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### A Gentle Whisper: Restorying the Narrative of Eleven Ministers to Create a Collective Voice in the Battle Against Burnout

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A GENTLE WHISPER: RESTORYING THE NARRATIVE OF ELEVEN MINISTERS TO  
CREATE A COLLECTIVE VOICE IN THE BATTLE AGAINST BURNOUT

A PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE HAZELIP SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
DARREL J. SEARS

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

APRIL, 2023

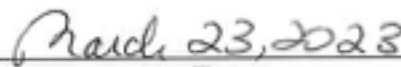
This Doctor of Ministry Project, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Hazelip School of Theology of Lipscomb University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry.

A GENTLE WHISPER: RESTORYING THE NARRATIVE OF ELEVEN MINISTERS TO  
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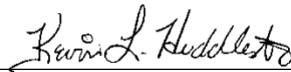
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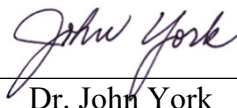
  
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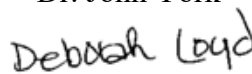
  
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*For my parents, Steve and Patti Sears.  
Thank you for leading me to Jesus  
and for the example of your faith.*

## ABSTRACT

### A GENTLE WHISPER: RESTORYING THE NARRATIVE OF ELEVEN MINISTERS TO CREATE A COLLECTIVE VOICE IN THE BATTLE AGAINST BURNOUT

There has been much research poured into the subject of burnout over the last fifty years and how its effects take a toll on an employee's emotional, physical, and mental health. Burnout is especially prevalent in helping professions like human services, nursing, social work, psychology, and criminal justice to name a few. Vocational ministry, also a helping profession, has received its fair share of attention pertaining to burnout. Countless hours and hard work concerning stress management, clergy outpatient therapy, emotional contagions, self-care practices, spiritual-care practices, and a slew of others have been studied. Yet, where does a minister or elder in the church go to get a firm grasp on what burnout is? How does a preacher, children's minister or worship minister know how to detect whether they are burned out, depressed or both? How does an elder know how to help a minister on staff with the symptoms they suffer from?

This doctor of ministry project was created in an effort to force acknowledgement, raise awareness, and foster advocacy for ministers from church elderships. The qualitative research method of narrative inquiry was used in this project to interview eleven ministers brave enough to share how burnout has impacted their personal and professional lives. By applying the commonalities and differences from their answers several threads emerged that were used to construct a new narrative with a collective voice. It is the hope of this project that a better partnership can be formed amongst the parties above to create a robust environment of understanding, communication, and support.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the help and the support of so many friends and family. First, I would like to thank the elders of the Church of Christ at Oakdale. You have walked with me through every step of my burnout journey and have lovingly supported me, my family, and this project. I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to be my advocate. Also, I would like to thank the members of the Oakdale congregation for your loving support. Your prayers and encouragement helped me across the finish line.

I have the privilege of doing life together with so many wonderful small groups. I wouldn't be thriving in ministry today without you guys. To my accountability brothers in the "2%", thank you for giving me a safe place to be myself and share my struggles. To my brothers in arms from Preacher Camp 3, it means the world to have fellow ministers to lean on in times of joy, frustration, and uncertainty. I would like to say thank you to my Tuesday morning preaching mentors; you make me a more grateful and joyful person. Also, thank you to my compadres in Lit405; your friendship and fellowship mean more than you know.

To my family, thank you for walking this journey with me. Mom and dad, thanks for believing in my calling and pursuit of preaching. Mom, thanks for the books! To my children, Ben, Harrison, and Lauren, thank you for your love and understanding throughout this long process. Finally, and most importantly, I want to say thank you to my wife, Beth. You have always been my biggest cheerleader and my greatest supporter. I couldn't ask for a better partner in ministry. I thank God for you every day.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The relentless nature of ministry means that fatigue is a constant companion of leaders in the church. While lay people like to joke about ministers only working on Sundays, the truth lies on the other side of the continuum. A pastor's work is overwhelming because it wears upon the body and soul.<sup>1</sup>

Emotionally unhealthy leaders tend to be unaware of what is going on inside them. And even when they recognize a strong emotion such as anger, they fail to process or express it honestly and appropriately. They ignore emotion-related messages their body may send – fatigue, stress-induced illness, weight gain, ulcers, headaches, or depression. They avoid reflecting on fears, sadness, or anger. They fail to consider how God might be trying to communicate with them through these “difficult” emotions. They struggle to articulate the reason for their emotional triggers, their overreactions in the present rooted in difficult experiences from their past.<sup>2</sup>

### Statement of the Problem

Over the last seven decades research has continually shown that persons in psychological distress are more likely to seek out help from a minister before looking for assistance from a PCP or psychiatrist.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Matthew Stanford suggests three main reasons for this: First, the ease of access. Community members and church parishioners often feel more comfortable with someone they know and ministers typically do not charge for their services. Second, churches are known as healing communities for those in need, and third, because mental illness raises questions of

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors old Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> Willa D. Meylink and Richard L. Gorsuch, “Relationship Between Clergy and Psychologists: The Empirical Data.” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 7.1 (1988): 56-72; Philip S. Wang, Patricia A. Breglund, and Ronald C. Kessler, “Patterns and Correlates of Contacting Clergy for Mental Disorders in the United States.” *Health Services Research* 38. 2 (2003): 647-673. Quoted in, Matthew S. Stanford, *Madness and Grace: A Practical Guide for Pastoral Care and Serious Mental Illness* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2021), 14.

what it means to be human—“Who am I?” and “Do I have worth?” To find answers to these questions, many turn to a minister of faith.<sup>4</sup> Yet, who does the minister turn to when he or she is in crisis? How are these men and women supposed to help others when often times they do not know how to help themselves?

The issue of burnout is nothing new in clergy work. Employees in helping professions such as health care, social activism, and psychology, typically experience burnout at higher rates than other professions.<sup>5</sup> This is due in large part to the fact that, by definition, recipients in most helping relationships are people with problems. The negative part of the recipient’s life is what the helper sees and is most concerned about.<sup>6</sup> Just as nurses and therapists experience burnout, so do ministers. Investigative reporter and author, Jenny Moss, explains that “Workplace environments that require more emotional involvement, empathy, and personal investment, combined with an intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic rewards”<sup>7</sup> places helping personalities at risk. In other words, the very attributes of one’s personality that draws them into ministry can be the same attributes that make them the most susceptible to burnout.

### **Purpose Statement**

Much research and countless hours have been poured into projects and dissertations pertaining to ministry burnout. However, what I have found to be lacking is an *entry point resource* that ministers and elderships can use *together* to define burnout, recognize its

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<sup>4</sup> Stanford, *Madness and Grace*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Moss, “Rethinking Burnout” in *HBR Guide to Beating Burnout: Recognize the Signs, Make Sustainable Changes, Reengage at Work* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Altos, CA: Malor Books, 2015), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021), 69.

symptoms, address misconceptions, and provide spiritual practices to combat it. In the following project my goal is to provide a working definition for burnout as it pertains to ministry and then provide a theological framework to show how God lives in the midst of our struggle for mental wellness. I will make the case that, although not labeled so, burnout symptoms existed long ago in the lives of great biblical leaders. After a psychological and theological foundation for burnout are established, I give voice to real ministers in the field and their struggles with burnout symptoms.

By using the qualitative research method of narrative inquiry, I asked eleven brave ministers to share their experiences of how burnout has affected their life and ministry. The interview questions specifically concerned: burnout stressors, its impact on the family, what keeps them in ministry or would cause them to leave, their relationship with their church leaders, the resources that are lacking or provided by their congregation for mental wellness, and what spiritual disciplines they practice on a regular basis to maintain good mental and spiritual health. Through my findings in the interviews and with a better understanding from my research, I then used the common and dominant narratives from the interviewees to create a collective voice, called restorying, in an effort to force acknowledgement, raise awareness and foster advocacy amongst church leaderships in the battle against burnout.

### **Ministry Context**

For the last twenty-two years I have served in full-time ministry within the Churches of Christ. I spent nearly six years in youth ministry with two different congregations in Illinois and Kansas before transitioning into preaching in 2007. I am currently the preaching minister for the Church of Christ at Oakdale in Oklahoma City, OK. It is important to know that I have served in vocational ministry for my entire adult life. In May of 2001, I graduated from York University

with a degree in Biblical Studies and quickly made preparations to move to Peoria, Illinois the following weekend to be the Church of Christ Northwest's first youth minister.

Preaching and pastoral care are deep passions of mine. I have felt a strong calling to ministry since I was seven years old. There has never been anything else I have wanted to do with my life than preach and teach the Gospel. With that said, I have always wondered what it would be like to be just a "person in the pew." Would I attend worship regularly if I was not employed to be there? Would I show up to service projects or help parishioners move if it was not my job? Moreover, what would it be like to sit in worship with my family, enjoying the Lord's Supper, without the distraction of the sermon playing over and over again in my mind? "Make sure you say this in your opening illustration." or "Don't forget to ask the person in the sound booth to turn down the mic before you head to the front."

When COVID 19 hit in the spring of 2020 I found myself, like many ministers, in an uncharted world with little to no direction on how to navigate the new rules for community engagement and worship. Nothing was mentioned on how to handle a pandemic in my courses at college! I was making things up on the fly, doing my best to keep my head above water. This pandemic, compounded with social and political unrest in America, hit me in a way I was not prepared for. I was mentally spent. I was tired of phone calls about needing to wear masks followed up by phone calls about not wanting to wear masks. I was exhausted by partisan politics in the congregation, members telling me and others we were not Christians if we did not vote a certain way. I laid awake at night wondering how I should address the murder of George Floyd in my sermon, knowing no matter what I said, I would get a phone call or email about "going too far" or "not going far enough."

I remember driving home one day and passing an Amazon delivery van. I found myself daydreaming, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to drive an Amazon truck? I could listen to ESPN radio all day, drop off packages, and then clock out and go home to my family at night.” From that day on I thought about it all the time. A half-joking daydream turned into a serious consideration. I even went online to see if Amazon was hiring. As I sat at my desk staring at job listings, I realized I was in trouble. I loved ministry and hated it at the same time. How could something so life giving also be so life draining? In July of 2021, I finally went to my elders and told them I needed a break. I needed more than a break; I needed a sabbatical. I cannot begin to tell you how understanding and gracious they were towards me. I truly believe their response to my plea kept me in ministry. Their concern and prayer on my behalf lifted a weight I had been carrying for years.

This project was birthed out of a desire to help other ministers lighten the load of ministry caused by burnout. My hope is that this project will serve the church in the following ways: 1) To be a voice for ministers who cannot or will not speak up for themselves concerning their mental wellness, 2) To raise awareness amongst church leaderships of the reality, dangers, and consequences that burnout can produce, and 3) offer a way forward to mental and spiritual wellness through spiritual and pastoral practices.

### **Title of the Project**

In 1 Kings 19 we find Elijah running for his life. Jezebel is on the warpath after the prophets of Baal were struck down at his command. Elijah is exhausted, wanting to die, needing the provision of angels to even eat. From a place of despair, Elijah flees to meet with God on the mountain. The presence of the Lord appeared to Elijah in the most unexpected way. Mighty winds shattered rocks, followed by an earthquake and fire, but verse 12 tells us that God was not

in the fire. After the fire, “came a gentle whisper.”<sup>8</sup> While there are many translations for this phrase in 1 Kings 19:12,<sup>9</sup> almost all translations use the same phrase to begin 1 Kings 19:13. It says, “Elijah heard it.” There was something in the low, soft whisper of God that got Elijah’s attention. Despite fire from heaven in chapter 18 and winds, an earthquake, and more fire in chapter 19, it was the gentle whisper of God that Elijah needed to hear most.

Ministry is packed with wonderfully inspiring and difficult work. Ask any minister and they can probably share dozens of stories of how they have seen God acting in the life of their congregation. Most do not doubt God or deny his existence. Yet, like Elijah, life in ministry can be so hard sometimes that no matter how earth shaking the work of God is, they cannot feel his presence. Listen to the words of ministry veteran Wayne Cordeiro in his book, *Leading on Empty*:

After thirty years of a marathon ministry, I hit the wall—and I had no idea how to switch to another fuel system. What gives you thrust in the beginning often abandons you at the twenty-mile mark. Every runner will hit the wall, but for me the wall hit back...I needed God to quiet every voice but his own.<sup>10</sup>

If not careful, burnout can cause spiritual deafness in the heart of a minister. Caring professionals can lose the sense of empathy, purpose, and drive. This project is for all of those who struggle in ministry through burnout but want desperately to hear God’s gentle whisper.

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<sup>8</sup> NIV. Scriptural quotations throughout the rest of the project will be taken from the NRSV unless specifically stated.

<sup>9</sup> The CSB says, “there was a voice, a soft whisper; The ESV states, “the sound of a low whisper;” while the NRSV simply says, “a sound of sheer silence.”

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 36-37.

## **Basic Assumptions**

This project was formed with four basic assumptions. First, that burnout was prevalent in ministry before the COVID 19 pandemic but has escalated tremendously since the pandemic began. Second, most ministers will experience some form of burnout in the life of their ministry. Third, most elderships care about the mental well-being of their staff and would not purposefully discount their mental health needs. Finally, while there are many well-versed ministers and elders with knowledge and skills to combat burnout, there are as many, if not more, that are unaware of the dangers they or their staff are facing and need intervention and resources that can help.

## **Limitations**

I chose narrative inquiry because there is power in testimony, and shared experiences are great ways to display the heart of human subjects. As Donileen Loseke says, “Stories are important because they are a meaning-making form of communication.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, storytelling is contextualized and is based upon several factors such as the geographic location, size of the congregation, size of the ministry staff, and doctrinal beliefs or practices. What might be one minister’s experience in a particular ministry setting might not be another’s experience in a different environment. Furthermore, the opposite can also be true. The details shared may be different based upon their perceptions of what took place in the same crash.

Temporality is also a major factor in storytelling. Questions asked in an interview today might have been answered differently fifteen years ago or even three years ago. For instance, a

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<sup>11</sup> Donileen R. Loseke, *Narrative as Topic and Method in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2022), 19.



few of the ministers I interviewed are empty nesters. They admitted their answers concerning stress and exhaustion would have been very different if their children were younger and still lived at home. Stories have tremendous meaning but they are limited by time and context. However, this does not discount narrative research. Narrative research holds weight because it cuts to the heart of a person's experience.

### **Definitions**

*Burnout* - Burnout has many variables and the definition to the term is perceived in many different ways, as will be shown in chapter two. For the sake of this study, I found it necessary to provide a psychological definition and background to burnout in the following chapter because mental health and illness are defined in this same sphere. However, for the sake of the interviews conducted, I purposely did not try to define burnout for the interviewees, as not to persuade their answers towards one particular way of thinking or expressing themselves. In other words, I was more interested in hearing how they perceived burnout to affect their lives than their understanding of the technical definition.

*Depression* - Depression (major depressive disorder) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and at home.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "What is Depression?" American Psychiatric Association, *psychiatry.org*, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>, Last updated October 2020, (Accessed February 18, 2023).

*Mental Health* - Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.<sup>13</sup>

*Mental Illness* - Mental illness, also called mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions—disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.<sup>14</sup>

*Self-Care* - Self-care is the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker.<sup>15</sup>

*Existentialism* – is a philosophical term with a wide variety of definitions and characteristics. Psychotherapist, Victor Frankl, once said, “We have to remain aware that there are as many existentialisms as there are existentialists.”<sup>16</sup> For terms of this project, I am using it in its broadest sense—the search for what it means to “be” in the world, the study of what makes life meaningful and good.

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<sup>13</sup>“What is Mental Health?” *mentalhealth.gov*, <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>, Last updated February 28, 2022, (Accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> “What is Mental Illness?” American Psychiatric Association, *psychiatry.org*, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>, Last updated November, 2022, (Accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> “Self-care Interventions for Health.” World Health Organization, *who.int*, [https://www.who.int/health-topics/self-care#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/self-care#tab=tab_1), Last updated 2023, (Accessed February 18, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Victor E. Frankl, “Logotherapy and Existentialism.” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 4.3 (August 1967): 138. Doi:10.1037/h0087982.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXPLORING THE BURNOUT PROBLEM

Although he was not aware of it at the time, Stan's work situation made him clearly "at risk" for burnout. It required him to deal with many other people over an extended period of time. Hour after hour, day after day, he was supposed to help people with their "sorrows" and problems. And in doing so he was expected always to be concerned, warm, and caring. The emotional strain of such extensive caring was something he had underestimated or perhaps had not even recognized. He began to get too involved in his client's woes and to feel overwhelmed by them. Added to this was a lack of rapport and support among his co-workers and administrators, an excess of paperwork and the frustration of red tape. Thus, Stan was in a situation of escalating emotional overload—too much was being asked of him and too little was being returned to him. The inner flame of concern and caring that he had originally brought to his job was slowly being snuffed out.<sup>17</sup>

#### Defining Burnout

It is estimated that over 6,000 journal articles, dissertations, and books have been published on the subject of burnout since it was first introduced nearly forty-two years ago.<sup>18</sup> The term burnout, as used in relation to the workplace, came about in the 1970s by American psychologist, Herbert Freudenberger. In a journal article titled, "Staff Burnout,"<sup>19</sup> Freudenberger described the loss of caring and compassion he noticed amongst practitioners working with drug addicted clients. At the time, *addicts* were the ones classified as "burnouts" because of their lack of care for anything other than the next fix. However, Freudenberger observed that weary and exhausted *practitioners* were displaying a similar lack of care with their clients.<sup>20</sup> Freudenberger

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<sup>17</sup> Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas M. Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Self-care Strategies for the Helping Professions* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Freudenberger, "Staff Burnout," in Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 102.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

was the first to describe burnout as a psychological syndrome that progressively made practitioners and volunteers less committed, amotivated, and emotionally depleted.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1980s, the phenomenon of burnout began to take shape, due in large part to Christina Maslach, Michael Leiter, and Susan Jackson’s research and development of an assessment tool known as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (hereafter known as the MBI). This groundbreaking inventory gave organizations a way to collect data and measure burnout symptoms.<sup>22</sup> In her book, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, Maslach states:

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do “people work” of some kind. It is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems.<sup>23</sup>

When any of the three dimensions above—exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—are present on the job, the fully engaged worker begins to burn out over time.

Gina Calvano explains that when employees are overextended, they are high on exhaustion, when disengaged they are high on cynicism, and when they are ineffective, they experience high levels of inefficacy.<sup>24</sup>

<u>Fully Engaged</u>	<u>Burned Out</u>
Energy	Exhaustion
Involvement	Cynicism
Efficacy	Ineffectiveness <sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gordon Parker, Gabriela Tavella, and Kerrie Eyers, *Burnout: A Guide to Identifying Burnout and Pathways to Recovery* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Moss, “Rethinking Burnout,” in *HBR Guide to Beating Burnout*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Christina Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Gina Calvano, *From Burnout to Purpose: Simple Strategies for a Soul-Fulfilling Approach to Work* (Morristown, NJ: Indigoforce, 2022), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner*, 104.

It is important to note that for Maslach and her colleagues, burnout appears to be specific to the work domain.<sup>26</sup> While it has some of the same effects as other stress responses, burnout is unique in that the stress arises from *social* interaction between the helper and the recipient.<sup>27</sup> Foundational to a proper understanding of burnout, one must know the inner workings of the three dimensions Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson built their research upon and how they can trigger deep emotional, physiological, and mental health issues in the work place.

### **Exhaustion**

In the helping professions exhaustion is inevitable. There is a continual pull between other-care and self-care. The helper is exhausted when saying yes and guilty when saying no.<sup>28</sup> One of burnout's defining features is a loss of empathy.<sup>29</sup> Typically, one enters a helping profession in order to use their gifts of compassion and empathy to serve the needs of others. Yet, when their own needs go unmet there can be dire consequences. One such consequence is *compassion fatigue*. Compassion fatigue occurs when exhaustion over a long period of time depletes the giver's desire to nurture a recipient in need. Emily and Amelia Nagoski explain that, "Givers may spend years attending to the needs of others, while dismissing their own stress

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<sup>26</sup> Christina Maslach and Wilmar Schaufeli, "Historical and Conceptual Development of Burnout," in *Professional Burnout: Recent Developments in Theory and Research*, eds. Wilmar Schaufeli, Christina Maslach, and Tadeusz Marek (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, *The Resilient Practitioner*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eyers, *Burnout*, 30.

generated in response to witnessing those needs.”<sup>30</sup> Compassion fatigue presents itself in the following ways:

- Checking out emotionally—faking empathy when you can’t feel emotion
- Minimizing or dismissing suffering that isn’t the most extreme—“It’s not slavery/genocide/child rape/nuclear war, so quit complaining.”
- Feeling helpless, hopeless, or powerless, while also feeling personally responsible for doing more; and
- Staying in a bad situation, whether a workplace or a relationship, out of a sense of grandiosity—“If I don’t do it, no one will.”<sup>31</sup>

Overload is also one of the main contributors to burnout. Whereas compassion fatigue is a direct result of exhaustion, overload is a direct cause of it. Overload can be defined as an emotional or physical burden that exceeds a person’s ability to handle stress. “Too much information is pouring in, too many demands are being made, and it is all occurring too fast for the person to keep up with it.”<sup>32</sup> In the battle against exhaustion, *overload* joins forces with its twin, *overwhelm*. As the helper takes more and more upon his or her self (overload), eventually they reach a point where they feel incapacitated to do anything (overwhelm). Calvano defines being overwhelmed as a way of thinking, feeling, or behaving in a way to protect or serve primarily yourself.<sup>33</sup> Self-preservation becomes a way of life for the burnout victim. Rather than giving from a place of abundance they now live from a place of scarcity.

Exhaustion caused by burnout is constant and continual over a long period of time. One is tired when they have to work an overtime shift; they are exhausted when overtime shifts

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<sup>30</sup> Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2019), 95.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> Calvano, *From Burnout to Purpose*, 23.

frequently become the norm and expectation from management. Burnout is chronic, not occasional. Workplaces are full of stressors; people will likely experience some of the effects of burnout in any given time but burnout is feeling exhausted, overloaded, and overwhelmed all of the time.

### **Depersonalization (Cynicism)**

Depersonalization or cynicism, is the second dimension of burnout associated with the MBI and is related to overload and exhaustion. Cynicism refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job.<sup>34</sup> Calvano adds that cynicism is grounded in an egocentric focus that believes *others* are only motivated by self-interest.<sup>35</sup> Depersonalization can be manifested in a detachment from work, the workplace and/or co-workers. Much like compassion fatigue, depersonalization is a self-preservation tactic. Elizabeth Grace Saunders says, “You know you’re on the verge of burnout when you’re perpetually exhausted, annoyed, and feeling unaccomplished and unappreciated.”<sup>36</sup> The feeling of constant annoyance and negativity around people is a burnout red flag. Helping professions, by nature of interpersonal relationships, often come with more stress than other jobs. When a nurse or police officer feels the weight of emotional demands and emotional dissonance is involved, burnout ensues and cynicism forms as a byproduct.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, *The Burnout Challenge: Managing People’s Relationships with Their Jobs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 34.

<sup>35</sup> Calvano, *From Burnout to Purpose*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Grace Saunders, “Six Causes of Burnout, and How to Avoid Them,” in *Harvard Business Review Guide to Beating Burnout*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Bakker and Ellen Heuven, “Emotional Dissonance, Burnout, and in-Role Performance Among Nurses and Police Officers.” *Internal Journal of Stress Management* 13.4 (November 2006): 427. Doi:L10.1037/1072-5245. 13.4.

### **Reduced Personal Accomplishment (Inefficacy)**

Reduced personal accomplishment is the third major dimension of burnout syndrome and refers to the feeling of powerlessness and lack of achievement and productivity at work.<sup>38</sup>

Inefficacy can cause feelings of inadequacy and many times the exhaustion dimension can be a precursor. Just as burnout can create cynicism outwardly towards others, inefficacy turns those negative feelings inward towards the self. However, inefficacy is not merely a production problem; it can also pertain to a lack of motivation or personal accomplishment. Maslach and Leiter, speaking on the ineffective profile associated with persons exhibiting reduced personal accomplishment traits, state:

The main problem for people in the ineffective profile is a negative sense of their own professional accomplishments on the job. They may have energy, and they may care about the social context of the job, but perhaps the work is not intrinsically rewarding or they do not see themselves as making any progress. Even if they contribute real effort, the results may seem trivial, and they may lose confidence in their ability to make a difference.<sup>39</sup>

It is easy to see how the three dimensions—exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment can be linked components in the cause of burnout, but it is important to note that not all the dimensions have to be present at the same time, nor must every burnout victim experience all three. Monique Valcour says, “Some people are mainly exhausted but haven’t yet developed cynicism or begun to doubt their performance. Others are primarily cynical or suffer most from feelings of reduced efficacy. People can also be high on two compounds and low on one.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Maslach and Leiter, *The Burnout Challenge*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>40</sup> Monique Valcour, “Beating Burnout,” in *Harvard Business Review Guide to Beating Burnout*, 69.



## The Problem of Ambiguity

Like Valcour above, burnout researchers must admit that many of the variables concerning burnout are not fixed. One of the greatest problems in burnout research has been the lack of concrete terminology in its definition. For instance, while Maslach credits burnout to professions dealing with people-problems, Freudenberger and Richelson are more ambiguous claiming burnout is, “a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by a devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.”<sup>41</sup> Pines and Aronson, even more ambiguous, say that burnout is, “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally draining.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps there can be complementation rather than competition in these definitions. Maslach is right in her correlation of burnout and social interaction between the helper and recipient, but does this have to be in a paid working environment? Cannot frustration to a devoted cause and emotional drain also take place in the home between parent and child or even in a marriage between spouses? I believe Parker, Tavella, and Eyers are right in their assessment that research on burnout occurring outside of formal employment is a neglected issue in need of more consideration.<sup>43</sup>

With such a broad range of definitions and variables at play, popular culture has latched on to its own usage of the word. Maslach and Leiter have observed that people, especially during the pandemic, have used the term “burned out” colloquially to describe feeling stressed.

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<sup>41</sup> Herbert Freudenberger and Geraldine Richelson, *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 13. Quoted in *Professional Burnout*, eds. Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, *Career Burnout: Causes and Cures* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1988), 9. Quoted in *Professional Burnout*, eds. Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eyers, *Burnout*, 33.

However, they do not seem overly concerned by a more watered-down public definition, stating, “Doing so does not question burnout’s research-based definition, any more than people saying colloquially that they are depressed challenges the reality that depression is a clinically diagnosable condition.”<sup>44</sup> While this sentiment is understood, it begs the question whether most employers and employees know the severity and symptoms of Maslach and Leiter’s definition and the dangers to mental health that workplace environments can create. Diagnosed or not, depression is a word that usually flags attention in professional and personal circles, but can the same be said about burnout? At the current time, it would seem that depression is taken much more seriously.

### **Expanding the Dimensions**

The psychology world owes a debt of gratitude to Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson for their expansion of Freudenberg’s work. Their construction of the MBI was groundbreaking in the 1980’s and they continue to be major contributors in the field today. However, Maslach, Leiter and Jackson’s work on the MBI has been met with some deserved criticism. Parker, Tavella, and Eysers take issue with several components in the MBI inventory, seven of which are listed below:

1. A three-pointer: (i) the MBI is insufficiently grounded in clinical observation and theory, (ii) its items were selected on an ‘arbitrary’ basis and (iii) if a broader set of symptoms (e.g. depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance) had been included and evaluated, the resulting MBI-based definition of burnout might be quite different.
2. The measure is circular. That is, the MBI was developed to measure ‘burnout’ and then burnout came to be defined by the MBI triadic model.
3. While higher MBI scores indicate more severe burnout, the MBI does not deliver a yes/no decision as to whether an individual is actually burnt out or not, as it has no designated burnout cut-off score.
4. It is unclear how the three scale scores generated by the MBI should be used. If someone obtains a high score on one scale but lower scores on the other two scales, are they burnt out or not?

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<sup>44</sup> Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, *The Burnout Challenge*, 6.

