ABSTRACT

CLERGY STRESS:

A STUDY OF STRESSORS AND STRESS-RELIEVING PRACTICES AMONG

UNITED METHODIST CLERGY ACROSS THREE DISTRICTS OF THE

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE

by

Claude J. Kayler

Clergy stress is a debilitating problem that not only harms pastors, but their families and their churches as well. This study sought to address that problem by determining which work-related stressors and which stress-relieving practices are most common among clergy in the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The quantitative portion of this study consisted of a researcher-designed online survey. Respondents indicated whether they experienced certain work-related stressors identified in the literature on clergy stress. They also indicated how often they engaged in certain stress-relieving practices. The qualitative portion of the study consisted of three focus groups who elaborated on the data gathered by the survey.

Survey results showed that time demands are the most commonly experienced work-related stressors and spiritual disciplines are the most commonly used stress-relieving practices. Focus group discussions, however, revealed that church health issues may be more significant stressors and developing strong support systems may be the stress-relieving practice that can have the most impact on clergy well-being. Focus group

discussions also highlighted the need for ongoing clergy training. These findings led to

specific recommendations for clergy and those who supervise them.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

Each month in the United States, an estimated 1,500 pastors leave their ministry

assignment due to burnout, moral failure, or church conflict (Focus on the Family 3).

Three-quarters of pastors say they have experienced a significant stress-related crisis at

least once in their ministry. Almost half of pastors say they have experienced depression

or burnout severe enough to cause them to take a leave of absence from ministry. Almost

two-thirds say that their self-esteem is lower now than when they started pastoral

ministry (London and Wiseman 20, 172). These statistics illustrate the problem of clergy

stress.

Stress is prevalent among clergy. Studies report growing levels of stress and

burnout among clergy and their families as they deal with intrusive demands,

overwhelming responsibilities, financial strain and other issues (Darling, Hill, and

McWey 268-70; Forward 165-70; Lee 481-84; Morris and Blanton, "Influence of Work-

Related Stressors" 189-90; Rowatt 526).

In 2008, the Clergy Health Initiative of Duke Divinity School surveyed 1,726

United Methodist clergy in the North Carolina and Western North Carolina conferences.

The results show a higher rate of stress-related illness among these clergy when

compared to the general population of this state. For example, among males aged thirty-

five to forty-four, the rate of hypertension among these clergy is 25.8 percent, as

compared to 18.5 percent among the general population. The rate of heart attacks among

this same demographic is 6 percent for the clergy, as opposed to 0.5 percent for the

general population. In addition, United Methodist clergy in North Carolina are twice as likely to be depressed as the general population (Swift).

George Jacobs directs the Davidson Clergy Center in Davidson, North Carolina. This center offers counseling and programs designed to promote emotional and physical health of clergy. Jacobs states that the center works with sixty-five to one hundred clergy every year, many of whom are burned out or considering a transition to another career.

The emotional struggles of pastors have a negative impact on the churches they lead. David Walls demonstrates this relationship in a study that revealed a correlation between the emotional health of the pastor and the spiritual health of the church (148). This study inspired me to explore the issue of clergy stress.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to determine which work-related stressors and which stress-relieving practices identified in literature are most common among United Methodist clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference in order to provide recommendations to clergy and those who supervise them.

Research Questions

Three research questions were identified to fulfill the purpose of this study.

Research Question #1

Which of the work-related stressors identified in literature do the clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church most commonly experience?

Research Question #2

Which of the stress-relieving practices identified in literature do these clergy most commonly use to relieve stress?

Research Question #3

What recommendations for clergy and those who supervise them arise from this study?

Definition of Terms

In this study, a *work-related stressor* is a job characteristic or condition that arises from the practice of ordained ministry that contributes to emotional strain or tension on the part of clergy.

A *stress-relieving practice* is a spiritual, physical, cognitive, or relational activity that relieves or prevents emotional strain or tension related to the work of ordained ministry.

Ministry Intervention

This research project consisted of an online survey followed by focus group discussions. The researcher-developed survey had two parts. The first part gathered information about work-related stressors; the second part gathered information about stress-relieving practices. After responses to the survey were gathered and analyzed, I conducted three focus groups of United Methodist clergy to discuss the data.

Context

Clergy in the United States minister in a context that is changing rapidly. The church is declining in both numbers and influence. The increasing secularization of United States' culture means that clergy no longer hold the authoritative position in

society that they once did. This loss of authority leads to role ambiguity, unclear or

unrealistic expectations, and conflict with parishioners (Mead 32-35; Nelson 64-67;

Miner, Sterland and Dowson 213-17; Zondag 254-55).

These changes impact United Methodist pastors as well. Like all American

clergy, they minister in a changing landscape; however, they also deal with stressors

particular to the United Methodist Church (UMC). Since the UMC is the third largest

religious body in America, its denominational squabbles and leadership failures garner

regional or national publicity, which can produce stress for clergy at the local level.

Because the UMC requires ordained ministers to have a seminary degree, many UMC

pastors with modest incomes are struggling to pay off substantial student loans, leading to

financial stress. The itinerant system for deploying clergy produces high levels of stress

when pastors are reassigned with relatively short notice, and their lives, and the lives of

their families, are disrupted. Clergy can also perceive this system as placing themselves

in competition with other pastors for the best appointments (Proescheld-Bell et al.).

These stressors certainly affect United Methodist clergy of the Western North

Carolina Conference. This conference covers forty-four counties and is the fourth largest

in United Methodism. It contains a wide variety of churches: rural, suburban, large

downtown churches, and inner city churches; African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Anglo,

and multicultural. The conference is located in an area of the country where

secularization has not run as deep, and the church still gains some support from the

surrounding culture. While the Western North Carolina Conference maintains a strong

presence in this area, most of its local churches have plateaued or are in decline.

