

CHAPTER 3 SPECIFIC HEALTH CHALLENGES THREATENING PASTORAL FAMILIES

This chapter will endeavor to analyze the four most common health challenges threatening pastoral families. Data presented will offer support for the notion that these health issues are directly related to the ministry stressors analyzed in chapter 2. Statistical findings related to the health of the public-at-large as well as clergy in North America will be presented before the depth of disturbing data regarding physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health concerns is examined.

Landscape of Overall Health: The General Public and the Pastor

An overview of the health of both the general public and pastors will be presented in an attempt to identify certain commonalities related to unhealthy lifestyles.

The General Public: A Brief Synopsis

A change of culture began to surface in the United States in the early 1980s in regard to physical health and, from that point until present day, Americans continue making their health a part of their New Year's resolutions. Many determine to diet by choosing "... from ten of the most popular diets on the market: Atkins, Jenny Craig, Ornish, NutriSystem, Slim Fast, South Beach, Subway, Sugar Busters, Weight Watchers and the Zone."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Leah Hoffmann and Lacey Rose, "Costly calories: How much do we spend on diets?" www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7432448/ns/health-fitness/t/costly-calories (accessed May 20, 2011).

Surveys reveal that most of these well-intentioned Americans will fail at keeping their diet resolutions, and that the money spent on these programs will be wasted. Forbes Health and Fitness claimed these are “costly calories”²⁰⁹ and suggest:

It's no secret that Americans are fat—and getting fatter by the burger. Nearly one-third of U.S. adults are overweight, and another third are technically obese, as defined by a body-mass index of more than 30. And Americans aren't happy about it. Last year [2004], we spent an estimated \$46 billion on diet products and self-help books.²¹⁰

What is the rate of return when we are spending so much money on self-help?

The government argues that

two-thirds of American dieters regained all the weight they had lost within a year, and 97 percent had gained it all back within five years. And following these regimes is significantly more expensive than the tried and true technique of eating less and exercising more.²¹¹

Steven Salerno is an author and journalist who, for more than 20 years, has written for many popular publications. He recently authored a book entitled *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, in which he declares the obvious about most Americans, suggesting that they have a “love affair with self-help.”²¹² That “upward of \$8 billion every year”²¹³ is spent on the various self-help programs and products proves his point. Salerno investigated the monetary revenues generated by this movement and uncovered some fascinating, but perhaps not shocking, results.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Steve Salerno, *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (Random House, 2005), 7.

²¹³ Ibid.

“Today self-improvement in all its forms constitutes an \$8.56 Billion business, up from \$5.7 Billion in 2000. Market data now expects the industry to be perched at the \$12 Billion threshold by 2008.”²¹⁴

Emotional health statistics are as troubling as the physical health statistics.

Currently depression (clinical) affects

about 15 million adult Americans ... that is 8 percent of the American population of age 18 and over. About 3 percent or 6 million Americans suffer from manic depression or bipolar depression each year. The population affected by depression is increasing each year. And specialists predict that by 2020, depression would become the second most common health problem throughout the world.²¹⁵

People who encounter various forms of emotional issues struggle with “prolonged sadness, frustration and anxiety.”²¹⁶ Estimates are that “9.5 percent of adult Americans” suffer from depressive disorders,²¹⁷ and this data does not include the anxiety, behavioral, and personality disorders which are recognized as emotional disorders.

The landscape of relationships is peculiar, and statistics are difficult to determine, as that would necessitate factoring in the various ranges and aspects of relationships from casual, friendship, marriage, extramarital, adulterous, abusive, to online and dating. Self-fulfillment, companionship, adventure, security, and love round out the list of reasons for relationships; clearly people love connecting with one another.

A 2010 national profile estimated the population of the United States to be 310,232,683, of whom 81.2 percent claimed to be Christians. Various aspects would need

²¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

²¹⁵ “Depression Statistics,” depressiontreatmenthelp.org/depression-statistics.php (accessed Jun 1, 2011).

²¹⁶ “Statistics about Emotional disorders,” www.rightdiagnosis.com/e/emotional_disorders/stats.htm (accessed Jul 1, 2011).

²¹⁷ Ibid.

to be factored in when assessing the true spiritual commitment and health of these “Christians”; however, the focus of this chapter will consider data gathered from Christian clergy affirming some denominational affiliation.

The Pastor

In an attempt to better appreciate and gain a more realistic understanding of the gravity of specific health challenges encountered by pastoral families, this portion of the thesis will speak to the importance of life itself, alert us to current statistics regarding clergy health, address the workaholic mentality of the clergy, study the attitudes, actions, and abuses of self-care by the clergy, examine the overall landscape in the clergy environment where pastors adopt a people-pleasing presence, and peek into the minds of unstable pastors who commit suicide.

In many of the recent studies involving clergy health, it appears that data is not being collected regarding how much money, if any, being spent by clergy from their own personal budgets is for any of the aforementioned self-help books or programs. Considering the number of self-help books and fitness videos being produced by Christian leaders, flying off local bookstore shelves, being purchased online in record numbers, data about clergy as consumers of this material might prove interesting to researchers and could provide the Christian community with important insights about ways to contribute to clergy health.

Salerno points out that some of the currently most-recognized leaders who have authored self-help material in an obvious attempt to spark an interest within the Christian community.

Self-Help was well represented on the best-seller lists in 2004, anchored by a spate of musings from the Family McGraw (Dr. Phil and his son Jay); Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*; Joel Osteen's spiritually tinged *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living At Your Full Potential*;...Steven Covey's *The Eighth Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* ... to Tony Robbins' various tomes about the giant that slumbers within you and the six dozen separate *Chicken Soup* books now in print.²¹⁸

Perchance, the aforesaid authors have taken to heart the alarming health statistics of most Americans when deciding to write self-help books that would in turn encourage the clergy community to take care of their health, to relax, and to enjoy life.

In the New Testament record, Jesus declares one very important reason for his coming which at times is overlooked by many people: "I have come that [you] may have life, and that [you] may have *it* more abundantly" (John 10:10, NKJV). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "life" as "the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body."²¹⁹ In regard to the alarming statistics regarding clergy health which will be examined in greater detail in this chapter, consideration should be given to the specific words, "vital and functional," being utilized in this definition. Today's clergy might ask themselves if they are truly living with vitality and functionality. Many pastors are so consumed with the daily rigors and realities of their pastorates that they often forget what the meaning of life is and what life is all about. They feel pressure to perform,

²¹⁸ Salerno, *Sham*, 7.

²¹⁹ "Life," www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/life (accessed Aug 12, 2012).

feel guilty for taking time off, and often find it difficult even to engage in that abundant life Jesus talks about.

USA TODAY recently published an article suggesting that scientists are struggling to define life, “pushing the bounds of biology, astronomy and robotics.”²²⁰ Professor Mark Bedau gave his overall conclusions: “We are doing things which were thought to be the province, in some quarters, of God—like making new forms of life. Life is very powerful, and if we can get it to do what we want ... there are all kinds of good things that can be done.”²²¹

While one may or may not agree with the apparent tampering with life, Bedau’s statement, “if we can get [life] to do what we want ... all kinds of good ... can be done,” should be considered especially in light of clergy health and the purposes of this thesis. If a contribution of knowledge can be made toward educating clergy and also developing plans and programs, suggesting support systems, and giving guidance through pertinent resources and counseling, then perhaps we can embrace Bedau’s goal of getting life to do what we want with all kinds of good being done, but specifically with the interest of the pastoral family in mind. Author Charles Stone argues that

Clergy health is the issue at the beginning of the 21st century. If we in leadership can model healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual formation – Jesus wins, his church wins, his followers win, and we live abundantly in his joy.²²²

Hoping to “win” for Jesus, I myself admittedly launched into ministry a novice at 19, both anticipating and hoping to experience extraordinary moves of God in whatever

²²⁰ Seth Borenstein, “Scientists Struggle to Define Life,” *USA TODAY* (Aug 19, 2007), www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2007-08-19-life_N.htm (accessed Mar 1, 2012).