5. The MBI was designed for those in formal/paid employment. However, burnout occurs across a much wider sphere. An immense number of sufferers are unpaid caregivers, a sector overlooked in the design of the MBI.
6. The MBI may not distinguish sufficiently between burnout and job dissatisfaction or occupational stress.
7. Finally, those with other psychological conditions (e.g. depression, anxiety, stress) return high scores on all burnout measures (including the MBI) risking ‘false positive’ burnout diagnoses.<sup>45</sup>

Departing from the MBI, Parker, Tavella, and Eysers created their own study to determine the symptoms that accompany burnout. Known as the Sydney Studies, more than a thousand adults, self-diagnosing as burned out, participated in the study at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. A total of 12 symptoms emerged about burnout syndrome from the Sydney Studies. They are:

- **Exhaustion** (nominated by 69% of the sample) experienced as fatigue, tiredness, lethargy and feeling drained.
- **Anxiety** (51%) feeling stressed, worried and overwhelmed, unable to relax or switch off, ruminating about work when not there, experiencing a sense of dread and feeling fidgety or restless.
- **Indifference** (47%) experienced as lack of empathy and interest or pleasure in work or activities outside of work, cynicism, apathy, disengagement, lack of feeling and instead just ‘going through the motions.’
- **Depression** (38%) low mood and sadness, hopelessness and helplessness, lowered self-worth, self-doubt and even (albeit rarely) suicidal thoughts.
- **Irritability and anger** (35%) with the most frequent descriptors being irritability, impatience, agitation, frustration, anger and resentment.
- **Sleep disturbance** (34%) with either lack of sleep or excessive sleep being reported.
- **Lack of motivation or passion** (33%) experienced as a lack of satisfaction in life and/or work, feelings of not making any difference at work or that work lacked purpose, or reduced passion for their job.
- **Cognitive problems** (32%) components included concentration, attention and memory problems, ‘brain fog’ or cloudy thinking, difficulty in planning or making decisions as well as feeling confused.
- **Impaired performance** (26%) evidenced by lower productivity, reduced quality of output, making more mistakes, avoiding responsibilities or procrastinating.
- **Becoming asocial** (25%) effectively cocooning themselves and withdrawing from family, friends, colleagues and clients.

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<sup>45</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eysers, *Burnout*, 42.

- **Physical symptoms** (25%) aches or headaches, eating and appetite changes, nausea and low libido.
- **Emotional lability** (16%) fragile emotions, increased sensitivity, emotional outbursts and being more tearful.<sup>46</sup>

To be fair, a hybrid model of the MBI and Sydney Studies is probably most beneficial.

Exhaustion, depersonalization (detachment), and reduced personal accomplishment (lack of efficacy) are symptoms that can be used as building blocks to create a framework for burnout.

The Sydney Studies rounds out Maslach and company's research with a more robust understanding of the emotional, physical, and mental weight that burnout produces.

### **Burnout and Depression—Similarities and Differences**

It is important to stop for a moment and speak to the similarities and differences between burnout and depression. Differentiating between the two can be tricky. These terms are often used interchangeably, but while related, they are not the same. Depression and burnout share symptoms like loss of energy, lowered self-esteem, and negative attitudes. In particular, there have been strong correlations in the exhaustion dimension.<sup>47</sup> Yet, burnout and depression do not always appear together. In a Finnish health study conducted in 2000, only about half of those with severe burnout fulfilled the criteria of a depressive disorder.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the Sydney Studies show that while depression is one of the 12 main symptoms of burnout, only 38% of the 1019 people interviewed claimed to be depressed. Therefore, both the Finnish and Sydney data

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<sup>46</sup> Gabriela Tavella and Gordon Parker, "A qualitative re-examination of the key features of burnout," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 208 (2020): 452-458. Quoted in Parker, Tavella, and Eyers, *Burnout*, 47-48.

<sup>47</sup> Kirsi Ahola and Jari Hakanen, "Burnout and Health," in *Burnout at Work: A Psychological Perspective*, eds. Michael P. Leiter, Arnold B. Bakker, and Christina Maslach (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>48</sup> Kirsi Ahola, "People and Work Research Reports" in *Occupational Burnout and Health* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2007), 81. Quoted in *Burnout at Work*, eds. Leiter, Bakker, and Maslach, 17.

support the reasoning that burnout and depression differ the most in terms of context. Ahola and Hakanen seem to concur with the internal/external reasoning that burnout is contextual and depression is context free.<sup>49</sup> Pines, also in agreement, adds, “Unlike burnout, depression tends to be all-pervasive...in burnout, on the other hand, the search for both causes and the cures focuses on stresses in the work environment.”<sup>50</sup>

According to a study by Ahola and Hakanen, when burnout was dichotomized as no burnout versus mild or severe, it overlapped with both physical illness and mental disorders. In the Finnish study, those who suffered from severe burnout (defined by weekly symptoms) were the most likely to have a depressive disorder (45%).<sup>51</sup> In short, some depressed people are also burnt out at work and some burnt out people may develop depression as a result of burnout, but it would not be accurate or wise to use burnout and depression synonymously.

### **A Formal Diagnosis**

In 2019, burnout research achieved a major breakthrough. For the first time, burnout was given a formal diagnosis by the World Health Organization (WHO) and listed in the International Classification of Diseases manual (ICD-10), describing it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”<sup>52</sup> The WHO goes on to characterize burnout by describing its three dimensions:

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<sup>49</sup> Ahola and Hakanen, “Burnout and Health,” 17.

<sup>50</sup> Ayala Pines, “Burnout: An Existential Perspective,” in *Professional Burnout: Recent Developments in Theory and Research*, Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek, eds. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 39.

<sup>51</sup> Ahola and Hakanen, “Burnout and Health,” 13.

<sup>52</sup> “Burn-out an ‘Occupational Phenomenon’: International Classification of Diseases,” World Health Organization, May 28, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>. As quoted in, Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How we can Fix It* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021), 3.

“feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy.”<sup>53</sup> The three dimensions used to describe burnout by the WHO should sound very familiar. They are taken almost word for word from Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson’s work.

The WHO’s classification could not have come at a better time. When the COVID 19 pandemic hit one year later, burnout in the workplace skyrocketed. Moss explains how the WHO’s diagnosis put organizations on formal notice:

Leaders must now focus on the systems and policies that prioritize psychological safety for their employees, as they do for physical safety. We have clear rules that protect people from working in smoke-filled spaces or buildings riddled with asbestos; shouldn’t we equally protect them from working in emotionally toxic environments that systemically cause burnout?<sup>54</sup>

A very important distinction is made in IDC-10 manual concerning the nature of burnout. The burnout diagnosis is not considered a medical condition, but rather an occupational phenomenon.<sup>55</sup> While at first this may sound defeating, this clarification is actually helpful. Parker, Tavella, and Eysers state, “Burnout by definition is not an illness or injury...thus, it is not regarded as a formal psychiatric disorder or condition, a position consistent with the views of sufferers who see burnout as a ‘normal’ rather than pathological reaction to work stressors.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, burnout is created when *external* problems arise in the work place, whereas a psychiatric disorder, like schizophrenia, originates *internally*. When one is taken out of the work

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<sup>53</sup> World Health Organization, as quoted in Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Moss, “Rethinking Burnout” in *HBR Guide to Beating Burnout*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eysers, *Burnout*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

environment causing exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, burnout symptoms should subside.

### **Six Causes of Burnout and the “We” Problem**

Gallup data on burnout shows that only 30% of the workforce is engaged at work.<sup>57</sup> These statistics should be an eye opener for any employer. Burnout is not an individual problem; it is systemic. Therefore, as Moss suggests, in order to engage burnout in the workplace, organizations must begin to see burnout syndrome as a “we” issue instead of a “me” issue.<sup>58</sup> She goes on to say that while self-care is good, it is a tactic, not a solution.<sup>59</sup> Burnout cannot be eradicated by giving mental-health days, providing insurance for counseling or handing out free fit-bits at Christmas that are programmed with relaxation reminders. Perks and benefits certainly help the employee, and I am fairly certain most would welcome these acts of generosity, but perks do not change a system. The roots of burnout are often associated with poor corporate hygiene.<sup>60</sup> Just like showering and brushing your teeth daily for good physical health, good workplace hygiene must be established and repeated over a long period of time. Below are the 6 major causes or “triggers” of burnout:

1. Workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Lack of reward or recognition
4. Poor relationships
5. Lack of fairness
6. Values mismatch<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Jennifer Moss, “Rethinking Burnout,” in *HBR Guide to Beating Burnout*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Notice the root for most of these causes is a need for better leadership or workplace environment. It is true that each individual has their role to play in promoting and maintaining healthy relationships, but organizational leaders can drastically reduce burnout symptoms by practicing corporate hygiene habits such as fair workloads, giving employees autonomy to accomplish tasks without micromanagement, and clearly communicating realistic expectations.

Many organizations are slow to address burnout and the mental health issues it creates. They feel they do not have the time to learn new habits and cannot afford to add anything else to busy agendas. However, if organizations will look at the statistics, they will see they cannot afford *not* to address the burnout epidemic. In 2016, the World Economic Forum estimated the cost of burnout to be £255 billion (approximately \$332 billion in U.S. currency). These costs come from:

- Absenteeism (being unable to turn up for work)
- Presenteeism (turning up at work but unable to function adequately)
- Premature retirement
- Indirect costs of treating mental and physical health impacts.<sup>62</sup>

I would add to the list the cost of employees exiting early from jobs, the search process for new workers, and the time it takes to train them. Organizations that take care of their employees' mental health by creating a fair and balanced system within the workplace exemplify good ethics and good business.

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<sup>62</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eysers, *Burnout*, 36.



## Burnout Stressors and Stress—What’s the Difference?

The introduction of the “we” problem by Moss<sup>63</sup> is cutting edge and controversial in burnout circles, but is gaining traction. Burnout is systemic in the sense that the environment of the workplace is to blame for burnout. However, the internal damage that burnout does to one’s personality—their self-esteem, self-confidence, anxiety, and so forth—must also be addressed in burnout research. The “we” solution that Moss proposes addresses only half the problem. Even if unhealthy work environments are changed, post-traumatic stress most likely still lingers. Important to the understanding of burnout, the differentiation of stressors versus stress is needed.

*Stressors* are what activate the stress in one’s body. *Stress* is the neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter one of these threats.<sup>64</sup> Stressors can be external (money, expectations, discrimination,) or they can be internal (self-criticism, body image, identity). Stress will often dissipate when stressors are removed, but not always. For example: Imagine you are taking a walk in the African savannah and come face to face with a lion. As it inches closer, physiological changes begin to happen in your body; adrenaline kicks as your heart starts to pound. You quickly grab your rifle and shoot the lion as it charges towards you. The lion drops dead, the stressor is removed, but the stress on the body remains.<sup>65</sup> The Nagoski sisters explain:

Your body is stuck in the middle of the stress response. Just telling yourself, “You’re safe now; calm down,” doesn’t help. Even seeing the dead lion isn’t enough. You have to do something that signals to your body that you are safe, or else you’ll stay in that state, with neurochemicals and hormones degrading but never shifting into relaxation.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Jennifer Moss, “Rethinking Burnout” in *HBR Guide to Beating Burnout*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> E. Nagoski and A. Nagoski, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

In an unhealthy workplace environment, “lions” are everywhere; and even when one lion is removed another will take its place. Even when all lions are killed and hauled off, memories remain. The conjuring up of a memory (internal stressor) is enough to stress the body even though the external stressor is no longer present. This is why the “we” and the “me” problem must both be addressed. It is important for any organization to keep in mind that it takes time to change a work environment and it also takes time for employees to feel safe and regain trust in their employer.

### **Giving Personalities Most at Risk**

In Maslach, Leiter, and Jackson’s three dimensions of burnout I touched briefly on the weight and taxation care-givers can experience with recipients in helping professions.

Compassion fatigue, loss of empathy, self-preservation, and withdrawal can occur in the most kind and caring people. Maslach states:

Unlike other jobs where only technical skills are required, these professions call for the use of interpersonal skills as well. The provider must be empathetic and understanding, calm and objective while dealing with intimate information, and ready to give help and reassurance. The provider’s ability in these areas is largely a function of his or her personality and life experiences. This is especially true if there has been no job training in interpersonal skills. Thus, personality and other personal qualities have a very significant part to play in burnout.<sup>67</sup>

A common misconception about burnout victims is that they hate their jobs. While this may be true of some, in most cases burnout occurs because the helper cares too much. People work is a double-edged sword. Empaths are keenly aware of the feelings of others and seek ways to engage and comfort the hurting. Personalities rich in compassion feel a need to intervene when they see suffering. Empathy, compassion, generosity, love, and kindness are giving traits. While

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<sup>67</sup> Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, 95.

everyone is capable of developing these characteristics, some come by it more naturally. It is those who are hardwired with the giving traits that are most vulnerable to burnout. Maslach explains it this way:

What a person brings to a situation is just as critical as what the situation brings out of (or puts into) him or her. And what a person brings are individual characteristics such as motivations, needs, values, self, esteem, emotional expressiveness and control, and personal style. These internal qualities determine how someone handles external sources of emotional stress and help explain why Person A will experience burnout in a particular work setting while Person B will not. They are also implicated in an individual's original choice of a helping profession as a career.<sup>68</sup>

### Summary

- Burnout is a syndrome found primarily in the dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.
- Symptoms of burnout include but are not limited to anxiety, depression, irritability, cognitive problems, and physical ailments.
- Depression and burnout are not the same. In two different studies, less than half of burnout victims said they were depressed.
- Much work is left to be done in burnout research, but a formal diagnosis in 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO) has forced organizations to acknowledge the burnout problem.
- Burnout is an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. It is created by external problems in the workplace.
- Burnout is systemic. Mental health benefits can treat symptoms, but they cannot solve the problem. Change must happen in the workplace in order to eradicate burnout.
- Stressors and stress are both components of burnout. Burnout is created by external factors (stressors), but can cause physiological damage (stress) to one's emotional, mental, and physical health. The "we" problem and the "me" problem must both be treated.
- People in helping professions typically do not get burned out because they hate their job. They burn out because they care too much.
- Persons in helping professions are most at risk for burnout. Those with giving traits like compassion, empathy, kindness, and love find themselves depleted when they give more than they receive.

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<sup>68</sup> Maslach, *Burnout: The cost of caring*, 94-95.

## CHAPTER 3

### PRACTICAL AND PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO BURNOUT

No other profession demands competency in such a variety of roles as the ordained ministry. Ministers are expected to be administrators, spiritual advisors, caregivers, healers, preachers, teachers, conflict negotiators, arbiters, lawyers, biblical scholars, church and denominational historians, visionaries, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, confidants, psychologists, sociologists, economists, fundraisers, prophets, priests, advocates for social justice, defenders of the poor and oppressed, evangelists, spiritual warriors, truth tellers, armor bearers, and leaders of workshops, worship services, Bible studies, and church retreats. Given all these expectations—not to mention the expectation that clergy be God’s representatives—is it any wonder that some people expect clergy to be God and are disappointed when they are not? What other profession requires and demands so many different things of one person in order to be successful?<sup>69</sup>

Thus far in the project, I have stuck to a psychological definition and explanation of burnout syndrome, specifically focusing on organizational and employee relations and how helping professions can drain the care-giver. In this chapter I want to shift from a psychological perspective to one of practical and pastoral theology. Practical theology is rooted in hermeneutics and aims to examine experiences and practices in light of Scripture. Pastoral theology falls under the umbrella of practical theology but is primarily concerned with theological reflection that explores the nature of care, its rationale, and how it is practiced by and through communities of faith.<sup>70</sup> Three questions shaped my research for this chapter: 1) How does *calling* create an existential burnout crisis in ministry? 2) What are the “spiritual burnout barriers” sure to kill a healthy ministry? 3) Where do we see burnout symptoms in biblical narrative and what can this teach us about God and ministry?

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<sup>69</sup> Carlyle Fielding-Stewart III, “Why Do Clergy Experience Burnout?” *Quarterly Review* 23.1 (2003) 78.

<sup>70</sup> Hartness M. Samushonga. 2021. “Distinguishing Between the Pastor and the Superhero: God on Burnout and Self-Care” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31.1 (August 13, 2020): 5. Doi:10.1080/10649867.2020.1748919.

## **The Existential Crisis of Calling in Ministry**

Ask a minister why they chose to enter into ministry and chances are they will use the word “calling” in their answer. Those who feel called do not feel like they chose ministry but rather God chose them for kingdom service. Ministers feel a pull from God to preach, teach, serve, and lead, all in efforts to share the love of Christ. Few join the ranks of clergy on a whim or for the pay. A divine call from God, while wonderful, can present a real challenge in the burnout realm. Burnout in church work occurs when a minister questions their self-worth and sense of call in the face of various demands and conflicts.<sup>71</sup> On one hand, they feel a sense of duty to answer the call, and on the other hand they feel a sense of guilt from the exhaustion, stress, and anxiety the calling creates.

To be fair, those in other helping professions may also feel called to their work. Yet, clergy work is unique because faith, friendships, family, and ministry are all intertwined. The church becomes the hub of the minister’s existence. So, what does a minister do when someone causes strife in his or her congregation? Who do they share this information with? Who do they go to for advice when everything and everyone are connected? Ministry is different from other people professions because if one were to choose to leave ministry, they would not just be leaving a job, but their calling and way of life. In many ways, to leave a congregation is to leave a family; it feels like a divorce.

Christina Pohl says, “It is in community that we flourish and become most fully human...The character of our shared life—as congregations, communities, and families—has the power to draw people to the kingdom or to push them away. How we live together is the most

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Muse, Milton Love, and Kyle Christensen, “Intensive Outpatient Therapy for Clergy Burnout: How Much Difference Can a Week Make?” *Journal of Religion and Health* 55.1 (March 15, 2015): 48. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-015-0013-x>.

persuasive sermon we'll ever preach.”<sup>72</sup> I believe the ideal of kingdom community is what most ministers seek. They want to see the congregation flourish, restored, celebrating life together and sharing burdens, but as it is in all human relationships, the opposite is also possible.

Ayala Pines argues, “The root cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do—and consequently we ourselves—are useful and important...when people try to find meaning in their life through work and feel they have failed, the result is burnout.”<sup>73</sup> Pines is speaking here to a crisis of *occupational existentialism*, the belief that work is a needed component to make life meaningful. Ministry is first and foremost God work, but secondly it is people work—congregational and community work. You could even say that God work *is* people work. When asked by a teacher of the law, which of the commandments was the greatest? Jesus answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). To love God is to love people. So, when the congregation fights and fractures or the next-door neighbor continually refuses the Gospel despite many attempts at sharing, ministers feel the weight of this failure, and in turn can feel like they are a failure.

Failure is often accompanied by shame. Sometimes shame is birthed from moral failure, but other times it is created by real or perceived incompetence. For instance, when the size of a congregation shrinks by 50% during a preacher’s tenure, they may feel ashamed and embarrassed, regardless if the loss of membership is their fault or not. Failure causes shame and

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<sup>72</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Ayala Pines, “Burnout: An Existential Perspective,” in *Professional Burnout*, 33.

shame strikes a blow to self-worth. In his book, *The Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson reveals the remedy to shame: vulnerability. He says:

Vulnerability is not something we choose or that is true in a given moment, while the rest of the time it is not. Rather, it is something we *are*. This is why we wear clothes, live in houses, and have speed limits. So much of what we do in life is designed, among other things, to protect us from the fact that we are vulnerable *at all times*.<sup>74</sup>

I believe Thompson is spot on in his assertion, but vulnerability is not easily given or accepted as a minister. Before vulnerability can occur, there must be an incubator for trust and safety. The minister needs a community that will carry his or her burdens, not add more. When vulnerability is difficult in a particular environment, the risk of burnout increases. Ministers often find themselves surrounded by people, yet removed from the two-way intimacy they seek.<sup>75</sup> Ronald Beebe describes this as, “a heartfelt desire to engage others at a deeply personal and spiritual level and yet often finding these same individuals to be the cause of vocational burnout because of parishioners’ expectations to fulfill a multitude of emotional demands.”<sup>76</sup>

In the previous chapter I mentioned the great myth of burnout—people in helping professions burnout because they do not care. This simply is not true. As you can see above, burnout in ministry happens most often when ministers care deeply. Pines says, “Failure in the existential quest for meaning is the root cause of burnout. This is why burnout tends to afflict people with high goals and expectations.”<sup>77</sup> Ministers can grow to care in such a way that they

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<sup>74</sup> Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 115.

<sup>75</sup> Muse, Love, and Christensen, “Intensive OutPatient Therapy for Clergy Burnout” 151.

<sup>76</sup> Ronald S. Beebe, “Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy.” *Journal of Career Assessment*, 15.2 (2007) 258. Quoted in Muse, Love, and Christensen. “Intensive OutPatient Therapy for Clergy Burnout” 151.

<sup>77</sup> Pines, “Burnout: An Existential Perspective” 34.

enmesh and entangle their self-worth with the success of the congregation. Ironically, Pine tells us those who are not people-persons are far less likely to burnout in their career. “If you don’t feel a devotion to your cause, if you do people work but don’t care about people you work with, if you are not emotionally involved in your work—you are not likely to burn out.”<sup>78</sup>

There are several reasons why clergy stay in church work, but through my research I have found the most compelling to be calling.<sup>79</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie believe self-care is synonymous with spiritual formation and that is why burnout can be so complicated in clergy work.<sup>80</sup> Burns and his colleagues were surprised in their interviews with ministers how many of them questioned their own calling to the particular ministry in which they were serving. This seemed to be nearly a universal experience.<sup>81</sup> In other words, many ministers do not question their calling to ministry in general as much as they do to a particular church or religious organization. Preachers often fear if they leave one congregation for another, will this be seen as selfish? Even though people leave jobs in the secular world for higher pay, a new challenge, or to be closer to family, there seems to be an expectation of loyalty that church leaders and congregants place upon their ministers. Most troubling to this crisis of calling is there are no easy answers. It may sound drastic, but when one fails in ministry, they often feel they are failing in life and/or failing others. Occupational existentialism and inefficacy are directly linked here. Purpose is found in the minister’s spiritual calling but their abilities may be better suited

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>79</sup> In the interviews conducted for this research project, 7 of 11 ministers specifically used the word “calling” for the reason they stay in ministry. 10 of 11 linked their relationship with Christ or the Spirit as what keeps them in ministry. I speak more specifically to these results in chapter five.

<sup>80</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 64.



somewhere else. Trying to please God, family, and the congregation can be a daunting task and no matter the choice, someone always seems to get hurt, not least the ministers themselves.

### **Spiritual Burnout Barriers**

For some ministry leaders the idea of burning out for God sounds wonderful. “Why not burn out for Jesus? Jesus emptied himself on the cross, made himself nothing, took on the very nature of a servant (Philippians 2:7-8). Shouldn’t I do the same?” It is as if guarding one’s self against burnout is selfish and unspiritual. In his book, *Zeal Without Burnout*, Christopher Ash explains the fault in this reasoning. “The problem is that we do not sacrifice alone. It may sound heroic, even romantic, to burn out for Jesus. The reality is that others are implicated in our crashes...there is a difference between godly sacrifice and needless burnout.”<sup>82</sup>

The ability to discern the difference between needless sacrifice and burnout is more difficult than one might imagine. Self-care and laziness are viewed as synonymous in some church circles. Sabbath rest is time that could be spent saving souls or hosting Bible studies. But how is the minister to nurture their own family, the congregation, and the community if they do not know how to care for themselves? Below are the five “spiritual burnout barriers,” as I call them, that I have found in my research that are sure to bring down the healthiest of ministers. Spiritual burnout barriers have one thing in common; they all originate from a place of *lack*<sup>83</sup> which stands to reason, as burnout is caused by a deficit from giving without replenishing. Burnt out ministers suffer from a *lack* of time and stillness with God—hurry sickness; a *lack* of

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<sup>82</sup> Christopher Ash, *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Co., 2016), 24.

<sup>83</sup> Parker, Tavella, and Eysers, *Burnout*, 49, display a word cloud with burnout descriptors from the 1,019 participants in the Sydney Studies. The largest and predominant word used over and over again was *lack*. The word cloud can be viewed in Appendix E.

intimacy with God; a *lack* of intimacy with others; a *lack* of self-awareness; and a *lack* of self-care.

### *Hurry Sickness*

There is a danger in life called hurry sickness and ministers easily fall under its spell. Hurry sickness is now classified by mental health experts as a disease, a behavioral pattern caused by anxiousness and continual rushing.<sup>84</sup> Those who suffer from hurry sickness have no time to take personal inventory or be still in the presence of God. Maybe this is why Morton Kelsey says, “Hurry is not *of* the Devil; it *is* the Devil.”<sup>85</sup> Comer describes how hurry has robbed him of intimacy with God and others:

All my worst moments as a father, a husband, and a pastor, even as a human being, are when I’m in a hurry—late for an appointment, behind on my unrealistic to-do list, trying to cram too much into my day. I ooze anger, tension, a critical nagging—the antitheses of love.<sup>86</sup>

Hurry keeps us at arm’s length from God. Relationship with the Creator is robbed of intimacy, merely becoming a transaction to satisfy and appease the demands of religion.

### *Lack of Intimacy with God*

Intimacy with God requires more than just *doing*, it requires *being*. Hurry acts as kryptonite to intimacy with Christ. Often in prayer we say, “Lord be with us.” How often do we pray, “Lord teach us to be with you.” Perhaps this line of thinking is why burnout is so prevalent in ministry. Intimacy with God requires more than acknowledgment of existence, it requires

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<sup>84</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2019), 46.

<sup>85</sup> Morton T. Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1976), quoted in Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 15.

<sup>86</sup> Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 23.

reciprocation, meditation, and appreciation. Ministry exhaustion over a prolonged period of time depletes spiritual leaders of a desire for meaningful relationships. Nowhere is this more evident than the minister's relationship with the Creator. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie list spiritual formation as an essential theme of resilient ministry. They define spiritual formation as, "the ongoing process of maturing as a Christian, both personally and interpersonally."<sup>87</sup> It takes maturity to notice the symptoms of burnout and it takes an equal amount of maturity (and wisdom) to know what to do about it. A minister cannot give what he or she does not have. If the preacher, children's minister, or worship leader is depleted of spiritual fruit they have nothing to offer. But the goal of practicing spiritual disciplines is more than filling up to be poured out. Spiritual disciplines are also for filling up to be quenched and satisfied by the Spirit of God within. Comer puts it this way:

A discipline is a way to access power. A spiritual discipline is similar but different...it's a way to access power, but it's different in that not only are you exercising your own capacity to do the right thing (what we call willpower), but you are also opening yourself up to a power far beyond your own—that of the Spirit.<sup>88</sup>

A parishioner might think that if anyone should be full of the Spirit's love, passion, and energy it should be those who are paid to preach and teach and study the Word. However, chronic stress, exhaustion, and the weight of clergy work can drain ministers of love, joy, peace, and every other spiritual fruit. Without the maturity to practice spiritual disciplines, burnout will almost certainly cost clergy their career and calling.

In Jeremiah 2:13, the prophet says, "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the foundation of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns

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<sup>87</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 110-11.

that can hold no water.” Broken cisterns come in different shapes and sizes. There are cisterns cracked and broken by attempts to replace intimacy with God with worldly things.<sup>89</sup> Even “good” behaviors can be broken cisterns if the motive is misplaced. Out of habit, one can pray before bed and read from their Bible app to keep the streak alive and still be a broken cistern. The goal of spiritual discipline is not only to develop habits, but develop habits that continually deepen intimacy with the Creator. Wilson and Hoffmann say, “The most miserable people in the world are Christian leaders whose intimacy with God has gone cold.”<sup>90</sup> Busyness for God is not intimacy. Spiritual disciplines become duties rather than delicacies when we drink from broken cisterns.

### *Lack of Intimacy with Others*

Ministry is as much about the person as it is about the task and because of this it is easy for ministers to have their personhood absorbed by the tasks they take on. Therefore, it is important for ministers to take steps to differentiate between role and identity.<sup>91</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie believe the first thing ministers must do is “maintain the disciplines of their own personal relationship with Christ as distinct from their ministry responsibilities.”<sup>92</sup> Along with personal disciplines it is vital for a minister’s spiritual and mental health to have relationships inside and outside of the church that are trustworthy and safe to share confidences.

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure: A Shepherd Care Guide for Pastors, Ministers and Other Caregivers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 40.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson and Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure*, 41.

<sup>91</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 68.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Diane Chandler says, “By observing, interacting with, and imitating others, we learn about God through relationships that intertwine with the spiritual, emotional and intellectual holistic dimensions. Thus, relational formation is the glue that binds together our formation in Christ.”<sup>93</sup> All persons need formattable relationships, but it is imperative that ministers have circles where they can simply be themselves, not the preacher, associate minister, or evangelist. Tod Bolsinger puts it like this: “If the first critical element for a leader’s development of resilience is vulnerable self-reflection, then the second, equally critical element, is solid, safe relationships. Thick, heavy relationships.”<sup>94</sup>

In terms of ethics, burnout is neutral. It is neither good or evil, it just is. However, it should be noted that symptoms of burnout can kindle a dangerous fire. One of the fastest roads to moral failure in ministry is lack of accountability.<sup>95</sup> To engage in the battle against burnout all Christians—especially ministry leaders—need truth-telling communities where confession and repentance are not shocking but expected. Consider these words from Richard Foster:

Confession is a difficult Discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship for saints before we see it as a fellowship for sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road of heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from others and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy. But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 107.

