

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Issue Threatening Pastoral Families**

There is a problem in our pulpits. Pastors are evacuating them, and studies reveal that the reasons behind their exits are often connected with health challenges resulting from ministry stressors. The Clergy Health Initiative<sup>1</sup> at Duke University in North Carolina published recent findings of a survey of 1,726 ministers (in a study that began in 2007). Their findings were astonishing, yet not unexpected. “Members of the clergy are more likely to suffer from stress-related illnesses such as obesity, arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and depression than most Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Stress can now be pinpointed as the culprit of “90 percent of all diseases ... [and] anxiety reduction may now be the largest single business in the Western world.”<sup>3</sup> What kind of stress would bring about such physical and emotional challenges within the clergy community? The list is overwhelming to say the least. Pastors today have increasingly heavy demands placed upon them. Not only are ministers expected to produce weekly apostle-Paul-like sermons, marry and bury people, commit to an around-the-clock schedule, and be at their congregants’ beck-and-call, they are also expected to operate as the chief executive officers of their churches. Taking this into consideration, imagine then the trickle-down effect on the minister’s family.

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<sup>1</sup> The Duke Clergy Health Initiative is a \$12 million, seven-year program intended to improve the health and wellbeing of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Z, “Stress and Burnout Endanger Clergy Health,” *Stresshacker* (Aug 2010), [www.stresshacker.com/2010/08/stress-and-burnout-endanger-clergy-health](http://www.stresshacker.com/2010/08/stress-and-burnout-endanger-clergy-health) (accessed Mar 15, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Rowland Croucher, “Stress and Burnout in Ministry,” [www.churchlink.com.au/churchlink/forum/r\\_croucher/stress\\_burnout.html](http://www.churchlink.com.au/churchlink/forum/r_croucher/stress_burnout.html) (accessed Mar 16, 2012).

### **Consideration of Favorable Aspects of Ministry**

Lest the aforementioned discoveries dissuade anyone from accepting the call of God to the pastorate, consideration should be given to the positive aspects of ministry. Pastoring includes the triad of privilege, responsibility, and reward. This sacred privilege is first realized as the pastor receives and responds to his<sup>4</sup> God-called directive in declaring, “Here I am, send me” (Isa 6:8). The mission to which the pastor is assigned is redemptive in nature, and it is his privilege to proclaim (1 Pet 2:9) and utilize his gift mix for service (Eph 4:12) in advancing the kingdom agenda in his community. The pastorate provides not only a platform for the pastor to preach and teach; it also offers him a plethora of opportunities through which to edify those entrusted to his care, witnessing their spiritual growth. The mystery of all mysteries is that a Holy God uses human agency to accomplish his plan; he invites flawed and undeserving people to be used by him for his greater good.

### **Consideration of Adverse Aspects of Ministry**

A portion of this thesis will reveal potential adverse sides of the pastorate. With that idea in mind, and so as not to labor the point prior to considering the research analyzed in the chapters of this thesis, a discussion of Paul’s communiqué to the Corinthian believers is worth noting, as it is something to which many pastors can relate. “For a great and effective door has opened to me, and *there are* many adversaries” (1 Cor 16:9). Balancing opportunity with obstacles in the pastorate, although never easy, is nonetheless expected.

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<sup>4</sup> In most cases, “he” is understood in an inclusive sense. When a specific man or woman is in view, the appropriate pronoun will be used.

### **Incentive for the Study**

I am honored to have ministered in both evangelism and the pastorate; I have spent 33 years in ministry, with the first 17 years spent in full-time, evangelistic, city-wide crusades in over 1,300 local North American churches, followed by 16 years in a mega-church plant in the United States. I was humbled to receive invaluable mentoring from the beloved pastors and their spouses in the churches in which we ministered. Through all the trials and tribulations associated with our own ministry, God has blessed me with a happy and healthy 33-year marriage to my best friend, three awesome children who are passionate for God, all married, and in full-time ministry, and four absolutely adorable grandchildren. The road has been difficult at times. There were many years of separation while my evangelist husband traveled the globe, as it was not always expedient for our family to accompany him. My husband would affirm my sincere and humble admission that I virtually single-handedly raised our children, but not without my continually second-guessing my ability to instill within each of them spiritual passion and love for God.

Incentive for my thesis arose from my years in ministry as well as concerns about issues raised by recent statistics provided by The Fuller Institute and George Barna. Their findings acknowledge that “94 percent of ... ministers’ families feel the pressures of the pastors’ ministries while 80 percent report that it has negatively affected them.”<sup>5</sup> It would be disingenuous of me to fail to admit to personally experiencing similar effects. The rigorous demands of ministry can take its toll on members of the pastoral family, a toll

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<sup>5</sup> *Pastoral Care, Inc.*, [www.pastoralcareinc.com/WhyPastoralCare/Statistics.php](http://www.pastoralcareinc.com/WhyPastoralCare/Statistics.php).

manifested in the decline of physical, emotional, relational and spiritual health. As a minister, I have endured a barrage of challenges over the past five years while serving in full-time local church ministry. I realize the importance of confronting this problem as well as implementing a strategy for the minister's overall health. In my tenure as a pastor/pastor's wife, I have been kissed on and cursed at, high-fived and had a fist in my face, prayed over and pelted with insults, spat at and spoiled, loved on and lied to, fed and forsaken, disappointed and delighted.