Methodology

This study sought to identify the work-related stressors most often experienced by clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference and then to identify the self-care practices most commonly employed by these clergy. I utilized an explanatory mixed-method design. After identifying important stressors and stress-relieving practices from the literature, I designed an online survey to measure the commonality of these stressors and practices among the target population. This quantitative phase was followed by qualitative focus group discussions.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study included the 206 clergy appointed to local churches in the Asheville, Marion, and Waynesville Districts of the Western North Carolina Conference. Clergy who were willing to participate made up the self-selected sample.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this study consisted of an online survey followed by focus groups with members of the target population. I designed the clergy stress survey as a series of statements with forced-choice Likert-type responses using a scale of 1 to 4. The survey had two sections. In the first section, participants responded to statements about work-related stressors. In the second section, participants responded to statements about spiritual, physical, and relational practices that relieve or prevent work-related stress in a healthy manner. After collecting and analyzing the survey responses, I conducted three focus groups with clergy from the Western North Carolina Conference. Seven to ten pastors participated in each group. Four to six open-ended focus group questions were

discussed within a ninety-minute setting to obtain contextualized data related to the research questions of this study.

Data Collection

I conducted the clergy stress survey using a Web site called Survey Monkey. All members of the target population who have Internet access received an e-mail with a link to the survey. The link took them directly to the survey, and they were able to complete it electronically in five to ten minutes. Online administration protected the respondents' anonymity. It also provided me with instant information on the number of surveys completed.

I conducted the focus groups by asking four to six open-ended questions and allowing free discussion. Each focus group took place in a comfortable, informal setting and lasted ninety minutes. The focus group discussions were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Survey Monkey's software compiled the results of the online stress survey using descriptive statistics and presented these results in a variety of charts and graphs. These charts showed clearly the aggregate responses to each item on the survey.

I reflected carefully on the transcriptions of the focus group discussions. Transcriptions were coded for themes and patterns that emerged. The qualitative focus group data provided further explanation and richer understanding of the quantitative data collected by the survey.

Generalizability

Work-related stressors and stress-relieving practices can be similar for all pastors, regardless of geographical location or denominational background. The findings of this study may be helpful to anyone in the United States who has an interest in the emotional health of clergy. However, because of certain characteristics of the United Methodist Church and the southeastern United States, the most pertinent application of this study's findings would be to United Methodist clergy serving in the southeastern jurisdiction. The findings could help these clergy develop effective coping strategies for dealing with the stress of ministry. The results could also help district superintendents and bishops in that jurisdiction in the formation of policies and procedures to promote emotional health in the clergy they supervise. Finally, these findings may help parachurch organizations that minister to clergy (such as Plowpoint Ministries) in the development of programs that promote emotional health in their clergy clients.

Theological Foundation

Many theologians believe that stress begins with the fall of humanity (Gen. 3). The first two chapters of Genesis describe a stress-free situation. God creates a perfect world and declares it good. God creates human beings who live in perfect relationship with God, with each other, and with the natural world. Peace reigns and stress is absent—until sin enters the picture.

According to Genesis 3, sin involves pride, a lack of trust in God, and a desire to be in control. The life of faith, by contrast, involves humility, trust, and the relinquishment of control. Biblical writers view Abraham as a model of faith (Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Jas. 2; Heb. 11) because he relinquishes control of his life, trusts God enough to

leave his home, and humbly accepts the life of a wandering nomad. While he certainly

falters at some points (for example, when he lies about his wife), Abraham allows God to

direct him through a hostile world, and he experiences the blessings of God as he trusts,

avoids pride, and relinquishes control.

Today humanity lives in a fallen world filled with suffering, conflict, and pain. No

one can avoid the stress that results from this condition. Abraham, however, provides the

first biblical template for coping with stress through a relationship with God

characterized by humility, trust, and surrender.

A theological approach to stress relief, then, begins with the development of these

three aspects of faith: humility, trust and surrender. Based on a study by Diane J.

Chandler ("Exploratory Study"; "Pastoral Burnout"), I believe that three key pastoral

practices are effective in developing these characteristics of faith: spiritual disciplines,

Sabbath, and support system practices.

Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and reflection on Scripture, are a pastor's

means of abiding in Christ. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who

abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing"

(John 15:5, NRSV). Jesus does not say that the branch has to do anything other than

abide. This truth is great news for pastors burdened with stress. A productive ministry has

more to do with abiding in Christ than with clever planning or frantic activity. Pastors

who abide in Christ through spiritual disciplines find enormous resources with which to

face the demands of ministry.

Sabbath is a full day off to rest from work. The word Sabbath—*Shabbat* in

Hebrew—means, "to cease, desist" (Achtmeier 888-89). It means to stop working, stop

worrying, stop pushing to accomplish more, and stop trying to prove one's value by what one produces. To stop in this manner is to submit to the limits that God has placed on human beings and to relinquish control and display trust by allowing God to be in charge. Sabbath is a command; it is also, however, a gift of God for pastors dealing with stress.

Support system practices are a pastor's means of developing a network of supportive relationships. God created humans to live in community. Even before the Fall, God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18, NIV). Those who live in a world ravaged by the results of the Fall need each other even more, yet to admit this need is difficult for some. The image of the cowhand riding the range alone continues to resonate in an individualistic culture. Similarly, the popular caricature of the emotionally needy support group attendee leads many to resist supportive relationships. Both of these responses stem from human pride. To build a support system is an act of humility.

Spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, and support system practices can develop faith and, by so doing, relieve stress. They have a strong biblical and theological foundation. In addition, Chandler's research has verified empirically that they are effective in relieving stress and preventing burnout among clergy ("Exploratory Study"; "Pastoral Burnout"). These practices are discussed at length in the chapters that follow.

Overview

Chapter 2 contains a review of literature pertaining to stress in general and clergy stress in particular. Chapter 3 explains the clergy stress survey and the post-survey focus groups in detail, describing methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents a summary of the study's findings. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the study's

major findings along with recommendations for pastors, denominational officials, and lay

committees that work with clergy.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Introduction

Clergy are struggling with the emotional strains of pastoral ministry. In a survey administered through the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 80 percent of clergy respondents said that ministry had affected their families negatively, and 50 percent said they had dropped out of full-time ministry within five years. Of those responding to the survey, 70 percent said they had no close friends, and 37 percent had engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior (Meek et al. 339). Statistics such as these illustrate the problem of clergy stress.

The present study sought to address this problem. Its purpose was to determine which work-related stressors and which stress-relieving practices identified in literature are most common among United Methodist clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference in order to provide recommendations to clergy and those who supervise them.

Theological Framework

Stress is a modern psychological, medical, and behavioral concept. Hans Selye introduced the concept in his 1936 article "A Syndrome Produced by Diverse Nocuous Agents." Stress has become the proverbial household word, the focus of much research, and the subject of hundreds of articles and books, both scholarly and popular.

One may wonder whether stress is an appropriate subject for theological reflection. Because the study of stress as a concept is less than one hundred years old, one

might ask whether ancient biblical texts even speak to this modern-day problem. The answer is yes. Stress is ultimately a theological issue.

Many of the stressors that pastors face are the same stressors faced by every professional, such as deadlines, long hours, and people issues. Many of the stressors faced by pastors, however, are unique to ministry. Some, if not all of these are theological, in that they find their source in the fallen nature of humanity and its effects on human relationships with God and with each other.

Similarly, many of the stress management practices recommended to pastors are the same for everyone: exercise, sleep, proper nutrition, relaxation techniques, and talk therapy, for example. Some stress management practices that pastors can use, however, are specifically theological in that they stem from a relationship with God and they access the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

The first part of this literature review provides a theological approach to the problem of stress. Using Scripture as the primary resource, it establishes a specifically theological understanding of stress origins and stress relievers.

Stress Origins

William Edward Hulme defines stress as "debilitating tension" (3). All humans have experienced this emotional strain and its physical manifestations. Popular phrases, such as *stress headache, stressed out,* or *I'm stressed* indicate the prevalence of this phenomenon, which is more common in society today than ever before (Wallace 56). A theological discussion of stress begins with an understanding of the origins of stress.

Creation and Fall. In Genesis 1:1-2:3, God creates the world by the power of his word. What God creates is good: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it

was very good" (Gen. 1:31, NRSV). Several themes present in the creation account are important for a consideration of stress. The first of these themes is the concept of boundaries. God creates by bringing order from chaos (Brueggemann 29-30; Headley 129; Steinke, *How Your Church Family* 26-27; Walton 72). This order comes about through the setting of boundaries. The light is separate from the darkness, and the sea is separate from the land. Animals and plants are created in distinct species. The world is no longer an undifferentiated mass (Headley 129; Steinke, *How Your Church Family* 26-27).

Another important theme is the concept of balance and rhythm. The days of creation reflect a purposeful, balanced plan. Commentators have observed a balanced symmetry in the similarities between days one and four, days two and five, and days three and six. In addition, the formula, "And there was evening, and there was morning" (e.g., Gen. 1:4) appears at the end of each day. God did not rush the process of creation but took time to reflect on what he had done. Finally, God did not work incessantly but rested on the seventh day. God's design includes balance (Headley 135-37).

A final important theme in Genesis 1 is the dignity of human beings. Throughout this passage, God was a host preparing the world for important guests (Headley 105, 108). Finally, on the sixth day, God created humans "in his own image" (Gen. 1:27, NIV). The concept of the image of God relates to the practice of ancient kings who would place statues of themselves throughout their realms in order to establish their authority in a given place. In a similar way, God established his authority by placing his image bearers in his newly created world to care for it (Bruggemann 32; Headley 106; Walton 130).

Genesis 2:3-25 describes the creation of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. The theme of boundaries continued as God instructed the man not to eat from a certain tree. The theme of balance continued as God set the man in the garden to work it. Later, when the ground is cursed because of the Fall, work became "painful toil" (Gen. 3:17). Prior to the curse, however, work was a joyful cooperation with God. The theme of human dignity continued as God allowed his image-bearer to name the animals.

A new theme that emerges in Genesis 2 is the theme of human relationships. God looked at Adam and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). God created Eve, and Adam and Eve were united in an intimate relationship of complete openness: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25).

At this point in the Genesis narrative, the first humans were at peace with God and at peace with each other. Their residence in the Garden of Eden indicates that they were at peace with the natural world. Stress had not yet entered the world.

The situation changed, however, in Genesis 3. This chapter describes the Fall of humanity, in which sin entered the world. Sin disrupts relationships between humans and God, between humans and each other, and between humans and the natural world. The image-bearers violated the boundaries and the world was no longer in balance.

Adam and Eve's broken relationship with God leads to shame and fear: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Gen. 3:10). Their broken relationship with each other led to blaming and conflict. Though Adam was with Eve when the serpent spoke to her (Gen. 3:6), he attempted to blame her for their sin: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it" (Gen. 3:12). Their broken relationship with the natural world led to suffering and toil:

"With pain you will give birth to children.… [B]y the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Gen. 3:16, 19). Shame, fear, blaming, conflict, suffering and toil are all harbingers of stress.