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Charles Stone, *Ministry Killers and How to Defeat Them* (Bethany House, 2010), 36.

way the Lord permitted. In the foundational years, ministry tutelage came from various sages who were saturated with God's wisdom. With earnest delight, I allowed myself to be drenched, like a dry sponge being soaked with water, with teaching; I took to heart every last drop of the savants' discerning words. On one very sobering occasion, a seasoned and rather sedate pastor failed to shield me from the foreseeable future, which was certain to include trials and tribulation, and in attempting to mature me rather quickly in regard to ministry and life, he offered his suggestion for success by pronouncing, "Be ready to preach, pray, sing, or die in a moment's notice."

Such straightforward advice was also tempered with other instruction gleaned from various church conferences I attended, especially during my early years in ministry. With great expectations, sessions were educational and incredible coaching was received. Experiencing ministry overload upon departure from the various conferences, I hoped to retain everything and, indeed, some sessions, statements, and sermons are forever remembered.

Nancy Beach, with 20 years of experience as the programming director for Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, reminded attendees during one such conference, that "Sunday comes around with amazing regularity." No mantra resonates with pastors more than this one. Regardless of what occurs during the week, whether it is babies birthed, weddings, funerals, hospital visits, counseling congregants, raising money, and finally squeezing in some family time, there is always a sermon, or two, that must be prepared and be ready to be preached. The dedication and self-sacrifice of most pastors is unceasing and, in the end, many clergy are faithfully serving the Lord while often neglecting themselves and their families. The ministry environment with all its

eccentricities often drains and exhausts the pastor of all physical, emotional, and spiritual reserves.

Like a tourist accidentally fallen overboard during a rafting excursion down the untamed waters of a wild and erratic river, the pastor finds himself caught in a swirling current, desperately struggling to survive while incessantly gulping in air and water concurrently. Dale Wolery²²³ and Dale Ryan²²⁴ have an interesting assessment of the pastor caught in such a crisis:

He is drowning, arms flailing. Throw him a rope. If he grabs the rope. Pull him out. Simple. Rescue complete. But in real life it seldom works that simply. There are complications. Lots of them. This is especially true if the person flailing about in the waters of crisis and failure is your pastor. What then? What is he doing there? How did this happen? This is not supposed to happen. Isn't he supposed to be a model to follow? Doesn't the office of pastor have some higher standards?²²⁵

Perhaps Richard Swanson's assumptions are correct:

"We have more questions [today] than answers, more problems than solutions. Few know where we are headed, but universally acknowledge that we are careening along at breakneck speed."²²⁶

Possibly, this is how the pastor found himself "flailing about in the waters of crisis and failure." He became overwhelmed with too many questions that needed answering and more parishioners' problems than he could find solutions. If only the pastor could grab onto the rope offered him he might survive. But then again, if he did, he might become a "ropeaholic."

²²³ Dale O. Wolery is the executive director of the Clergy Recovery Network.

²²⁴ Dale S. Ryan is the CEO of Christian Recovery International.

²²⁵ Dale O. Wolery and Dale S. Ryan, "Hope in Times of Crisis: When Pastors and Churches Need Recovery," (Jan 17, 2009), www.clergyrecovery.com/?p=18 (accessed Dec 1, 2010).

²²⁶ Richard A. Swanson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004), 22.

This term was adapted when one pastor immediately identified with the man on a journey in the story after listening to Edwin Friedman's tale *The Bridge*. He decided he and his friends, who are also pastors and were present during the reading, were a "bunch of *ropeaholics*." Sheri S. Ferguson, executive director of North Alabama United Methodist Pastoral Care and Counseling, paraphrases Friedman's fable, adding her insights as well as those of another colleague.

A man on a journey who meets another man with a rope tied around his waist 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 "rope burn." Although some research indicates that 80 percent 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.²²⁷

Accepting the call to ministry is not something about which most pastors are flippant. Pastoring is a privilege and reaps incredible rewards; however, the seasoned

²²⁷ Sheri S. Ferguson, "Clergy: Compassion Fatigue," *Family Therapy Magazine* (Mar–Apr 2007), 16–19.

pastor also understands that this honor is met with daily responsibilities that can take an incredible toll on the pastor and his family. Balancing ministry, marriage, parenting, and self-care is a constant battle and, if not careful, the pastor risks becoming one of those “ropeaholics” helplessly suffering from scorching-, albeit sacred-, rope burn. These painful abrasions are incurred for various reasons and as a result of stressors already presented in chapter 2 of this thesis; excessive workload, poor priorities and time management, compassion fatigue, conflict, congregational needs and, for some, it is simply guilt. Pastors take to heart biblical passages such as “for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48, NKJV), and “let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment,” (Jas 3:1, NKJV) often adopting them as a sort of legalistic onus on their ministry. They then find themselves adding to their already strenuous workload in order to prove they are fulfilling the duties of their unrealistic job description.

The most recent statistical data is troubling and indicates that pastors realize the detrimental impact the pastorate can have on both them and their families. Clergy are beginning to step forward and decry revered reformer Martin Luther’s well-meaning refrain, “If I rest, I rust!” Harvey Herman admits that while Luther’s dedication to ministry is to be admired, “even dedication taken to an extreme turns into bondage.”²²⁸ Dedication to the pastorate does not mean the pastor is exempt from taking some time to promote his own self-care.

²²⁸ Harvey A. Herman, “Anorexia of the Soul: A Burnout Checklist for Pastors,” *enrichment journal*, enrichmentjournal.org/200902/200902_000_Anorexia_of_soul.cfm (accessed Dec 1, 2011).

Taking a break from the Lord's work by all accounts sounds like a great idea, especially for the worn-out pastor struggling to keep pace with his perpetually chaotic schedule, in which he is faced every day with increasing demands that are accumulating faster than they can be addressed. Contemporary culture, with its ever-advancing technology, has affected not only secular society, but the sacred as well. Clergy now sense more pressure than at any other time in history to utilize every means available in getting their job done. Forgotten are the days of delayed responses due to rotary dial telephone, answering machine, and pager. Today's pastor is virtually suspect by parishioners, in regard to fulfilling his job description, if not instantly available or savvy to the latest texting, tweeting, blogging, Facebook, email, Skype, and other such social media. Clergy needs are mounting, and many are in need of a break to recharge physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

New York Times religion reporter Paul Vitello, in an article he titled "Taking a Break From the Lord's Work,"²²⁹ delivers sobering findings about clergy health to his readers. Vitello writes: "The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice."²³⁰ Vitello reports on the results obtained from several surveys conducted by various denominations and organizations in which clergy health is suffering:

Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could. Public health experts who have led the studies caution that there is no simple explanation of why so many members of a profession once associated with rosy-cheeked longevity

²²⁹ Vitello, "Taking a Break," *New York Times*, August 1, 2010.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

have become so unhealthy and unhappy. But while research continues, a growing number of health care experts and religious leaders have settled on one simple remedy that has long been a touchy subject with many clerics: taking more time off.²³¹

The remedy is duly noted by most pastors, and they welcome the idea of time off, however some are choosing to take a permanent break from the Lord's work. So writes Greg Warner in a *USA TODAY* article titled "Suicide: When pastors' silent suffering turns tragic."²³² The lead paragraph was shocking and reveals a disturbing trend among clergy. Warner asks a thought-provoking question:

What kind of personal pain would cause a 42-year-old pastor to abandon his family, his calling and even life itself? Members of a Baptist church here are asking that question after their pastor committed suicide in his parked car in September.²³³

As random as this might seem, reports suggest it to be an increasingly common phenomenon among pastors within a localized southeastern area of the United States. This young pastor chose to end his life like "two others in North Carolina...and three in South Carolina ... all in the last four years."²³⁴

The pain that pastors experience in ministry today can be overwhelming to many. Coping with the constant expectations of being "spot-on" in regards to his relationship with God, his own person, the health of his marriage and parenting skills, as well as taking care of the needs of his parishioners, is almost impossible. Some pastors suffer from extreme depression as a result and determine to permanently put an end to the pain.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Greg Warner, "Suicide: When pastors' silent suffering turns tragic," *USA TODAY* (Oct 29, 2009), www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-10-28-pastor_suicides_N.htm?csp=34 (accessed Jan 30, 2010).

