church. Sometimes pastors do not have the knowledge, skills, or abilities necessary to undertake the pastoral work required for their local ministry context. Most detrimental are mismatches in ministry values and conflict about ministry priorities between pastor and congregation.
6. Insufficient ministry pay or benefits can be especially challenging for both younger clergy and older second-career pastors. Over time, a salary that is inadequate for meeting life needs, insufficient or absent medical and other benefits,



and poor living (e.g., parsonage or housing) conditions can erode wellbeing and aggravate burnout.

Responding to and Preventing Burnout

Because burnout has been the subject of an extensive amount of research in medicine and the social sciences, there are evidence-based approaches that have proven to be effective for responding to and preventing burnout. In this section we provide a concise overview of these best practices and at the end of this report we list additional resources that provide detailed information about specific interventions and practices. Best practices for dealing with high levels of burnout address four core components:

Stress management. Stress management training comes in a variety of forms, but there are only two approaches that have proven effective-- cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness-based stress reduction programs. These are multi-week training programs in which participants learn about stress and methods

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to reduce or alleviate stress and they receive expert support as they adopt those methods to their own life style and preferences. . The University of Massachusetts (www.umassmed.edu/cfm/

Centering and contemplative practices can reduce burnout and prevent its recurrence

stress-reduction) mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program is regarded as among the very best although many medical schools now offer MBSR programs. Most clinical and counseling psychology centers offer cognitive behavioral stress management training. The keys to successful stress management training is a combination of new knowledge and guided practice. Short programs provide some new knowledge, but without adequate support in turning knowledge to

positive new habits, pastors are much less able to integrate stress management practices into their daily routines.

Contemplative/centering practices.

There is a large and growing body of research that attests to the healing and nourishing benefits of contemplative and centering

Sufficient daily sleep and rest is a key to reducing and preventing burnout

practices. The term “mindfulness” is often used to describe the wide variety of practices (www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree) that share common features of calming thoughts, inducing peacefulness, and restoring emotional balance. Over time, contemplative practices have many health benefits and they

also boost capacities for dealing effectively with both daily stress and major challenges. Research indicates as little as five minutes a day can have significant positive effects. The advantage of the wide range of practices is that individuals can select an approach that works best for them. Most religious traditions have specific practices such as contemplative or centering prayer, the daily examen, and Scripture-based practices such as lectio divina. There are many on-line training resources that provide a variety of self-guided learning opportunities. The Wellbeing at Work team has also found the Headspace and Stop Breathe Think smart device apps to be effective training tools.

Personal reflection practices.

Another area of practice that shows great promise for overcoming burnout are activities that help pastors step back from the flow of daily life to gain insights and perspectives into how their ministry and life is unfolding. Some of the luminaries of the Christian faith kept daily journals including Augustine of Hippo, Ignatius of Loyola, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

Research shows there is great wisdom in taking time each day to record and reflect on our life. These practices can be very effective when used in combination with professional counseling, but even used alone, research indicates that daily reflection has many positive benefits including assisting individuals in overcoming burnout and trauma. Again, a wide variety of practices are available from daily life journals and diaries, to semi-structured expressive writing activities (e.g., the Flourishing in Ministry Program's Life Narrative Writing activity), to religious practices such as the prayer of examen. The intervention is to create regular opportunities for individuals to step back from the flow of daily life to examine the positives and negatives of life. These practices create space to identify problems, stresses and challenges. Individuals can then take remedial actions. See James Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth's (2016) *Opening Up by Writing It Down* and Timothy Wilson's (2013) *Redirect* that describe the science behind personal reflection along with helpful methods. (see "Resources," below).

Small group social support with
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pastors and other ministers. For many years the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. has supported the development of social support among pastors. In her book *So Much Better Penny Long Marler* provides key lessons from the SPE initiative. We note that the American Medical Association is promoting physician groups because they have proven to be effective in preventing and treating burnout (American Balint Society and *Doctoring to Heal* at The Center for Physician Wellbeing). Our report titled *Social Support and the "Stages" of Ministry Life* provides more insights from our research on how social support can reduce burnout, rebuild wellbeing, and foster flourishing among pastors.

Effective Self-Care for Burnout

There is much that pastors can initiate on their own to minimize or prevent themselves from burning out. The four areas of practice we outlined above are good places to start. Another key area of focus should be ministry work load and work demands which we address in our report *A Burden Too Heavy?*

For example, even without outside support, pastors can integrate daily contemplative and life reflection practices into their daily routines. A variety of research studies, including our own, shows five additional areas of daily practice can be important preventative medicine for burnout;

Sufficient sleep. Adequate rest and relaxation each day is one key. Research shows that most people—including most pastors—need between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. Of course, there are many life challenges that may interrupt sleep. Parents of young children may face unique challenges. We have heard of tag-team sleeping where parents swap night time responsibilities so that each night at least one parent gets sufficient sleep. Getting enough sleep might require support from a health care professional. There may be other challenges pastors must overcome, but research is conclusive that too many sleepless nights undermines physical and mental health. It is also a potent cause of burnout.