Stress originates, then, with the introduction of sin into the world. Sin is disobedience resulting from unbelief. Jesus said, "And when [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin … because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:9, NKJV). In the Adam and Eve story, unbelief resulted in the first humans' decision to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In making this choice, Adam and Eve displayed a lack of trust in God. Rather than trust that what God told them is true, they chose to listen to a different voice, the voice of the serpent. Describing this choice, John Wesley writes, "Here sin began; namely, unbelief. [They] believed a lie: [They] gave more credit to the word of the devil, than to the word of God" (6: 216-17).

In addition, the first humans' choice reflects pride. By stepping over the boundary established by God, they essentially claimed to know better than God. "So unbelief begot pride," writes Wesley (6: 272). The man and the woman considered themselves "wiser than God; capable of finding a better way to happiness than God had taught [them]" (6: 272).

Most significantly, the choice to disobey represents a refusal to let God be in charge. Rather than submit to God's will, the first humans grappled with God for control of their lives. In Wesley's words, their unbelief and pride led to "self-will" in that Eve (and by extension, Adam) "was determined to do her own will, not the will of Him that made her" (6: 272).

Sin entered the world, then, because of unbelief. Unbelief has three aspects: lack of trust, pride, and a desire to be in control. Lack of trust is a failure to place full confidence in God's word. It is listening to a voice other than the voice of God. Pride is an unhealthy preoccupation with self that puts self at the center of one's existence. It is thinking more highly of oneself than is warranted. The desire to be in control of life is an inability to let God be in charge. It is refusal to submit to the will of God, stemming from lack of trust (i.e., "God is not good") or pride (i.e., "I know better than God").

Sin disrupts relationships. Humanity is no longer at peace with God, at peace with each other, or at peace with the natural world. Instead of peace, humans now experience "pain, sickness, and a whole train of uneasy, as well as unholy, passions and tempers" (6: 231). Stress is one of these unholy tempers.

Contemporary pressures. Life in a fallen, broken world is difficult. The natural world is no longer in balance. Weather rages out of control, tectonic plates shift, and new diseases develop and spread. Conditions such as these are threatening. Stress is the body's response to a threat (Selye, *Stress of Life* 38-47; "Syndrome").

The stories in Genesis 4-11 bear witness to the brokenness of humanity. Adam's son Cain experienced envy and murdered his brother Abel. Lamech killed a man for wounding him. By the time of Noah, the violence of humanity brought grief to the heart of God. Noah walked with God and was blameless; therefore, God chose him and his family to survive the flood and re-populate the earth. Once the flood was over, however, sin continued to cause pain and distress. Noah became drunk and Ham dishonored him. In anger and shame, Noah pronounced a curse on all of Ham's descendants. Humans once again displayed pride, a lack of trust in God, and a desire to be in control as they

constructed the tower of Babel. This act of human self-will led, in the end, to further alienation and its attendant stress.

The world of today is the same world described in Genesis 4-11. Even though knowledge and technology have changed exponentially, human nature has remained the same. Genesis 4-11 portrays power struggles, miscommunication, division and alienation, criminal behavior, verbal and physical abuse, family dysfunction, secrets hidden in shame, and destructive human pride. All of these pressures and others are still present in today's world. When people experience pressure beyond their resources to cope, they are in a state of stress (Tolman and Rose 151; Wilmoth and Smyser 155).

Christian pastors are called by God to proclaim God's word and care for God's people in this fallen world. Life in this world is difficult for everyone. Pastors experience specific forms of stress related to their unique role as leaders of God's people.

Pastoral Stress—The Moses Model

Moses provides the first model of pastoral leadership in the Bible. His relationship with God and commitment to leadership are exemplary (Headley 24). In Exodus 18:13-23, however, Moses demonstrated an unhealthy approach to ministry (Headley 25). In this passage, Moses spent long hours personally arbitrating disputes for the people. The people stood around him from "morning till evening" (Exod. 18:13, NIV). His father-in-law, Jethro, pointed out that what he was doing is "not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out" (Exod. 18:17-18). Anthony J. Headley states that many pastors follow this approach to ministry today (23-24). They try to "do it all" (49) and have difficulty saying no (55).

One reason pastors attempt to follow the Moses model is the expectations of their congregations. George Barna describes this problem: "Our studies show that churchgoers expect their pastor to juggle an average of sixteen major tasks. That's a recipe for failure—nobody can handle the wide range of responsibilities that people expect pastors to master" (qtd. in "Profile of Protestant Pastors"). Most pastors have preaching as one of their main tasks. Other tasks they must perform can include counseling, youth work, administration, biblical scholarship and teaching, staff management, volunteer recruitment and training, conflict mediation, janitorial work, and pastoral visitation (London and Wiseman 64-65; Spaite and Goodwin 71).

Pastors also bear the burden of unrealistic expectations concerning their character and skills. Pastors in Headley's Stress in Ministry seminars said they felt pressure never to "get tired or fed up," never to be sick, to be "everything to everyone, every time," and to be perfect (36). Church members sometimes hold pastors responsible for situations beyond their control, such as lack of church growth or the divorce of a couple (London and Wiseman 65).

In addition to congregational expectations, pastors can also place unrealistic expectations upon themselves. These expectations may stem from an unhealthy perfectionism, from fear of failure, from unwillingness to admit weakness, from narcissism, or from a *God complex* that sees ministry as belonging to the pastor rather than to God (Headley 88-89; London and Wiseman 65; Olsen and Grosch 297, 299-300; Wilson and Hoffman 18-19). A pastor's self-imposed expectations may also stem from an unhealthy need to please people (Olsen and Grosch 300).

