



Clergy

Compassion Fatigue

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Clergy are often in the unique position to be the first responders to individuals and families during times of trauma and crisis. Pastoral care of church members is one of the clear priorities of pastoral ministry. Yet, who cares for them? Today's clergy seem to have greater demands and less support, and the radical changes in our society over the past 50 years have fundamentally redefined the very nature of what it means to be in ministry. The very acts that get clergy rewarded in their ministry can also be the very things that wreak havoc on their family, personal, physical and spiritual lives.

In 2001, Pulpit and Pew, a research project on pastoral leadership based at Duke Divinity School, surveyed over 2,500 clergy and found that 10% reported being depressed. While this is similar to the general population, 40% reported being depressed or "worn out" at times (Wells, 2002). The study also found serious health problems among them, and that 76% of clergy were overweight or obese, compared to 61% of the general population. A survey of Lutheran clergy report that 68% were overweight and 16% of male clergy and 24% of women clergy report depression (Wells, 2002). Another study of Lutheran pastors noted that 40% of them experienced mild to severe burnout. Statistics vary between 76–90% of pastors reporting they work over 55 hours a week. More and more clergy report they feel there are too many demands on their time. One survey found that 74% of clergy felt that way and they admit to a significant crisis due to the stress of ministry at least once in the ministry (Jinkins, 2002).

One of the biggest sources of compassion fatigue in the clergy is dealing with con-

flict in their churches. A study at Fuller Theological Seminary in the late 1980s revealed that 40% of clergy report at least one serious conflict with at least one parishioner a month (Lehr, 2006). In 2002, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary found that the most draining issue for new pastors is dealing with conflict (Jinkins, 2002). One pastor admitted having difficulty being present to a couple in counseling because she was preoccupied with ongoing conflict.

What Unique Stressors do Clergy Face Who Also Provide Therapy?

Lack of adequate training

Although some clergy acknowledge it was their own decision to complete seminary training without having a pastoral care course, up to 90% state they feel they were not adequately trained in seminary to cope with pastoral care needs in their congregation



(Lehr, 2006). In addition, there are few professions where there is such an “instant jump from student to head of the institution,” as when a seminarian moves straight into his or her own parish (Gilbert, 1992).

Young clergy are often more susceptible to compassion fatigue than older, more experienced clergy. A 2006 informal study in the North Alabama United Methodist Conference, with clergy under the age of 35, looked at how to attract young clergy to the area. The survey suggests that many young clergy feel unprepared for pastoral care and leading a church. Experience and time seem to help reduce anxiety, because clergy can begin to depend on their own effective responses.

Four factors were cited in one study of psychologists that contribute to burnout. They are “being young, having low income, engaging in little personal psychotherapy, and feeling overly committed to clients” (Weaver et al., 2003). These

factors certainly apply to many clergy. Salary is often not commensurate with experience and/or training for clergy. In terms of education, clergy rank in the top ten percent. In contrast, they are ranked in the lower one third of occupations “in terms of salary received” (Weaver et al.). These factors can be sources of frustration and burnout for clergy.

Isolation

Many clergy state they feel alone in their struggles and think the church culture often can reinforce isolation. There is often an expectation of perfection clergy say they feel from their congregations. In some denominations, clergy move frequently. This can make it harder to form lasting friendships outside the church membership, and to establish ongoing accountability partners.

Having accountability and supervision in early ministry is critical (Weems, 2005). However, those who are in denominations with hierarchical accountability often report a general lack of support from their supervising clergy and they can feel “left holding the bag.” Some have speculated there are higher incidences of boundary violations especially with nondenominational and Baptist pastors due to lack of accountability in denominational structures. They can have a “CEO mentality” and are on their own (Elliott, 2007).

There is a problem for clergy in rural areas with limited access to mental health professionals to whom they can refer their church members. While generally advised to limit therapy to three to six sessions, some clergy report they see church members longer because they have few local professional resources available.

Personality traits

“We’re a bunch of ‘ropeaholics.’ That’s what we are,” lamented a pastor to describe himself and his fellow clergy sitting around the table after listening to Ed Friedman’s fable *The Bridge*. In this fable, Friedman tells the story of a man on a journey who meets another man with a rope tied around his waist

who politely asks him to hold the rope for a minute. The man on the journey takes the rope, probably before he thinks about it, and the other man jumps off a bridge. When the one holding the rope protests, the man at the other end of the rope says he is his responsibility and he needs to hold on to him. The man with the rope attached to him takes no responsibility for his situation. The man holding the rope tries to decide how to shift the responsibility from himself to the other man who actually did the jumping (Friedman, 1990). This group of clergy identified with the dilemma of the man holding the rope. As they discussed how much responsibility the man holding the rope should have for the man at the other end of the rope, they looked at why it seems so difficult to let go once we are experiencing “ropeburn.”