For the first 10 years of our church plant, we enjoyed growth and prosperity without any major disturbances. However, on March 11, 2007, after taking a state-wide stand in defense of the 2005 Kansas marriage amendment, which limited marriage to the union of one man and one woman and was met with the approval of 70 percent of voters, and taking a strong stand on abortion (we live in the state where George Tiller performed over 60,000 abortions), as well as preaching a biblically conservative message in an extremely lost and liberal community, all hell broke loose. Since that date, a very antagonistic investigative reporter teamed up with disgruntled former church members and wrote over 20 front-page, and other-than-front-page, slanderous articles against my husband, me, our son, and our beloved church, prompting investigations by the FBI, the Kansas Attorney General's office, and the IRS. We were cleared of all allegations, but only after thousands of dollars in attorney fees and the like were paid. In the process, our family has been threatened and thrilled, depressed and discouraged, brokenhearted and blessed, vandalized and venerated, mocked and embraced, as well as ridiculed and renewed. We remained steadfast after taking the brunt of bombardment from local "talk radio" shows, lasting five hours at a time with live call-ins from hostile, naïve people, as

well as being lied about by bullying bloggers. I have experienced my fair share of panic attacks and taken prescription medications just to get through the terror of it all. And then, just when we thought we were at the end of such major persecution, our church's lending institution called our church loan of \$14 million. The economy of the United States had affected the bank's A-1 rating, and it was downgraded as a result of federal regulations. The bank demanded the entire amount within 30 days, and we were served with foreclosure papers in January of 2011. To our great horror, and after never missing or being late on one payment, the bank foreclosed on our 51-acre church campus and took the building from us on September 11, 2011.

In spite of these dreadful ministry stressors and health challenges, we have, by God's grace, persevered. I offer the aforementioned personal experiences as a foundation and an example of the utter factual reality of my thesis research topic, all the while acknowledging John 15:5b, wherein Jesus declares, "Apart from me, you can do nothing."

### **Intention of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: It will analyze the most significant pastoral stressors while exploring four primary health challenges that pastors and their families can encounter while going through a period of overwhelming ministry stress. It will then seek to develop a strategy for the overall health of pastors (and their families).

After over 18 years of researching pastoral trends ... we have found that pastors are in a dangerous occupation ... [it is] the single most stressful and frustrating working profession, more than medical doctors, lawyers,

politicians ... over 70 percent of pastors are so stressed out ... that they regularly consider leaving the ministry.<sup>6</sup>

The exponential impact of this reality, both in churches and in the pastor's home, is alarming. Scripture says, "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" (Zech 13:7). What a brilliant strategy of the enemy: destroy the pastor, his family, and his church, and God's redemptive plan is seriously impeded. Considering the even more alarming recent findings that "doctors, lawyers, and clergy have the most problems with drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide,"<sup>7</sup> the pastorate can be viewed as a perilous profession indeed.

Chapter 1 will define stress and its expression in the biblical record, then seek to explore the reality and problem of stress in the lives of God's leaders in both the Old and New Testaments as well as in the lives of contemporary clergy.

Chapter 2 will survey early and contemporary research in regard to stressors within ministry as reported by pastoral families. The pastor's vocational responsibilities according to Scripture will be outlined, and a distinction between stress, burnout, and depression will be considered.

Chapter 3 will examine the four predominant areas of health challenge threatening pastoral families who encounter enduring periods of overwhelming stress: i.e., physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Krejcir, "Statistics on Pastors," (2007), [www.intothyword.org/articles\\_view.asp?articleid=36562&columnid=](http://www.intothyword.org/articles_view.asp?articleid=36562&columnid=) (accessed Mar 12, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Chapter 4 will present research completed through case study questionnaires involving pastors, pastor's wives, and the adult children of pastors. The objective will be to gather and qualitatively analyze information concerning the aforementioned ministry stressors and challenges and the overall impact on real life.

Chapter 5 will present the development of a strategic plan for long-term overall health care for the pastoral family.

The conclusion will summarize the results of the study and draw conclusions about the concern raised in this thesis. Suggestions will be offered about ways to better inform and help educate pastoral families, congregations, and denominational organizations in regard to the dangers of allowing ongoing ministry stressors to spin out of control, creating the perfect storm that can lead to the collapse of the health of the pastoral family.