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

David Treadway, the 42-year-old pastor who is the subject of Warner's article, was discovered Sunday morning September 27, 2009, by his wife. She was leaving for church and found him dead in the car. Treadway pastored a growing church of 900 members for five years and informed his congregation several months prior to his suicide that he was being treated for depression. *The Biblical Recorder*²³⁵ reported that a note recovered by police indicated that the pastor committed suicide. The decision among clergy to end it all is a growing concern. I have personally experienced the calamitous tragedy of suicide on a personal level on more than one occasion and the events, especially surrounding a pastor's suicide, are incessantly haunting.

Truman Dollar was a friend first, with whom my spouse and I share treasured memories both personally and in ministry. Second, Truman was a pastor whose untimely death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head in 1996 shocked his dearest friends and family.

How is it that the pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in the USA would end up taking his own life? Truman Dollar did just that. As one of the most respected and revered Baptist pastors of the twentieth century, he put a gun to his head and committed suicide.²³⁶

Answering the phone around dinnertime on March 26, 1996, I will never forget hearing the whimpering voice of Truman's adult son confessing, "... my dad is dead." Shocked by the news and yet I was able to slowly respond, "Tim, I am so very sorry. Was it a heart attack?" His reply was instant. "No. (This was followed by momentary silence

²³⁵ Norman Jameson, "Bulletin: Sandy Ridge pastor found dead," www.biblicalrecorder.org/post/2009/09/27/bulletin-sandy-ridge-pastor-found-dead.aspx (accessed Nov 20, 2011).

²³⁶ "Truman Dollar," allaboutbaptists.com/history_Truman_Dollar.html (accessed Jun 20, 2010).

and more crying.) He did it. He killed himself.” Paralyzed, I struggled to find words that might comfort him.

Truman, the son of a pastor, began his own preaching ministry at 15 years of age. During his lifetime, he pastored four steadily growing congregations and faithfully followed his calling. While serving in his final pastorate at Temple Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, Truman was instrumental in influencing enormous change in regard to racism within the church. However, like many great Christian leaders, he had an Achilles heel, and he succumbed to the temptations of this world and lost not only his pastorate, but tragically his life as well.

In 1983, Truman left Kansas City to become pastor of the Temple Baptist Church in Detroit. The church has a large congregation with 5,000 members and a whites-only membership policy. Dollar challenged both the narrow legalistic Christianity and the racism that was preached by the church's previous pastor. Although he met with resistance, the deacons of the church voted to allow non-white people to join the church in September of 1985. However, it came to light that Dollar had had inappropriate conversations with a woman while he was pastor at the Kansas City Baptist Temple. In 1992, Dollar was asked to resign his position as pastor and he moved with his family to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he worked for an advertising agency. He committed suicide in 1996.²³⁷

The pastor officiating at Truman’s funeral reminded friends and family that pastors are people too, and they struggle with many of the same issues laity do. As he finished, he sent the grieving crowd away with one final, very comforting thought. The unthinkable act carried out by Truman in the last seconds of his life that cold winter day while propped up against a tombstone in a Michigan cemetery should not for any reason eclipse the entirety of his life.

²³⁷ openlibrary.org/authors/OL1759584A/Truman_Dollar

Despite his own moral dilemma, attention should be focused on the fact that Truman was a pastor who suffered from years of depression, a common problem among many clergy today. Mental health professionals admit that clergy suicide is a very rare ending to this very common problem; however, it is an option some pastors are choosing and neglecting the root of this concern is unconscionable. H. B. London claims that “we set the bar so high that most pastors can't achieve that ... and because most pastors are people-pleasers, they get frustrated and feel they can't live up to that.”²³⁸

According to recent surveys, the church is losing many a “people-pleaser”; servants who are called by God to be generals leading in warfare so intense the bloodshed and loss are unfathomable. Clergy suicides number in the hundreds every year and is an outright tragedy. Sobering and undeniable is the fact that once an army loses its general, defeat is right around the corner.

Even a madman like Adolph Hitler understood this. Just before he launched his attack against the Soviet Union in 1941, he arranged for Stalin to see forged documents that indicated his own officers were conspiring against him. Gripped by paranoia, Stalin executed or imprisoned 35,000 top officers—over half of the Russian officer corps,²³⁹

and the implications of this masterminded move by Hitler proved to be detrimental for the Russian army. They experienced staggering casualties and imminent defeat.

A comparable truth in biblical terms might be best understood in the prophecy of Zechariah. “Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech 13:7, NKJV). Shepherds struggle to maintain green pastures on which their sheep can feed. They encounter thieves from every angle attempting to take them and their flock out.

²³⁸ Warner, “Suicide.”

²³⁹ William Stevenson, *A Man Called Intrepid* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 36.

Shepherds are limping away from their pastures, incapable of caring for themselves, let alone their sheep. Scripture reveals that “the thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy” (John 10:10). The enemy uses an inexhaustible supply of tactics in his attempts to bring God’s shepherds and the church down. Sadly, statistics reveal that many surrender to his fiery incoming attacks being launched from every possible direction. The adversary need not confront clergy with the expected. Instead, he bullies them with countless stressors, resulting in incredible health challenges for both the pastor and his family. The cumulative experiences of years of ministry, though often unavoidable, are lessons either learned or evaded. “Experience is a cruel teacher; first the exam and then the lesson.”²⁴⁰ Kenneth Boa suggests this: “In the University of Life, stress and affliction are not elective courses; they’re a required part of the curriculum.”²⁴¹

Research indicates that pastors and members of their family confront a variety of these afflictions; ministry stressors that attack clergy families and result in challenges of epic proportions. These families confess to a reoccurring struggle in maintaining physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, spiritual, and financial health, just to acknowledge a few areas of concern.

The pastorate is a very public ministry and will inevitably produce pressure on the pastor and his family. In view of the nature of the stressors continually experienced by the pastoral family within the clergy environment, as described in chapter 2, it is equally essential to examine the most common health challenges these clergy families encounter as well as and how these threats impact their overall, long-term well-being.

²⁴⁰ *Red Tails*, released 2012.

²⁴¹ “Leadership Qualities: Stress Management,” www.kenboa.org/text_resources/free_articles/5390 (accessed Mar 25, 2011).

For the purpose of this chapter of the thesis, consideration will be given to presenting four specific areas of health challenge, areas acknowledged to be some of the more observable by both pastors and family members who participated in surveys, studies, and research. The areas of challenge relate to physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual well-being. They are listed and analyzed individually, however, not in order of occurrence or relevance in regard to the findings. The author understands the significance of exploring these areas of challenge in relation to survey results. Their interplay will be considered in chapter 5, in the discussion of developing a strategic overall health plan for the pastoral family.

Health Challenges Encountered by Pastoral Families

Physical

Pastors and their families often live from trial to tragedy—this is not surprising given the nature of the pastorate.

Given the high levels of stress for ministry leaders and their families and the rarity of outside support and mentorship, families that stay in the ministry are at risk for missing the signs of serious problems that might destroy their ministries.²⁴²

The frequency of high levels of continual stress for the pastoral family is not always a precursor to major health issues; however it does indicate the risk is imminent.

If you operate in a world driven by chaos it may have the potential for disastrous personal results. You might think of yourself as a hero and hard

²⁴² Philip G. Monroe, “The Needs of Ministry Leaders and Their Families: A Review,” (2007), wisecounsel.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/needs-of-ministry-leaders.pdf (accessed May 30, 2011).

worker, but if you do not take [precautionary] steps ... you may find yourself sitting in the pew instead of standing in the pulpit.²⁴³

Recent findings about the health of pastors in the United States are sobering and visibly indicate some ministers may indeed be forfeiting their pulpits, albeit reluctantly, and finding a place on the pew.