Although some research indicates that 80% of the mental health profession struggle with codependency from time to time, clergy may struggle more and codependence can play a major role in compassion fatigue for them. Codependence is an unhealthy pattern of behaviors that are “self-defeating and result in diminished capacity” (Lehr, 2006). Unlike alcoholism or substance abuse, codependence is often culturally accepted and common. This makes it easier to deny its harmful effects. There are also more subtle addictions like approval, being good, being helpful, work, high idealism and perfectionism that can lead to fatigue. Clergy who want to please and don’t make a priority of self-care can be more easily controlled by others’ behaviors and attitudes. Depending on the denominational call/appointment structure, many pastors talk about job insecurity, and they relate it to the approval of their parishioners to their ministry.

Church culture can reinforce caretaking and expectations of perfectionism

Clergy compassion fatigue is also encouraged by the unhealthy, congregational system dynamics in which they work. Triangulation can easily occur in the inability of church members to deal constructively with each other. Clergy



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are involved in triangulation between church members because confronting a member who causes anxiety increases anxiety, and it reduces anxiety to involve a third party. If the clergy sees becoming involved and intervening as a part of their ministry, it can prove to be very stressful to them.

There is also greater likelihood of projection of unresolved issues with authority, like parents or God, which can make clergy prime targets for a church member's anger and unmet dependency needs. People also attribute power to clergy as being persons "set apart" to represent God. As God is always present, so clergy must be also. "And as God would surely never turn God's back on the needs of the people, God's representative dare not either" (Lehr, 2006).

According to congregational size theory, a majority of congregations are "pastoral" churches. These are churches with average worship attendance between 50 and 150. In these churches, everything centers around the clergy; meetings don't take place without the clergy being present; expectations are high for clergy to manage and control

everything; and the clergy are expected to relate to everyone on an intimate level, "even at the expense of attention to the pastor's spouse and family" (Lehr, 2006). Since growth in this size church depends on the personality of the pastor, it can be a trap for compassion fatigue.

Where Do They Turn When They Are Burned Out from Their Dual Roles?

Not surprisingly, research has determined that pastors who cultivate relationships with friends, family, colleagues, support systems/mentors, and consultants have lower incidences of depression and burnout (Jenkins, 2002). In a study of 161 pastors, 29% state they have seen a pastoral counselor or therapist. The percentage is also 29% of ordained clergy seen in the North Alabama United Methodist Conference office of Pastoral Care and Counseling during 2005 and 2006.

There are religious bodies that provide counseling resources for clergy and their families. One model that has been providing free counseling to clergy and their families since 1968 is the East Ohio

Conference of the United Methodist Church, Office of Pastoral Care and Counseling. Howard Humphress, Executive Director for fifteen years, states that outside of being mandated to receive therapy regarding some allegation, clergy seek therapy because they are frustrated with the conflicting and overwhelming expectations from their church members. Dr. Humphress says that approximately 50% of clergy he sees are dealing with church conflict of some kind.

The North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church has had a similar program for about the same amount of time. We see clergy and their families and our experience is that their self-view has some impact on whether they receive therapy. For example, if they see themselves as caregiver and “shepherd of the flock,” it can make it more difficult for them to receive care.

What Can Be Done?

One important thing clergy can do to prevent compassion fatigue is to be faithful to a support/accountability system. It is vital to find a place where there is permission to talk about the demands of ministry in a confidential and trusting environment. It is in these relationships where clergy become more self-aware and more amenable to self-care.

Besides managing workload, practicing stress reduction strategies, having hobbies, nurturing humor, and working to incorporate a balanced lifestyle, clergy have to derive meaning and satisfaction from their work. These are critical immunizations against compassion fatigue. For clergy, it is also important to look at how often they participate in worship outside the place where they are the leader.

Finally, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the unrealistic expectations congregations place on their clergy. For this to happen, parishioners need to be educated about role expectations of their clergy, time management, and the importance of self-care. Jesus set a good example of setting aside times for retreat from the crowds, and we would be wise to follow his example. ○



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