The Moses model can lead to negative spiritual outcomes. The pastor who seeks to glorify God through hard work actually draws attention away from God. Further, the burnout that results from overwork leads to anger and resentment towards parishioners and even towards God. In Numbers 11, a burned out Moses rails against God for assigning him to lead the Israelites: "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?" (Num. 11:11). Headley notes that the state of burnout that Moses has reached is not only damaging to him; it is also damaging to the people of Israel (67-68; 48). In the same way, pastors' attempts to overachieve hurt their congregations in the end by robbing the laity of their ministry, by modeling unhealthy behavior, and by bringing pastors to a point of burnout in which they are no longer able to minister faithfully (50-51, 62-64).

Stress Relievers

No one can avoid stress. One can develop strategies, however, for coping with stress. If the origins of stress are theological, then the most significant stress relievers are theological as well. As "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11), Abraham provides an important model for consideration.

Abraham, the model of faith. As noted, the Genesis narrative establishes the fallen nature of the world and the brokenness of humanity in the first eleven chapters. A major structural break occurs in the narrative between the last verse of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12. It is a break between "the history of the curse and the history of the blessing" (Brueggemann 116). God begins a new history as he calls Abram to a life of faith (Anderson 353).

God's call to Abram is radical: "Leave your country, your kindred and your father's household…" (Gen.12:1a). Abram left the places that provided comfort and familiarity and abandoned the relationships that provided security and identity. He left everything to follow God into an uncertain future. God only identified his destination as "the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1b).

Despite its demanding and uncertain nature, Abram answered the call: "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him…" (Gen. 12:4, NRSV). Stress began with the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3; the answer to stress begins in Genesis 12. "Abram's obedience is the antidote to Eden's unbelief" (Green and Willimon 19). Abram's trusting obedience to God's call makes him the first link in a global plan that eventually reversed the effects of the Fall (Sjogren 28-53; Stott 10-18). It also initiated a journey that becomes a model for those who would live the life of faith today.

Three aspects of faith. Abram/Abraham's journey models three important aspects of faith. These aspects stand in direct opposition to the three aspects of unbelief that led to the Fall.

First, Abraham relinquished control of his life to God. The journey he embraced is a metaphor for the life of faith (Brueggemann 121). Leaving behind human sources of security, safety, and identity (i.e., country, kindred and father's household), Abram submitted to the unseen voice that had not yet revealed where he is going. In this way, he embraced the uncertainty and ambiguity that define the life of faith. *Abraham surrendered.*

Second, Abraham trusted God's promise of descendants "as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore" (Heb. 11:12, NIV). This aspect of

his faith is significant because the promise defies reason. At the time of his call, Abram was seventy-five years old and his wife Sarai was childless. Although Abraham struggled to maintain this trust, his faith was initially strong enough to cause him to answer God's call, and, in the end, his faith won out over his struggles. *Abraham trusted.*

Third, Abraham's faith manifested itself in obedience. Abram's obedience may have meant leaving behind the most advanced civilization of his day to accept the life of a wandering nomad (Cahill 58-59, 63). Whether this conjecture is accurate or not, Abraham's obedience, like all obedience freely chosen, was an act of humility. It was the opposite of the pride that led to the Fall. *Abraham displayed humility.*

The life of faith that Abraham modeled, then, involved humility, trust, and surrender. These three aspects of faith stand in direct opposition to the three aspects of unbelief (i.e., pride, distrust, and the need for control) that led to the Fall, which is the origin of stress. A theological approach to stress relief will involve practices that serve to develop these three aspects of faith.

Trust means placing full confidence in the word of God. More than intellectual assent to an idea, trust is relying wholeheartedly upon God. Humility is a sane estimate of oneself. It is recognizing one's brokenness, one's sinfulness, one's creatureliness, and one's dependence upon the grace, kindness, and unconditional love of God. Humility also involves willingness to obey God, not out of fear but out of recognition that God knows what is best. Surrender is relinquishing control of one's life to God.

Trust, humility, and surrender require a lifetime to develop. They are not static. For example, a person who trusts God fully one day may have difficulty trusting God the next. Further, a person who surrenders to God in a moment of commitment may later find

areas of life that are not yet under God's control. In fact, Robert Tuttle, Jr. states that Christians are those who commit all that they know of themselves to all that they know of God. As they learn more about themselves, they have more of themselves to commit. As they learn more about God, they have a deeper understanding of God to which to commit. "What is 'perfection' today might not be 'perfection' tomorrow," if commitment does not deepen along with understanding.

Trust, humility, and surrender do not ensure a stress-free life. They do not relieve stress immediately, like a hot bath or a massage. Instead, they form the foundation of a spiritually grounded inner life. This inner life of faith is like the keel of a sailboat—an unseen weight beneath the surface that keeps the boat stable and enables it to travel through storms (MacDonald 4).

This life of faith also provides important resources for reframing. Reframing is viewing the same situation through a different lens. Mark Twain's story of Tom Sawyer convincing his friend Ben to see whitewashing the fence as an enjoyable task rather than drudgery is an example of reframing (Headley 9-12). A person who journeys through life trusting God, surrendering to God, and humbly depending on God is able to view stressful events differently from a person who has no faith. For example, a person of faith can reframe a negative event as an opportunity to grow spiritually. This person might even be able to "rejoice in suffering" (Rom. 5:3-4) and "consider it pure joy" (Jas. 1:2-4) because of the promise of increased spiritual maturity.

Finally, the three aspects of faith modeled by Abraham lead to a healthier and less stressful theological foundation for pastoral ministry. Trusting God frees pastors from the notion that ministry depends completely on them. Humility allows pastors to embrace

limits, to stop trying to be all things to all people. It allows pastors to delegate

responsibility, as Moses eventually learned to do in Exodus 18. Surrender, while

frightening at first, becomes freedom when pastors discover that God is better at being in

charge than they are.