- 71 percent of all ministers admitted to being overweight by an average of 32.1 pounds [14.59 kg]. One-third of all ministers were overweight by at least 25 pounds [11.36 kg], including 15 percent who were overweight by 50 pounds [22.73 kg] or more.
- Two-thirds of all pastors skip a meal at least one day a week, and 39 percent skip meals three or more days a week.
- 83 percent eat food once a week that they know they know they shouldn't because it is unhealthy, including 41 percent who do this three or more days a week.
- 88 percent eat fast food at least one day a week, and 33 percent eat fast food three or more days a week.
- 50 percent get the recommended minimum amount of exercise (30 minutes per day, three times a week); 28 percent don't exercise at all.
- Four out of ten ministers (approximately 39 percent) reported digestive problems once a week, with 14 percent having chronic digestive problems (three days per week).
- 87 percent don't get enough sleep at least once a week, with almost half (47 percent) getting less sleep than they need at least three nights a week. Only 16 percent regularly get the recommended eight hours or more per night.
- 52 percent experience physical symptoms of stress at least once a week, and nearly one out of four experiences physical symptoms three or more times a week.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Dale Roach, "How can a pastor survive the Stress of Crisis," www.likeateam.com/2012/02/18/how-a-pastor-can-survive-the-stress-of-a-crisis/ (accessed Jul 2, 2012).

²⁴⁴ Anne Jackson, *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 48–9.

The Pulpit & Pew organization conducted a national telephone survey, funded by a Lilly Endowment-funded research project, with approximately 900 pastors participating. All pastors were asked specific questions regarding their personal health and the findings were revealing.

Clergy tend to say they are in good shape. Of the nearly 900 pastors who participated in a national telephone survey, 76 percent said they enjoyed excellent or very good physical health. However, a follow up question found that 78 percent of clergy are either overweight (48 percent) or obese (30 percent). Though these figures are comparable to the U.S. population as a whole, they are nevertheless worrisome. As for handling stress, the Pulpit & Pew study found that pastors are doing a better job setting boundaries between work and personal time. Still, the average mainline pastor spent 50.8 hours a week at work, which was high in comparison with other managers and professionals.²⁴⁵

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative launched a multi-year, \$12 million program in 2007 with the objective of gathering and analyzing data about the health of clergy in an attempt to help improve the overall health of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.

The Clergy Health Initiative's research is the first to examine how to tailor health interventions to clergy. Our findings make clear that programs to improve clergy health will succeed only if they address the multiple conditions that contribute to health, especially conditions created by congregations and denominational polities.²⁴⁶

Two distinct clergy health studies were conducted, one in the summer of 2008 and the other in 2010, surveying every active United Methodist pastor in the state of North Carolina. The participation rate was unparalleled, “95 percent and 87 percent, respectively—we gathered a wealth of information about pastors’ physical, emotional,

²⁴⁵ “Fast Facts,” *Hartford Institute*.

See also Jackson Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

²⁴⁶ *The Clergy Health Initiative*, divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/clergy-health-initiative/learning (accessed Nov 20, 2011).

and spiritual health.”²⁴⁷ The survey will be administered again in 2012 for a third time as the Clergy Health Initiative continues to evaluate any variations in clergy health over a given time period. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data from the survey results provided gripping insights into clergy health as well as the dynamics influencing it.

One way of understanding the data pastors shared with us is to compare it with that of the overall North Carolina population. To make this comparison, we asked the pastors many of the same questions posed annually to a representative sample of North Carolinians by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On the survey, they provided insights into their health history by answering questions such as, “Have you ever been diagnosed with diabetes (when not pregnant)?” They also supplied their height and weight. Because 95 percent took the survey, we are able to compare disease rates between United Methodist clergy and other North Carolinians with confidence. Unfortunately, the news is not good. Even taking into account differences in age, income, employment status, insurance status, and gender, the rates of disease for clergy were much higher for diagnoses of diabetes, arthritis, asthma, and high blood pressure. North Carolina as a state ranks 12th worst in the nation in terms of the percentage of obese citizens, yet the proportion of clergy in North Carolina who are obese is significantly higher.²⁴⁸

Equally important in this vital information is an accurate assessment of exactly what these specific clergy health findings mean. The Clergy Health Initiative is focusing its efforts on why there is a higher percentage “of chronic disease and obesity” among North Carolina United Methodist pastors “than those of their non-pastor peers.” Their conclusions include some telling factors:

- The challenging aspects of the pastors’ vocation.
- The way pastors view physical health. Despite the number of diagnoses these pastors reported having, overall, they also reported having better physical health than their peers across the United States. Overall, they felt that their physical health was not getting in the way of their work and social activities. It could be that these pastors are so

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

attuned to their spiritual life and to seeking to fulfill their strong calling that they neglect warning signs of their physical health.²⁴⁹

When comparing the data from the overall population with that of North Carolina pastors, the study found that

the rates of disease for clergy were much higher for diagnoses of diabetes, arthritis, asthma, and high blood pressure. North Carolina as a state ranks 12th worst in the nation in terms of percentage of obese citizens, yet the proportion of clergy in North Carolina who are obese is significantly higher.²⁵⁰

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Ph.D., Research Director of the Clergy Health Initiative, recently reported these along with various other clergy health survey findings in an article entitled “A Holistic Approach to Wellness.”²⁵¹ Proeschold-Bells’ introductory comments are encouraging and yet telling:

Concern for the health and wellness of Christian pastors, especially in mainline denominations, has been rising for a number of years. The problem has not been obvious to lay members in the pews, but it has not escaped notice of denominational leaders and researchers. Several church bodies began pastoral wellness programs in the 1980s and 1990s, but later studies showed these programs had not solved the problem.²⁵²

“A survey of Lutheran clergy report that 68 percent were overweight and 16 percent of male clergy and 24 percent of women clergy report depression.”²⁵³ However other studies reveal these clergy health challenges are no respecter of persons.

Lutheran pastors noted that 40 percent of them experienced mild to severe burnout. Statistics vary between 76–90 percent of pastors reporting they

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, “A holistic approach to wellness,” www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/holistic-approach-wellness (accessed Jan 20, 2011).

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ferguson, “Clergy,” 16.

work over 55 hours a week. More and more clergy report they feel there are too many demands on their time.²⁵⁴

Dr. Gwen Halaas's 2002 study of ministerial wellness in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America described significant levels of stress, depression, and lifestyle-related physical ailments in ELCA pastors who, in her words, faced greater demands and less support than their predecessors. The Church Benefits Association's 2006 study of clergy in 10 Protestant denominations showed that clergy report more job demands, criticism and stress from criticism than do laity. All of these factors contribute to rising health care costs, challenges retaining clergy, and decreased passion and effectiveness among the clergy who remain. This picture of clergy health counters a popular belief that because clergy are disciplined in their spiritual practices they must also be disciplined in their personal practices. To the contrary, people working closely with clergy have been concerned about clergy physical and mental health practices. This research helps elucidate the pressures and beliefs of clergy, thereby paving the way for clergy, congregations and institutions to work together to create a healthy future for clergy.²⁵⁵

The Lutheran clergy members who honestly confessed to suffering from either mild or severe burnout are evidently not alone. They share concerns comparable with countless other pastoral families.

Harvey Herman suggests that "pastoral burnout resembles the physical malady, anorexia nervosa, where teenage girls become obsessed with being thin. They believe they are fat even though they are becoming very thin."²⁵⁶ Specialists in the field of eating disorders admit that anorexia can be a challenge to treat, invariably because the patient is oblivious to the fact that she has a problem. Experts also acknowledge that "[a]norexia

²⁵⁴ M. Jinkins, "Reflections of the study of clergy burnout" *The Alban Institute* (2002), www.alban.org/ShowArticle.asp?ID=42 (accessed January 15, 2007).

²⁵⁵ Proeschold-Bell, "Holistic Approach."

²⁵⁶ Herman, "Anorexia of the Soul."

isn't just a problem with food or weight. It's an attempt to use food and weight to deal with emotional problems.”²⁵⁷ Herman suggests:

Like a diminishing teenage girl, pastors are encountering a thinning of their souls. High stress levels often produce feelings of bleakness, powerlessness, cynicism, resentment, stagnation, and disappointment. Ministry activities they once enjoyed now produce boredom and drudgery.²⁵⁸

Pastors rarely tackle such hectic schedules and exorbitant expectation levels without succumbing to a number of health ailments. “Physical symptoms may include headaches, digestive problems, high blood pressure, teeth grinding, and fatigue.”²⁵⁹ Any one of these maladies can prove paralyzing; however, Christina Maslach writes in *Reversing Burnout* that “[w]hen burnout is counteracted with engagement, exhaustion is replaced with enthusiasm, bitterness with compassion, and anxiety with efficacy.”²⁶⁰

Caring for our own bodies is a biblical directive. If a pastor and his family neglect their bodies physically, they will eventually suffer emotionally and spiritually. There is much to do for the Kingdom agenda, but clergy families may need to take a step back and unlearn some rather potentially hazardous modern-day patterns. According to LynNell Hancock, in 1850, “the average person slept nine-and-a-half hours per night. Now, thanks to electricity, the figure is seven hours per night and declining. There are 70 million

²⁵⁷ “Eating Disorders,” (Nov 2010), www.familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders.html (accessed Jan 2011).