<sup>94</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 105.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson, and Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure*, 45.

<sup>96</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 145-6.

Ministers need a fellowship of sinners. Yes, it is important that they hear the confession of others, but it is equally important that they have confidants to hear their cries of repentance and confession.

God is relational. The Trinity models for humanity the community of the Father, Son, and Spirit. As the *imago Dei* (God's image bearers), the Christian community bears the responsibility to reflect God's relational nature.<sup>97</sup> Sometimes I think we forget how important community is in a Western culture of individualism. The late Anglican Arch Bishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu, spoke of a word in his culture called *ubuntu*. He wrote:

It speaks to the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu," ... Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons."<sup>98</sup>

What a beautiful picture of humanity described as God intended it. Ubuntu is the assurance of our identity in Christ, revealed to us in the hearts of our neighbors. Christian community exists when believers connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in Christ.<sup>99</sup> Burnout robs the Christian leader of experiencing life the way God intended it, together. Thomas Aquinas said long ago, "It would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth to one another."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, 107.

<sup>98</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

<sup>99</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 149.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 2, Question 109: "Of Truth," third article (New York, NY: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), p. 1662. Quoted in, Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community*, 113.

Ministers are typically a part of many communities; it goes with the territory. To be clear, I am not suggesting that they need to add more community in order to beat burnout. What they truly need is intimacy. Wilson and Hoffman share, “Of the thousands of broken ministers we’ve met, one of the common threads in their stories is a lack of genuine intimate friendships.”<sup>101</sup> On average, humans are believed to have the capacity to sustain approximately 150 personal relationships due to social, cognitive, and time restraints for relational investment.<sup>102</sup> Adding more networks to a plate already overloaded may cause further harm. What is needed is purposeful engagement with trusted friends in safe spaces for truth telling. Christina Pohl calls these *redeemed communities*.<sup>103</sup> Redeemed communities are called to be different; to be a community, “where we put away falsehood and speak truth with our neighbors, remembering that we belong to one another (Eph. 4:25) ... Followers of Jesus are called to a common life of grace and truth.”<sup>104</sup>

### *Lack of Self-Awareness*

Peter Scazzero describes an emotionally unhealthy leader as, “someone who operates out of a continuous state of emotional and spiritual deficit, lacking the emotional maturity and a ‘being *with* God’ sufficient to sustain their ‘doing *for* God.’”<sup>105</sup> He adds:

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<sup>101</sup> Wilson and Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure*, 45.

<sup>102</sup> Robin I. Dunbar, “Coevolution of Neocortical Size, Group Size and Language in Humans” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 16 (1993) 681-735. Doi:10/1037/h0088251. Quoted in, Candace Coppinger Pickett, Justin L. Barrett, Cynthia B. Eriksson, and Christina Kabiri, “Social Networks Among Ministry Relationships: Relational Capacity, Burnout, & Ministry Effectiveness” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45.2 (Summer 2017) 92.

<sup>103</sup> Pohl, *Living into Community*, 113.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 25.

When we talk about emotionally unhealthy Christian leaders, we are referring to the emotional and spiritual deficits that impact every aspect of their lives. *Emotional deficits* are manifested primarily by a pervasive lack of awareness. Unhealthy leaders lack, for example, awareness of their own feelings, their weaknesses and limits, how their past impacts the present, and how others experience them. They also lack the capacity and skill to enter deeply into the feelings and perspectives of others. They carry these immaturities with them into their teams and everything they do.<sup>106</sup>

A common misconception among elderships is that ministry staff will ask for help if they are burned out or are dealing with some kind of mental health issue. However, as Scazzero points out, emotionally unhealthy leaders often lack the *self-awareness* to identify their own symptoms. Bolstering self-awareness is a process that takes time, deliberate action, and patience. It does not occur with the flip of a switch. Wayne Cordeiro describes learning the symptoms of burnout like learning how to surf. He says veteran surfers, “possess an uncanny sense of the ocean’s currents and how waves behave. Their intuition tells them which ones to catch and which ones to let pass...one of the true marks of a veteran is not how he catches a wave, but whether he knows when and how to get off the wave.”<sup>107</sup> Seminary students are taught how to “catch waves,” so to speak, but how to get off them is a practice that takes discipline and mastery.

### *Lack of Self-Care*

Burnt out preachers have the uncanny and frightening ability to read words of Scripture and preach powerful sermons on grace, mercy, and love while disregarding the very message from their mouths to their own hearts. With great vigor they proclaim Christ’s words to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)!” Yet, too many ministers cannot accept they are weak, in need of care; the wonder of grace is an

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>107</sup> Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty*, 28.



antidote for the person in the pew, but not in the pulpit. In his book, *Leading on Empty*, Cordeiro admits, “Over the years of shepherding people, I found that giving myself permission to heal came hard. I’m not sure what it was—maybe my background of being raised by a strict military father – but I always felt guilty when I took a break.”<sup>108</sup>

In order for ministers to break the burn out cycle or prevent it all together, they must grant themselves permission to heal and let go of the guilt of practicing self-care. I preached a sermon a few years ago on the stigmas we place on mental health issues in the church. I used the word “self-care” while explaining the spiritual disciplines of sabbath and solitude. Afterwards a church member told me, “I don’t believe in all that sissy self-care stuff.” For some reason, self-care was a “snowflake” concept in her mind. It was clear that she had made up her mind on the matter, so I did not press the matter, but the truth is, self-care is not only a real practice, it is a biblical practice.

In Mark 6, we find Jesus in the middle of a ministry whirlwind that took its toll. The twelve had just returned from their first missionary journey, his cousin John the Baptist has just been beheaded, and he has a crowd of thousands clamoring for his attention. In the second part of verse 31 says there were so many people in the crowd coming and going that the disciples did not even have time to eat. Jesus, recognizing the disciple’s need for self-care, tells them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Why would Jesus intentionally take the disciples away from the thousands needed healing and forgiveness from the Master? Does he not care for the people? Verse 34 lets us know that cannot be the case. Mark tells us, “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep

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<sup>108</sup> Cordeiro, 31.

without a shepherd.” Jesus knew the importance of teaching the disciples self-care. They could not take care of the needs of the crowd if they did not take some time to care for themselves.

Parishioners, elders, and ministers need to understand that the spiritual practice of self-care is not a luxury, it is a necessity. H.B. London Jr. and Neil Wiseman interviewed several ministers in their book, *Pastors at Greater Risk*. The results are jaw-dropping:

- 80% believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- 75% report they’ve had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 50% feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- 90% feel they are inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- 80% of pastors say they have insufficient time with their spouse.
- 45.5% of pastors say that they’ve experienced depression and burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence in ministry.
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend.<sup>109</sup>

Pastoral work can be incredibly satisfying and challenging at the same time. According to a study by researchers at the Duke Divinity School, they found out of all the helping professions surveyed (clergy, social workers, counselors, teachers, emergency personnel, and police officers), police work was the only career that reported higher levels of burnout than clergy in the three domains of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.<sup>110</sup> It is critical for spiritual leaders to allow themselves to be led.

Jesus reminds us in Luke 10:38-42 of the importance of service and worship. While at the home of Mary and Martha, Jesus was teaching while Martha took care of all the tasks of being the host. Her sister Mary, also one of the homeowners, was seemingly neglecting her duties,

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<sup>109</sup> H.B. London Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Great Risk* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 20, 86, 118, 148, 172, 264. Quoted in Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty*, 32-33.

<sup>110</sup> Christopher J. Adams, Holly Hough, Rae J. Proeschold-Bell, Jia Yao, and Melanie Kolkin. "Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions." Abstract. *Pastoral Psychology* 66.2 (2017): 9. Accessed February 20, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0722-4>.

worshiping at the feet of Jesus. Yet, verse 40 tells us it was not Mary that was distracted, it was Martha. There is a time for hosting and there is a time for worshiping. Ministers have to remember that they cannot host all the time. Part of the problem with burnout though is that our current American culture caters to the Marthas of the church. Marthas are the important ones who get things done. Though we know the story and what Jesus says of Mary, Martha is the one we most identify with. Sure, worship is great and all, but there are things to do. This is but another story that ministers preach all too well, but have a hard time living out. Service without worship, sacrifice without self-care, and leading without following spell certain burnout.

Bolsinger shares a great metaphor from the work of blacksmiths and how heating and cooling are needed to make steel strong. He says:

In metallurgy, tempering is a heat treatment that includes heating the tool and shaping it at very high heat on an anvil, using tools, and then plunging it into the water to cool it. That plunging hardens the tool, locking in the stress of the tool, making it a stronger piece of steel. But if you used the tool right then, with all of the stress in it, it would likely soon become too brittle, the steel holding too much stress. It needs instead to be cooled, slowly heated up again, and slowly cooled again until it reaches the proper level of what metallurgists call the critical point, that is the place where hardness and flexibility exist for the tool to do its job.<sup>111</sup>

Ministers will not survive in people-work until they realize it is first God-work. The incarnate Son of God modeled a perfect balance of give and take when he went to the cross. Yes, it is true that he completely emptied himself on Calvary but we should not forget that he completely filled himself in the Garden of Gethsemane with the strength of his Father. Ministers, like all Christ followers who bear the *imago Dei*, must fill themselves to be emptied and empty themselves to be filled by the Spirit.

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<sup>111</sup> Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience*, 195.

## **Burnout Symptoms in Biblical Narrative**

Thus far, in this chapter I have shown some pastoral care practices (or lack thereof) that are directly linked to minister burnout. But what can be gleaned from a practical theological interpretation of burnout in Scripture? Can a case study from God's Word help us gain a better understanding of burnout symptoms and God's care for such? Though burnout syndrome would not be defined for centuries, I believe the symptoms are there in Scripture, so much so that I have wondered how I have missed them for so long. The two greatest arguments that can be made for burnout syndrome, in my opinion, are seen in the lives of Moses and Elijah, two leaders who bear the weight of the law and the prophets in the Hebrew Bible.

For the sake of brevity, my attention will focus extensively on Elijah's encounter with God in 1 Kings 18-19, but a brief word on Moses' troubles in Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:11-17 deserves mention.

In Exodus 18:13-27, we find Moses sitting as the judge for all of Israel from morning until evening. Moses' father-in-law has the wisdom to foresee that Moses will wear himself out because the task is too heavy for one person. Jethro teaches Moses the importance of delegation. In Numbers 11:11-17, Moses contends with the grumbling of the people. In verse 14 and 15 Moses tells God he is not able to carry the people alone, for their weight is too heavy. Moses has a moment, much like Elijah in the following story, where he asks to be put to death if God is going to continue to treat him this way. In these two short narratives, the reader can feel the weight of exhaustion and depersonalization. Moses loves the people, contends for the people (Exodus 32), but also desperately needs reprieve.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> For a thorough treatment on Moses and burnout I recommend Hartness M. Samushonga "Distinguishing Between the Pastor and the Superhero: God on Burnout and Self-Care," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31.1 (2021): 4-19. DOI. 10.1080/10649867.2020.1748919.

## **Elijah and the Gentle Voice of God**

### *Elijah and the Prophets of Baal—1 Kings 18*

For two quarters on Super Bowl Sunday, February 7, 2017, the Atlanta Falcons looked like the best team in football. Going into the locker room at halftime they held a 21-3 lead over the perennial powerhouse, New England Patriots. Falcon players were elated, the Patriot organization was in shock; no team had ever come back from a two-touchdown deficit in the Super Bowl; it seemed like an insurmountable task for anyone...except for the five-time Super Bowl champions, the New England Patriots. Quarterback Tom Brady, and his high-powered offense, clawed their way back into the game and stunned the world (and the Falcons) with a 34-28 victory. As the clock struck zero, Falcon fans stared silently into their flat screen televisions in complete and utter disbelief.

1 Kings 18 and 19 play out kind of like Super Bowl 51. In chapter 18, Elijah seems invincible. From Mt. Carmel, Elijah calls for a battle of sacrifices with the prophets of Baal. King Ahab had led Israel into idol worship, turning their hearts against God and closing their ears to his prophet. Elijah calls to Israel from the mountain, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him (1 Kings 18:21).” The prophets of Baal are challenged to a duel of sorts. They will build an altar and prepare a sacrifice for their god and Elijah will do the same. The winner of the prophetic duel will be the whichever is consumed by the fire of their deity. Liking Elijah’s plan, the prophets of Baal prepared a bull for sacrifice and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” (1 Kings 18:26). Verse 26 describes the prophets of Baal limping around the altar they had made. Elijah, up big in the first quarter, taunts the prophets of Baal,

saying, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened” (1 Kings 18:27). The frantic prophets cut themselves and cried aloud to Baal all day, but no answer came from their god.

1 Kings 18:30-40 tells of the mighty second quarter Elijah has at the hands of God. First, he repaired the altar of Yahweh that had been torn down and forgotten by Israel. Next, he put the wood on the altar, cut the bull in pieces, and laid down the sacrifice. Finally, Elijah ordered four jars of water be poured out onto the offering and the wood. He commanded this three times, until the water ran all around the altar and filled the trench with water. Then looking to heaven, Elijah says, “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (1 Kings 18:37). Then it says in the next verse that fire from the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and all of the water in the trench.

As the clock runs out at the end of the first half, Elijah seems victorious, the prophets of Baal are slaughtered, and Israel fell on its face at the sight of the Lord’s might. To top off the end of chapter, Elijah tells Ahab to go home and eat and drink because God is about to send rain for the first time in three years. Elijah heads into the locker room with calm assurance that Yahweh reigns. But there is still another half to play.

#### *Elijah Flees from Jezebel—1 Kings 19:1-8*

As the second half begins in 1 Kings 19, Jezebel storms into the scene, furious that the prophets of her pagan religion have been killed. She sends messengers to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow” (1 Kings 19:3). In verse 3, the momentum begins to shift. Paul House says, “For whatever reason—fatigue, lack of faith, or a sense of resignation at the prospect of never

having peace—Elijah flees.”<sup>113</sup> But Elijah does not just flee to a hiding place just outside of royal palace, he flees to Beer-sheba, the southernmost limit of Judah. DeVries suggests that Elijah interprets Jezebel’s declaration as a personal attack against his ministry and that fleeing to the land of Judah is not just for the sake of safety, but to resign his post. Furthermore, when Elijah dismisses his servant at Beer-sheba and heads to the wilderness, DeVries says this act signifies that Elijah is done with ministry all together.<sup>114</sup>

In a few short verses, we see Elijah spiral from good to scared to wanting to die. “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). Yet, as he lays down to sleep under a broom tree, an angel of the Lord brings Elijah nourishment to eat. In fact, he does this twice. As the angel awakens Elijah the second time, he says something curious. He tells Elijah, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” A few things to note here. First, the NRSV seems to speak in future tense, stating the journey “*will be too much*” for Elijah. However, the NIV and ESV phrase the angel’s words differently. They both have the angel telling Elijah to get up and eat because the journey “*is too much*” for Elijah. The Hebrew seems to be more in line with the latter: הַיָּרֵדָה: מְאֹדָּה גָּדוֹל לְךָ (“because the journey is too great for you”). While the language usage here may sound trivial, it is important for interpreting meaning in the narrative. God is not just concerned with providing Elijah enough nourishment to get to Mt. Horeb; he recognizes Elijah’s current state of despair and provides for his prophet’s needs. Fed by the Lord, Elijah rises in strength, and sets off in

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<sup>113</sup> Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary, Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, Vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 222.

<sup>114</sup> Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, Edited by Glenn W. Barker, David A. Hubbard, and Bruce M. Metzger, 2nd ed., Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 235.

God's direction. He travels forty days and forty nights on the food God provides so that he can stand in the presence of God on Horeb, the great mountain of confrontation.<sup>115</sup>

*Elijah Meets God at Horeb—1 Kings 19:9-18*

I once had a college professor that would say, “If I tell you something once it’s important. If I tell you twice, it will be on the test.” As Elijah stands in the presence of God, he is asked the same questions twice by Yahweh, “What are you doing here Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9, 13). The first time God speaks, these are the first words out of his mouth. Elijah, tired and frustrated, says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:10). From all of his diatribe, Elijah makes a statement, but he does not give an answer. Before God asks the question again, he decides to show Elijah a small glimpse of his glory. He says, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11).

As Elijah stands on the mountain before the Lord, there was a great wind so strong that it broke rocks and split the mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake came a fire, yet God was not in the fire either. After all these displays of power—wind, earthquake, and fire—Scripture says, “came a gentle whisper (NIV)” or “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). Though God speaks gently, his presence is still too much for Elijah. Verse 13 says he wrapped his face in his

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<sup>115</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary, Edited by R. Scott Nash (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys Publishing, 2000), 234.



mantle before he went and stood at the entrance of the cave. Now that God has Elijah's attention, he asks him again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

### **Elijah's Spiritual Burnout Barriers**

The question asked of Elijah on the mountain is not one of placement but of purpose. The most troubling part of the narrative is that even after God reveals his glory, Elijah still turns the attention back to himself. Elijah's answer is the same as the first. He speaks to his passion and work ethic (zeal) and reminds the Lord that he is the only one working to get the job done. There is a dangerous tendency for ministers to get wrapped up in the incessant need for success. "Is the church growing numerically? Are my sermons making an impact? Do parents understand how much I do for their kids in this children's ministry?" When a minister's worth is determined by their successes or failures, like Elijah, their purpose is misaligned with God's. Pines, drawing back to her existential perspective of burnout, states, "I would argue that the feelings of efficacy and competence are so important because they give professionals a sense of existential significance. If my work makes a difference, I make a difference."<sup>116</sup>

Elijah, like so many burnout victims, places his identity in what he does in ministry rather than who he is called to be as God's minister. Concerning Elijah's claims of being *very* zealous for God (1 Kings 19:14), Brueggemann explains, "The grammar employs an intensifying form of a verb that is already intense. He has been passionately, singularly, utterly devoted to Yahweh, without qualification. That very passion has now put him at risk."<sup>117</sup> It is good to be zealous for

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<sup>116</sup> Pines, "An Existential Perspective," 36.

<sup>117</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 235.

God, but the purpose must be good (Galatians 4:18, NIV). Zealousness in ministry should be used to bolster God's resume not our own.

In this passage the reader should not overlook how many times the narrative draws attention to Elijah's *life*.<sup>118</sup> At the beginning of 1 Kings 19, Elijah flees from Jezebel to save his life; then in a time of depression and isolation he asks God to take his life; then in a theophanous scene, God rejects Elijah's request to end his life and provides him with super-natural strength for a quest to Horeb. Could it be that Elijah is dealing with burnout symptoms, living in the deficit, needing replenishment? DeVries seems to think so:

There can be little doubt but that the Elijah of our narrative is so weak and filled with despair because he has suddenly cut himself off from the fountain of his strength, the God of Israel, who is also the God of heaven and earth. All that he can remember that is positive is his own prophetic authority and authenticity...Any prophet who sees things going badly in his ministry and as a result wants to abandon it and perhaps surrender his very life must assuredly have forgotten from whom his real strength comes.<sup>119</sup>

Elijah forgets that his worth is not wrapped up in his success but faithfulness. Success, in large part, is a product of *doing*. Faithfulness, however, combines a sense of *being* with *doing*. A large weight is removed from the shoulders of clergy workers when they believe that what they do comes out of their identity in Christ rather than hurriedly acting busy to gain a sense of self. Doing without being is legalism. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." The burnout symptoms of feeling incompetent and unimportant can be greatly reduced through finding daily time to abide in God's

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<sup>118</sup> DeVries, *1 Kings*, 236.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

presence. In Yahweh's presence we do not have to be anything other than his child; we simply are.

Earlier, I alluded to the problem of hurry sickness and how we with our busy schedules want to feel important; the busier we are in our work the more important we seem in our work environments. Ministers tend to wear it as a badge of honor when congregants label them as "go-getters" or "driven." But is being busy the same as being zealous? Elijah was a go-getter, he got things done. He worked himself so hard in ministry that he literally collapsed with exhaustion; the journey was just too much. Busyness and zeal are not synonymous in the kingdom of God.

Many ministers find themselves in the story of Elijah and his burnout symptoms. He is lonely, in large part due to self-isolation; he has a warped view of others due to his own self-righteousness; in the presence of the glory of God his focus is not on worship but on his own tasks and accomplishments; his mood is directly affected by his ministry environment, laughing at the prophets of Baal and then flees for his life; he is emotionally and physically exhausted, cynical of every Israelite, and realizes he is no more effective than his prophetic fathers in calling Israel back to the covenant.<sup>120</sup>

Part of the beauty of 1 Kings 19 is that it does not end with a disgruntled prophet sulking back down the mountain. Elijah may not have received what he wanted but he received what he needed. Brueggemann says:

There is no small irony in the movement of the chapter: at the outset Elijah is afraid and filled with self-pity; he has withdrawn. At the end, he is prepared to carry on. He recruits Elisha without a word about the risk or the cost. The transformative events that move him from fear to resolve are only two: He is fed by an angel, and he is addressed by a voice.

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<sup>120</sup> Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 141.

He is compelled by a mandate and assurance that are beyond his comprehension and certainly beyond the horizon of the king.<sup>121</sup>

Yahweh shows throughout this narrative that he is the Sustainer. As he cared for Elijah, he cares for his vocational leaders. For whatever reason we come to the mountain, God will meet us there. Burnout does not have to be the fate of ministers; God still feeds his leaders and lends his gentle voice. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus offers an invitation to the lost, the last, the least, and the lonely minister: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Ministers need to camp in Matthew 11 and let the words wash over them. The God of the mountain is the same God of the cross. The words of Christ are comforting, but admittedly they are often misunderstood. Some will read these words and think that Jesus is offering the easy life, but that is not what Jesus says. Instead of offering an easy life he offers an easy burden. In other words, ministers do not have to work alone.

Jesus was a minister of the people. He knew how to speak in terms that they would understand. He often told parables about fishing and gardening and farming. When Jesus spoke these words, the crowd knew the yoke of which he spoke. Wooden plows were heavy, so heavy it usually took two oxen to pull it. The farmers listening to Jesus knew full well the importance of getting the team to work together. Mike Breen explains:

What these farmers did was partner a young, very energetic ox with a much older, seasoned ox that had plowed the fields for many seasons. The farmers found that the younger ox would push quite hard at the beginning of the day, using up all of his energy and would have nothing left for the second half of the day. Remember, we’re talking eleven-to twelve-hour work days. However, when bridled with an older, more experienced ox, the younger ox would be forced to learn the rhythm and pace of the day.

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<sup>121</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 239.

He couldn't run ahead because he was bridled to the older ox. And so, eventually, the young ox learned the best rhythm from the older ox so he could last for the whole day and was able to keep an even, sustained pace. The rhythms of life were passed from one to the other.<sup>122</sup>

Christ offers the invitation for the weary and burdened to work alongside of him. He knows the rhythm of work and sabbath. He promises the weight of the yoke to be lighter and the work to be easier in his presence. Elijah's story in 1 Kings 19 does not end in retirement or a change of occupation, but it does come with strength to endure and a prophet to train. God yokes Elijah and Elisha in the throes of ministry until the zealous prophet is relieved and rewarded with a chariot ride (2 Kings 2:1-12).

### Summary

- The most compelling reason that ministers stay in ministry is calling.
- Calling is complicated, often creating a crisis of occupational existentialism, the belief that one's work is what provides meaning and worth in life.
- Clergy work is unique in that faith, friendships, family, and ministry are all connected. Leaving ministry or a church is not just leaving a job, it is leaving a way of life.
- Burnout occurs in a minister's life when there is an over extension of ministry and a depletion of the Spirit.
- Spiritual burnout barriers include, but are not limited to: hurry sickness, a lack of intimacy with God, a lack of intimacy with others, a lack of self-awareness, and lack of self-care.
- Parishioners, elders, and ministers need to understand that self-care must be taken seriously; it is not a luxury but a necessity for good mental and spiritual health.
- Though the study of burnout syndrome and a formal diagnosis come centuries after the Bible is written, burnout symptoms can be found in biblical narratives. Moses and Elijah were leaders of God that experienced burnout symptoms like exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy, isolation, and depression.
- Jesus does not promise to relieve us of our work, but he does promise to lighten the load when we yoke our lives to his and learn to work and rest at his pace.

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<sup>122</sup> Mike Breen, *Building a Discipleship Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2011), 30-31.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

When theology is separated from the community, identity will not form. Each society must reflect upon its ritual practices and forms that have religious and moral dimensions. If structures and languages are adopted due to a former generation's adherence to them, the gap between what is believed and what is practiced will widen. Therefore, it is essential to begin with community...<sup>123</sup>

The DMIN project is not a lecture, an examination, or a debate. The project becomes an opportunity for dialogical inquiry that follows a question wherever it may go...conversation that creates critical correlation allows for the possibility of change.<sup>124</sup>

At the beginning of 2020, I was experiencing the early symptoms of what I later came to know as burnout. I was emotionally exhausted, withdrawn from friends, family, and my congregation, and wondered if I had anything left to offer the church. I was nine and a half years into my employment at Oakdale, almost three years longer than I had ever served in a particular congregation, and nearly five years longer than I had served in a particular ministry role.<sup>125</sup> I felt shame in my withdrawal and isolation, yet could not bring myself to reengage. Escapism was my coping mechanism, choosing to shut myself off from the news, social media, and church conflict. I did not want to think about those things...I did not want to think about anything really.

I completed my coursework for the Doctor of Ministry program at Lipscomb in the Spring of 2019. At the time I had a desire to write about racial healing in the church or the danger of the false gospel of Christian nationalism. The more I researched these topics, the more

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<sup>123</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2011), xxiii.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>125</sup> From 2004-2010 I worked for a congregation in Wichita, KS. serving both as the youth minister for 3 years and the pulpit minister for nearly 4. Prior to moving to Wichita, I served as a youth minister in Peoria, IL. for 3 years.

my anxiety, stress, and depression increased. Mentally and emotionally, I did not have the capacity to research and write. While I am still passionate about racial healing and denouncing Christian nationalism, I truly believe God was saving me for this project. Coming out of the other side of burnout, a fuel was fired to create a resource for Christian leaders experiencing burnout or needing tools to help a minister with burnout syndrome. Essentially, I wanted to create the resources and conversation I did not have at the time. I wanted to be able to share some of my story, but more importantly, I wanted to gather stories from other ministers to create a collective narrative that can rise as one voice to force acknowledgment, raise awareness, and foster advocacy.

### **Qualitative Research**

The qualitative research method was used for the purpose of this project thesis and its general requirements. Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, is structured in terms of words rather than numbers and uses open-ended questions to gather data rather than closed-ended questions to support a quantitative hypothesis.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, qualitative research is:

An approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.<sup>127</sup>

Experience is a key word in qualitative research; it is both personal and social. People must be understood individually, but they should not be understood only as individuals because persons

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<sup>126</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014), 4.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

are always in relation, always in a social context.<sup>128</sup> In qualitative research, the researcher is more interested in how human subjects in a particular setting, make sense of their surroundings in light of their own rituals, social structures, and worldviews.<sup>129</sup> As I share the results in the following chapter, statistics will be shared about the commonalities I found between participants. However, statistical analysis was not the primary reason for my research. A hypothetical example: Half of the focus group may believe the Holy Spirit played a primary role in their calling to become a minister. While the statistic bears mentioning, I am more interested in why they believe the Holy Spirit played a primary role. Also, I would want to explore the possibilities as to why the other half did not mention the Holy Spirit in their answer. Statistics without explanation is what qualitative research seeks to avoid.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a design of inquiry in which the researcher invites one or more individuals to tell stories in order to gain meaning from individual or collective experiences.<sup>130</sup> When more than one human subject is used in the narrative inquiry process, the researcher will often deduce commonalities in the narratives and retell or re-story the information into a narrative chronology.<sup>131</sup> Along with experience, narrative inquiry also concerns itself with continuity, the idea that experiences do not grow in a vacuum but instead out of other

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<sup>128</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 2.

<sup>129</sup> Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 57.

<sup>130</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 13.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



experiences.<sup>132</sup> This is of particular value in my research on burnout. It is useful not only to explore why a minister is burnt out at the time of the interview, but also what experiences from the past might be playing a role in the present. Making meaning of a particular story leans heavily on continuity and also on temporality. Temporality, in narrative thinking, is the concept that any event has a past, present, and an implied future.<sup>133</sup> Clandinin and Connelly explain that, “We take for granted that locating things in time is a way to think about them. When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time.”<sup>134</sup> One of the limits of narrative research is that what is true at one particular time might not be true in another. In other words, the answers I received from interviewees might have been different if I asked them fifteen years ago or if I were to ask them two years from now. Context, continuity, and temporality must all be taken into consideration when studying narratives in order to ensure proper meaning and relevance.