Relaxation and detachment. In addition to sleep, pastors need

daily relaxation and detachment. Relaxation refers to a state in which all physical tension is released. Relaxation can be achieved in a variety of ways: resting, reading a book or watching television in a comfortable physical position, soothing physical activities such as yoga or walking, or guided relaxation exercises. Detachment is a period of time in which pastors forget about work. It is a time when they are completely free of any ministry responsibility, including the potential for being contacted for ministry emergencies. Relaxation and detachment often go hand-in-hand. The most relaxing activities are those in which our minds and our bodies are free from tension and stress. Detachment can be especially challenging for solo pastors and this is one place the local churches can be helpful by creating lay resources to allow pastors time to be truly off the ministry clock.

Daily fun. Engaging in pleasant, positive activities puts us into a good mood, releases tensions, fosters relaxation and detachment, and can be extremely effective in overcoming bad days and forestalling burnout. Enjoyment can come in many different

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forms: a great meal with family or friends, reading a good book, watching an enjoyable movie or television show, physical exercise, games, sports, crafts, and many more possibilities. The key is to find even a small amount of time each day to do something for the sheer enjoyment of the activity. It is clear that “fun” is not a theological category for some pastors, but science continues to provide evidence that it is a very important life practice for overcoming burnout and boosting overall wellbeing.

Restorative niche. This may be a new term, but many people have heard of flow experiences which are a first-cousin. A restorative niche is an activity (1) that requires mastery, concentration and effort and (2) one that we enjoy a great deal. You may be tempted to call these “hobbies” but that term tends to carry connotations of frivolousness. Restorative niches are not frivolous. Indeed, they may be among the best ways to overcome burnout and boost overall wellbeing. Because of the combination of skill and enjoyment, we can get fully absorbed and even wonderfully lost in restorative niches. In so

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doing, they create detachment, foster positive moods and emotions, restore and strengthen our capacities for resilience, and foster overall positive mental and physical health. Restorative niches come in a variety of forms so there is almost certainly at least one niche that is right for each pastor. Pastors have described restorative niches in crafts such as knitting and woodworking; physical activities such as team sports, running and hiking; fine arts such as writing, painting and sculpture reading, performing arts including music and dance, and many others including gardening, cooking, and farming.

Conclusion

There is a wonderful old adage that counsels “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” This is especially true for burnout. The best approach to dealing with burnout is to prevent it from forming. There is much that pastors can do for themselves, and also a great deal that local churches, judicatories and denominations can do to prevent burnout. Almost all pastors will benefit from effective stress management training, even those

who are not experiencing burnout. Daily life practices including adequate rest, relaxation, and detachment plus contemplative practices and a good dose of daily fun are also important. Because integrating these daily activities may require making adjustments, pastors need the support and help of lay and denominational leaders, their peers, and families. In other words, minimizing and preventing burnout is a team effort, but one that will be well worth the effort.

Additional Insights from the Flourishing in Ministry Program

Flourishing in Ministry: The New
Science of Wellbeing

A Burden Too HeavyNever Alone:
Social Support and the Wellbeing
of Clergy

The “Stages” of Flourishing

Other Resources

The American Medical
Association’s “STEPS program”
for preventing physician burnout
(www.stepsforward.org).

Leiter, Michael P., and Christina
Maslach. Banishing burnout:

Six strategies for improving your
relationship with work. San
Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marler, Penny Long. 2013. So
much better: How thousands of
pastors help each other thrive, St.
Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.

Pennebaker, James W., and Joshua
M. Smyth. 2016. Opening up by
writing it down: How expressive
writing improves health and eases
emotional pain. New York: The
Guilford Press

Southwick, Steven M., and Dennis
S. Charney. 2012. Resilience: The
science of mastering life’s greatest
challenges. New York: Cambridge
University Press.

[thecenterforphysicianwellbeing.
org](http://thecenterforphysicianwellbeing.org)

Wilson, Timothy D. 2013. Redirect:
Changing the stories we live by.
New York: Penguin

Our Research Program

The Flourishing in Ministry Program is a major, long-term program of research designed to understand and support the wellbeing of clergy and ministers. We study the lives and ministries of women and men spanning Christian religious traditions including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, and Historically Black. As part of our ongoing research project we have gathered surveys from thousands of pastors and conducted life-narrative interviews with several hundred clergy. We are gathering daily life information from pastors to learn more about how ministry life unfolds day-by-day.

This series of reports provides information about current research insights and results. We will continue to publish and share more reports as we advance our research.

The Flourishing in Ministry team is located at the University of Notre Dame. Our research is supported by the generosity of the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

We invite and encourage pastors, judicatories, and denominations to join our project. Pastors can sign-up at our website and receive their own wellbeing profile. Judicatories and denominations can receive detailed information about the wellbeing of their member clergy.

Much more information is available at our website:

flourishing.nd.edu

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