²⁵⁸ Herman, “Anorexia of the Soul.”

²⁵⁹ “Are You Burned Out? How To Tell and What to Do About It,” *Partner’s Report* 6/5 (May 2006), 13.

²⁶⁰ Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, “Reversing Burnout: How to Rekindle Your Passion for Your Work,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 3/4 (2005), 44.

people with sleep disorders; we live in a society that is ‘fried’ by work, frazzled by the lack of time.”²⁶¹

“It’s time to be preventative, as well as curative.”²⁶² This is the recommendation of Reverend Dionne Hammond who admits this:

We (United Methodist ministers) are a terribly unhealthy pool of people physically; insurance rates reflect this. Self-care must be physical, emotional and spiritual. Simply put, we need a workout plan.²⁶³

Hammond is the associate pastor at East Lake United Methodist Church. One of her passions lay in her participation with Shade and Fresh Water, a ministry of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church. Hammond is co-chairperson of the ministry at Shade and Fresh Water. During the ministry’s launch in 2001, Hammond began her involvement with the organization. At the time she was the spouse of a clergyman and was attending Asbury Theological Seminary. The vision of Shade and Fresh Water’s ministry is clear. It exists

to provide a transformative sanctuary for individuals and their families who are professionally associated with the Florida Conference of The United Methodist Church for the restoration of body, mind and spirit toward more abundant living.²⁶⁴

Hammond however possesses her own personal vision in relation to the ministry’s overall objective. “My personal vision is, ‘How can we facilitate a culture change?’ ”

²⁶¹ LynNell Hancock, “Breaking Point” in *Newsweek* (Mar 6, 1995) 56-61.

²⁶² Derek Maul, “Ministry makes health of clergy and their families top priority” *e-Review Florida United Methodist News Service* (Dec 7, 2010), www.flumc.info/cgi-script/csArticles/articles/000069/006946-p.htm (accessed Feb 2, 2011).

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Emotional

Lucy Wray, board member of Shade and Fresh Water, argues that

[c]lergy need to model what a healthy lifestyle is. When a pastor sets healthy boundaries and seeks a balance in life between the time for personal prayer, study and reflection to time with family, church responsibilities and play, it sends a message to all: practice what I do.²⁶⁵

It is difficult for pastors to invite their congregations to “practice what I do” in matters of health when crises are continually erupting and the unhealthy signs of ministry stress are visible in the pastor’s own life. “One survey found that 74 percent of clergy admit to a significant crisis due to the stress of ministry at least once in the ministry.”²⁶⁶

Such a high percentage is certainly disturbing in regard to the pastor, but consider also the exponential impact such calamity could have on the pastor’s family members. Rarely does a pastor experience pain in ministry without it doubling back on those closest to him. Ongoing ministry stressors facing the pastor cannot be concealed forever. These demands and pressures can cause hurt and heartache of epic proportions, with a massive trickle-down effect on the pastor’s family that often impales them emotionally. This emotional pain runs deep, and if it is not dealt with, if it is left unattended or suppressed, it can eventually result in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder more commonly manifested in war veterans. This may be new information to many in the ministry; however, Thomas Fischer sheds light on it and on its increasing prominence because of its effects on pastoral families. “Pastors, no less than others, experience the pain of living in a broken, conflicted, and sinful world. The experience of this pain can affect pastors in remarkably dramatic ways.” Fischer continues: “Not all wounds are

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Jenkins, “Reflections.”

visible ... [and] though emotional and spiritual wounds outlast the physical pain, healing can happen.”²⁶⁷ This is good news; however, just as is the case with other maladies, one must recognize that there is a problem before healing can begin.

PTSD is a disorder which recounts and describes the nature of these [family violence, violence, crime, disasters, war, or any other overwhelming experience] acute and/or chronic traumatizations.²⁶⁸

According to the Sidran Institute:

There is a growing awareness among healthcare providers that traumatic experiences are widespread and that it is common for people who have been traumatized to develop medical and psychological symptoms associated with the experience.²⁶⁹

Is it fair therefore to suggest that the pastoral family might encounter overwhelming stressors in ministry, stressors so traumatizing and relentless that the outcome could result in such a disorder? Pastoral families are not immune from vulnerability to such an ailment. Consider the three specific categories of manifestations seen in those suffering from PTSD.

Intrusive Re-experiencing—People with PTSD frequently feel as if the trauma is happening again. This is sometimes called a flashback, reliving experience, or abreaction. The person may have intrusive pictures in his/her head about the trauma, have recurrent nightmares, or may even experience hallucinations about the trauma. Intrusive symptoms sometimes cause people to lose touch with the “here and now” and react in ways that they did when the trauma originally occurred. For example, many years later a victim of child abuse may hide trembling in a closet when feeling threatened, even if the perceived threat is not abuse-related.

Avoidance—People with PTSD work hard to avoid anything that might

²⁶⁷ Fischer, Thomas F., Post-Traumatic Stress: The Pastoral Experience, ministryhealth.net/mh_articles/328_ptsd_pastoral_experience.html. Accessed Mar 14, 2012.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ What Is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? <http://www.sidran.org/sub.cfm?contentID=76§ionid=4>. Accessed Mar 14, 2012.

remind them of the traumatic experience. They may try to avoid people, places, or things that are reminders, as well as numbing out emotions to avoid painful, overwhelming feelings. Numbing of thoughts and feelings in response to trauma is known as “dissociation” and is a hallmark of PTSD. Frequently, people with PTSD use drugs or alcohol to avoid trauma-related feelings and memories.

Arousal—Symptoms of psychological and physiological arousal are very distinctive in people with PTSD. They may be very jumpy, easily startled, irritable, and may have sleep disturbances like insomnia or nightmares. They may seem constantly on guard and may find it difficult to concentrate. Sometimes persons with PTSD will have panic attacks accompanied by shortness of breath and chest pain.²⁷⁰

When the pastor experiences ministry hurt of any magnitude, his family may feel the aftershocks. Thomas Fischer argues that “[p]astors can experience PTSD in response to severe crisis or crises such as severe conflict, congregational split, removal of office ... everyone has a different level of resilience and responds to traumatic stimuli in unique ways, there is no specific ‘trigger’ ... for PTSD.”²⁷¹

Other studies reveal that many clergy suffer depression as a result of confronting this continual ministry crisis. In an article entitled “The State of the Clergy,” G. Lloyd Rediger indicates that clergy depression is on the rise and the impact of it can be emotionally draining if people do not deal with it.

Another focus of clergy stress is the growing level of depression I’ve seen in pastors over the years. A clinically trained person knows that depression is debilitating and dangerous in either its biochemical form or its affective form. Medication and talk therapy can help. But unless the life-conditions perceived by the sufferer change in some way, or the hope of change is substantiated, depression often becomes chronic. Depression in its affective form is typically a function of internalized anger. Anger is usually internalized because of the fear of expressing it, because it is denied, and because no remedy is perceived. It is this relative lack of hope which is fueling much clergy depression. In its milder forms, it makes clergy more vulnerable to opportunities for malfeasance. In its more

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

severe forms it depletes personal energy beyond the normal drain from work. This is a leading reason why denominational programs flounder and congregational life is often drab. Such depression can become dangerous to health and to life as well.²⁷²

Sandra Moll and Kristine O'Brien, writing for the *Presbyterian Record* indicate that it is time to break the silence regarding emotionally unhealthy patterns plaguing clergy today. In reflecting on a sign posted outside a church in Ontario, Canada, that read "We're too blessed to be depressed," Moll and O'Brien claim that the sad reality is rather that

the truth is the message betrayed a sad fact about many of our congregations: we do not understand mental illness and we do not appreciate how deeply it is affecting the life of the church. Not only are people in the pew suffering, but our clergy show alarming statistics of depression and anxiety disorders.²⁷³

Their article, "Breaking the Silence," reveals findings of the World Health Organization that "estimate that by the year 2020, depression will be second only to heart disease as the leading global cause of disability and mortality."²⁷⁴

The gravity of mental illness is increasingly recognized as the number of individuals suffering from various forms of emotional issues continues to grow. Canadian findings alone indicate that

[m]ental illness in Canada is on the rise, and according to the Canadian Mental Health Association, one in five Canadians will develop a mental

²⁷² G. Lloyd Rediger, "The State of the Clergy," home.comcast.net/~glrediger/columns/survey.html (accessed Dec 1, 2011).