### *Narrative Characteristics*

Stories can be vastly different. This is one reason why narrative inquiry can be hard to interpret. They can be told as fiction or fact, can be told or acted out or both. Stories can be in the form of poetry or prose and they encourage audiences to think and/or feel in particular ways.<sup>135</sup>

Despite a vast array of variations, most narratives have three defining characteristics:

- Story events unfold within *scenes*. The most important to social research are typically ideological, historical, cultural, or economic.

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<sup>132</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Loseke, *Narrative as Topic and Method in Social Research*, 3.

- Stories contain *events* needed to create a plot, which links events into a coherent whole.
- Regardless of the order of which events are told, events in a completed story are *time-ordered* which conveys images of causality.
- Events achieve their meaning through *contextualization* within the story.<sup>136</sup>

For the researcher conducting several interviews, as is the case in my project, it is important in narrative inquiry to link themes that show commonality. Similar words, phrases, or emotions between interviewees to a particular question may indicate a pattern or data point for further analysis. Contextualization is an extremely important characteristic to take into consideration when trying to interpret meaning in multiple narratives. Contextualization is the study of what factors contribute to a particular person's experience. Does the minister work for a larger church or small church? Is the church in the Midwest or South? How much ministry experience do they have? The researcher must not only note similar answers between interviewees but also similar contexts. Furthermore, it is important not only for the researcher to take context into consideration, but it is also important for the audience to understand. Loseke explains, "The event of a 'woman putting on makeup,' has very different meanings depending on whether the woman is covering bruises from a beating, a sex worker preparing for work, or a happy bride dressing for her wedding."<sup>137</sup> The more detail shared and explained in narrative reporting the better, provided the details are useful to deduce meaning in the story.

### *Narrative Data Analysis*

When collecting narrative data analysis, Donileen Loseke explains that there are three characteristics of stories that shape this type of analysis:

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

- First, stories are a powerful form of communication because they can appeal to the *complexities* of social life.
- Second, stories can achieve their power through appealing to cognition, to emotion, and/or to moral sensibilities.
- And third, characteristics and meanings of story settings, characters, plots, and morals depend upon the characteristics, understandings, and experiences of audiences (including the researcher) doing the interpretations and evaluations.<sup>138</sup>

It is important to note that in narrative data analysis the purpose is not to collect stories to find the “right” answer, but rather to find what is true to the interviewee’s experience and arranging it in a way that is logical and coherent.<sup>139</sup>

### *The Validity of Narrative Inquiry*

In any kind of academic research, it is important for the research method to be systematic and empirical in its exploration for meaning. Systematic means that the research process is orderly, methodical, structured, and consistent. Empirical by definition means that the research is evidence based.<sup>140</sup> Narrative research seeks to find meaning in stories, but at a deeper level it is concerned with epistemology – distinguishing between belief and opinion in the social world.<sup>141</sup> Narrative methods fall well within the boundaries of academic expectations.

## **Project Intervention**

In order for potential ministers and elders in my seminars to understand the effects of burnout, I knew I needed to provide more than a clinical and spiritual definition. I needed to gather a group of their peers that would be willing to be truthful and vulnerable about their

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

struggles in ministry and the toll it takes on their mental and spiritual health. Therefore, I created a series of questions to be asked in an interview format that could be answered roughly in an hour's worth of time. Some of the questions pertained specifically to burnout, but I also created questions pertaining to calling, the ability or lack thereof for transparency and truth telling in congregational and elder relationships, self-care resources, and spiritual formation practices.

### *Determining Participants and Data Quantity*

For the interview process, I sent emails or texts to churches, social media ministry groups, and professional acquaintances to ask for minister volunteers to interview. I determined that I needed to interview at least eight ministers to provide a large enough sample for diversity and comparison. I also determined that any number larger than twelve would be too time consuming for the scope of the project. One of the greatest difficulties in narrative inquiry is transcribing each interview word for word as to provide an accurate representation of the participant's answers. Overall, I had fifteen respond to my various inquiries and twelve agreed to participate in the study. One of the participants decided to drop out before the interview process began. This left me with a total number of eleven minister participants.

### *Context Variables*

For the sake of my project, I decided to fix a few context variables and leave several others open. Context requirements for participation in the study included:

- A minister within the Churches of Christ
- In full-time ministry<sup>142</sup>
- Been in full-time ministry for at least 2 years

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<sup>142</sup> "Rachel" just recently left ministry for another helping profession. I asked her to participate anyway and share her experience in the ministry she just left.

- Church with an eldership<sup>143</sup>
- Male and female participation<sup>144</sup>

Context variables that I chose not to fix were:

- Ministry role<sup>145</sup>
- Age
- Marital status
- Parental status—either children in the home, grown children, or no children
- Size of congregation
- Race

Particular studies on burnout pertaining to specific fixed variables, such as how burnout affects preachers differently than worship ministers or how prevalent burnout is in Latino churches vs. African American churches, would be extremely helpful in expanding burnout research, but for the purposes of my research I was more interested in overarching themes across many ministerial contexts.<sup>146</sup>

### *Pre-Interview Process*

The eleven interviews I set up for this project were conducted over a period of three months, beginning in November 2022 and concluding in January 2023. There was no particular order for the interviews; I arranged meetings with each individual as quickly as I could when they responded to my invitation to be interviewed. I asked them to pick a time in their schedule

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<sup>143</sup> “Grady” lost his elders right before the interview process began. I asked him to speak to his experience of when he did have elders and his experience of what it is like not having elders now.

<sup>144</sup> My original hope was to have an equal sampling of male and female ministry participants. However, women were harder to find for my study, I’m guessing in large part due to the doctrinal views that many Churches of Christ have excluding women from serving in most vocational ministry positions.

<sup>145</sup> By this I mean I did not require all participants to be preachers, children’s ministers, etc.

<sup>146</sup> While I was able to secure interviews with ministers in a wide variety of ministry contexts, church sizes, and personal life circumstances, I was not able to secure enough interviews with persons of color to make any definitive statements. Only 1 out of the 11 interviews was with a person of color. This is my greatest regret in my research.

that would allow for at least one hour of questions and answers so not to feel rushed. Each minister, before agreeing to the interview process, was sent a recruitment guide, consent form, and the interview questions. I found that sending the interview questions ahead of time was helpful for two reasons. First, it gave the interviewee time to think about their answers; and second, it made them feel more comfortable as to what kind of questions would be asked of them. In the recruitment guide, and as the interview began, I reminded them that they did not have to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with and that they could end the interview at any time.

Before beginning each session, interviewees signed a consent form allowing me to use their stories in their entirety for this project. It is important to know that all words in italics, quotation marks, or block quotes in the following chapter are entirely their own. All interviewees were informed in the recruitment guide, a follow up email, and at the beginning of the interview their session would be recorded both audibly and visually. Every interview was conducted using the Zoom online medium. Participants were aware that their interview was being recorded on Zoom and also through a voice recording app, called Rev, on my phone. Finally, participants were also informed that audio and visual recordings would be deleted after a complete transcription was made of their interview. All audio and video files have been deleted to protect confidentiality.

As each interview concluded, I began the transcription process for my research. Following Creswell's method of data analysis,<sup>147</sup> I hand coded each transcript, looking for emerging themes, words, or phrases correlated with the results from other interviews or my academic research. When necessary, I emailed, texted, or called interviewees during the

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<sup>147</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 197. See appendix D.

transcription process for any clarification of certain words, phrases, or ideas to ensure accuracy.

By grouping interrelated themes, I then began the interpretation process and determined the most pertinent parts of each narrative to use in the results section of the project.

### *Minster Participants*

In the recruitment guide, anonymity was promised to each participant. They were assured that an alias would be used and that any identifying information in their answers would be changed to protect confidentiality. Below is a list of each participant's alias, the date they were interviewed, and helpful context pertinent to understanding their story.

- **Paul** – Preacher, white, in his 40s, married with children in school, over 20 years of ministry experience, congregation size less than 200,<sup>148</sup> West Coast.
- **Kevin** – Preacher, white, in his 30s, married with young children at home, over 10 years of ministry experience, congregation size less than 200, Midwest.
- **Adam** – Worship minister, white, in his 40s, married with young children and school aged children, over 20 years of ministry experience, congregation size above 400, East Coast.
- **Grady** – Preacher, white, in his 40s, married with children in school, more than 10 years of ministry experience, congregation size less than 100, East Coast, large metropolitan area.
- **Kendrick** – Preacher, person of color, in his 40s, married with children in school, over 10 years of ministry experience, congregation size under 200, Midwest, large metropolitan area.

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<sup>148</sup> I categorize small churches as under 200, medium size churches as 200-500, and large churches as 500+.

- **Emily** – Children’s minister, white, in her 30s, married with children in school, over 10 years of ministry experience, congregation size over 200, Midwest.
- **Tim** – Preacher, white, in his 60 s, married—empty nest, over 40 years of ministry experience, congregation size over 700, South, large metropolitan area.
- **Denise** – Children’s minister, white, in her 30s, single, less than 10 years of ministry experience, congregation size over 700, South.
- **David** – Preacher, white, in his 50s, married – empty nest, over 30 years of ministry experience, congregation size over 200, Midwest.
- **Rachel** – Family life minister, white, in her 50s, married with school age and grown children, over 20 years of ministry experience, congregation size under 200, East Coast, large metropolitan area.
- **Angela** – Pastoral care minister, white, in her 60s, single with grown children, over 20 years of ministry experience, congregation size over 700, South, large metropolitan area.

### Summary

- Qualitative research is the preferred methodology for the DMIN project thesis and is primarily concerned with exploring one’s experience through inductive methods to interpret and find understanding of individuals or groups within a social context.
- Narrative research is a method of qualitative research that explores meaning and understanding through stories.
- Narrative inquiry is a tool used to ask questions of individuals or groups in order to gather stories that create meaning and understanding.
- Narrative events typically contain scenes and events to create a plot that is time ordered and contextualized.
- Contextualization and temporality are important factors in story-telling. Contextualization helps the audience infer meaning, while temporality reminds the reader that the meaning of any particular story is fixed within a particular time-frame.



## CHAPTER 5

### NARRATIVE INQUIRY RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

“You’re never going to kill storytelling because it’s built in the human plan. We come with it.”<sup>149</sup>

The goal of my narrative inquiry was to create space for individual voices to be heard and validated in the interview process, while also joining threads from all eleven interviews to create a collective voice. Though these eleven ministers do not speak for all clergy men and women, their honesty and vulnerability has created a narrative that speaks to the experience of many in fulltime vocational ministry. It is my hope that these stories cause awareness, reflection, discernment, and action by ministers and elders in their own church contexts. To code data patterns, I grouped answers into three categories: unique perspectives (only one minister), common threads (of at least two ministers, but no more than four), and dominant threads (of five ministers or more). I then implemented the following storytelling format to create a flow to the story telling process:

1. The stating of the interview question.
2. The observation of unique perspectives.
3. The observation of similar answers that create a common thread.<sup>150</sup>
4. The observation of like-minded answers that create dominant threads.

The answers from the participants in the interviews have been place in *italics* in order to avoid any confusion over whether the interviewer or the interviewee is speaking. Where necessary, I footnoted details that are relevant to the contextualization of the interviewee’s answer and change identifying markers such as the state of residence, church names, and the

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<sup>149</sup> Margaret Atwood, as quoted in, John Ferris, “You’re Never Going to Kill Storytelling,” *Medium.com* (blog), December 31, 2019, <https://medium.com/@fundingtales/youre-never-going-to-kill-storytelling-761cd1d45ffe>.

<sup>150</sup> It was not uncommon for the interviewee to share multiple answers to a particular question. Therefore, some of their answers may fall both into the unique and common theme category.

names of family members. As stated in the previous chapter, aliases have been given to each participant. After each interview question, I made summary of my observations.

## **Interviews**

### **Question 1: What factors inside and/or outside of the church have directly contributed to a rise in exhaustion, stress, or burnout in your ministry?**

Unique Perspectives:

#### **Lack of Communication and Expectations**

*Paul – I'll start with myself...I guess there's some exhaustion that comes from a lack of clear ongoing expectations from leadership and the church. I don't receive good communication or evaluations or check-ins. I mean, no one likes to have evaluations or yearly check-ins, but there's a place in that. So, I think to myself, "Where are you? Are you fulfilling? Hey, is this what you were called to do?" I've had to really be the driver of maintaining communication, sharing with the elders, asking the elders, having to be the catalyst for all of that.*

#### **Criticism**

*Kevin – Criticism was the first thing that came to my mind that I don't really handle well. I handle constructive criticism well, like if someone says this is what I need to do, you know, these are the kind of changes that would be beneficial. Any time though, that I've attempted to bring what I believe to be positive change...that is typically met with staunch criticism. When you experience just negative, negative, negative...I think that was probably a big part of what has brought me to a feeling of burnout. A lot of that comes down to a question of success, you know? Am I being effective? And when I'm questioning my own effectiveness and questioning my own success, it became, and still is, very difficult to feel that I am doing what I should be doing with my life as far as my profession goes.*

#### **Elderly Congregation—death and funerals**

*David – Sunnyside is a little unique. We've been at our location for years and years...so we're an older congregation, and that has really hit us with funerals, especially this past fall. We did, what was it, six funerals in seven weeks and I just picked two more here this last week.*

#### **Interpersonal Staff Conflict**

*Kendrick – Inside the church, it's always been interpersonal conflict that has been a real stressor. For me personally...conflict with members, conflict with staff, conflict with elders. I*

*don't know if it is a predisposition to sometimes see conflict as bad. Conflict's not bad, it's just how you handle it or what type of conflict it is.*

## **Boundaries**

*Emily – One thing I've had a problem with, but lately I've done well at mitigating, is setting boundaries. The congregation feels like they have 24/7 access to you along with your leadership thinking they have 24/7 access to you. I've had to set times that I just won't respond. When I first started setting boundaries, they were not excited about it, but it has produced enough of an end result that they just ended up getting used to it.*

## **Parents of Children in the Children's Ministry**

*Denise – Um, a lot of it is due to parents right now and how parents interact in the ministry or choose not to interact in the ministry. Parents here can be entitled. I've had parents tell me they don't care what we do in here, they just want it to look nice. They're like, "We want you to have our kids all of these hours, but we don't want to help and we really don't want to give input on what you're doing." So that can be really exhausting and stressful, because we are making the best choices we can and are leading and engaging these kids in meaningful ways, but if it's not the way the parents want, then you're fighting that whole battle.*

### **Common Threads:**

## **Pull Between Family and Ministry**

*Rachel – I think the hardest thing for me...and I actually think it's worse for women is the pull between work and family because there's so much overlap when you're in ministry. Most ministry takes place when people are at work, so that's nights and weekends, and that's also when your family is home and that's like family time. Right? I think the gender roles, as progressive as we might be, is very hard on marriages on Sunday mornings. I think it's hard for a lot of men to be the caretaker while their wife is the spiritual leader, even if they want to be on board with that, it's just hard to push against those norms. And then I think there is just a ton of guilt. We are programmed by our culture to feel guilty about pursuing ambitions that are beyond home and family. And so, even when those ambitions are clear, like this is a call from God, it's still easy to feel guilty about it, like I'm taking away from what I really should be doing. I'm hurting my family. So, all of that is exhausting. It takes a lot of mental and spiritual energy to deal with all of that.*

*Angela – I deal with a lot of people in long-term circumstances...cancer, Parkinson's, you know, all those kinds of things, not just in older people, but a lot of it is older people. We have this illusion that if we can do one thing at a time it would help. It's rare that it's just one thing, you know? Whether it's a wedding being planned at the same time as family member dies...you know, most weeks in my life I get news of someone's bad diagnoses and it doesn't matter what*

*else I'm doing, everything can't be lined up perfectly. Oh, it just tugs at you. So, I think it's that constant tug.*

## **Political and Sociological Environment**

*Adam – Outside of the church, honestly, I think the overwhelming tension that is just out there, about everything...political views, racial tension, finances and money and stimulus, I mean so many factors that are just wearing down on everyone that it has to affect us in the church.*

*Grady – So, the changing political climate has definitely done that (caused exhaustion, stress, or burnout). We went through that a few years ago, where the level of intensity and perceived animosity by merely disagreeing was ramped up so that people could not even express themselves for a little while. I think that creates stress for me, and probably for ministers everywhere, because I don't want to talk about politics, but I very much feel called to talk about things that we have abandoned to the arena of the politics.*

*Kendrick – (Exhaustion, stress, or burnout) Inside of the church would be, "I don't think you should have spoken about that. Why didn't you say something about that? You didn't say that about this president," or "you're becoming too political."*

*Tim – Partisanship. Because it became so combative. People were like, "Whoa!" Where before they might have risked a conversation that could potentially evoke different political feelings. Now it's like, "Oh heck no! I'm not wading off into that." I mean, it's the difference between wading into a potential fistfight and wading into a potential gunfight. Well, I can survive one of those. So, isolation was increased by the rancor, the political partisanship that just went off the rails. So, I think that contributed to burnout.*

### **Dominant Thread:**

## **COVID 19<sup>151</sup>**

*Grady – Well, so I'll just start with the low hanging fruit. I think it's easy to just say Covid. I will say our experience of Covid was unique here because we're small. Online church was actually kind of a real boom for us for a while because instead of being spread out in an auditorium that's too big for us, we were all right in each other's living room and looking at each other instead of facing forward. And we know there's some kind of breakdown, a deficiency from meeting online, right? We want some kind of normal, but to come back to what wasn't necessarily healthier, life giving, or working in the first place...going back to what we did before*

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<sup>151</sup> All eleven interviewees mentioned how Covid either directly or indirectly led to exhaustion, stress, and/or burnout.

*meant giving up those things. So, the unintended consequences of our peak<sup>152</sup> is the real source of burnout to me. And that has really come into play post Covid as we recognize that we have to think transformative change rather than incremental change.*

*Rachel – I think we have carried a heavier load. My friends who are in education have too, I have a family minister who is in healthcare, she has too, but in ministry it's our own unique version of carrying the polarization and the division in our communities, our smaller communities and our larger communities. The worries about Covid, trying to figure out how to keep people safe...and the thing we said over and over for the two years of Covid that I was on church staff was we just feel like we're having to invent everything, you know, with no precedent. There was no road map...It's just a lot of work, you know? It's a lot of work.*

*Denise – Covid changed things a lot. Like for kids especially, I think our student ministers would agree that kids don't know how to be in groups anymore. So, it makes everything in children's ministry a little harder. I have a group of third grade boys, we're learning what the word distracted means. What does it mean to participate? What does it mean to be distracting? Because that has just never made sense to them. It's just been this season of change and multiple layers of it.*

*Adam – Inside the church, contributing to burnout would be lack of interest after Covid. We had a lot of fallout and when we came back together it seemed like the importance of meeting together had been lost. I don't like the idea that if you skip a Sunday, it's the worst thing in the world, but I also think we went the polar opposite with people saying, "Well, I'll just join online." There were people that normally would serve every week in some capacity that won't come back. So that just wears you down, that grinds you down.*

*Tim – One of the contributors to burnout would be expectations of the status quo, that things would stay the same in a manageable range. And it felt like we went to an unmanageable range. There was no way to fully anticipate what a pandemic would be like, so we don't have experience. It felt like overnight we were very different from the world we were used to, but in my opinion, it exposed a reality that was there already but it gave it an opportunity to kind of go crazy a little bit like a forest fire. Second thing would be isolation, and I would put that in the same category. Isolation didn't start with the pandemic, but clearly in a very tangible way, exacerbated isolationism.*

*Kendrick – During this season of Covid, we were having to make many more decisions than we used to. Like decisions for how you're going to do mitigation or if you're going to meet or not. Decisions for how you're going to handle the office, decisions for how you're going to work away from the office. Every week there was just a lot of decision making! Whose authority? What authoritative organization are we going to follow for our Covid protocols and mitigation? Then, how are we going to speak to the church about it?*

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<sup>152</sup> During the pandemic, Grady's church had more members join online than they did when they went back to in person worship.

David – *One I think everybody's going to be talking about is the pandemic coming up was a big impactor and everyone's had various levels of impact. We have literally lost part of our congregation.*<sup>153</sup>

Emily – *Covid was a stress for me. They*<sup>154</sup> *wanted the same results as before Covid during Covid and that just wasn't possible. I wasn't going to be able to get the same attendance during Covid.*

Kevin – *When you have a lot of unhappy folks, you also have people leaving. And so I think with people leaving because of Covid, I think that exemplified those negative feelings as well.*

Paul – *Outside of the church, you know dealing with what we've gone through this last couple of years with Covid, I mean, these things that are going on that are outside of our control that everyone is experiencing in the nation and world is exhausting.*

Angela – *Obviously, Covid has been a very, very stressful circumstance and I think I feel like I saw a reversal of things. I think in my life growing up it seemed like older people were more likely to feel kind of anxious about the future and what's going to happen. And to me, Covid brought out anxiety in younger people that I'm like, on our staff, the most freaked out people were under 40...I think people have just gotten freaked out. And one thing that has changed mightily is, I think my generation of parents in the church are a lot more sensitive to what their kids want them to do than my parent's generation was...I think lots of people my age*<sup>155</sup> *are waiting for their kids to decide what they think about it. Like, it's so backwards.*

### *Coding*

- To question 1, “What factors inside and/or outside of the church have directly contributed to a rise in exhaustion, stress, or burnout in your life and ministry?”
  - 6 unique perspectives:
    - Lack of communication/expectations, criticism, elderly congregation, interpersonal staff conflict, boundaries, and parents of kids in children's ministry
  - 2 common threads:
    - Pull between family and ministry (3).
    - Political and social environment (4).
  - 1 dominant thread:
    - COVID 19 (11).

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<sup>153</sup> A large part of David's congregation were lost to deaths and also to not coming back after the pandemic was over.

<sup>154</sup> Speaking of her elders.

<sup>155</sup> Angela is in her early 60's.

## *Observations*

Covid 19 was the only unanimous answer in the entire interview. All eleven ministers spoke to the effects that Covid had either on them personally or their work environment. Political and social tension was the second highest thread with four like responses. It seems 2020 was a perfect storm for disruption in the church. Words like tension, intensity, combative, and rancor show the weight these ministers were/are facing from social constructs. They seemed to not only feel the weight of what is happening in the world, but also in how they should speak about it. It almost seems like walking through a mine field every Sunday morning; one wrong word and the church will erupt. The idea of tension also shows up in the common thread of family vs. ministry. Ministers often feel guilty when they are at work and when they are at home and sometimes when they are at home, their mind is still at work. I was surprised by the number of unique perspectives to this question (6). All of their answers are valid and make sense, but I expected a little more cohesiveness in this answer.

## **Question 2: How has exhaustion, stress, or burnout in ministry affected your family and marital health?**

### Unique Perspectives:

#### **Expectations for the Preacher's Spouse**

Paul – *For my wife, you know, being a preacher's wife, of course it puts her in a glass house, you know? She feels a lot of that pressure of unlabeled, unrealistic expectations that she walks around with.*

#### **Parental Stress Due to Current Culture**

Rachel – *I spend a lot of my parenting energy trying to look after everyone's mental and emotional and spiritual health, like, okay, is everyone talking? Who is not talking? Who seems down? I'm just very convinced that kids today know so much...My older children grew up without social media. Two of my younger children watched the George Floyd video without me*

*knowing, like on their own, in their bedroom on their device and then told me afterwards. They were so upset, and you know, that wouldn't have happened when I was a kid. These kids, they're just carrying a lot and so trying to parent them when you don't really know what the answers are is tough.*

### **Expectations of Minister's Kids**

*Emily – I think it's hard on my kids per se because they don't get doted on like the other minister's kids, but they also have a higher expectation on them than other congregation kids do. So, it's kind of like they feel like black sheep with higher standards.*

### **My Spouse Takes the Way I'm Treated in Ministry Personally**

*Emily – I would say for my marriage, when things happen at church, it's more of a blending between...you know, ministry involves your social, emotional, spiritual life in addition to your career life and so when Randy complains about something at my work, I take it less personally than he does. He struggles between wanting to stay worshipping at the congregation because he's seen behind the veil of it, but he still supports me and is excited for me to do what I do. And I try to explain to him, "Well any church is going to have this behind the veil persona. It's all ugly. We're human. We're all flawed."*

### **Common Threads:**

#### **Empty Nesters are Less Stressed**

*Tim – It is important for you to know and for the study to know that we've been married 40 years and we don't have any children at home. So, this is very important, because if you back me up 15 years, 20 years and 30 years, the answer would of course be very different. So, Nancy and I have a very strong, open, deep relationship with each other. Our marriage has had less negative impact because of burnout. But we have not escaped negative impact by burnout.<sup>156</sup> There will be times we are both at home, I'm on a Zoom call with grieving family members, she's doing something in another room on a call and we begin to realize we are coming to the end of the day having spent almost no time with each other.*

*David – You know, all of our kids are kind of out of the house. We have a little different dynamic. It would probably be a different stress level if we still had children at home. But, as empty nesters, with this season of life, it seems a little more manageable. We have a very strong commitment and she is just the ideal preacher's wife. We are a team in ministry so we're in this together.*

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<sup>156</sup> Speaking primarily here of the days after the pandemic.



## **Pull Between Family and Ministry**

Angie – *Rarely is the timing of someone's emergency handy. You don't think, "This is the perfect day to need to go to the hospital twice." So, I think that need for constant flexibility, trying to figure out when you should just say, "I'm sorry, I can't get there." But you also have to be flexible. I think preachers back in the day probably had no guardrails. They were on call 24 hours a day. And I think right now there are lots of ministers that have too many guardrails and what they're saying, "My life and kids are more important than your life and kids." And I don't know if I quite see Jesus thinking that way, you know? It's a tough balance.*

Rachel – *I don't want to miss anything that's going on with my kids, but I also don't want to miss anything that's going on in my congregation. I mean, God forbid someone is really depressed and we've missed it, you know? You just...you just don't want to miss it. You want to be aware and in touch with people, and even more so, I mean, even worse is the idea that I'm caring for the congregation and someone in my family is really depressed and I missed it, you know?*

Adam – *I've come to be okay with the fact that I'm on 24/7 and if somebody needs something or they send an email or whatever and I answered at night, I'm not like, you know, respect my boundaries! My wife grew up a preacher's kid. She's just come to be like, that's what it is. You know, you've got to do this thing...well, I've got several children at home, so anytime I'm away from the normal time that I'm in the office is like a torturous death sentence, you know? I'll tell my wife, I have this seminar from 8 to 1 in the afternoon on Saturday and she'll be like, "You're going to be there all day?" I mean, I love that we are having a seminar and how it will help people, but then I realize that she has to stay here at home with the children and suffer.*

## **Marital Tension**

Kevin – *I think my wife told me this the other day...and it's a true statement because I felt it, I thought it, I just haven't told her. She said, "I feel like you're always frustrated with me, that I can't do anything right and that if I do what I think I should do then you're frustrated with me. If I don't do what I should do, then you're frustrated with me. So, I just feel like you're always frustrated with me." I didn't tell her, but she's right, I am frustrated with her. There's a sense of frustration that she does not understand the level of time I need to get my work done. For her, we're making these accommodations...I'm leaving at 3:30 to go pick up the kids, and I watched the kids one morning because our childcare worker was out of town...and then you expect me to do the stuff that would normally take me about 40ish hours in a shortened window of time and then to not sacrifice family time. You can go down the list. There's decreased sexual intercourse, decreased communication. There's a decrease even in just a genuine joy of being with one another.*

Adam – (speaking of his spouse) *I can sit silently and do something that I don't know about until it builds up so much that she has this anger or explosion and then I'm like, "Wait, I didn't know you felt that way!" And she's like, "Well, maybe I've been feeling this way for the last year and a half. I feel like I'm on an island!"*

Grady – (burnout and stress) affects my libido. I am not a particularly romantic person in terms of how I talk, but physical expressions of love mean a lot to my wife because that's a reassurance from me that I love her. I still find her attractive, not that she's had a reason to feel that way, but because I'm a dude, I guess it's like I'm not meeting a need somewhere else. It probably affects my kids understanding of what a healthy marriage looks like. It doesn't always have to look the same, but should always look loving.

Rachel – I think that the stress kind of in the world, that everyone's feeling, definitely has had an effect on my marriage just because we are both tired and stressed.

### **Always On, No Shut-off, Or Checked Out Language at Home**

Paul – In ministry it's hard to turn it off. It's hard to stop working, hard to stop thinking. And so that affects the time that I'm at home when my mind is not...is still thinking of ministry and work and not really dialing into the needs of the home and also not having enough time and space to put that to rest so that I can be available mentally at home. Early on, until the last few years, I had a hard time having good days off with the family. The family was aware that I kind of checked out.