Developing the three aspects. Chandler studied the impact on clergy burnout of

spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, and support system practices. She surveyed 270 pastors

using the Maslach Burnout Inventory to measure burnout and her own instrument to

measure engagement in these three practices. Her results showed a lower level of burnout

among those clergy who used the three practices ("Exploratory Study"; "Pastoral

Burnout").

Based on Chandler's work, I have given particular attention in this study to

spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, and support systems as stress-relieving practices. These

practices are theological in nature. They reflect and can help develop the three aspects of

faith displayed by Abraham.

Spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are means of developing a relationship

with God. Examples of spiritual disciplines include prayer, Bible reading, fasting,

meditation, solitude, and silence. These practices bring one into the presence of God and

make room for God to work in one's life. They are vital means of communication with

God, and they are the key to accessing the power of God in order to deal with stress.

Authors who specialize in spiritual formation recommend a wide variety of

spiritual disciplines (Foster; Mulholland; Willard). Authors writing specifically for

pastors also recommend a wide variety of spiritual practices (Fernando; Gemignani;

Swears; Job and Shawchuck). Studies of pastors reveal a wide variety of spiritual

disciplines as well. Pastors in Katheryn Rhoads Meek et al.'s study reported using retreat/solitude, study of Scripture, journaling, fasting and prayer. Pastors in Chandler's studies reported using some combination of Bible intake or study, prayer, meditation, worship, solitude, fasting, devotional reading other than Scripture, journaling, and retreat-taking ("Exploratory Study"; "Pastoral Burnout"). Virgle R. Grant conducted a study of twelve Southern Baptist pastors identified by association staff as spiritually vital. A composite list of the practices used by these pastors includes prayer, Bible study, retreats, journaling, submissiveness, service, solitude, fasting, meditation, evangelism, learning, confession, private and corporate worship, small group participation, Sabbath, and reading of Catholic devotional guides.

Authors recommend, and pastors use, a wide variety of spiritual disciplines. Review of the literature, however, reveals three practices recommended by every author and used by every pastor: prayer, reflection on Scripture, and fasting. This study has considered these three practices, as well as another practice modeled by Jesus and especially helpful to pastors—retreat from activity.

Prayer is "the lifting up of the heart to God" (Wesley 5: 330). Wesley gave prayer a place of priority among spiritual practices: "Prayer is certainly the grand means of drawing near to God: and all others are helpful to us only so far as they mix with, or prepare us for, this" (12: 274). Indeed, prayer is the foundation for other spiritual disciplines.

Jesus modeled prayer more than any other spiritual practice. He was in prayer when the Spirit descended upon him after his baptism (Luke 3:14). Throughout his ministry, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). Before

choosing the twelve, Jesus spent the night in prayer (Luke 6:12). The Transfiguration

occurred while he was praying (Luke 9:28-36). Finally, all three Synoptic Gospels

describe Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane (Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22).

Jesus also taught extensively on prayer. He taught his followers to pray secretly

and simply (Matt. 6:5-8). He gave them a model prayer (Matt. 6:9-12; Luke 11:2-4). In

teaching on prayer, Jesus told his followers to see God as a father who gives good things

to his children (Matt. 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13). He told the parables of the friend at

midnight (Luke 11:9-10) and the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8) to encourage the

disciples "always [to] pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).

Several features will mark the prayer life of the pastor who follows Jesus'

teaching and example. The pastor will pray simply and in secret on a regular basis. The

pastor's prayers will center on the purposes of God's kingdom and the needs of God's

children. The pastor will speak to God as a Father who cares, and the pastor will persist

in prayer, even when God seems not to answer.

Reflection on Scripture is reading, studying, or meditating on Scripture in order to

develop one's relationship with God. This practice is different from studying Scripture in

preparation to teach or preach. It can take the form of reading through large portions of

Scripture or meditating deeply on small portions of Scripture.

Jesus knew the Scriptures and valued them highly. The Gospels show Jesus

referring to Scripture over ninety times, whether by direct quotation, allusion, or the use

of biblical expression (Fernando 89). In the wilderness, Jesus withstood temptation by

quoting from the Scriptures. He began his ministry in Nazareth with a reading from the

prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:16-21). Throughout his ministry, he referred often to scriptural

prophecies to explain what was happening. For example, when he predicted the disciples' desertion, he quoted Zechariah 13:7: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matt. 26:31). To explain why some did not understand his parables, he quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10: "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes" (Matt. 13:15). The example set by Jesus is that of a minister "saturated in the Word" (Fernando 89).

Ajith Fernando writes that, in addition to Scripture's value as the source of authority, it is also a source of psychological security: "[T]he people we serve are fickle, and their actions inflict deep pain on us. [T]he ministry is never a good primary source for our security" (95). Fernando insists that the Scriptures are "the surest source of security on earth" (94). This unchanging source of security can become a safeguard against burnout and stress. Pastors who wish to alleviate the stress of ministry and pursue a love relationship with God do well to develop a regular habit of interaction with Scripture.

Fasting is "abstaining from food for spiritual purposes" (Foster 42). Fasting has several purposes. Its first purpose is to provide additional time for prayer (Harper 51). It also develops humility and confirms dependence on God (Willard 166). By affirming the priority of spiritual realities over physical needs, fasting opens one to God's presence. It strengthens the effectiveness of intercessory prayer (Foster 49; Job and Shawchuck 9). It can be helpful in seeking guidance for important decisions (Fernando 71; Foster 49). Finally, it can be a means of becoming more sensitive to the plight of the poor (Job and Shawchuck 9).