²⁷³ Sandra Moll and Kristine O'Brien, "Breaking the Silence: The mental health of our clergy," *Presbyterian Record*, www.presbyterianrecord.ca/2009/02/01/breaking-the-silence (accessed Aug 1, 2011).

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

illness in their lifetime. Among the most common are depression and anxiety disorders.²⁷⁵

In dealing with emotional concerns, many congregants find security and comfort in receiving counseling from their pastor, all the while ignorant of the fact that their pastor might be suffering with similar issues.

The Canadian landscape regarding clergy battling with emotional demons is as frightening as the American scene. A recent survey conducted by the Centre for Clergy Care on Clergy Well-Being revealed some disturbing trends. In its survey of more than 300 ministers from six Canadian denominations, they found that the number of those who had been diagnosed with clinical depression was double the national average. Almost 40 percent sought the care of a clinical counselor, and 45 percent sought advice from their family doctor regarding stress and anxiety issues. What is worse, these statistics likely underestimate the extent of clergy suffering, since studies show that only about half of those with major depression seek help. Clearly, the mental health of our clergy is in need of attention.²⁷⁶

Moll and O'Brien express their concerns regarding these findings and suggest that it is time to wake up and be attentive to just how serious this problem of clergy emotional health is.

The economic, personal and social costs of mental health problems are immense. It has been estimated that the cost of lost productivity due to workplace mental illness in Canada is in excess of \$30 billion per year.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Mental health issues can also lead to strained relationships at work and at home, erosion of self-esteem, and for some, even suicide.²⁷⁷

As already described in chapter 2, stressors and health challenges are no respecter of persons or denominations in considering clergy. Authors Will J. G. Evers and Welko Tomic report findings from a survey of Dutch Reformed pastors claiming that they struggle with higher amounts of emotional exhaustion and experience lower levels of feelings of accomplishment.²⁷⁸

In 2001, the Pulpit & Pew research project based at Duke Divinity School announced its findings after surveying 2,500 pastors on pastoral leadership. They found that 10 percent reported being depressed. While this is similar to the general population, 40 percent reported being depressed or “worn out” at times. The Clergy Health Initiative reports findings from surveying the United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina and concludes that “[b]y and large, pastors reported that their rate of depression is roughly double that of all people in the United States, and that is only a measure of their symptoms in the two weeks prior to survey completion.” By extension, many more clergy will have been depressed at some point during their careers. The Initiative points out the significance of what was learned during clergy focus groups in regard to “the interplay between their vocation and their health”²⁷⁹ and how important it is to realize what these findings mean. “They said that good health depends upon being able to cope with stress and enact healthy behaviors such as exercising, wholesome eating, and maintaining personal or family time. They indicated that their ability to cope with stress and enact

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Evers and Tomic, “Burnout among Dutch Reformed Pastors.”

²⁷⁹ divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/clergy-health-initiative/learning

healthy behaviors”²⁸⁰ is an important area to understand, and that there are many relevant factors involved in it, including the following:

- Their beliefs and skills, such as having the ability to set boundaries around personal time.
- The support of their close friends and family members.
- Their congregation’s ability to function well and afford the pastor personal time.
- The institution of the United Methodist Church. The extent to which the staff-parish relations committee understands and respects the pastor’s role, vacation, and personal time; whether their district superintendent supports healthy behaviors; and the challenges of itinerancy all impact a pastor’s level of stress and ability to maintain health behaviors.²⁸¹

The data reveal solid conclusions; if clergy choose not to practice good emotional care, other significant negative behaviors may surface. The pastor and/or his family members may develop negativity, cynicism, cantankerousness, confusion, and an indifference toward the ministry—all rather unfitting behaviors for a pastoral family.

Relational

Chris Jackson, writing for *Ministry Today* magazine, identifies a paralyzing pronouncement often made by parishioners, one which pastors often see coming and yet dislike hearing: “Pastor, we’ve decided to move on.”²⁸² For the pastor who has physically, emotionally, and spiritually been there for some of the most significant and life-changing events in the parishioner’s life to now hear him or her utter a seemingly casual “we’ll be

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Chris Jackson, “When the High Road Hurts,” *Ministry Today*, www.ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-leadership/pastoral-care/18487-when-the-high-road-hurts (accessed Jul 29, 2011).

seeing you, thanks”—almost nothing compares to the intense gut-wrenching ache these words invite. Jackson affirms:

It’s painful when we hear that people no longer want to be a part of our ministries. It’s additionally painful when they leave and don’t take the time to tell us *why* they’re leaving, *where* they’re going, or *what* we could possibly do to repair any damage in the relationship.²⁸³

Arguably, there is no more accurate avowal regarding clergy life than that “relationships both make and break a ministry.” This statement could be compared to the familiar saying, “you can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.” This declaration is often made about spouses in a marital relationship who are having difficulty relating; however, here it will be viewed in light of the pastorate. Ironic as it might appear, the pastor may be miserable if one of his parishioners is absent from church and yet, on the other hand, the parishioner’s very presence there might also make the pastor feel miserable. Relationships with congregants can be both pleasant and concurrently overwhelming. The shepherd is called to be in a relationship with his flock and generally finds great fulfillment in feeding them; however, there are times when he might be inclined to purposely turn his head away while tending the sheep, allowing them to wander a little too close to the edge of the cliff, ending up taking a good plunge. Determining whether or not a sheep is still a friend and happily grazing in your pasture, or a foe who is mischievously pursuing what seem to be greener pastures, is a daily reality.

In their book, *Ministerial Ethics*, authors Joe Trull and James Carter ask whether a minister’s congregation is “friend or foe?” They write of an interesting personal story

²⁸³ Ibid.

about a time when one of them visited a theological seminary and unexpectedly encountered a friend who just happened to be a tenured professor of theology at that institution.

After an exchange of greetings and inquiries about family, the professor brought up the problem of forced terminations. “Is the basic problem theology?” he asked. “No” was the reply to the scholar who had spent most of his adult life teaching theology. “Churches have an amazing tolerance for bad theology. The basic problem is relational.”²⁸⁴

Chris Jackson writes from the heart about pastors who have experienced lost relationships within the church. He argues that pastors should always “take the high road.”²⁸⁵ When parishioners leave the church, not only does the pastor have to deal with the break-up of a relationship, he also must tend to other hurts and disappointments as well.

People do leave, and when they do, their departure can lead us to an unexpected crossroads laced with pain, self-doubt and the bitter feelings that accompany injustice. God’s intention at these intersections is that we would take the high road. To do this we have to remember that we are sowers, and, according to Jesus, sowers don’t receive a 100 percent return from their sowing. In fact, from Jesus’ parable of the sower in Mark 4 we know that of all the seed we sow, 25 percent will be rejected outright, 75 percent will be appreciated and received, and only about 18 percent will actually bear fruit that remains.²⁸⁶

Many pastors and their families have experienced the utter joy and delight in witnessing parishioners come to salvation in Christ and then grow in their faith. At no other time does the pastoral family reflect the clear-cut dynamics of what relationship is all about than during these involvements. And at no other time do they operate as a

²⁸⁴ Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 89.

²⁸⁵ Jackson, “When the High Road Hurts.”