Grady – I tend to silo, which means I can withdraw from family relationships sometimes. It's not like a conscious decision but I'm introverted, so when I need to go find energy it's usually by myself. So, I don't make time for people in my home as easily as I would want to or I'm physically present but not fully present.

Denise – I'm an introvert by nature. I can tell you how many words I have for the day and when I'm going to be done. So, I don't really have a lot of friends currently outside of church and outside of the office because when I get home for the day I'm done.<sup>157</sup>

### **Irritability at Home – Jekyll and Hyde**

Grady – Burnout makes me shorter tempered, just more easily irritated and intolerant with people at home. My family history and story make that a really disappointing response personally for me when I am selfish with my time and attention or when anger becomes too quick of a response for me that feels an awful lot like my dad, which is like...some of the best things about who I am today are the things I learned to not be like him. Right? And so, there's a really vicious cycle in that for me then, because I'm feeding into my own vision of what failure really looks like. And so then it's more stress, more irritation.

Kendrick – My wife tells me I'm more irritable since we moved here.<sup>158</sup> I'm not extroverted at the house and I'm more irritable and like, "Hey, pick up those clothes!" I'm always fearful that

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<sup>157</sup> Denise is single and lives alone.

<sup>158</sup> Kendrick moved to a new state to take a lead minister position.

*they may see an incongruency and maybe...we joke about Sunday Kendrick vs. Home Kendrick, you know what I mean? Yeah, I'm a yeller. Uh, people may not know that about me, but that's how it was growing up for me. We just like yelled at each other all the time.*

*Kevin – For a while, my oldest daughter seemed jumpier around me and I think that stems from, she didn't know what version of dad she was going to get. There are times she senses something from me that causes her to be uneasy and that really affects me to know that.*

#### Dominant Threads:

Dominant threads - not applicable for question 2.

#### Coding

- To question 2, “How has exhaustion, stress or burnout in ministry affected your family and marital health?”
  - 4 unique perspectives:
    - Expectations towards the preacher's spouse, parental stress due to current culture, expectations of minister's kids, and my spouse takes the way I'm treated in ministry personally.
  - 5 Common threads:
    - Empty-nesters less stressed (2).
    - Pull between family and ministry (2).
    - Marital tension (4).
    - Always on, checked out, no shut off (3).
    - Irritability at home – Jekyll and Hyde (3).
  - 0 Dominant threads.

#### Observations

Some of the same themes from question one carried over into question two. This is to be expected since the first question asked what stressors inside and outside of the church contribute to exhaustion, stress or burnout. The work environment seems to compete with the family environment and vice versa. The pull between family and ministry creates a tension that affects the relationship of ministers with spouses and children. Irritability seems to be a common denominator in family relationships when burnout is high. In my own words, I describe it like Jekyll and Hyde. Family members never know which dad or mom they are going to get at home.

Marital tension was not surprising, but is concerning. Spouses of ministers feel the weight of ministry too and can feel shut out or second to ministry needs. It is also not surprising that empty nesters feel less stress in their marriage. There seems to be more of a partnership and ability to focus on the marriage when the kids are out of the home.

**Question 3: (a) What keeps you in ministry? (b) What deciding factor(s) might ever cause you to leave ministry?**

Unique Perspectives for Question 3 (a):

**Paying Forward the Kindness Shown to Me**

*Angela – Well, I'm in a very odd circumstance in the fact that in our big world most people don't end up staying where they grew up. I'm in the church where I grew up, so I'm getting to serve many of the same people who blessed me as a kid. I'm getting to pay it forward back to the people, the actual people...burying them and being with them in sickness and hard things, you know, so that part of it is very rewarding.*

**I Look to the Prophets...and the Paycheck**

*Kevin – I look to the prophets. I've spent a lot of time looking to the prophets and realizing that their life was far more difficult than I could ever imagine. Woe is me that I'm dealing with burnout while I'm still receiving a paycheck, while people still like me. Now that biblical encouragement only lasts so long. I'm actually going to say that they pay keeps me in ministry. I could probably make more in the private sector, but it would take me time to get more in the private sector.*

**I Realized I Love What I Do**

*Kevin - I actually was going to get out of ministry. I spent six months applying after I exited my last ministry position and got rejected by every one of them. I was finally offered a job by a non-profit organization. Part of the job would be to go out on Sunday nights and preach a sermon and then try to raise funds. The thing I was most excited about that job was not the fundraising, but the preaching. I realized then that I love what I do. So, that's probably been the biggest driving force to keep me in it.*

## **Caring for Kind and Gracious People Who Take Care of You**

Rachel – *I've tried to quit so many times and I always just changed my mind or someone else changed my mind and I just kind of laugh about it. I just feel it would be really hard for me to leave. I mean, I did just leave, but I'm back in another ministry and I did that intentionally. I have worked with really loving, gracious, wonderful churches. I just love being part of a community that is like-minded, seeking God, and wanting to do it together and I love having a role where I can shape that somewhat.*

## **The Thing That Keeps Me in Ministry is How I Became a Christian and my Spouse**

Tim – *The thing that keeps me in ministry is how I became a Christian, you know, it was this realization...I was in college when I came to Christ and it was this realization that every question that I was muddling through in life, Jesus kept surfacing at the center of the solution or the direction and it made me really excited and it gave me so much confidence in Jesus that I didn't have any hesitation sharing him with other people because I had come to learn how dependable Jesus can be to show up in situations. It's like having a car that's bulletproof, and people are like, "Hey, how do you like your car?" And I'm like, "Gosh man! I got 300,000 miles on this thing, you know, you feel so confident in recommending Jesus to someone because he's never gone away. I kept realizing that the reason I came to Christ in the first place is the reason that ministry makes sense. A second reason I stay in ministry is because Nancy and I are equally yoked. Nancy's dad worked in the auto industry and her dad was the most active man in their church. My dad was a ditch digger and a construction laborer. He was the most active man in his church. So, both of us were kind of embedded with that. We just knew we'd go into full-time ministry.*

## **Fear**

Kendrick – *Besides calling, the number two thing that keeps me in ministry is fear. Fear of how do I...how does that work? The unknown...where do I go? It's easier when you know something, but when you don't know something then it's like a bridge hidden in a shroud of fog.*

Common Threads to Question 3 (a):

Common threads – not applicable for question 3a.

Dominant Threads to Question 3 (a):

## **Calling**

Angela – *I just really know that I am doing His work. I used to be in children's ministry. You know, I had a passion for trying to get more of the Word into kids' hearts. Um, but this is a more*

*natural calling for me out of giftedness and it came from the elders watching me do children's ministry, knowing me and saying, "Hey, we want you to shift to this." And so, yeah, I definitely think it's a sense of calling. I feel like as I'm getting older, there's a part of ministry that is getting harder. But there's a part of it that I'm getting better. I'm able to hear the Lord better.*

*Kendrick – God keeps me in ministry, like no doubt about the fact that he hasn't given me another word, and I've sought it. I have, I mean 2020 and beyond I desperately sought a different word from the Lord. And he just refuses to give me a different word. You know, he is just very silent. He's quiet. That is definitely what keeps me and that would be the number one thing.*

*Paul – What keeps me in ministry is definitely a strong calling to do this and I find a lot of blessings in it. I have a great love for the Lord, for people, for his Word. I have a strong calling to be a servant.*

*Adam – What keeps me in ministry is I feel called. From the very beginning. From the time I was in college, I knew strongly that people and ministry and sharing Jesus was the thing that I was supposed to do and I never, never wavered from that. I always knew the core of me was to be in local ministry, in a local church serving and being able to use the gifts and talents that God has given me.*

*David – One is call. Mine started at a young age. Apparently, when I was about five years old, going to church I said, "Mom, when I grow up, I want to be a preacher." I totally forgot that until my mom kind of brought that up when I was about 18. I said, "You've got to be kidding me. That's the last thing I want to do." But when I got back into the campus ministry when I was about 21 I got this invitation from the campus minister to do the AIM program and I've always wanted to study the Bible better. There was a time as an adult when I got out of full-time ministry for a while. I was working a manual labor job and I was just hot, burnt and tired from lugging around all this stuff. That night I said, "God, there has to be something else you want me to do!" And literally, my phone rang at 9:30 p.m. that night and it was a preacher friend about ready to retire, asking me if I would consider taking his place. I thought, "Man, I can't be a Jonah here." I literally prayed and an hour later got the call.*

*Denise – So, my degree is actually in something other than children's ministry. I worked in my degree field for 2 years before I moved to my first ministry job. That position didn't work out, so I was trying to decide whether I wanted to go back to my degree field or do something else. Every time I would pull up a job listing for my degree field, it felt wrong. I never felt peace about moving on. And then this ministry opening came up and they asked me in the interview process, "Why keep going? Why are you not going back to your degree field?" I'm trusting that it's the Holy Spirit saying it's not what you're supposed to be doing because it never feels right to move back.*

*Grady – I have a sense of calling. People I love and trust think I should be doing this and that they do means a lot to me because I really don't trust a ton of people, but those that I do, their opinion tends to mean a lot to me. So, if I'm called, then the experiences of stress or burnout or failure are just...they're just implied in the calling. Right?*

## Unique Perspectives for 3 (b):

### Change in Marital Status

Denise – *If I ever get married and have a family, the hours I'm keeping wouldn't be realistic.*

### I Will Not Be Talked To Like That Ever Again

Emily – *Just because there is a real calling doesn't mean there's not a temptation to walk away. I think that's the reality, the fact that there's going to be a lot of things that make it hard for you to want to stay too. I almost walked away last year because my elders misheard something that had happened and without asking me what had happened first, I was in a room of ten men<sup>159</sup> and they were literally screaming at me. And then they brought up another incident<sup>160</sup> and accused me of handling that wrong even though they know I didn't...there was just this whole attacking of my character when there was nothing in my character to give them cause to attack it. Honestly, I just waited a little bit because I told myself I'd wait so many months before making the decision to quit or not and then I realized I still love my job and I love what the children's ministry is doing and what not. But if I walked, it would be a situation like that. I don't think I would ever sit in a room with ten men screaming at me again. I'd probably just get up and walk out. I was just caught so off guard because I hadn't really been in trouble before and to be in trouble for something I didn't contribute to at all and given no benefit of the doubt...I think I only stayed because I was blindsided. But now if that happened, I would just get up and leave.*

### I'm Tired of Being Objectified and Not Worthy of Being Known

Tim – *I say this not as hyperbole, but to keep it real. I have quit ministry 1,000 times in the last three or four years and that's part of why I wanted to be a part of your study. I have quit ministry; I have cussed the world while I'm blowing leaves so no one hears me over the leaf blower. I've lost sleep about anger, hurt, frustration, pain, all of it...you know, getting blamed for the rotation of the earth is what it feels like, you know, the crop shortage in a foreign nation is somehow my fault. It feels like there was no recognition of humanity. I told one of our ministers the other day that I am slowly beginning to feel a little more human and less objectified. And so that would be my answer...If I was going to quit ministry, it would be because I get tired of being objectified and not worthy of being know. Okay? I don't have any interest in living like that. I don't want to live my whole life within a setting where someone doesn't care to know me beyond kind of a surface thing. But to my appreciation in life, that's not where I am. It doesn't take a long time...the way I imagine telling you this is, I think about a rubber band that gets stretched but fairly quickly returns to its form. That's more of what it's been like for me.*

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<sup>159</sup> Implying the eldership of her church.

<sup>160</sup> Emily described for me in detail what this incident was, but for the sake of anonymity I have decided to keep the details of this incident hidden. I will say that it involved Emily being physically assaulted on church grounds.

## **Getting Burned**

Rachel – *I suppose I can imagine a situation where I could just get really burned by a church and not want to go back, but that hasn't happened to me.*

## **Being Micromanaged**

Kevin – *I think what would cause me to leave would be a micromanaged work environment. I have incredible flexibility. If I had someone constantly watching over me or expecting things from me, I think that would really drive me away.*

## **Inability to Do the Job**

David – *What would get me out would probably be health, inability to do the job. There is a certain mental aptitude that you have to have to write lessons and to counsel and to play at a high level and if I felt like I couldn't do that very well I wouldn't want to do it anymore. I made a commitment years ago about this position. I said, "I do not want to be one of those cranky burned out Church of Christ preachers the last part of my life."*

## **Moral Failure**

Grady – *Moral failure would cause me to leave ministry. God's grace is sufficient to forgive me for that kind of thing, but I'm tired of watching ministers do that and then rapidly ascend back to a position of telling other people how to live. I tear up my card. I'm going to live a quiet life of service somewhere else and never be in front of the microphone again.*

## **Compromising Integrity or Convictions**

Kendrick – *Being put in a place where I compromise my integrity or convictions would cause me to leave ministry. Being put in a place where I have to choose between providing for my family and being truthful or having integrity and character.*

## **I Don't Want to Go Anywhere Else**

Angela – *I don't really have very much interest in going somewhere else to do what I'm doing. I feel like I'm called for this place and this time.*



### Common Threads for Question 3 (b):

#### Calling or Misinterpreting Calling

Grady – *I’m probably a different cat than some on this. It is not the times that I feel burned out that tempts me to walk away from this industry. It’s the times that I feel like I personally failed at ministry in a way that makes me doubt my calling. It makes me question whether or not I interpreted or listened to the right voices initially.*

Paul – *The deciding factors that might cause me to leave...I think also would be another sense of calling, that God is calling me, telling me that he has something else for me.*

#### The Needs of the Family

Paul – *To be honest, me and Rebekah, we’ve talked about you know, what is the next ten years? We’ve been thinking about retirement. I’m in my 40’s you know and think about future plans. I know that 65 may be the goal of retirement, but you know, how do we want to spend our later years in life together? And what will that mean for us financially – retirement wise. I don’t have social security. I opted out when I began ministry. We need to figure out what our desire is as a couple and as a family for that stage. There are lots of things that could come up, but initially that’s what would get me out of ministry first.*

David – *Perhaps a family situation might put me in a situation to say I need to dedicate my time to Sara or the kids or aging parents.*

Adam – *The older I get the more I think about providing for my family. I’m thinking about college for my oldest child...it’s just one of those things where you have to ask if this career is sustainable. Right now, it is sustainable and I feel good about it. Like, I can accomplish what I need to accomplish, but it’s been rough. I’m not going to lie. This is the roughest season of the year for us.<sup>161</sup>*

### Dominant Threads for Question 3 (b):

Dominant threads – not applicable for question 3b.

#### Coding

- To the first part of question 3 (3a), “What keeps you in ministry?”
  - 6 Unique perspectives:
    - Paying forward kindness, the prophets and the paycheck, I love what I do, caring for kind/gracious people who care for you, how I became a Christian and my spouse, and fear.

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<sup>161</sup> This interview was conducted around Christmas.

- 0 Common threads for question 3a, meaning there were no common answers of two or more but less than five.
- 1 dominant thread:
  - Calling (7).
- The second part of question 3 (3b), “What factor(s) might ever cause you to leave ministry?”
  - 10 Unique perspectives for this question, showing that there were far more commonalities for why ministers stay in ministry than leave. Unique perspectives were:
    - Marital status change, I won’t be talked to like that again, being objectified and unworthy to be known, getting burned, being micromanaged, inability to do the job, moral failure, compromising convictions, and I don’t want to go anywhere else.
  - 2 Common threads:
    - Calling to something else/misinterpreting calling (2).
    - The needs of family (2).
  - 0 Dominant threads for question 3b, meaning there were no similar answers of five or more.

### *Observations*

The number of unique perspectives were almost as large as the dominant thread. There were six unique perspectives and seven mentions of calling, creating a dominant thread. Yet there were no common threads. Fear and a paycheck were classified as unique perspectives, but could possibly be categorized as a common thread. Kendrick mentioned the unknown of what is outside of ministry as the fear he was referring to. Kevin seems to support this idea of fear by signifying a paycheck keeps him in ministry. It could be implied that the unknown of not having that paycheck would cause him to be fearful. The number of unique perspectives as to what might cause a minister to leave ministry surprised me as well. While there were 7 like answers concerning what keeps a minister in ministry (calling), there does not seem to be much cohesion as to why the minister might leave. However, it should be noted that Paul and Grady both mentioned calling as a reason to leave and not just stay. Their perspectives on calling here are different though. A questioning of calling would be the reason for Grady to get out of ministry, whereas Paul believes

God might call him to another congregation or to get out of ministry to support his family. This raises an interesting theological question. Does God only call people into ministry or might he also call someone out of ministry?

#### **Question 4: What do you wish your elders knew about the mental health needs of ministry?**

##### **Unique Perspectives:**

##### **Treating Me Different Because I'm a Woman in Ministry is Exhausting and Hurtful**

Emily – *The way they talk to me is not ok. I am lucky in my personality that I tend to be a little more thick-blooded and outgoing, but they're not willing to accept the fact that I have a right to feel uncomfortable in meetings. The biggest part I see is they have no concept or ability to think outside of their norm, what it's like for me as a woman in Churches of Christ. And I don't know how to convey it in a way that they're able to comprehend it, because I've been trying. There have been times when we're interviewing people for staff positions and they forget to invite me. And when I ask why, they're like, "Oh, we assumed you wanted to be with your family." And I'm like, "Well, everyone else that you invited has a family too. I think you're saying that because I'm a woman." And they're like, "Oh, no, no, no!" I have to like climb for it every time and it's just exhausting have to re-dig the whole every single time.*<sup>162</sup>

##### **How Devoted to Who We Are and What We Do**

Tim – *Man, I do know that I'm blessed. I trust every single elder all the way. So, I don't have a situation where I'm trying to edge around another elder, which I've had before, but what I wish they knew more than anything is how devoted the staff is to who we are and what we do. Because, sometimes when we're in a leadership meeting and the elders make a comment about ministry, there are times when I realized sitting there that one of my co-ministers just got stung by something that was said because it's clear that the elder doesn't know that the person that is doing the exact thing is sitting two chairs away from them. And that's really painful when you've given your whole life to something and you realize that one of your leaders two chairs away from you is articulating that, not only is already being done, but you're the one doing it. So, that's the number one mental health issue is feeling like the people who have a lot of sway over your existence, or at least around your existence, don't know you and don't know what you're doing.*

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<sup>162</sup> Emily is the only woman minister I interviewed in a Church of Christ where women are not allowed to participate in worship or leadership roles. To get around calling her a "minister," she is called the children's ministry director. Her church's view of women in ministry was the predominate narrative in her story. m

## **Ministry is Lonely**

Kevin – *I think loneliness is the biggest thing that surrounds a minister that the elders don't understand. If a preacher gets fired, they lose everything. I mean, there's no longer even a surrounding of people who will...you lose your friends, you lose your church. I don't think that level of loneliness sinks in for most elders.*

### **Common Threads:**

## **Trivial Answers are Not Helpful, They are Hurtful**

Kevin – *Another thing, and part of this is through the lens of loneliness, is the inability to be honest with struggles. There is a perception that ministers need to be somewhat above the fray. I think the answer from a lot of ministers in the mental health realm is, "Well, you have a lack of faith," or "you just need to pray more." And I think that is a trivial answer to a real problem. I think fears, concerns, emotions, and feelings are valid. I think that's where a leadership needs to stand back and say, "We're going to help give you the confidence to know that these things are ok to talk about." During Covid, I expressed to my elders in a meeting that I was struggling with some mental health things and most of them had no idea what to do. One of them said, "Well, you need to pray more." And I had another one say, "Well, you just need to know who Jesus is and Jesus will get you through it." Those responses were very discouraging because I put out the request for help or even just someone to say, "You know what, I don't know what you need, but I'll pray for you and I'll walk with you. When you figure out what you need, let us know and we want to help." But the, have more faith, love Jesus more, you know...the little Kevin that's inside fighting is like, what? I have faith! It's not a question of faith.*

Denise – *We have a few elders who are of the generation and the mindset that any kind of mental illness, mental therapy, is, "You're just not praying hard enough." And so, that's hard. I mean, I'm someone, I'm happy to say, that goes to counseling every other week. I like myself better when I am talking to somebody about things. And some of them see that as weakness. Whether they would say that or not, they treat it that way, which is hard.*

## **Need for Sabbath**

Grady – *I wish elders recognized our need for rest. Not just vacation days between Sundays, but Sundays off to worship somewhere else.*

Rachel – *My elders had never heard of the word sabbatical in their lives. Like, they were fine with vacations but we as a staff usually worked on vacation. We usually called into the staff meeting. So, I would have loved to have a structure that said you need breaks and we're going to make sure you get breaks. A lot of churches are good at that. My church was not. I joke that I did have four sabbaticals because I had four babies and took time, but even then, I was never...I had, I think one pregnancy out of the four where I was like, "I will see you guys in a couple of months!" and really pushed away, and the others I was like, "I'm back. What do you need." I*

*think they think that ministry is not hard. They think what they're doing is hard, but ministry is just not that hard. And so, I don't think they really get it. I think they see it as really meaningful work, but not hard work.*

### **Ministry Stress is Different**

*Denise – I really wish they understood the feeling of always being on, that there's not a lot of break and rest, and the toll it takes.<sup>163</sup> There's the feeling that I should always be doing more with less and that's anxiety producing and frustrating when you already feel like you're carrying a hundred pounds all the time.*

*Kendrick – I wish they knew how personally we take things and how we can't let things rest. Like you can't shut it off. It's not like felling trees. I've always thought, man, if I start a business, I think I'd like to fell trees. I don't want to be an arborist or anything, just cut down trees and grind the stumps, and at the end of the night you come home and go to bed and you're not thinking, "Oh crap! I wonder how that tree is doing." You know what I mean? I just fell trees. I didn't get to all the trees, but tomorrow I'm going to wake up and I'm going to drive somewhere and I'm going to fell some more trees and then I'm going to go home and I'm going to go to bed and then I'm going to get up the next morning and fell trees. And so, there's a tree standing and then I see it fall and then I grind the stump and cut it up and I haul it off and I look at it with my hands on my hips, and I'm like, "I did good work today." It's not the same in ministry. It's not the same when someone is going through a divorce, you meet with them and you recommend them someplace and you pray with them and their kids are in your kid's ministry. Everybody's like, we're texting them, an elder visits them, and...you don't stand back and put your hands on your hips and say, "Look what we did!" You know? Ie they end up getting a divorce anyways and they end up leaving the church anyways. You know what I mean? I think that's what makes weddings and baptisms so celebratory. It's like you can kind of stand with hands on hips and look and say, "Look at what God's done here." That's why I think ministers become event planners because you get volunteers, a budget for the event, you put it on the calendar, you execute the event and you stand back. You're like, "That was a good event." But in ministry...we're all a work in progress and nothing is ever completed.*

*David – Every job has a stress level to it. So, that's not unheard of. All of us have stress on the job, but ministry stress is different. I've done different jobs and ministry stress is different. I think about Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:28 when he said, "I face daily the pressure upon me of concern for all the churches." I think that's what is a little bit different. You know, there's something different about a 40-hour work week. Whenever my shift is over, I'm done. I don't think about the job. Ministry continues on day after day. I was working all day yesterday planning a funeral. That was supposed to be my day off, and that is eight hours, you know, or getting calls late at night or just on my lunch break, saying, "Hey, we have a member that's going to have this major surgery tomorrow." So, they don't understand, you know, how we carry this stuff with us all the time. I think it was Spurgeon who talked about how it's not uncommon in preaching preparation for preachers to go through bouts of depression, and I think our aptitude and what we do, we're*

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<sup>163</sup> This statement could also fit in the need for sabbath thread.

*a little more prone to that. And so, I don't think elders know of that ongoing kind of pressure that we have. It's different than other jobs.*

**We need YOU to check in, initiate conversation, and stand up for us.**

*Adam – I think what elders need to know if they don't know already is that conversation has to be had and that we need a mental health avenue, we need avenues to seek help.*

*Paul – I wish they knew that when it comes to mental health, we need to be asked about that area, we need to be approached about that. We need to know that others are thinking about our hearts and minds as much as we are. We need people to be looking into that for us, and that's a role of shepherding, of not just the outside, but the inside. Ask us, and then find things that we can't see. They're always like, if you ever need something, let us know. And they've been very gracious, but as far as advocating, they're not thinking about me and the ministry as much as I am thinking about me and the ministry.*

*Angela – I am a person that is viewed as sturdy, strong. And so, it is rare that anybody checks in on me because I'm sturdy. I have hundreds of people who have told me things that they'd never share with anybody else. So, the need to be a vault is huge. That's what we call it in our family when you can talk to someone, you know, it's never gonna leak out. You know, the need to be a vault is huge. And yet, I'm still carrying a load because of what I know. It's the weight, you know? I have no desire to be a needy minister who is always saying what I do is hard, but there's heavy lifting. I do believe this, that there are ministers that aren't people persons and I think they hear less because they're less approachable. When someone is approachable, their load is going to be heavier. It's kind of like the visual, you got on a backpack and if people keep dropping big rocks in it for long, you're walking way out of balance because you're just carrying a load. So, I think what I would want elders to appreciate the fact that likely a minister is carrying a load you don't know anything about especially if they are a people-person.*

*Grady – I wish elders had a sense of protectiveness around ministers, that sometimes they need to take up a fight for us. Just because I can handle a squeaky wheel doesn't mean it should always be my responsibility to do it. There's a difference between elders who will appropriately respond to your cry for help and elders who will anticipate cries for help because they're shepherding you too. Right? I also want to say though that I wish elders would be involved enough in my life to be lovingly confrontational with me before I have something to fix or apologize for or make a mistake. I want to be shepherded. It seems to me we don't want elders to be a board of directors anymore, and that's great, but what they've kind of become is a damage control team and that's not shepherding either. You're a bad shepherd if you've gotten good at stitching up sheep after the wolves get in. Like, keep the wolves out man!*

**Coding**

- To question 4, “What do you wish your elders knew and understood about the mental health needs of ministry?”
  - 3 Unique perspectives:

- They are, treating me different because I am a woman in ministry is exhausting and hurtful, we are devoted to who we are and what we do, and ministry is lonely.
- 4 Common threads:
  - Trivial answers are not helpful, they are hurtful (2).
  - Need for sabbath/sabbatical (2).
  - Ministry stress is different (3).
  - We need YOU to check in, initiate conversation, and stand up for us (4).
- 0 Dominant threads:

### *Observations*

While there are no dominant threads for this question, there are some significant common themes that emerge. The need for elders to initiate contact and check in was strong (4). Both Paul and Grady used the metaphor of shepherding here. They want to be shepherded like the rest of the congregation. Trivial answers are hurtful and do not help with burnout syndrome. As will be shown in question 6, the way an elder responds to a minister's need for help greatly effects whether the minister will come to them again. When the response is negative the bridge appears to be burned.