United Methodist bishops are required to ask candidates for ordained ministry, "Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, both by precept and example?" (*Book of Discipline*, pars. 330, 336). Jesus certainly recommended fasting by precept and example. He fasted in the wilderness for forty days. While he never commanded fasting, his teaching assumed it: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do…" (Matt. 6:16). When John the Baptist's disciples asked why Jesus' disciples did not fast, Jesus did not condemn fasting; rather, Jesus explained that after he was taken, his disciples would indeed fast (Matt. 9:14-15).

The practice of fasting is an effective way for pastors to develop the three aspects of faith modeled by Abraham (i.e., trust, humility, and surrender). While abstaining from food, the pastor trusts God to provide energy for daily tasks. The fasting pastor usually discovers that God's power is made perfect in the physical weakness of fasting (2 Cor. 12:9). This experience helps the pastor become more dependent on God, which leads to greater humility. Finally, the pastor seeking God's guidance through fasting is developing surrender and submission to the will of God. Fasting is an important spiritual renewal practice for developing these three aspects of faith, which are necessary for dealing with the stress of ministry.

Retreating from activity is spending one or more days away from one's ministry setting for the purpose of spiritual renewal. Jesus modeled the practice of withdrawing from active engagement with people. In the first chapter of Mark, for example, Jesus preached, taught, called the first disciples, cast out demons and healed many. This chapter records, however, two occasions where Jesus retreated from public activity. The first is immediately after his baptism, when he spent forty days in the desert (vv. 12-13).

The second is after a very busy day that concluded with "the whole town" gathering at the door of the house where Jesus was staying (v. 33). The next morning people were still looking for Jesus, but he had retreated to "a solitary place, where he prayed" (v. 35). These examples show that Jesus was not always busy, nor was he constantly available. He made time to retreat from activity.

Fernando presents five benefits of retreat taking in the life of a pastor. First, retreats "affirm the priority of the spiritual" (62). They are opportunities to focus on the works of God. Second, retreats "slow us down" (63). The command to wait upon the Lord appears throughout Scripture. Third, retreats "help make us receptive to God's voice" (64). The stories of Abraham's struggles with faithfulness highlight the importance of listening to God's voice. Scripture records many instances of God speaking to leaders during retreats. Both Moses and Elijah heard the voice of God during forty days on the mountain. Peter heard the voice of God while praying on a rooftop.

Fourth, retreats "help people escape the tyranny of busyness" (Fernando 65). In the 2002 Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary survey on clergy burnout, 74 percent of pastors surveyed reported that their greatest stress relates to "too many demands on their time" (Jinkins 12; Jinkins and Wulff 4). The urgent, multiple demands of ministry drain pastors emotionally and impede unhurried time alone with God. Retreat taking is an antidote to this problem.

Finally, Fernando writes that retreats "affirm God's help in the midst of challenges" (66). During times of conflict or crisis, pastors sometimes focus on the difficulties of ministry and lose their sense of the presence and strength of God.

Retreating from activity helps a pastor remember God's past acts of salvation, reconnect with God in the present, and find renewed strength to face the challenges of the future.

Spiritual disciplines and differentiation of self. Another benefit of spiritual disciplines is self-differentiation. Differentiation of self is a concept that originated with the family systems theory of Murray Bowen. It refers to a person's ability to define himself or herself while staying in touch with others. Having clarified their values and beliefs, differentiated persons are able to act on principle, set goals, take positions, and choose a course of direction. While maintaining this individuality, they are also able to connect with others and to do so without either losing self through emotional fusion or preserving self through emotional cutoff. In this way, differentiated persons are able to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of others' strong emotional forces (Friedman 27; Holeman and Martyn 62; Majerus and Sandage 42; Nessan 392-93; Steinke, *Congregational Leadership* 19; *Healthy Congregations* 102-04).

Brian D. Majerus and Steven J. Sandage posit that differentiation of self is a conceptualization of spiritual maturity (41). Spiritual maturity in the Bible includes, for example, clearly defined beliefs (Jas. 1:5-6), responsibility for self (Gal. 6:4), and living as a unique individual in relationship with others (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). These signs of spiritual maturity are aspects of self-differentiation (45-46).

Peter J. Jankowski and Marsha Vaughn demonstrated a correlation between spiritual disciplines and differentiation of self (82). They administered five instruments to a sample of seventy-eight Christian college students. Two of these instruments measured differentiation of self; the other three measured aspects of spiritual practice, development,

and commitment (87-89). Their results indicate that spiritual practices are a predictor of both spiritual development and self-differentiation (94).

Self-differentiation is important in ministry for at least two reasons. First, it can relieve stress by helping a pastor deal with time demands and unrealistic expectations. Ronald S. Beebe hypothesized that more highly differentiated pastors would display less burnout. Their self-definition would permit them to avoid role overload caused by the expectations of others (261-62). His study demonstrates that greater differentiation of self and role among clergy does, in fact, lead to lower levels of burnout (267).

Second, differentiation is necessary for effective leadership. Edwin H. Friedman promotes "leadership through self-definition" as the most effective means of changing a congregation: "[S]elf-definition is a more important agent of change than expertise" (3). Friedman was both a family therapist and an ordained rabbi. His experience in both of these fields led him to the conclusion that the most important work of a leader is self-work. When a leader takes responsibility for his or her own self-definition while staying in touch with the organization, the organization eventually follows (228-29).

Spiritual disciplines are an important practice for developing differentiation of self. Most importantly, however, spiritual disciplines are a pastor's means of developing and maintaining a strong relationship with God. This relationship and the power that flows from it are essential for dealing with the stress of ministry.