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

ministry team than when each participates in tending to the flock. These times are typically stress-free, but can also be rather short-lived. When the parishioner begins to act up and act out—for instance, questioning the integrity and character of the pastoral family—the relationship is compromised and may never be salvaged. Some of these antagonists, these “clergy killers,” will never be content until they succeed at running the pastor out of town.

Pastors and their families experience no greater anguish than when the battle seems lost and relationships are forever ruined. In his book, *Wounded Ministers*, pastor Eric Rogers pens, with vulnerable honesty, the gut-wrenching experiences of lost relationships in the months leading up to his leaving his pastorate. “Regardless of how long and how strong the pastor stands... [a] deep and desperate emotional damage is the fallout. The pastor, his spouse and family feel torched by a diabolical sense and strategy of rejection and disbelief from the enemies of God.”²⁸⁷ Rogers’s story suggests that the pastorate is essentially one big relationship, and the pastor and his family had better have their guard up, because it will only be a matter of time before “Sister Snake” and “Demon Dumb”²⁸⁸—who were once your great friends—become your worst nightmare, leaving broken hearts and a multitude of questions in their wake.

The pastor and his spouse are faced with more questions than answers. What just happened? How could this happen? Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? Who can we trust? They feel alone and are facing problems never anticipated. This crisis eventually affects every aspect of their lives. In many instances, neither the pastor nor the spouse nor the children can talk about the church without heated conversations and bitterness marred in pain. Ultimately, the pastor and his family’s spiritual and emotional state, their financial condition and their health are severely

²⁸⁷ Eric O. Rogers, *Wounded Minister: Reflections of a Former Pastor* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006), 11.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-9.

impacted, similar to a grief cycle and emotional rollercoaster of (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance).²⁸⁹

Trull and Carter recognize the significance of relationships in ministry:

Relationships are more important in ministry than in any other profession. The morals of the carpenter who framed your house probably did not concern you greatly. You probably do not worry much about whether you like your dentist personally as long as he or she is competent in dentistry. When you look for a surgeon, your primary concern is more than likely the person's professional qualifications and competence [rather than] the surgeon's personality. In all these areas, professional competence is of more importance than personal relationships.²⁹⁰

The authors convincingly argue this is not the case in ministry. Typically, it does not matter how biblically literate the pastor is, or what an incredible Bible expositor he might be, or that he has tremendous skill in running the church as an organization; pastors cannot lead churches without being in good relationships with their people. Yet this is undoubtedly the greatest issue facing clergy today; not having enough time in his or her schedule to be in a reasonable yet enjoyable relationship with his parishioners, let alone his own family.

Bill Tammeus is an award-winning faith columnist. He currently writes a monthly piece for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Tammeus recently wrote an article for the *National Catholic Reporter* entitled "To Avoid Clergy Burnout, Parishioners Have to Lend a Hand." In the article, Tammeus encourages parishioners to help their pastors out a little by relieving some of the pastoral burdens. In addition, he sums up for the reader what he imagines a sort of day-in-the-life-of-a-pastor to be, offering his readers some insight into why many of the pastor's relationships are barely existent.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁹⁰ Trull and Carter, *Ministerial Ethics*, 89-90

When I think about the work of the clergy these days, I imagine someone sitting in front of three active computer screens while holding and using two smart phones—all the while carrying on an eyeball-to-eyeball conversation with a parishioner and motioning directions to a church staff member at the next desk. And while all this is going on the pastor is also praying and meditating. That may be hyperbole but it doesn't sound unrealistic to lots of clergy I know.²⁹¹

In October 2008, a telephone survey was led by LifeWay Research, in which 1,002 Protestant pastors were randomly selected in an attempt to gather findings about how they spend their time.²⁹² The results were predictable: “Protestant pastors in America are working long hours, sometimes at the expense of relationships with church members, prospects, family and even the Lord.”²⁹³ Pastors confessed to working long and exhausting hours, and declare that “meetings and electronic correspondence consume large amounts of time ... while counseling, visitation, family time, prayer and personal devotions suffer in too many cases.”²⁹⁴ Other findings in the survey were telling as well.

Time with family rates as a priority for many pastors, but some find alarmingly little opportunity to be with their spouses and children. While 30 percent of the pastors report spending 20–29 hours with their families each week—and 16 percent indicate spending 40 or more hours with them weekly—almost 10 percent say they spend nine hours a week or less with family members. At the same time, 24 percent say they watch 10–14 hours of television each week, and 13 percent put their TV time at 15 hours or more.²⁹⁵

Clergywoman Sheri S. Ferguson suggests:

²⁹¹ Bill Tammeus, “To avoid clergy burnout, parishioners have to lend a hand,” *National Catholic Reporter* (Sept 22, 2010), nronline.org/.../avoid-clergy-burnout-parishioners-have-lend-hand (accessed Dec 10, 2011).

²⁹² Responses were weighted to reflect the geographic distribution of the churches, and the sample size provides 95 percent confidence that sampling error does not exceed ± 3.2 percent.

²⁹³ Mark Kelly, “LifeWay Research finds pastors long work hours can come at the expense of people, ministry,” (Jan 05, 2010), www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-pastors-long-work-hours-can-come-at-the-expense-of-people-ministry (accessed Feb 2, 2012).

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

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.²⁹⁶

Christian leaders and clergy enter into ministry with an understanding that there will be demands placed upon them, and it is often the dreams with which they are pregnant that cause them to hang in there through trials and tribulations. Most will affirm that their families pay an enormous price and experience great loss in giving him/her to the Lord's work. Daniel Langford confesses that his wife Diana lost the

time and attention of her husband to other lovers. These paramours were educational achievements, success, and personal growth. The goals in themselves are not wrong. However, when you as the husband/father are the only one benefiting, these dreams become whores.²⁹⁷

Most clergy make an attempt at eking out time to begin and nurture relationships both at home and within the congregation. First and foremost, they understand from the biblical mandate how important it is to maintain a healthy family life. Pastor and author, Wayne Cordeiro, reminds clergy how significant a stable home life is.

Someone once said that the darkest place of any lighthouse is always at its base. The same can be said of our families. A pastor can shine a radiant beam out to the horizons, warning passing ships of dangerous waters ... while their own unmaintained plumbing floods the home.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Ferguson, "Clergy."

²⁹⁷ Daniel L. Langford, *The Pastor's Family: The Challenges of Family Life and Pastoral Responsibilities* (Binghamton: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998), 17.

²⁹⁸ Wayne Cordeiro, "Fighting for Your Family," www.ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-leadership/pastoral-care/18392-fighting-for-your-family (accessed Dec 10, 2011).

The base of the foundation is shaky in countless pastoral homes, and the floodwater is rising. The pastor fights an uphill battle to be all and do all in meeting not only the needs of his family members, but the needs of his parishioners as well.

The pastor's wife and children confront their own set of relationship issues and are many times the unsung heroes waiting in the background, hoping to catch even a glimpse of their husband/dad and encourage him to come and enjoy some personal family time. The PWs and PKs admit to frequently fighting feelings of anger, abandonment, and disappointment as they struggle to get his much-needed attention. Daniel L. Langford, author of *The Pastor's Family*, admits:

I did not understand what I had done, but ... I deserted my family, and I am not alone. Preachers' kids and pastors' wives from innumerable churches and denominations have experienced a culturally accepted wholesale neglect that has been woven into a deficient model of ministry. The most common perpetrators of this neglect are male pastors.²⁹⁹

The PW and PK often find it problematic in complaining about the neglect they feel as a result of the ministry demands placed on their husband/father. Not only do they battle with neglect, they also feel loneliness, anger, bitterness, abandonment, and heartbreaking disappointment. Because the pastorate requires loving and caring for people, the idea of grumbling too much adds guilt to their already growing list of issues. Pastors who are already overly stressed can many times interpret these longings for his time as nagging selfishness, and so the relationship with his wife and kids is hindered and struggles to survive.

²⁹⁹ Langford, *The Pastor's Family*, 3.

Psychologist Archibald Hart, speaking at a seminar in California, was vulnerably honest with his audience and presented some interesting advice. “Bitching gives valuable information.”³⁰⁰ Langford reinforces Hart’s counsel by sharing from his own personal experience about learning a valuable lesson from his wife in regard to grumbling.