### **Question 5: What do you wish your congregation knew and understood about the mental health needs of ministry?**

Unique Perspectives:

#### **How Much I Care**

Denise – *I wish they knew how much time I really do spend thinking about their kids and the job and the church.*

#### **We Do Not Act Independently**

Tim – *One thing I wish that the congregation knew was that ministers do not act independently. That when you see a minister do something, automatically assume they're nice, that they are attached to a web of relationships and activities. So, if a minister takes two steps and you*

*thought the minister should have taken three or if the minister took five steps and you thought they should have not taken any, then know that doesn't happen here independently. We're attached. So, for instance, if a member says, "I can't believe we don't talk more about sexual abuse in the church." Well, we do and we have, but when we do, we actually talked with some of the people who have experienced it before we talk about it to get some parameters about what is triggering and perhaps damaging. Well, then the member can be like, "Oh, oh, I didn't know that." Right...but now that you do, I would love it if you would apply that across other areas of ministry and discernment.*

## **A More Honest Picture of Mental Health in Ministers**

*Grady – I genuinely believe we have to start trusting the people we worship with to be our church family, and so it's really important for me to have said early on in my ministry life here that I'm chemically predisposed to depression. I just told them, "You guys just need to know that." And the truth is, I take medicine every day and it helps. About four years in to the job here we had a crisis with one of our kids, and I mean it went from bad to really bad, to horrible. When that happened there was no amount of medicine I could have taken to keep me from falling off. I mean, I did. I just fell off a cliff and I got probably the closest I've ever been to suicidal. There was a triggering event to it, but it ceased to be rational. And man, thank God I had been honest about that ahead of time because people would call and I wouldn't answer the phone, and people would come to my house to try and talk and I would say, "Thanks but I don't want to talk to you." Or, I would say, ok let's talk about it and I'm going to let you in on what's going on in my head and scare the crap out of them, right? Cause I'm like, so depressed. I don't want to live anymore. And that's the horror. I don't want to share that with people. But yeah, I need you to check on me from time to time and I need you to know I take medication and if you see me acting funny, you come ask me if I'm taking my medicine. What's amazing is that changed my relationship with a few people in the church who then became my depression sponsors. Like, we're in AA together because they went Grady, I take medicine too. There may be things I struggle with. I am trying to figure out how to be more like Jesus with all of the same challenges that you do. And I recognize that makes it borderline ridiculous that I stand up here and speak to you every week. So, we're going to talk about the Holy Spirit and we're going to talk about the calling of God and why that empowers some of us to do that. But we're in this together. I'm not here to be the minister in front of you, I'm here to be the minister among you and to share life with you. Now...there's a healthy level of disclosure and probably progression of disclosure. That was not my first sermon where I laid all of that out. I want people to see my humanity on display.*

## **I Go Outside of the Church for Mental Health Support**

*Rachel – As a pastor, I want to be there to support the people that I'm caring for, and I generally don't want them to feel like they need to take care of me. That doesn't mean they can thank me. I want them to thank me for my work, to show appreciation. I like it when they give me goodies for Christmas or whatever, but generally if I need support, I'm not going to someone in the congregation, I'm going to go to someone else. It's kind of a boundary issue and it might be*



*helpful for that even to be articulated to the congregation. Sometimes I think we in the church, we're so comfortable with the family metaphor that we kind of think we're all just here and we're all kind of the same. Which, on the one hand, I think is really beautiful, we really believe in the priesthood of all believers, but I think it would be great for the congregation to see, ok, the we are a congregation that values the mental and spiritual health of our leaders and our ministers and so that is what we are going to give you, this much time and maybe money for spiritual direction or therapy. Like, just things you can do to really care for your leaders.*

### Common Threads:

#### **We Take Things Personally; We are Regular People.**

*Kendrick – I want the congregation to understand some of the same things I said about the elders. I think we take things personally. If they come up and say they are leaving or they are about to leave, we don't disconnect that from ourselves. At some level we still take it very personal. Critiques, we do weigh them. I know to stay in it long enough, you have to weigh them, but they also hurt us. We think about it a lot. We think about our impact on the church a lot. We think about our impact on the community. We find it hard to lay the work down and we can stress about things too. What we preach about is what we are struggling with. We're preaching about being stressed or we're preaching about being hungry, anxious, lonely, and tired because that's us too. I mean, we're not about that.*

*Angela – That's a question I've never really thought of. I guess I would just say we're regular people. I know some ministers who make it a point not to tell people about their personal life. And I'm like, there comes a point where that's not doing anybody a service because we are people with families, with needs, with wonderful situations and with bone crushing situations. So really, we are just like everybody else. There's no replacement for suffering in the life of an elder or minister. It's good for everybody to know that the family has been challenging, to know that health has been challenging, to know that finances have been challenging, that you've suffered in some way. If someone thinks you've always gotten it as you ordered, they're less likely to share that they didn't get what they ordered. But if they know whether you wanted to have kids and you couldn't have kids, or if they know you have had a cancer scare, I think that suffering is transferable into any other suffering.*

*Adam – What I wish the congregation knew about mental health needs for ministers is that ministers need open communication about their concerns. That we are human beings with feelings and that we respond to how they come and ask about things. Sometimes there has been communication that hasn't been so kind.*

#### **I Need You to Care About Me; I Need Encouragement.**

*Emily – We do a lot to support the church. Like, we go to every baby shower, we go to every funeral, we go to everything. I was raised primarily by my grandparents and when I lost a grandparent, almost no one attended the funeral that I had to put on and arrange. I didn't get*

*any cards; I didn't get flowers from the church that they usually automatically arrange. No elders showed up to the funeral. There were only like two or three people from the congregation that showed up for me. The people that supported me and brought meals for me, with the exception of one other minister, were people that were friends that did not go to my church. It's like the church doesn't understand that ministers are grieving humans too. It made me feel like I was an outsider in my own church and not actually a part of it anymore.*

*Paul – I think it's kind of the same thing I said about elders, that those in leadership need encouragement, they need support and friends as fellow workers in Christ, and to maybe be asking about that or checking in on that or making sure that our needs are taken care of.*

### **My Congregation Understands More Than My Elders**

*Kevin – I'm going to say that the congregation understands my mental health needs pretty well. I say that because in my recent sermons, I've been vulnerable and even maybe a month ago I shared that I've been attending counseling publicly. It was received favorably by the majority of the congregation. People I never would have expected came up to me and expressed an appreciation and a desire to walk with me, and I mean, just were so encouraging.*

*Rachel – It's interesting. I actually felt like the congregation understood me more than our leaders did. I would get a lot of very kind support from the congregation. "You do so much. How you do everything you do?"*

*Paul – When it comes to checking in and asking about needs, some congregation members do that better than the leadership, you know, because they say, "Hey we appreciate what you're doing." Just those words, "we appreciate you" or a card or a shoutout, or I'm praying for you, or if they see a hard time, they say I love you, I see you...they notice. They notice.*

### **Respect Boundaries**

*Denise – In a perfect world, they would understand when I turn my phone off, you know, try to text me during work hours. We need breaks, but in some ways, we need it differently because my work is also the place I love, where we all come to worship Jesus, and those can all get messy together.*

*David – I've been really blessed here at Sunnyside in that most respect boundaries and stuff with me. I don't have too many boundary issues with folks, but sometimes I have to let them know I'm not always going to be available 24/7. There's time I need to spend with family and I don't need to feel guilty if I'm watching a football game or if I don't immediately answer the phone or something like that. So, I don't know if they understand maybe having to have some time away from that.*

## Coding

- To question 5, “What do you wish your congregation knew and understood about the mental health needs of ministry?”
  - 4 Unique perspectives:
    - Unique perspectives were, how much I care, we do not act independently, a more honest picture of mental health, and I go outside of the church for mental health support.
  - 4 Common threads:
    - We take things personally; we are regular people (3).
    - I need you to care about me; I need encouragement (2).
    - My congregation understands my mental health needs better than my elders (3).
    - Respect boundaries (2).
  - 0 Dominant Threads.

## Observations

Here again we see the minister’s need for caring relationships. Ministers take conversations personally and feel the relationship is often one sided. Even in a large church a minister can feel lonely and misunderstood. A very interesting common thread amongst Kevin, Rachel, and Paul is that they all feel that their congregation has a better understanding of mental health than their elders. In other words, they feel church members do a better job of understanding boundaries, checking in, and support their vulnerability.

**Question 6: Please describe your level of comfort in asking your elders for help in regards to your mental health. What would hinder you from asking for help? What would encourage you to ask for help?**

Unique Perspectives:

### **I Wouldn’t Go to Them for Help**

*Rachel – I don’t think I went to them once in twenty years. We have had more of a senior pastor model. Our senior minister is also an elder, so a lot of conversations would be with him. I think it goes back to that there’s some health and dysfunction in that I wanted to find care for myself away from the church and I think that was just kind of a boundary. It just seemed like it was crossing a boundary to really ask the church to support me. I couldn’t just show up at church*

*and put on a happy face and act like everything was good. I needed a completely separate place to be able to be real and vulnerable and you know, struggle.*

#### Common Threads:

### **I Would be Comfortable Approaching Some but Not All**

*Angela – I would say my stock is up right now, that I'm valued, so...obviously I'm more likely to talk to some elders than other elders and I don't think I'm picking on anybody, but I think the more life has gone swimmingly for you, you just don't really get it. You just don't really get that someone gets worn out on doing good stuff. You have those real simple answers, you know? And so I would be a lot more likely to say something to some of them than other elders. I mean, there are elders we have that it would be a total waste of my breath. They'd be like, "Well, did you take your vacation time?" Yes. "Well then, what's the matter?" I'd say I'm probably Comfortable going to half of our elders. I think part of it is a tendency toward simple spiritual solutions.<sup>164</sup> I would say I would be very likely to ask for help, but it wouldn't be with the broad group.<sup>165</sup>*

*Denise – I have a relative who is one of the elders, but I work a really good line of not abusing that I have a different access to the eldership than the rest of the staff does. Most of my elders, that feel mental health is an "interesting idea" I would never go to. I mean, they mean well but they just don't realize what they're asking or how they approach you. They need to prove themselves to be safe, either in how they respond to me about different things or in how we have conversations after meetings. There are some that don't engage with the staff of women outside of meetings, and so they haven't built trust that I would go and say, "Hey I'm having some anxiety." We also have over 25 elders. So, I have about three that are interested in the children's ministry and about another two or three that I know on a personal level. But the rest, I have no reason to think it would be a wise thing to go talk to them.*

### **Hesitant Because of Past Experiences**

*Paul – Well, I think through some past experiences, sometimes it's taken for me to get pretty desperate. My elders don't check in on that level. Again, I have to be the driver of communication. I've had to approach them about financial things, which bleed into mental-health things, being cared for. You know, having to ask them for a raise, you don't like to have to go and ask for any time of help, especially financial.*

*Kevin – I think I'm going to lean on my answer for question four. I would be hesitant, but willing. Hesitant because, as trivial as the answer was for me to just pray and have more faith, I understand that people can have a bad day. But I'm still hesitant because of my past experiences.*

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<sup>164</sup> A thread to "trivial answers are not helpful, but hurtful" in question 4.

<sup>165</sup> Angela works in a large congregation with over 30 elders.

Emily – *If it's normal mental health, that's not gender specific, I'm fairly comfortable and I have asked for help, but I have very little comfort when it comes to mental health related to sexual gender differentiation, because when I've tried to approach the subject, I'm dismissed.*

#### Dominant Thread:

#### High Level of Comfort

Adam – *My level of comfort in asking the elders for help is high. I feel like I can ask them anything about mental health and they would do what they could to help me through the situation. I mean, they've already told us if you need to see a counselor, we're here for you, we want to help you find a place and we'll pay for the counseling or we'll go in on half or something. That's not normal. I know most churches don't have that.*

David – *Mine is very positive. I get along very well with our eldership. I am really, really blessed. I would feel very comfortable. I would not have any fear of job loss. With my experience, to say, here's what would be helpful, I need to do this, to talk with a counselor, I would have their support.*

Kendrick – *I believe with group of men I would feel comfortable. Have I taken the opportunity to really do that? Not really. Sometimes I have a passive aggressive way of communicating. I'll get frustrated with something and just kind of vent to the group and drop hints.*

Grady – *I would say that my level is and must remain high. I would just go in and say, "Listen guys, this keeps me better. This makes me better. I have to go do this."*<sup>166</sup>

Tim – *With this group of elders I wouldn't have any problem at all with that. In the past, it would have honestly been more my insecurity than their posture. I can't really put that on them.*

#### Coding

- To Question 6, "Please describe your level of comfort in asking your elders for help in regards to your mental health. What would hinder you from asking for help? What would encourage you to ask for help?"
  - Unique perspective:
    - I wouldn't go to them for help.
  - 2 Common threads:
    - I would be comfortable approaching some but not all (2).
    - I am hesitant because of past experiences (3).
  - 1 Dominant thread:

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<sup>166</sup> Grady's elders just stepped down, so I asked him to speak to how comfortable he was approaching those men when they were still in eldership.

- High level of comfort in approaching elders (5).

### *Observation*

The dominant thread in this question reveals that for most ministers, even when they get frustrated with their elders or feel like they lack support, they still feel the relationship between them makes them comfortable enough to ask for help. However, as was mentioned 4, though they might be comfortable in these relationships, they do not want to be the person that always has to ask for what they need. Also, just as negative responses can damage future communication, so can negative past experiences. Ministers want to know their elders are safe for them to approach. Communication is severed when there is a lack of safety and trust. Something else of note from this question is that this dominant thread is comprised completely of male ministers. None of the women ministers said they would feel comfortable approaching their eldership as a whole. Two of the female ministers, Denise and Angela, stated they would feel comfortable approaching a select few.

### **Question 7: When do you feel the most lonely and isolated in ministry?**

#### Unique Perspectives:

#### **I Don't Feel Lonely or Isolated**

*David – I've thought about this one and I really don't feel lonely. The church is centrally located in town and so I don't sense isolation. I stay connected with ministers in the area. Having lived in this state for over twenty years I've known them for so long and we get together once a month. I have ministry friends in other states that if I ever have an issue or struggle or something, I have ministry friends I can pray and talk with.*

#### **Calendar Seasons of the Year**

*Adam – I think the most lonely time for me would be the fall and winter. Everybody is tired from the year. Everybody is gearing up for the holidays. As a worship minister I'm over here planning these times where we're going to come together, like the Christmas Eve service and our online thing we do, but everybody's busy doing this, that, or the other.*

## **When Serving**

Angela – *I think we are most like Christ when we are serving in isolation. There's something powerful about only the Lord having witnessed something. God joins us in those most intimate times and he's honored by it. I don't feel very lonely, I'm a self-attuned person and I have good friends in town and good friends out of town that are vaults that I can download too. And one of the ways I cope is I drive. There's nothing like getting out on a long drive for me.*

## **When in Groups with Other Ministers**

Denise – *I probably feel the most isolated at times when I'm in a group with other ministers. There's a lack of understanding about what children's ministry entails, and when we're in meeting there's no one to relate to about it. It's very frustrating, very isolating when no one seems to really understand your job. One of the ways I cope is when I need to someone, I call up a really good friend in ministry from my last church. I also have a dog, so we'll go for walks and throw the ball in the backyard and I can throw it as hard as I want and she'll run for days and catch.*

## **Gender Issues**

Rachel – *There are definitely some times with gender things where I feel left out. It's like a fine line between advocating for yourself and pushing people to a place where they feel worried about you, like, oh no, if we do this Rachel is going to be offended. We are a fully inclusive gender church but because of a number of dynamics I still felt very often like I wasn't really being given the space to do what I was good at, what God was calling me to do.*

## **Lack of Communication**

Paul – *I guess it comes back down to when there's a lack of communication, not knowing what others are doing and thinking I'm the only one thinking or caring about this.*

## **When All my Relationships are in the Church**

Rachel – *I'll tell you something that I don't hear many people talk about, but that was a very big dynamic for me. My family's closest friends were church people. My closest group of girlfriends were church people. My husband's closest friends were church people, my colleagues were church people. My church people were church people! All of these different things were all the same. On the one hand it was awesome and on the other hand, if there was like any strife in any of those areas, it felt kind of like infected everything. So, I found it to be very complicated to have all these relationships in the same bundle. I cope with all of this by having clergy groups. The most significant ones have been with other women. I have a small group of Church of Christ women who are my age in ministry. Then I have two larger clergy groups. I think that groups on*

*social media are incredibly supportive for female professionals. And I've lucked into having found a really phenomenal therapist who's a psychologist and a pastor.*

### **When I'm in the Middle of Staff and Elder Conflict**

*Kendrick – You have elders and you have staff, right? Like, you're in the middle of how your staff views you and how your elders view you. You're not really the staff's friend because they directly report to you and then you're not really the elders peer, right? There are elders, staff, and you. You have your own line by yourself, that's you. So, I feel lonely by default, by position. I especially feel that way when I'm trying to hold space between a disagreement or some relational problem between staff and elders. I cope by friendships, calling other ministers. But everybody is out of town. Everybody is somewhere else.*

### **When Demands Pile Up**

*Tim – You know, probably when someone makes a request/demand that doesn't take into account how many hours and how much energy has already been put into it. That can make you feel lonely. I just had this conversation with a couple of our elders this week where I just said, "Look, I'm all about getting this particular work done. I'm all about it! But we need some people to come alongside and offer some help here." I said it's too much to ask to keep adding these things.*

### **Common Threads:**

#### **All the Time**

*Kevin – So, my first response was all the time. Our church doesn't have a young adult age. It's interesting that the people who could potentially be young adult here, all leave and they go to other churches. I'm blessed that I feel connected to older folks, but the deep connection that allows for, let's say, a best friend to someone who could truly carry the weight of your burdens and can lift you up, I wouldn't say I have that necessarily. In a way, I want vulnerability with someone who doesn't go to church with me and I don't have that. So that's when the loneliness kicks in. So, how do I cope with that? I carry it around. Where we lived in our previous ministry there was an area wide preacher meeting that happened once a month and that was always a great source of comfort and encouragement for me. There's very little relationship between churches in my current city, so it's a very different loneliness that comes here.*

*Grady – I always feel isolated...I am isolated. Almost every family or household in our congregation is employed full-time. We're a regional church, like we're all spread out. It takes forever to get anywhere. So, I mean, between my introversion and our geography it's easy to feel that way. How do I cope? Well, I'm going to have positive and negative responses, right? When I'm unhealthy, the vice of sloth takes hold or I become hyper busy. I'll take a nap or play video games. Healthy responses...I find my spiritual community that can share the burden with me.*



## **When I Don't Feel Supported**

Emily – *I spoke before about no one at church attending my grandparent's funeral. I felt lonely and isolated from my church going that Sunday following and knowing, like, I wasn't considered family to them.*

Tim – *I feel lonely and isolated when we are full tilt taking care of other families in crisis and then Nancy's dad falls, you know, my mom has surgery and we both feel torn. So, where am I supposed to be for the next four Sundays, right? But the families that are in the same situation we're in with their families, they can say, hey we're going to be gone for the next three weeks, so we'll be online. But we don't get to do that. And so, because we can't do that, then there are feelings sometimes of isolation.*

## **When I Can't Talk About Something**

Emily – *When I have to call child protective services or something that you're not really supposed to talk about happens or when you have a disagreement with your leadership that you really can't talk about to anyone else. Having to process a lot of hard emotions in isolation is very lonely.*

Adam – *Feeling lonely and isolated can happen with my spouse. I've had lonely and isolated times where I feel like I don't want to tell her things about church because I don't want to burden her. I don't want to bring stuff from church to home and I don't want her to think negatively of someone. If something's going on and I'm stressed about it, I don't want to tell her. That kind of shuts you up.*

## *Coding*

- To question 7, “When do you feel the most lonely and isolated in ministry? How do you cope with these feelings?”
  - 9 Unique perspectives:
    - I don't feel lonely or isolated, calendar seasons of the year, when serving, when in groups with other ministers, gender issues, lack of communication, when all my relationships are in the church, when I'm in the middle of staff/elder conflict, and when demands pile up.
  - 3 Common threads:
    - All the time (2).
    - When I don't feel supported (2).
    - When I can't talk about something (2).
  - 0 dominant threads.

## *Observations*

Answers for this question were more varied than any other question, meaning there are wide variety of reasons why ministers feel isolated and lonely in ministry. Perspectives ranged from I don't feel lonely to I'm lonely all the time. There are many parts of ministry that must remain confidential. When a minister cannot talk with someone about what is going on or does not feel supported in their ministry, loneliness and isolation may become key factors.

### **Question 8: What spiritual habits, practices, or rhythms do you lean into on a regular basis to help you with exhaustion, stress or burnout?**

#### Unique Perspectives:

#### **Good Night of Sleep**

David – *I've discovered with mental health and stress and burnout, you know, I have got to get a good night's sleep. I try to get to bed around 10:30 every night and get a good seven hours.*

#### **Time With Family**

Paul – *I've always strived to be done with work by the time my kids are out of school, so that I'm available to them. Of course, there are times when I have things planned, but I always try to keep that time sacred. I've really been trying to be present in life, in ministry, and in the home.*

#### **Seeking Out the Lonely**

Kevin – *Something that I've started doing recently, and I didn't really even know why until my counselor gave me some good insight, I began seeking out the folks on the prayer list. Not that I haven't prayed for folks before or been concerned about them. You know, in some way the minister checks in on these folks because that's their job. But I felt different about it. I felt like that was something I needed to do and then I almost felt demented when I started finding joy in people's struggles. But my counselor made this comment and it resonated with me. I've kind of switched from saying, I found joy in other people suffering to saying, "I'm finding a sense of community in my own suffering."*

## **Singing**

Rachel – *I love to sing and I like to sing in the car. That's like one of my biggest spiritual practices in the car by myself. I've made some Spotify playlists that I'll just sing with. That nurtures my soul and that's a way that I communicate with God and it's the way God communicates with me.*

## **Life Coach**

Grady – *The coaching thing is something I've been doing in the last season, maybe six months I think. Since I knew we were about to lose our elders.*

## **Learn New Ministry Skills**

David – *I went to singing school for a few summers and now I know how to conduct and I'm getting involved in grief share ministry. I just always want to learn new aspects of ministry.*

## **Books and Articles**

Adam – *I try to read articles and books and things on worship theory.*

## **Devotional Time with Spouse**

Tim – *I write a note of encouragement to Nancy every single morning and put it with her coffee. This gets me thinking outwardly, it gets me connecting the lives of the people around me, specifically my wife with the sustenance of God. Every single night Nancy and I do our evening prayers together. We do our morning prayer separate because of our schedules, but every night we pray together and that has been of monumental importance.*

## **Common Threads:**

### **Ministry Network/Support Groups**

Adam – *I'm part of a network of worship ministers and we have a retreat each year. And man, we just unload and download and talk about what's working and what's not working. I'm on a text line with these guys all the time. It's just that network of people, man. I can honestly say they've been a huge help for me personally.*

Tim – *I received a devotional book from my daughter. She made me promise to only read one per day. So, what I did was I set up a spiritual practice every day with one of my elders. After I read in the morning, I would take a picture of it, send it to him, he would read it, and then every single day we discussed it and we did this throughout the entire book. Second thing, I have a*

*Tuesday morning men's prayer group at 7 a.m. We have a Bible study every Tuesday morning. We have a rotating leadership so that I was not the one leading the discussion every week and that has been super, super helpful.*

*Emily – I do a small ladies Bible study. We meet once a week. It ranges from 3 to 5 of us and for me, having it smaller like that, especially as a minister, allows me to be more intimate and vulnerable, which I need. For years I just tried to study on my own and I felt like I was just going through the emotions. Coming together with these ladies is life-breathing. And then I have a group of people that are all over the nation and we get together online and meet up and pray every six weeks or so.*

## **Sabbath**

*Kevin – So, I'm a big believer in sabbath. I think it's a gift from God...you can just hang out without a schedule. Sundays don't make sense for me and my family, so we started doing Wednesday mornings. I would wait and go into the office at one so we could have a leisurely morning together as a family, we will have brunch. During nice weather, we will go to the zoo or something like that.*

*Denise – When I'm practicing my rhythms I try to take a full Friday or Saturday for full sabbath. I'll put my phone on do not disturb. I don't watch tv.*

## **Dominant Threads:**

### **Prayer**

*Adam – Burnout has actually contributed in a positive way to my prayer life. A lot of times you overlook your own personal prayer life, you overlook your own personal worship time.*

*David – I want to grow in the avenue of prayer, that's always something I'm trying to do.*

*Paul – I spend time in prayer and have some good journaling practices that I participate in.*

*Rachel – I have a tormented relationship with prayer because for so long prayer and devotional was something I was supposed to do every day and if I didn't do it, maybe my faith wasn't even real. Then after a while I just rebelled and was like, no I'm not going to accept that. I'm just going to trust that I'm praying all the time. And so I just got into kind of a mindset of finding God in the cracks and crevices and in the car. As my youngest has gotten a little bit older I have shifted this a bit. I've just realized how much I love actually prioritizing prayer and actually prioritizing just like a set time where I'm listening to God and interacting with Scripture. I try to sit down a few times a week with pen and a journal and just sit there for ten minutes.*

Kendrick – *Brian Zahnd has been very helpful. He saved my life there in Covid around May of 2020. I went to one of his prayer schools, and basically what he teaches is the daily order. You just pray using the Book of Common Prayer. That rescued me.*

Emily – *So, I've worked a lot on different aspects of my prayer life. I have three different whisper prayers I do during the day and then I journal my prayer once a day.*

Angela – *I pray constantly.*

Grady – *I'm digging into contemplative prayer a lot right now.*

## **Scripture**

David – *The first thing I'll do to start my day is I'll read Scripture. It sets the pace for the day.*

Paul – *In my alone time I spend time in Scripture.*

Denise – *I love to do Bible studies. I like to dig into commentaries. Diving in and asking questions is life-giving for me. It's a connection point for me and God in this season of my life. I like reading for advent. I light my advent wreath every morning and I like to read my advent reading for the day by the advent light, which is my favorite thing, I look forward to it every year.*

Rachel – *I'm doing my best to listen to God and interact with Scripture. You have to like consciously remind yourself that you're not doing this to teach, you're doing this to receive and not to pull out the commentaries and really try to dig in, but it's really just to let God love me in this space and speak to me whatever God might want to say to me.*

Angela – *I'm more a meditator on the Word than just reading. I'm dyslexic so I kind of dread reading. So, I'm more of a meditator.*

Kendrick – *I do daily Bible reading stuff, like reading the Bible in a year. I think that saved me. You know, yeah, it did. I think saved me.*

## **Solitude**

Paul – *I've gotten into a really good habit before leaving the home to have my God time alone.*

Angela – *I try to give myself some space after something heavy, like I'll take the rest of the afternoon off or go have a relaxed dinner. Do something that speaks to the other side of life.*

Grady – *Silence is really helpful to me. It's hard to make time some days, but man, when I do it is so life-giving. Even on most days when it's not, it's not something that comes out of the silence,*

*it's the sitting in the silence. It's the awareness of just being content in God's presence. That's really helpful to me.*

*Tim – Every morning I'm the first one up. I'm up at five o'clock so that I can have my coffee. Those who know me well know that my brain spins up, which I cannot stop it from doing that and this practice helps it unwind itself a little bit.*

*Denise – To be totally honest, prayer is hard for me in this season of life. So, I try to take time to just be quiet. Maybe this isn't a season where me having words to pray is super easy, but I can try to sit in the quiet and just trust that God knows what is on my heart, even if I don't have words to tell him.*

### **Physical Exercise**

*David – I'm kind of a disciplined person. I work out every day, some kind of physical activity. I have stuff here at home and Sara and I have kind of made a pact to go to Planet Fitness together a couple times a week.*

*Paul – Sometimes I'll go for a hike.*

*Rachel – Another thing I do that is pretty significant is I walk, and walking checks a lot of boxes for me because if I feel like I haven't had space for prayer and for listening to God, I'll walk without headphones. I really predictably find that like the first ten minutes my brain is kind of full and all over the place and after about ten minutes, I like settle and go to this deeper place, and it's interesting, I've read quite a bit about just the spirituality of walking and how there's a really long tradition of walking and prayer.*

*Angela – I'm a yard girl and so I do a lot of yard work and I think that just kind of reminds you that the Lord ordered all of this and this is all organized to his plan.*

*Denise – I think it was John Mark Comer who said that if you work with your hands, you should sabbath with your mind. If you work with your mind, you should sabbath with your hands. So, I like to spend a lot of time pulling weeds in my yard or doing a puzzle or taking my dog for walks.*

### **Coding**

- To question 8, “What spiritual habits, practices, or rhythms do you lean into on a regular basis to help you with exhaustion stress or burnout?”
  - 8 Unique perspectives:
    - Good night sleep, time with family, seeking out the lonely, singing, life coach, learn new ministry skills, books and articles, devotional time with spouse.
  - 2 Common threads:
    - Ministry network/support group (3).

- Sabbath (2).
- 4 Dominant threads:
  - Prayer (8).
  - Scripture (6).
  - Solitude (5).
  - Physical activity (5).

### *Observations*

The spiritual disciplines of prayer, reading Scripture, and solitude along with physical activity are all dominant threads to this question. That part was not surprising to me. What is surprising is the variety of ways these ministers practice them. Some prayer is contemplative, others is more meditative or through a prayer guide. Some pray and meditate on Scripture while walking or working in the garden. I thought the number of ministry or support networks would have been a dominant thread but there were only three mentions. However, in other parts of the interview process, many shared their reliance on ministry friends and cohorts for networking and help. I did not try to sway the answers in this direction during the interview, but I suspect that number would be higher if I asked.