A distressing argument with my wife ... opened my eyes to my neglectful behavior. Nonetheless, I found it hard to accept this confrontation as necessary to bring about needed changes. The argument with Diana gave me valuable information, and I was forced to pay attention to problems that had put our family off balance.³⁰¹

It is well documented that most Christian leaders and pastors are “off balance” in their relationships. Many suffer from loneliness and very rarely have a close personal same-gender person they call “friend.” They choose by default to live their pastoral/personal life in seclusion instead of forming meaningful relationships. Why? the issue is primarily one of trust. “One pastor put it this way:

There are times when I feel alone in the church, with no apparent encouragement or support from the congregation. I’m the pastor and I’m supposed to keep everything going. The attitude seems to be *You feed me; it’s your job, and I do not have to help you.* I’m supposed to give, give, and give until finally there is nothing left.³⁰²

According to Peter Drucker, “great leaders have to walk alone from time to time; therefore the leader must somehow create a capacity for loneliness.”³⁰³ The pastor often purposefully chooses his spouse and children as his close friend(s); however, in an

³⁰⁰ Archibald Hart, *The Emotional Hazards of Ministry*, A Doctor of Ministry Seminar, Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, May, 1988.

³⁰¹ Langford, *The Pastor’s Family*, 4.

³⁰² J. Kesler, *Being Holy, Being Human: Dealing with the Expectations of Ministry* (The Leadership Library 13. Waco, TX: CTI; Word Books, 1988), 31.

³⁰³ Peter F. Drucker, *The Leader of the Future*, (San Francisco CA, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 9.

attempt to protect them, he seldom confides in them about the depth of his burdens and the pressures under which he continually ministers.

A Barna study recently revealed that “sixty-one percent of pastors say they have no close personal friends.”³⁰⁴ Having to forfeit precious relationships is perhaps one of the necessary evils for the pastor; however, Neil Anderson, author and President of Freedom in Christ Ministries, cautions pastors that

[a] major symptom of depression is withdrawal from meaningful relationships, which would be number two on the list of destructive behaviors. Isolating yourself to the point where you are alone with your negative thoughts will certainly contribute to the downward spiral.³⁰⁵

If isolating oneself is truly injurious to the pastor’s health, then, indeed, countless clergy appear to be sinking.

The pastor is not precisely like any other leader; not CEO, not physician, not attorney, not social worker. The pastor rightly marches to a different drumbeat. And that’s the challenge for pastors who lead. They cannot march lockstep with the methods of corporations and secular nonprofit organizations. No one outside the pastorate fully understands its own unique cadence.”³⁰⁶

Spiritual

The Clergy Health Initiative study reveals: “Pastors define health broadly as mind, body, and spirit, and they do not feel healthy unless they feel spiritually vital.”³⁰⁷ The Institute’s

³⁰⁴ Matthew Green, “What We Lost,” *Ministry Today*, www.ministrytodaymag.com/~ministry/index.php/features/14355-what-we-lost (accessed Feb 20, 2012).

³⁰⁵ Anderson, *Christ Centered Therapy*, 279.

³⁰⁶ Harold L. Myra, “Leaders: Learning Leadership From Some of Christianity’s Best,” (Leadership Library 12. *Christianity Today*, 1987).

³⁰⁷ *Clergy Health Initiative*.

research team presented questions pertaining to various aspects of the pastor's own spirituality.

We asked questions such as this: "During the past 6 months, how often have you ... experienced the presence and power of God in the ordinary?" Their responses indicate that their spiritual vitality is very strong; on a scale from "never" to "always," most responses fell between "often" and "frequently."³⁰⁸

This data, however, contradicts other findings and may not really present a true picture of pastors' spiritual health. They may feel a connection with God as well as his presence, but most pastors confess to failing and some miserably so, when keeping their commitment to maintaining their spiritual health. Most pastors today seem to struggle with high levels of spiritual anemia. Ministry sucks the spiritual life right out of them, and many are in need of a spiritual blood transfusion. Pastors realize the importance of spending time with God: It is how God speaks to pastors and instills them with wisdom so that they may fully please Him in all they do.³⁰⁹ How would anyone persuade a pastor, who is supposed to be in constant close communion with God, to honestly answer questions about his spiritual disciplines? Most pastors will admit they never feel as close as they need to be to God or spend as much time sharing spiritual intimacy with him as they desire.

Trull and Carter argue that

[t]he cleric is a ministering person as well as a pilgrim of faith. Continual spiritual growth is as important for the minister as it is for a parishioner ... 'familiarity breeds contempt,' states the proverb. Few ministers treat the Bible or spiritual disciplines with contempt, but some ministers may treat

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Col 1:9-12

both ... with such familiarity that they lose some of their mystery and wonder.³¹⁰

A LifeWay survey of pastors indicates that some pastors are not making their spiritual disciplines a priority:

The amount of time spent in prayer and personal devotions raises questions about the vitality of many pastors' spiritual lives. While 52 percent report spending one to six hours in prayer each week, 5 percent say they spend no time at all in prayer. Furthermore, while 52 percent say they spend two to five hours a week in personal devotions unrelated to teaching preparation, 14 percent indicate they spend an hour or less in personal devotions each week.³¹¹

The late W. A. Criswell, described as one of the great expositional preachers of the twentieth century,³¹² mentored up-and-coming pastors looking to him for words of wisdom at succeeding in life and ministry. Whenever asked, Criswell overtly admonished them: “Keep your mornings for God.”³¹³

Doug Morell and his wife, Suzie, have, since 1994, faithfully provided many hundreds of thousands of free discipleship resources online to various Christian organizations through their ministry, CoreDiscipleship. Doug has some rather keen insight in relation to how one’s spiritual discipline is affected by our current culture.

We are a generation of “PopTart” people in regard to our stillness before the Lord. The pace of this present darkness has infiltrated our church; we are running a marathon at an unsustainable 100-meter pace—a pace that does not afford opportunity to be still and know that God is God (Ps. 46:10). We are so busy that we cannot worship God. We do not know how to get quiet and be quiet. What we call our devotional time or study is the spiritual equivalent of devouring a PopTart for breakfast. We are

³¹⁰ Trull and Carter, *Ministerial Ethics*, 68.

³¹¹ Kelly, “LifeWay Research.”

³¹² Todd Starnes and Tammi Ledbetter, “Texas Baptists prepare to memorialize Criswell,” *Baptist Press* (Jan 10, 2002), www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=12520 (accessed Feb 15, 2011).

³¹³ W.A. Criswell, *Criswell’s Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Braodman Press, 1980), 59.

overworked and overwhelmed. We are fragmented, frenetic, and disenfranchised—ever scurrying about, but achieving little to nothing of eternal value. And instead of modeling a lifestyle of quiet contemplation, the church has joined the marketplace roar.³¹⁴

Have contemporary clergy demoted themselves into “Pastor Pop Tarts” waiting in line only to be popped in the toaster and spiritually heated, to give out fuzzy warm spiritual feelings that last only a few passing moments?

Concluding Thoughts

Current data and various resources analyzed certainly assist our understanding of the serious nature of the pastor’s health challenges and the trickle-down effect it has on his family as well as his congregation. While certain data argues that some pastors are learning via hard knocks that ministry stressors must be controlled for the sake of good health habits, other findings suggest that contemporary clergy are succumbing to a workhorse mentality just as easily today as previous generations of pastors did, and at the expense of their good health. It appears from survey findings that we really have not yet learned the hard lessons regarding balance in ministry and family. From all indications pastors must continue to be educated in declaring that their health and family life is as much of an obligation as is the Lord’s work. When the pastor and his family experience serious relationship issues internally or with peers or congregants, their healthy lifestyle is compromised and so is their productivity and effectiveness in ministry. Findings show that the United Methodists seems to be the frontrunners in concentrating on clergy health issues, by educating their pastors and congregants to work toward better health habits.

³¹⁴ Doug Morrell, “Too Busy for God,” coregroups.org/toobusy.html (accessed Feb 1, 2012).

However, in studying data crossing denominational lines, there appears to be a distinct lack of attention to seeking more detailed data about the health and well-being of pastors' kids. Since there is inadequate information we can only draw tentative conclusions.