**Question 9: (a)What resources, retreats or practices are offered to you by your eldership in regards to healing, maintaining or strengthening your mental health? (b)What resources, retreats or practices would be beneficial if they were offered?**

Unique Perspectives for Question 9 (a):

#### **Christmas Break**

*Denise – Our office will be closed for two weeks during Christmas and New Year's. So that's another they do. They don't have to do but they're gracious and everyone's gone, not just ministry staff but secretaries don't have to come in, which is amazingly kind to do.*

#### **Church Retreats**

*Rachel – The only thing we really did, and I mean, we as ministers organized it ourselves, we would do staff retreats. Usually, it was just a half day or day. I think it was really good for us to get us to a different setting. It brought us together as friends, we would eat together and laugh*

*and kind of get out of our scripts. We also did a women's retreat every year and a congregational retreat every year and they were energizing and also exhausting. Like, kind of everything that was energizing we were also working and leading and preparing and planning. It was hard for me because my family would go and sit and it would be three days of trying to do this mother/minister thing at the same time. That was so exhausting.*

#### Common Threads for Question 9 (a):

##### **Sabbatical**

*Denise – I get a sabbatical every three years, and we are encouraged not to do anything work related. Like, they don't want us going to conferences or anything like that during the sabbatical. It's not forbidden, but they would really rather you just go rest, read or whatever you need during that time. The sabbatical is for four weeks.*

*Angela – Every five years we get a four-week sabbatical.*

*Adam – We get a sabbatical every seven years and I'm up for one, but I don't know how we're going to do that, especially because what I do is so niche. There's not a lot of people who can lead both a cappella and play an instrument in the band. So, it's just a difficult thing.*

*Kendrick – Their willingness to offer sabbaticals is good. After seven weeks you get up to eight weeks off and then after another five years you can take another one.*

##### **Counseling/Therapy**

*Denise – Our church is able to provide us with health insurance that does cover some therapy services, which is a very generous thing, because I know not all churches are able to offer that.*

*Tim – They have built in counseling to our health benefits.*

*Angela – Just now, our eldership is making a change to our health benefits, paying for counseling. That will happen soon.*

*Adam – Honestly, the elders are very open about, we can go visit a counselor whenever we need to. I don't see a counselor regularly here, but yeah, it's there.*

#### Dominant Threads for Question 9 (a):

##### **Conference/Personal Growth/ Continuing Education Budget**

*Emily – They give me a budget to go to a children's ministry conference, but I have to seek that out myself.*



Kevin – *I have it written in my contract that there's a \$2,000 allowance to do personal growth things. I have good elders, good leaders. I mean, they have their own weaknesses but they have never told me no if I've asked for anything and I've asked for some pretty big stuff. Me feeling like I have the time to go spend a week at a retreat or to go do something.*

Kendrick – *The elders give me a sum of money, \$5,000 a year, for what we call continual education, but it's really for all of it...preacher retreats, Pepperdine Lectures, etc. I've used that money in the past to hire a life coach. I'm going to use it this year to hire a preaching coach.*

Grady – *I do have someone doing some ministry coaching for me. The church does pay for some of that. I get a fixed budget of \$2,000 a year to spend on seminars and conferences. Obviously, I supplement that a fair amount myself.*

Paul – *I mean, it's very basic. I get some financial support for retreats, seminars, and furthering education. When I first came here I was in the middle of a graduate school program and they supported me and gave me some financial assistance to help with that and the time off.*

David – *So, right now I think in our budget we have like \$500 for each minister to go to retreats, seminars or whatever and then like \$200 for videos and resources and stuff. But, you know, thinking about it, that's really not very much.*

Adam – *They're pretty much like, you go find what you need to do and go do it, you know, kind of thing.*

#### Unique Perspectives for Question 9 (b):

##### **Marriage Seminar**

David – *Maybe a marriage seminar, even if you're not having any problems, say, "Hey, let's just send you down there and we want you guys just to be tuned up a little bit to learn." Things like that.*

##### **Trauma Informed Training**

Emily – *I would love for there to be trauma informed training for leadership too. If all leadership, all staff were more trained on being trauma informed, there being more compassion and less rebuke and maybe more equipping people to get out situations they're in...I guarantee you they've all been around it because if you're around people, there are people experiencing it. It's being disarming enough for people to let you know what's happening.*

## **Bigger Conference and Retreat Budget**

David – *So, right now I think in our budget we have like \$500 for each minister to go to retreats, seminars or whatever and then like \$200 for videos and resources and stuff. But, you know, thinking about it, that's really not very much. It may pay the gas bill somewhere but what's the motel? What's the registration and stuff. That's probably underfunded there.*

### **Common Threads for Question 9 (b):**

#### **Please Initiate Help/Hold us Accountable – We Don't Want to Ask**

Adam – *I don't see a counselor regularly here. Yeah, it's there, just again, I have to search it out, do it, set it up.*

Paul – *I mean, it's very basic. I get some financial support for retreats, seminars, and furthering education. But, again, it's at my discretion. They are not saying here are things we would encourage you to use this for or here's an opportunity for you. It's just given to me to decide. It's nice to have that freedom, but I feel I'm having to supply them with things.*

Kendrick – *I think just giving us resources and time. Like verbally saying, if you need help, we'll offer you resources, if you need time we will give you time, and then showing an example of that.*

Kevin – *Probably the biggest weakness for me is me feeling like I have the time to go spend a week at a retreat or go do something. I'm given four Sundays of allotted time off within the year to either preach or go for self-enrichment. I don't know when I've used that and that's my fault. I think it would be a big help if my elders said maybe in January, "Kevin, where are you going this year?" Maybe that's what I need. I think it would help too if they said, "Hey can we you get someone to watch your kids, and you and your wife both go and make it a retreat for both of you?"*

Tim – *(I followed up on a question with Tim about needing a personal retreat. I asked "If you went to your elders and said, hey, I think we need to add this. I need this retreat. How do you think they would respond to that?) Good. And I probably need to do something like that. I know it sounds simple, right? But...I know part of the reason is because I'm the initiator. You know, I'm one, like today, I'm watching a guy from our church at a work center and I see him pick up his cup of coffee and realize it's empty. So, I go over and I asked him what he had in his coffee cup, if he wanted it refilled? Because our personalities are more geared like that. And so that's what I'm thinking, is I wish they would look at my coffee cup and say, man, I'll bet this would really bless you. Right? But I can help coach that. That's something I need to do.*

#### **Personal/Mental Wellness Retreat**

Angela – *My little niche is kind of weird in the fact that there aren't really conferences. It seems like it's just really clinical. I haven't had much success in retreats and conferences and that kind*

*of thing. With me, it probably would help if I could just take one person with me and get off on my own. Something where I could connect my body and soul together.*

*Kevin – I don't want to go to a conference where I feel that it's more Bible knowledge. I'm looking for a retreat that is more wellness focused. I would almost rather go to a hotel room for a weekend and watch RightNow Media videos for a weekend and let the church pay for that than sit and listen to more about, you know, Deutero-Isaiah and how that plays into theology or something.*

*Tim – We have a family in our church who reached out to me, and they have stressful jobs. Uh, they have very stressful jobs, and they reached out and said to all the staff, on them, they will provide a week at a local retreat center for mental health rest. But our elders have not done that. We can go get counseling, everything you would need in that way, but not in the sense of a retreat. And so for someone like me who does better in mental health through more of a retreat setting and more of a, you know, contemplative approach...I don't have that. If the elders offered something like that, I would be on it in a heart beat. But that has not been offered.*

### **I Wish I Didn't Have to Work Twice as Hard in Order to Take Time Off**

*David – I always have to do so much work before I leave and there is so much to catch up on when I get back. So, let's make sure that this is a retreat versus, "Well, I had to work twice as hard."*

*Denise – There's a lack of understanding...it's really hard for me to take a Sunday off. I could but it's really hard. And so, I almost wish there was...I don't even know what that would look like. I wish someone would say, "We know you're working really hard. We know that it's hard for you to do that, but we're going to make it possible that you can take holidays like everybody else does. You just can't take a Sunday off without a lot of preparation. I've taken four Sundays off since I started here. Three of them have started with text messages first thing in the morning. I'm not even in town. I don't know how you want me to fix the problem.*

### **Sabbatical**

*Grady – Sabbaticals for small churches is just impossible as we are currently structured. But man, it's necessary. I am so often just baby birding my sermons cause I just barely have had the time to choose something and I'm trying to feed it to somebody else.*

*Rachel – I would like a really well thought out vacation package and continuous ed, and sabbatical. Like, set up from the get-go, saying this is important and so this is part of us hiring you, this is part of your compensation.*

## Dominant Thread for Question 9 (b):

### Counseling /Therapy

David – *To keep us in the game a little better I think we need to have a scheduled time in the calendar to talk to counselors just for a tune up once or twice a year.*

Rachel – *I'd love therapy. You know, financial support for therapy. But I realize it just depends on the financial situation with the church.*

Paul – *Whether you all it counseling or life coaching, just an update, where the elders say we would love for you to have a session at least annually. I found a life coach last summer, but it was on my own funding.*

Grady – *We need staff or ministry adjacent super qualified pastoral counselors available to preachers. I should get two or three days a year, every couple of years with a counselor somewhere just power driving through some of the crap and someone that I could check in with every couple of weeks, even if it's online. Someone I can unload on that has both the capacity to hold it with me but also the experience to help me unpack it some.*

Emily – *I think all ministers should have access to at least some form of counseling that is covered by the church. It is just not a job where you get to clock out and be done. I think that would be the biggest thing I would advocate for is that all ministers in any capacity should have access to that.*

### Coding

- To questions 9 (a), “What resources, retreats or spiritual practices are offered to you by your eldership in regards to healing, maintaining or strengthening your mental health?”
  - 2 Unique perspectives:
    - Christmas break, church retreats
  - 2 Common threads:
    - Sabbatical (4).
    - Counseling/Therapy (4).
  - 1 Dominant thread:
    - Conferences/personal growth/continuing education budget (7).
- To question 9 (b), “What resources, retreats or practices would be beneficial if they were offered?”
  - 3 Unique perspectives:
    - Marriage seminar, trauma informed training, bigger conference/retreat budget.
  - 4 Common threads:
    - Please initiate help, hold us accountable. We don't want to have to ask (4).
    - Personal/mental wellness retreat (3).
    - I wish I didn't have to work twice as hard to take time off (2).
    - Sabbatical (2).

- 1 Dominant thread:
  - Counseling/therapy (5).

### *Observations*

Seven out of eleven ministers said their elders offer them the opportunity to go to conferences, retreats, and seek continuing education. Interestingly, all seven are responsible for choosing and putting those plans together. From what I could gather, they like the freedom of choosing and planning their own conferences and retreats. However, this is a double-edged sword. While they want the freedom they lose the accountability, meaning the elders take a more hands off approach, which I believe is one of the reasons for the lack of check-ins concerning mental and spiritual health. Again, the theme here arises of not wanting to have to ask for these benefits and the desire for conferences and retreats to be offered from time to time. I suspect there are a lot of ministers like Kevin who is given time, freedom, and a budget to plan self-care but do not because they are too busy. Also of note, while 4 ministers stated their church offers counseling as a part of their health plan or benefit package, five ministers stated they do not have any such outlet. To them it seems that counseling is not a perk or benefit; it is desperately needed.

**Question 10: Galatians 5:22 says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (a) Which of these fruits are you craving most in your life right now? (b) Which of these fruits are you needing the most from others right now?**

Unique Perspectives for Question 10 (a):

### **Patience**

*Amy – So the one I’m landing on that I feel like I need right now is patience. Because change is slow; change in me and change in my children to cultural change in the church or change in the world.*

## **Generosity**

Adam – *The generosity thing...you can't give what you don't have. And you've got a bunch of people running around, you know, wanting to give things they don't have, but not wanting to give the things they do have. And that's difficult. You know, I'm in that boat. I don't have a bunch of extra time. I don't have a bunch of extra moments of mental clarity in my day. I can't give what I don't have and I just feel like I don't have much.*

## **Gentleness**

Kevin – *Gentleness in the fact, thinking about my daughter's flinching. There's a gentleness in Jesus' discipline that shows care and love. I think there's a gentleness in the way I treat other people and the concern that I have for other people that I need to focus on. I like to think I'm gentle towards other people and I probably am outwardly, but inwardly I'm not, and I would even say that gentleness towards myself. I can be a very hard critic of who I am and what I've done.*

## **Love**

David – *So, running through that list, what is kind of jumping out of me is maybe love. People go through so many tragic situations and I want to make sure that that love for others, that love for God is still open and continuing.*

### **Common Threads for Question 10 (a):**

## **Peace**

Denise – *I think for myself, I would probably say peace. I'm just in a busy season. I am struggling to leave work at work and not question every decision I've made. The ability to just rest and to feel at peace and I don't have to do it all.*

Emily – *Peace is the one I wish that I had the most; resting in his love and being content. I have a really hard time resting, you know, just being at peace in a situation.*

## **Self-Control**

Kevin – *I think self-control too. I struggled with pornography a lot as a teenager, even into early ministry, I did. I'm thankful that I don't currently feel that's a struggle, but my food and my eating is...maybe I changed one compulsion for another. That level of craving occurs when I'm tired because I know my body is needing energy to go and work, and I've got kids, and I've got a wife. And so, I know that is a perpetual cycle.*

Adam – *I would say that I’m craving self-control mainly because it’s been a rough season. We just adopted twins that we were fostering. We’ve had them for four years. So, when I’m exhausted, which is most of the time and I’m worn down with everyday church stuff that is happening...put this in your paper, fostering twins during a pandemic and being a minister will test every level of your entire soul! It was insane, but we came out on the other side we’re all good. I just need to be a little more disciplined.*

#### Dominant Thread for Question 10 (a):

##### **Joy**

Tim – *The one for me...joy. Nancy told me the other day. She said, “You know, Tim, you used to be more winsome and humorous and you’ve been a little heavy on the serious side the last couple of years.” And I was like, that’s a good point.*

Paul – *I’m craving joy. I’m craving joy and you know; I’ve been working hard the last several years about being content no matter the circumstances. And I feel like I’m in a season of joy and finding those joys. But once you have a little bit of it, you want it, you crave it. You crave it.*

Josh – *I crave joy most right now...I’m in a season of life where for some reason I’m having trouble figuring out what it is I really enjoy. Even simple things. What are the simple things in my regular, everyday life where I just feel super compelled to smile. You know what I mean? In the midst of what I feel like is kind of a chaotic time I need those moments of joy, and those reminders of goodness, even happiness may be unattainable at the moment because there is too much going on. So, joy would be a real balm for me.*

Kendrick – *Joy. I want joy for myself. I want joy. I am desperately craving more joy in my life.*

Angela – *I think joy for me. This coming Saturday will be my brother’s funeral. It’s not that it wasn’t expected, but I haven’t lost a sibling before. So, I think I’m in a spot that feels kind of heavy.*

#### Unique Answers for Question 10 (b):

##### **I Feel Fully Supported**

Angela – *I don’t know. I can’t think of anything. People go out of their way for me all the time. I’m loved. I’m supported. The Lord just sees to it that I’m taken care of.*

##### **Peace**

Adam – *Peace is just something I pray about. Not worrying, not feeling like the hammer’s going to fall, not struggling to breathe every day or trying to keep our head above water or you know,*

*not have an incident. I need peace for my life, but I need it from others too. More than anything, I need people modeling peace.*

#### Common Threads for Question 10 (b):

##### **Love**

*Paul – I would say love is what I'm needing from others. You know, it's hard to say, "Love me." But, you know, I just need people checking in in whatever capacity, and that's a sacrifice, you know, to think of someone else.*

*Kevin – I would say love. I went to lunch with a friend of mine, a secular friend. We actually went to college together. He was a Bible major; he was a preacher. He left the church. We go to lunch once every couple of months together and he made a comment. He basically said something about how good I was. It was something that was building up; it was encouraging to me. And it was genuine on his part and it was a very loving thing...and I cannot explain the rush of emotion and feeling that it caused within me. There was a genuine love and concern and appreciation. I felt better from that. You don't get that from the handshakes at the end of a sermon or the end of church. I think most people just assume things are running along fine until there's a major hiccup. For some reason he sensed or picked up on it. So, I would say love.*

##### **Kindness**

*David – Kindness when you think about concerns or complaints, you know, and all the little criticisms that come or even those little digs and barbs. Sometimes folks joke and say, hey we'll just give him a hard time and it's a death by a thousand cuts. It's not like one big thing or one person, but it just accumulates over time.*

*Rachel – Maybe kindness? Not that they were unkind to me, but when I think of kindness, I think of like proactively looking out for the good of the other person. I would say really wanting what's best and recognizing that maybe you don't know what's best, and that you need to ask and try to proactively ask what can we do? To say, "We love you so much. What can we do to really help you be ok?"*

*Kendrick – Kindness. Yeah, I think I would like to experience more kindness. More love and kindness from people.*

##### **Gentleness**

*Emily – Just because, I have far more expectations put on me than some of the staff. I'm expected to be in charge of every event at church, and if something goes wrong, even if it wasn't delegated to me, I'm the one they approach because I should have caught it and fixed it. And if*



*there was just some more gentleness in the way they handled that, it wouldn't be so exhausting and defeating.*

*Denise – I guess maybe it's gentleness and how people support me with time, how they respond. And just you know, approaching me with understanding that I'm doing my best.*

## **Faithfulness**

*Grady – Personally, for me, faithfulness feels like it's in really short supply with church people. I know that verse is about faithfulness to God, but I'm one of God's people that's trying to journey with them, and one of them in particular who's kind of chosen to put a lot more time and energy and effort into the basket of serving that journey with God. And sometimes I wish there were indicators that people even fractionally spent anything like that kind of time concerned about me and my family's well-being the way I do about them and their family.*

*Tim – Faithfulness would be number one for me. When it comes to friendships, I believe in the long game, you know, that it's a lifelong thing. You know, we are going to get to know each other over the long haul and that loyalty is a big deal and it really means a lot to me when people demonstrate faithfulness and I don't feel like I'm one foot on a rock and the other on a lily pad, and one slip this way or the other could make the relationship fade. So, faithfulness. Faithfulness is the number one thing I need from others.*

### **Dominant Threads for Question 10 (b):**

Dominant threads – Not applicable for Question 10 (b).

### **Coding**

- To question 10 (a), “Which of the fruits of the Spirit are you craving most in your life right now?”
  - 4 Unique perspectives:
    - Patience, generosity, gentleness, and love.
  - 2 Common threads:
    - Peace (2).
    - Self-control (2).
  - 1 Dominant thread:
    - Joy (5).
- To question 10 (b), “Which of the fruits of the Spirit are you craving the most from others?”
  - 2 Unique perspectives:
    - I feel fully supported, peace
  - 4 Common threads:
    - Love (2).
    - Kindness (2).

- Gentleness (2).
- Faithfulness (2).
- 0 Dominant threads.

### *Observations*

Nearly half of all interviewees said they crave joy the most (5). This seems to correlate with leaders like Moses and Elijah that loved the Lord but sometimes felt down. Ministry can be rewarding and it can also be depleting. All of the fruits of the Spirit are relational, but the common threads for what ministers most need from others really seem to center around the rough edge that can accompany interpersonal relationships in the church. Ministers need kindness, gentleness, love, and faithfulness. I particularly find it interesting that both Grady and Tim used faithfulness not in terms of their relationship with God, but in relationships with others. Another word that could be used here is loyalty. Ministers are expected to be loyal to the congregation but do they receive loyalty in return?

## CHAPTER 6

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESTORY

We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.<sup>167</sup>

Throughout this project I have made a case for the church's need to acknowledge the validity of the burnout that stems from exhaustion, depersonalization and the feelings of inefficacy that can manifest in the relationship between the helper (minister) and recipient (parishioner). The World Health Organization officially recognizes burnout as an occupational hazard that deserves attention. It is not a fad; it is not the blues or boredom. Ministers and church leaders must recognize burnout for what it is; a mental and spiritual deficiency that must be managed.

Furthermore, I have demonstrated that burnout symptoms manifested in the lives of great leaders like Moses and Elijah, men who prayed and conversed with God face to face, yet still felt detached, lonely, and worthless at times. And finally, men and women in ministry have testified to the challenges that ministry creates in their personal and professional life, especially in this Covid era. Acknowledging burnout and admitting there is a problem are half the battle, but a strategic plan for change is still needed. Therefore, I offer a way forward through some recommendations to church leaders. First, the mental wellness environment of ministry must be addressed and inventoried for real change to occur in the work place. Second, the meaning of life must shift from a focus on ministry to a focus on Jesus. Third, the myth that self-care is selfish

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<sup>167</sup> Henri J. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossway Books, 1989), 61-62.

must be dispelled. Fourth, in order to prevent or recover from burnout a spiritual rhythm must be initiated, and finally, ministers must empower themselves to speak up and tell their story.

### **Changing the Leadership Culture**

#### *Recommendation for Elders*

In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger writes about the difficulty in changing a leadership culture. He says, “You can’t go alone, but you haven’t succeeded until you’ve survived the sabotage.”<sup>168</sup> For most of us in ministry who are tasked with creating a vision, starting a movement, or rallying the troops the easy part is the game plan. Yet, the game plan is usually more successful on paper than in real life. Bolsinger adds, “Very often the same people who applaud the stirring vision resist the implementation. Leaders are lauded for their boldness and creativity, and then in the very same breath shouted down for suggesting that the change effort will require each of us to change personally.”<sup>169</sup>

In any leadership culture there are bound to be saboteurs, it is natural. For the most part, saboteurs are not conscientious dissenters, they simply want to support the status quo. When a culture shift is needed, and often times even supported, there will still be resistance due to self-preservation.<sup>170</sup> A shift to a more robust, proactive model for mental wellness will take a commitment to engagement from all of the elders in your church. Community drives belonging.<sup>171</sup> Listen to these statistics from Deloitte’s Global Human Capital Trends survey:

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<sup>168</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 15.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>171</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 49.

79% of survey respondents said that fostering a sense of belonging in the workforce was important to the organization's success in the next 12-18 months, and 93 percent agreed that a sense of belonging drives organizational performance—one of the highest rates of consensus on importance the company has seen in a decade.<sup>172</sup>

Creating an environment for mental wellness in the church sounds great, but it comes with sacrifice. Elders, your staff needs to know that they not only have your approval, but also your blessing and willingness to partner with them in their spiritual and mental wellness journey. For transformation in a culture to take root, leaders must be willing to change their vocabulary, reconfigure their score card, and alter their behavior.<sup>173</sup> If you have not done so already, I encourage you read the answers the eleven ministers gave to question four and six in this study, concerning the comfort they feel in approaching their elders with mental health concerns. The more willing you are to walk with them (not just talk) through a mental or spiritual health crisis, the more likely a minister will be to come to you in the future.

I found it remarkable that I spent nearly an hour with each interviewee (some even more) and not one of the ministers showed any kind of disdain or disrespect for their elders. Sure, there was disappointment and heartache over situations that could have been handled differently, but these ministers love their leaders. They are looking to you to love them back in tangible and sustainable ways. Jim Moss, the executive director of YMCA WorkWell and husband of author Jenny Moss says, “The moment someone perceives that the community they once relied on for social support and psychological safety has abandoned them, it can have substantial negative rippling effects.”<sup>174</sup> Cynicism is contagious. When a minister on your church staff does not feel

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<sup>172</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 49.

<sup>173</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church – and What We Should Do Instead* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2015), 134.

<sup>174</sup> Jennifer Moss, *The Burnout Epidemic*, 51.

supported by you or your fellow elders, the negativity felt in that relationship spreads to other staff members.

In Matthew 5:5, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Perhaps one of the greatest qualities of a shepherd is meekness. It takes skill and patience to lead sheep. On the one hand, you need to teach them to follow, but on the other, you must teach them to trust your voice. A culture shift will require new methods, and for some a new attitude I call *empathetic authority*. Like a parent with a child, it is not your responsibility to be the minister’s best friend, but it is your responsibility to teach and train and nurture and love. There is a lot of room for grace in relationships where love leads.

One of the greatest mistakes I see in elderships today is trying to run the church like a business, and in turn, treating staff like employees to be managed. Sure, the staff are employees and technically you are their boss, but words like manage and boss are not kingdom words. Jesus told his disciples not to be like the pagans that loved to lord their rule over others (Matthew 20:25). Servant leadership was Christ’s model and it must be your model too. A few months ago, I was speaking to Angela, one of the interviewees, over the phone answering some questions she had about the interview process before she agreed to sign on. She said, “have you ever noticed how few elders are in helping professions?” I was dumbfounded. I had never thought about that before. I’m sure there are elders in these positions, but it is usually the exception rather than the rule. The harsh truth in leadership is that we live in a culture that values lordship over servanthood. Stated bluntly, business models are not only hard on relationships between elders and staff in the church, they are unbiblical. Perhaps the business model below of church leadership looks familiar to you:

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- Elders = board of trustees
- Lead Minister = president/CEO
- Staff = vice presidents
- Members = shareholders/loyal customers
- Visitors = potential customers<sup>175</sup>

The ministers in this study repeatedly stated they are not looking for a utopian church culture where anything goes. In fact, many are looking for more communication, implementation, and structure. However, they are not seeking board members; they are seeking shepherds to lead them with empathetic authority. There are so many metaphors of shepherds and sheep in the Bible. David writes about the comfort he feels in the presence of his Shepherd in Psalm 23 and Jesus speaks to being the Good Shepherd in John 10. One passage that does not receive as much attention is Ezekiel 34. The leaders of Israel, the supposed shepherds of the flock, are called out by the Lord for feeding themselves and neglecting the sheep. In fact, God says the sheep scattered because there was no shepherd to tend them (Ezekiel 34:5). Jeramie Rinne puts it this way, if you are going to be a shepherd, you better smell like sheep.<sup>176</sup> Read the words of Grady's interview again, when asked, what do you wish your elders understood about the mental health needs of ministry?

*I wish elders had a sense of protectiveness around ministers, that sometimes they need to take up a fight for us. Just because I can handle a squeaky wheel doesn't mean it should always be my responsibility to do it. There's a difference between elders who will appropriately respond to your cry for help and elders who will anticipate cries for help because they're shepherding you too. Right? I also want to say though, that I wish elders would be involved enough in my life to be lovingly confrontational with me before I have something to fix or apologize for or make a mistake. I want to be shepherded. It seems to me we don't want elders to be a board of directors anymore, and that's great, but what they've kind of become is a damage control team and that's not shepherding either. You're a bad shepherd if you've gotten good at stitching up sheep after the wolves get in. Like, keep the wolves out man!*

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<sup>175</sup> Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 32.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 35.

Grady is hurting, admittedly depressed, lonely, and the eldership in his church just disbanded. He does not crave elders who will manage him; he desires to have elders who will walk with him and guide him through his struggles in ministry and in life.

Elders, I get it. You have a very difficult responsibility and you often go unthanked and unappreciated.<sup>177</sup> You also are sheep needing a shepherd. Please know your ministers are not asking you to walk on water, but to simply to smell like sheep. Simple is different than easy. Easy means something can be done with little effort. Simple means a plan can be achieved by following clearly designated steps. From the interviews and research in this study, I offer these recommendations for creating and maintaining a mental wellness culture for your ministry staff:

- Listen with empathy. Seek to understand, not just to fix or find solutions.
- Provide health insurance that comes with counseling benefits or make a line item in the church budget to pay for counseling as needed.
- Offer a sabbatical of at least four weeks every five years.<sup>178</sup>
- Provide time and funds for a personal wellness retreat once a year that does not count towards vacation or conferences.
- Designate at least one elder to be a mental and spiritual health mentor to each staff member. This elder must be proactive rather than reactive to wellness needs. Make a wellness plan with the staff member and lovingly hold them accountable to use the time and resources offered.
- Much like sick days, provide a minimum of three mental health days to be used throughout the year.

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<sup>177</sup> In the future, I would like to conduct another narrative inquiry for elders in the church. Though often overlooked, I believe there are many elders in the church that also suffer from burnout. Many Church of Christ eldership do not have term limits or sabbatical periods for their elders, meaning some serve until they are completely spent. It is not uncommon for elders to resign and then disengage from the congregation. There needs to be research and intervention of some kind as to how burnout affects these leaders and what can be done to prevent it.

<sup>178</sup> Sabbaticals may need to be offered as needed if burnout symptoms are severe.



## **Ministry for Jesus vs. Ministry from Jesus**

### *Recommendation for Ministers*

Perhaps you are facing an existential crisis. Somewhere down the line of ministry, you began to believe that the purpose of your life, the very meaning of your existence, was to be a minister. You believe that everything you are is wrapped up in whether you fail or succeed in leading and teaching and evangelizing others. Yet, think about this; if your worth is completely wrapped up in your successes, then even Jesus was a failure. Yes, he ushered thousands upon thousands into a new kingdom and died on the cross and rose from the grave to conquer sin...but if we are measuring worth based solely on the successes of ministry, he failed. I realize this might sound like the most bold and blasphemous statement ever made, but hear me out.

The day after Jesus fed the five thousand, the crowd came back asking for more. Jesus explained his purpose was not to feed people bread from the earth but the bread of life that came down from heaven. He proclaimed, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you (John 6:53).” John 6:60 tells us that when many of the disciples heard Jesus’ words, they decided his teachings were too difficult and they turned away. Technically speaking, Jesus failed, his numbers went down, he lost part of the crowd. Throughout the gospels we see people turning away; a rich young ruler, childhood friends from his hometown synagogue, and his own apostle, Judas. In baseball terms, not even Jesus batted a thousand.

I am guessing that, despite Christ’s numbers, you do not believe he was a failure. You believe that Jesus’ life had purpose and meaning because of the way he lived and loved through the power of his Father and that is what you must believe about yourself. Your worth is not determined by what you do for Jesus but by who you are and how you live from Jesus.

Ministerial identity is misguided because it is founded on the grounds of moral conformity rather than God's grace. In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller retells the story of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. He makes the case that there are two lost sons in the story. The youngest, who we tend to focus on, suffers from the sin of self-discovery. He believes that the purpose of life is his own enjoyment. The older brother though, is not without sin, he suffers from moral conformity. Keller explains:

The elder brother in the parable illustrates the way of moral conformity. The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed that, while they were a people chosen by God, they could only maintain their place in his blessing and receive final salvation through strict obedience to the Bible. There are innumerable varieties of this paradigm, but they all believe in putting the will of God and the standards of the community above individual fulfillment. In this view, we only attain happiness and a world made right by achieving moral rectitude. We may fall at times, of course, but then we will be judged by how abject and intense our regret is. In this view, even in our failures we must always measure up.<sup>179</sup>

This is the story of so many Christians and so many ministers. We believe that happiness in ministry can only be attained through our good works and making the world right. Then when we fail morally or the world spirals deeper into darkness, we question our effectiveness as spiritual leaders. Paul teaches a very different theology of work than that of occupational existentialism. Work is, and always will be, a large part of ministry but the work itself does not bring meaning. Meaning in ministry can only be found in the worth given to us by God in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:8-10). I love the phrasing of the NRSV here. "We are what

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<sup>179</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 34-35.

he made us.” It is through Christ we are saved, not through our works. Works are the natural byproduct of our salvation, not the way to it.

Ministers, my greatest recommendation for a place to start in breaking the burnout cycle is to remember your worth. Your work is meaningful in ministry when it flows from Christ and not just for Christ. Yes, you work in Jesus’ name, but do you live all life in Jesus’ name? As I have expressed throughout this project, calling is complicated. You are probably in ministry because you feel gifted by God to use your talents to serve. Let the giftedness you’ve been given to serve as a reminder that you are not self-sufficient. You have no ability to do God’s work without God’s gifts.<sup>180</sup> Your giftedness does not make you worthy, but rather in your worthiness, God has given you gifts.

### **Practicing Self-Care**

#### *Recommendations for Ministers and Elders*

The church needs your help in dispelling the myth that self-care is selfish. It is actually quite the opposite. Up front, it should be stated that every disciple is called to a life of self-sacrifice. Christians are called to live beyond themselves by looking to the needs of others. However, self-sacrifice and “burning out” for Jesus are not the same. Service and sacrifice are attributes of Jesus, but service without the discipline of self-care is dangerous. Again, drawing on the example of Jesus, one can see that Christ practiced both. There were days he exhausted himself meeting the needs of the crowd and there were others where he spent time alone with God in prayer (Mark 1:35).

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<sup>180</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 75.

Part of the deception that self-care is selfish comes from our interpretation of Scripture. Verses like, “deny yourself and take up your cross (Luke 9:23),” and “offer your body as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1),” have been used to bully burnout for years. While these verses are true, Jesus and Paul worked in partnership with other disciples to further the kingdom and sought support, fellowship, solitude and rest. While Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, nine of his apostles were left in the valley below to continue the work (Matthew 17). In the very same chapter where Paul calls the Romans to be living sacrifices, he mentions that each disciple is a member of the body and not all members have the same function. Not all parts of the body can be active all of the time.

The call to self-denial by Jesus refers to the motivational self, whereas self-care deals with the structural self. Peter Brain explains, “Hard work and consistent sacrifice is required by virtue of being of being Christians—it cannot be otherwise if we are to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Yet, being human, we need rest, refreshment and encouragement.”<sup>181</sup> He goes on to say that his own conviction remains, “That devoted service and obedience not only will flow out of a base of thoughtful self-care, but will be fueled by it.”<sup>182</sup> Author, Christopher Ash shares the story of a minister friend that also serves as a fire fighter. He explains self-care and self-sacrifice this way:

Obviously you have to push yourself to physical limits when fighting a fire. It’s a stretching experience that is uncomfortable and physically difficult. You have to know your limitations while making the sacrifices needed to get the tasks done that must be done. It’s foolish to ignore your limitations, try to be the hero, and cramp up, pass out, or have a heart attack while in a burning structure because you’re beyond your limits of what God has supplied you with the capacity of doing. It’s a form of heroic suicide that is

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<sup>181</sup> Peter Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit For a Lifetime of Ministry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Youngstown, OH: Matthias Media, 2006), 22.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 126.

counterproductive because you're now no longer effective in fighting fire and the resources that were dedicated to fighting the fire are now dedicated to saving you.<sup>183</sup>

Elders, throughout this project I have tried to show that burnout is not a syndrome that that develops from a lack of care. It is actually quite the opposite. If you have a staff member dealing with burnout symptoms like extreme exhaustion, stress, anxiety and depersonalization please know they care about the church a great deal. Ministers, my recommendation to you is to resolve to make self-care a priority. No one can do this for you. Use the disciplines of prayer, Scripture, solitude, sabbath and others to connect you to God so you can continue connecting to others. As Adam said in his interview, "You can't give what you don't have." It is not selfish to ask Christ to fill your cup, it is spiritual.

### **Establishing a Rule for Life**

When I prepare to preach a sermon, I must confess that it is easy to get lost in my commentaries. There is so much information to learn and digest. I fill notebooks with Greek and Hebrew definitions, theological insights, and background information. While all of this is important to the process of constructing a sermon, I have learned the hard way that interesting facts and theology mean little to the listener if there is not something tangible to grab onto. In order for a sermon to be powerful and effective, it must address the question of "What now?". In the same way, a doctor of ministry project that defines and explains the nature of burnout without practical application is of little value. It is like a waiter giving you a menu at a restaurant, but never letting you order. Filling the deficit that burnout creates is essential to regaining or maintaining mental and spiritual health.

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<sup>183</sup> Ash, *Zeal Without Burnout*, 25.

The most tangible way to fight burnout is to create a *rule for life*. A rule for life can be defined as establishing regular rhythms and spiritual practices that continually open a person to the will and presence of Christ.<sup>184</sup> The word *rule* is derived from the Latin word *regula*, which literally means a straight piece of wood.<sup>185</sup> A rule may sound rigid or controlling, but the intended purpose of a rule for life is to provide support and structure. Comer tells us that the word *regula* was also used for trellis in the Latin language.<sup>186</sup> A trellis is used underneath the heavy vine to provide structure so that the vine can thrive in producing grapes.<sup>187</sup>

The structure for each individual's rule of life may look different. Fasting, feasting on the Word, time in solitude and time in community are important disciplines we see Jesus exemplify in the Gospels. While all of these disciplines are of vital importance, there are three that have been most crucial in my battle against burnout; a rhythm of prayer, the practice of sabbath, and a community to confide in.

### *Prayer*

Ministers who are burned out often spend a lot of their time searching for meaning. They desire a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God. They dream of a fulfilling life but cannot find a way to get there. A rule of prayer, in and of itself, does not create a deep and meaningful relationship with God, but it does provide avenues to constantly be in God's presence. When disciples of Jesus seek ways to be present to God, deep meaning often follows.

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<sup>184</sup> Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 37.

<sup>185</sup> Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 95.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

Calhoun says, “Prayer is a word that describes a relationship.”<sup>188</sup> A rule of life for any disciple, especially ministers, must contain prayer. When I interviewed the ministers for this project, I asked them what spiritual disciplines they practice on a regular basis to help them combat burnout. Prayer was a predominant answer given by 8 of the 11 ministers. I expected this answer, but what I did not expect was the variety of ways in which prayer is practiced. Emily, Angela, and Rachel pray little prayers throughout the day, engaging God in simple conversation, or as Rachel puts it, “finding God in the cracks and crevices” of everyday life. Others, like Kendrick and Grady, practice prayer through a more structured contemplative process. David admits he needs to grow in the discipline of prayer and Rachel confessed to having a tormented relationship with prayer.

The important thing to remember in practicing prayer as a part of a rule of life is to focus on the intended outcome. Calhoun says, “Prayer is sustained less by duty than by a desire to connect and grow in intimacy and communion with the holy Three.”<sup>189</sup> Whether one’s prayer life is fluent, strained, simple or complex, prayer serves as a way to fill the burnout deficit by creating a surplus of God’s abiding presence.

### *The Practice of Sabbath*

Sabbath is one of the most important spiritual disciplines for burnout victims because it teaches trust. Godly rest serves as a reminder that God is the provider and the sustainer, the only one who can fill our depleted souls. Sabbath teaches that ministry is bigger than the minister. In Matthew 26, while Jesus is at the house of Simon the leper, a woman with an alabaster jar of

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<sup>188</sup> Calhoun, 231.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

costly ointment anointed the head of Jesus while he reclined at the table. This act of generosity towards Jesus was seen as too costly and careless by the disciples. But Jesus said, “Why do you trouble this woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me” (vs. 10-11). This verse provides insight into the heart of Jesus and the heart of ministry. Does Jesus not care about the poor? Was he being selfish? Of course not. Jesus knew that the ministry to the poor would be constant. No one loved the poor like Jesus did, but Jesus knew that compassion was also meant for the giver.<sup>190</sup> Ministry leaders must learn to have compassion for themselves, taking the opportunity to rest at the feet of Jesus.

God knows our tendency to leave him out of the picture. He knows that we find worth in a great many things besides him. Perhaps this is one of the reasons God created sabbath. The giving of manna in Exodus 16 is telling of God’s design for sabbath. God gave Israel what they needed for each day, and on the sixth day God told them to gather twice as much for the seventh because that day was to be a holy sabbath, a day of rest. The people of Israel seemed to live from a place of scarcity rather than abundance. They gathered more than they needed throughout the week only to see the manna spoil in the morning. On the seventh day they went out to gather manna but found none. God was teaching Israel reliance and trust. The Creator who gives abundantly gave what they needed when they needed it.

It would have been so much easier for God to build a barn and fill it with manna that would never spoil. Israel could come to the storehouses and gather manna at any time. However, this was not God’s design. Ministers need sabbath as much as any disciple. There needs to be a rhythm built into our week that shows trust and reliance in the God of abundance. A sabbath

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<sup>190</sup> Wayne Mueller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1999), 49.



rhythm reminds the minister that God is taking care of the poor and the broken on the days we work and the days we rest. Sabbath allows for God to fill our souls with quiet rest and provides others with the opportunity to share the load of ministry.

### *A Community of Confidants*

Since the interview process, I have spent a lot of time thinking about Grady and Kevin. Both shared a deep sense of loneliness and isolation that has caused varying levels of depression. They each crave a community where they are valued and can be vulnerable. Their stories underscore the deep need in ministry for a community of confidants. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie define a confidant as someone that operates outside of the organizational boundary, has few if any conflicting loyalties, and aligned interests.<sup>191</sup> In my own experience, I have found the best confidants to be ministers, particularly ministers from other congregations. While it is possible to find close companions within the congregation, they usually fill the role of an ally. An ally is a person that shares many of your values, strategies, and operates across some organizational or factional boundary.<sup>192</sup> It can be hard to be truly vulnerable and honest with members of the congregation. In some instances, it would even be inappropriate to share struggles with other members, leadership, or staff.

A rule of life most often centers around practices that bring one into the presence of God, but I would argue that trusted people can also bring us into the presence of God. One of the greatest ways to prevent or heal burnout is to formulate relationships that spur spiritual growth and accountability. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie state, “Pastors need brothers and sisters who

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<sup>191</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 42.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

are confidants: persons who can provide you with a place where you can say everything that's in your heart, everything that's on your mind, without being predigested or well packaged."<sup>193</sup>

### *My Burnout Recovery and Rule of Life*

As I have come out on the other side of burnout, it has been my experience that exhaustion and anxiety still creep in from time to time. Burnout symptoms come and go like waves and I am most vulnerable to burnout when I am not practicing the presence of God. It is easy for me to focus on the structure of the rule rather than the purpose—abiding in God's presence. When I was at my lowest point in ministry in 2020, I operated completely out of the deficit. My life was centered in scarcity. I was a Martha who had no idea how to sit at the feet of Jesus like Mary. Three years later, my life is not perfect, but it is abundant. I have slowly learned that my life is not wrapped up in my vocation and that my being with God must come before my doing for God. Developing a rule of life has created a rhythm for me to practice being in God's presence daily. Prayer keeps me in relationship with my Creator and King, sabbath reminds me that I am dependent upon God's goodness and grace, and my community of confidants allows me to see the face of God in humanity. Prayer brings me peace, sabbath gives me rest, and community brings me joy.

### **Take Control of Your Narrative—Tell Your Story**

To my brothers and sisters in ministry experiencing burnout, hold on. You are not alone. The greatest way to bring yourself to the other side and to help others in similar circumstances is to tell your story. Curt Thompson tells us:

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 44.

Of all the things that set us apart from the rest of creation as humans, one feature stands out: we tell stories...whether we know it or not, and whether we intend to or not, we live our lives telling stories...we do so not just to describe what we are doing but to make sense of what we have done.<sup>194</sup>

Today is full of empty pages, inviting you to pick up the pen and take control of your narrative. God not only redeems brokenness; he uses it to tell to tell redemptive stories. As you write and share the words of your life, listen for God's voice. He may show up in the wind, an earthquake or fire, but maybe, just maybe he will come to you in a soft gentle whisper.

### **Restorying the Narrative**

From the stories of eleven brave men and women in ministry a narrative formed, consisting of unique perspectives and common and dominant threads. Using their unique and shared experiences I reconstructed their story,<sup>195</sup> often called *restorying*, to create a collective voice. Re-storying is a type of narrative therapy that has been used to help practitioners understand and respect diversity within the value base, culture, lived experience and life context of the people they serve.<sup>196</sup> Rafaely and Goldberg explain that, "Narrative therapy suggests a client can rewrite his or her story and acknowledges that the journey is what is important, not the product or outcome."<sup>197</sup> While often used in psychotherapy conditions, restorying can also be used as a tool in qualitative research to help the researcher create a story by combining several

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<sup>194</sup> Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 11.

<sup>195</sup> And in many ways my own story.

<sup>196</sup> Priscilla Ridgway, "ReStorying Psychiatric Disability: Learning from first person recovery narratives" *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 24.4 (Spr 2001), 336. Doi:10.1037/h0095071.

<sup>197</sup> Molly Rafaely and Rebecca M. Goldberg, "Grief Snow Globe: A creative approach to restorying grief and loss through narrative therapy." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 15, no. 4 (Oct. 2020), 483. Doi:10.1080/15401383.2020.1725704.

instances of particular stories to produce a more general story form.<sup>198</sup> Screenwriter, Lena Waith once said, “I’m writing my story so that others might see fragments of themselves.”<sup>199</sup> My hope is that this re-story will speak for the many ministers experiencing burnout that do not feel that they have the agency to speak for themselves. Here is our story:

### I am a minister

*I am a minister. From a young age I have felt a calling from God to serve others and share the good news of Jesus. Typically, I love what I do, but sometimes I don’t. Please don’t take it personally, it’s not you...well, sometimes it is you, but it’s also me. It’s us! Ministry is heavy, especially after Covid. Everything I thought I knew about church work went right out the window. It’s like we’re having to reinvent the wheel. This being a family thing is complicated.*

*It’s hard to describe the weight I carry around daily. It’s almost as if I carry a backpack full of burdens everywhere I go. I lie awake at night thinking about the problems in your marriage, while trying to maintain mine. I toss and turn thinking about the hearts of your kids while constantly worrying about the struggles of mine. I wonder if you like my sermons and if you’ll switch churches if you’re not happy. I wonder what it will take to raise our Sunday morning attendance. I wonder how many members we’ll lose before my job is in jeopardy. I wonder if you notice the amount of work I put into worship and Bible class. It’s so easy for me to wonder what you’re wondering; I forget to think about what God thinks. Isn’t that weird? I do ministry almost every day of the week and sometimes I don’t even think about God. And there is*

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<sup>198</sup> Loseke, *Narrative as Topic*, 49.

<sup>199</sup> Lena Waith, as quoted in, Valaida Fullwood, “Word to the Wise,” thecharlottecenter.org, November 30, 2022, <https://www.thecharlottecenter.org/news-notes/the-brief-november-2022>.

*so much guilt and shame that comes along with that. Here I am, this person who feels called to ministry, and I'm failing spiritually, mentally and emotionally.*

*Sometimes I think about leaving ministry behind. I dream about it; what it would be like to put the backpack down and drive a truck or chop down trees. But there's this calling on my life, right? So, I stick it out, I grin and bear it. It's so messed up...calling brought me into ministry, it's what keeps me in ministry, but it can also be what makes me resent ministry. Who am I, if not a minister? I'm not saying every minister feels this way. I have lots of minister friends who are thriving, but that makes me feel guilt and shame too. Why am I not like that? Why am I surviving when they're thriving. I finally broke down the other day and went to the elders. I told them I was exhausted, checked out, and questioning my call. Do you want to know what they told me? They said, "You need to have more faith. Take some time to pray about it." I was so angry! I do have faith! I do pray, but I need help! I can't carry this backpack much longer.*

*Please don't get me wrong, I love my elders and I know they love me. Sometimes I just don't think they know what to do. Most of them are used to running companies or managing people. They have told me, "Our door is always open. You can come to us with anything you need." And I appreciate that. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that, but I guess I'm stubborn. I want them to check in on me, shepherd me, hold me accountable. I'm not saying I want to be micromanaged; I just want to be seen and heard. Am I being selfish? I want to fill cups, but I need someone to fill my cup too!*

*It seems I'm always working from a deficit. I'll give and give until I can't give anymore. And that's my problem. I can't give what I don't have. I know this sounds crazy, but do you know what I crave more than anything? Joy. I'm not talking about happiness; happiness is*

*circumstantial. I'm talking about the joy one finds resting assured in the presence God. Rest. Now there's a word that's foreign to me. My ministry brain never shuts off. It's hard to be present at home and with friends. I don't even like going out on Saturday nights because all I can do is think about Sunday morning.*

*Anyways, I'm rambling...I just need you to know that I love being your minister. I still love serving others and telling people about Jesus, but I get lonely, I feel isolated at times. I'm a person just like you with real feelings and real fears. I'm not quite sure why I'm telling you all of this. Maybe it's a way to lighten the load, you know; take at least one burden out of the bag. So, I guess what I'm asking is, will you carry this burden with me?*

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## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT GUIDE

### Recruitment Guide

Dear Minister,

My name is Darrel Sears and I am a student at Lipscomb University working on my project thesis as a requirement for my Doctor of Ministry degree. The title of my project is “A Gentle Whisper: Restorying the Narrative of Ministers to Create a Collective Voice in the Battle Against Burnout.”

Over the past ten years or so, I have developed a growing concern for ministers and their mental health, particularly in the area of burnout. My project aims to force acknowledgment, raise awareness, and foster advocacy amongst ministers and elders in the church who are struggling to understand or find resources concerning burnout syndrome.

In order to identify the factors causing burnout, I need your help. I am hoping to interview 8-12 ministers on the subject. Would you consider letting me interview you to ask a series of questions about burnout and how it affects your personal life and profession in ministry? The interview involves 10 open ended questions that will take about an hour to an hour and a half of your time. The interview will be conducted over a Zoom conference call and your answers will be completely confidential. In the event that I use information from your answers in my project, an alias will be used and any identifying factors will be changed for the sake of anonymity. Audio and video from the Zoom call will be recorded for reference in my research only and will not be shared with any outside sources. No monetary compensation will be offered for participation in the study but my hope is that your participation will help many ministers and churches in the future.

To qualify for the interview, one must be at least 18 years old, in full-time ministry, and a minister within the Churches of Christ. You do not have to be a pulpit minister to take part in this interview. I would love to interview youth and family ministers, worship ministers, children’s ministers, and associate ministers as well. Both men and women are desired to participate in this study.

If you are willing to take part in the interview or would like more information before committing to the interview process, please send me an email at: [darrelsears@gmail.com](mailto:darrelsears@gmail.com). Thank you so much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,  
Darrel Sears

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWING HUMAN SUBJECTS

### **Adult Consent Form: Zoom Group Sessions with Video Recording**

Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in my DMin project. This form describes the interview process and what will be asked of you. Please read this document in its entirety and let me know if you have any questions or concerns before the interview begins.

#### **PURPOSE:**

Many ministers within the Churches of Christ find themselves overwhelmed by the vast struggles their congregants face on a daily basis. Whether it be the Covid pandemic, partisan politics, or the multifaceted socio-economic crisis, the weight of ministry often feels too heavy to bear. As a result, exhaustion, stress and burnout in ministry has become a mental health crisis that demands the attention of church leaders everywhere. The purpose of this study is to provide a narrative as to how burnout is affecting ministry leaders and how church elderships can become advocates and active participants in the spiritual and mental health of the men and women that minister in their congregations. By participating in this interview, your testimony will play a pivotal role in unmasking and understanding burnout and its effects.

#### **PROCEDURE:**

If selected for participation, you will be asked a series of 10 questions conducted via Zoom by the researcher of this project. The interview will take approximately 1 to 1 and ½ hours depending upon your answers to the questions given. The audio and video of the zoom session will be recorded for the sole purpose of reference for the researcher. No other persons will be present in person or online besides the researcher and interviewee. The answers you provide to the interview questions may be used in full or in part in the researcher's doctoral project but will be kept anonymous.

#### **RISKS:**

There are no known risks to taking part in this study. If you feel distressed at any time during the interview, please inform the researcher.

#### **BENEFITS:**

While it cannot be guaranteed, the hope is that you will find the exploratory questions in the interview meaningful and insightful to your life and ministry.

#### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:**

Please note that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even after agreement to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY:**

Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Your confidentiality will be protected in the recording and storing of data and all writing related to the study. When direct quotes are necessary, in order to share findings or conclusions, an alias will be used to protect anonymity. A transcription of the interview will be made after the interview

from the audio and video recordings. Once the transcription process is complete, the audio and video will be permanently deleted. Transcriptions will be kept on an external hard drive and kept in a locked safe. No recordings or transcripts will be kept in cloud storage for privacy purposes.

### **SHARING THE RESULTS:**

The researcher plans to use the results in writing of a project thesis to complete the Doctor of Ministry degree. The forementioned document will be shared in both academic and congregational settings.

### **PUBLICATION:**

This study will be published and made available to the public. The researcher retains the right to use the data collected from the project thesis towards future works and publishing. As promised, aliases will be used in the project thesis to protect anonymity and aliases will be used in any future publications that refer to data collected in the interview process.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS:**

If you have any questions about the project, the project leader, researcher, and author is Darrel Sears and may be contacted at [djsears@mail.lipscomb.edu](mailto:djsears@mail.lipscomb.edu)

In the event that you are unable to reach the project leader or you wish to speak to someone other than the project leader, you may contact Dr. John York at (512) 476-2772 or [john.york@lipscomb.edu](mailto:john.york@lipscomb.edu)

If you have concerns about this study, believe you have been injured because of the study, or have general questions about your rights as a study participant, you may contact Lipscomb University's Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Justin Briggs. He can be reached at [justin.briggs@lipscomb.edu](mailto:justin.briggs@lipscomb.edu) or by contacting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [irb@lipscomb.edu](mailto:irb@lipscomb.edu)

### **SIGNING CONSIDERATIONS:**

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in an online zoom interview, consisting of 10 questions, that will record both audio and video, for the sole use of research for Darrel Sears' project thesis. By signing, you acknowledge that the answers you give in the Zoom interview may be used in whole or in part in the project thesis and that this project will be published for public use. Furthermore, by signing, you understand that the data collected in the interview may be used in future research or publications. Finally, by signing below, you acknowledge that all questions about the interview process, the collection of research, and the publication of such have been answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be presented to you.

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: NARRATIVE INQUIRY – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

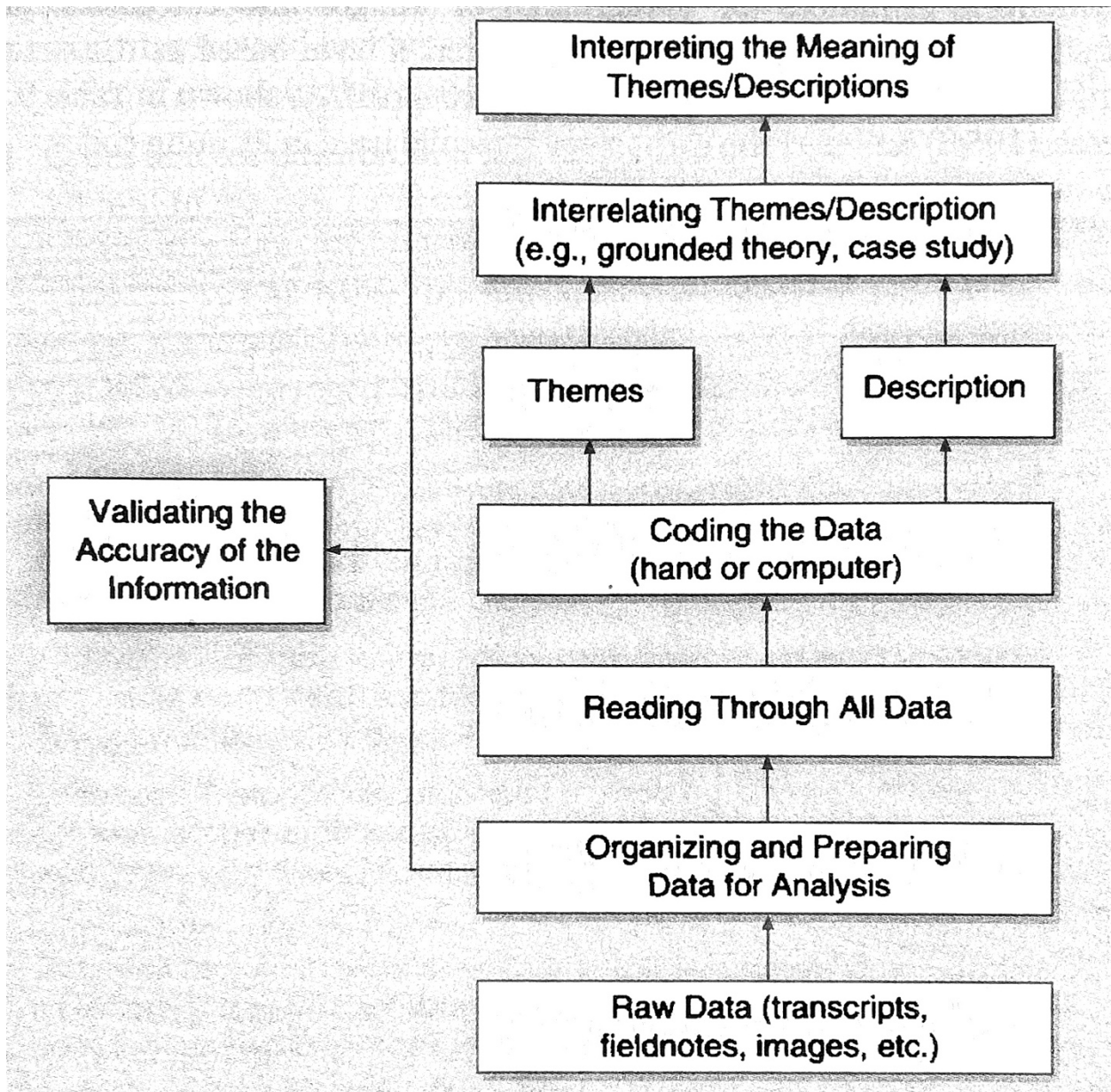
### Interview Questionnaire: Exhaustion, Stress, and Burnout and Its Effects on Life and Ministry

1. What factors inside and/or outside of the church have directly contributed to a rise in exhaustion, stress, or burnout in your life and ministry?
2. How has exhaustion, stress or burnout in ministry affected your family and marital health?
3. What keeps you in ministry? What deciding factor(s) might cause you to leave ministry?
4. What do you wish your elders knew and understood about the mental health needs of ministry?
5. What do you wish your congregation knew and understood about the mental health needs of ministry?
6. Please describe your level of comfort in asking your elders for help in regards to your mental health? What would hinder you from asking for help? What would encourage you to ask for help?
7. When do you feel the most lonely and isolated in ministry? How do you cope with these feelings?
8. What spiritual habits, practices, or rhythms do you lean into on a regular basis to help you with exhaustion, stress or burnout?
9. What resources, retreats or practices are offered to you by your eldership in regards to healing, maintaining, or strengthening your mental health? What resources, retreats, or practices would be beneficial to you if they were offered?
10. Galatians 5:22 says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”<sup>200</sup> Which of these fruits are you craving most in your life right now? Which of these fruits are you needing most from others right now?

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<sup>200</sup> New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989.

APPENDIX D: CRESWELL'S DATA ANALYSIS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH –  
CODING PROCESS





## APPENDIX E: THE SYDNEY STUDIES BURNOUT DESCRIPTORS WORD CLOUD