Sabbath. Sabbath is the practice of devoting one day each week to rest from work. The word Sabbath—*Shabbat* in Hebrew—means "to cease, desist" (Achtmeier 888-89). One of the "ceasings" of Sabbath rest is "ceasing our trying to be God" (Dawn 28-35). Many pastors suffer from a Messiah or "God" complex (Headley 88-89; London

and Wiseman 65; Olsen and Grosch 297, 299-300; Wilson and Hoffman 18-19).

Consciously or subconsciously, they feel that the success of the church, the well-being of

its members, and the fulfillment of the Great Commission rest entirely upon their

shoulders. Opposing this tendency through Sabbath rest is an act of humility.

Sabbath rest is also a relinquishing of control. "[T]he first condition of Sabbath

obedience is a spirit of 'letting go,' as we lay aside our own interests and pursuits"

(Sherman 45). Noting that the call to stop comes whether the work is accomplished or

not, Wayne Muller says simply, "Sabbath requires surrender" (82). Submitting to a

weekly Sabbath is a sign of surrendering one's schedule to God.

Sabbath rest is a matter of trust (Dawn 29; Wirzba 35). When a busy pastor stops

working and rests, he or she displays trust in God. The pastor trusts that God will take

care of the church in his or her absence, placing concerns about unfinished work in God's

hands.

Sabbath rest is one of the Ten Commandments. Dorothy C. Bass writes of an

evening in which she and a group of friends were discussing the work they planned to do

on Sunday:

> That's when it hit me. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."
> This was a commandment, one of the ten laws in the basic moral code of
> Christianity, Judaism and Western Civilization; and here we were hatching
> plans to violate it. I could not imagine this group sitting around saying,
> "I'm planning to take God's name in vain"; "I'm planning to commit
> adultery"; "I think I'll steal something." (45)

Understanding Sabbath as a command provides a gift to busy pastors. Many pastors feel

guilty about resting while so much remains undone. Many fear the comments of

parishioners who might consider them lazy or irresponsible. The fourth commandment

alleviates these concerns. Taking a day off is not a luxury. It is obedience.

Sabbath is not, however, a burdensome obligation. "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NRSV). The dreary, legalistic Sunday observance made famous by the Puritans is not the Sabbath of Scripture. Instead, the Sabbath is a day of delight, a time to enjoy the good gifts of God. "The experience of delight is what Sabbath is all about" (Wirzba 52). A special meal and extended time with family and friends are Sabbath traditions. In addition, God's people are encouraged to follow God's example and delight in creation on the seventh day. Spending time in nature admiring and being refreshed by the creative work of God is an appropriate Sabbath activity (Allender 66; Dawn 84). Taking an afternoon nap (Gordis 8) and, for married couples, engaging in sexual intercourse are appropriate as well. In fact, Jewish tradition strongly encourages intercourse on the Sabbath (Muller 31). It is considered a *mitzvah*—a good deed (Bruzzese 22).

Eugene H. Peterson offers an important theological perspective on Sabbath. In the biblical understanding, a new day begins in the evening; therefore, each day actually begins with the gift of rest. The day's work becomes a response to this gift from God. The rhythm of evening followed by morning, then, is a rhythm of grace followed by work. Peterson accuses pastors of "the sin of reversing the rhythms. Instead of grace/work, we make it work/grace" (55). This ignoring of divine rhythms explains why so few pastors practice a weekly Sabbath. If rest must be earned by work, then rest will never be attained because the work of most pastors is never complete. Conversely, to receive the gift of Sabbath is to live with the divine rhythm of grace followed by work.

Support system practices. Loneliness is one of the main causes of pastoral burnout, stress and depression (Hart, *Coping with Depression* 17-18; Jinkins 25-26;

Morris and Blanton, "Influence of Work-Related Stressors" 189-90; Proeschold-Bell et

al.; Spaite and Goodwin 83-91; Wilson and Hoffman 11). This loneliness can result from

geographical isolation, as in the case of a solo pastor in a rural setting, or from busyness

that prevents deep fellowship among church workers. It can also result from the pastor's

struggle to maintain appropriate boundaries. Finally, it can result from perceptions, on the

part of pastors or parishioners, that the pastor should not have special friends in the

congregation (Blackbird and Wright 275; Jinkins 26; Spaite and Goodwin 86).

One of Jesus' first acts at the beginning of his public ministry was to call disciples

(Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:14-20; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-51). These disciples were learners

or students, but they were also a support system for Jesus. Jesus chose these men in order

to delegate some of his work to them; however, he also chose them "that they might *be*

[emphasis mine] with him" (Mark 3:14). Jesus developed close friendships with these

men that sustained him during difficult points in his ministry.

Jesus seems to have been especially close to Peter, James, and John. He invited

them to accompany him up the mountain to witness the Transfiguration. Later he asked

them to watch and pray with him during the most difficult hour of his life, when he

prayed in Gethsemane. Jesus' request reveals his desire for support: "My soul is

overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me"

(Matt. 26:38). While Peter, James, and John could not have changed Jesus' situation,

their presence with him was a source of comfort.

In addition to the disciples, Jesus had support from his friends Mary and Martha,

along with their brother Lazarus. On at least two occasions, Mary and Martha hosted

Jesus for dinner (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-11). The second occasion took place during

the week before his death—a time when Jesus would have been in great need of support. During this dinner, Mary anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. This show of support and love drew criticism from others present, but Jesus appreciated the supportive nature of this symbolic preparation for his burial.

The example of Jesus demonstrates the importance of support system practices in ministry. His example also shows that support can take on different forms: a small group of co-laborers (the twelve), broader friendships (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus), and intimate relationships with a few (Peter, James and John). Pastors would do well to develop a similar network that includes different types of support.

Many pastors have difficulty, however, developing an adequate support system. As noted, relationships with parishioners are fraught with difficulties. Some church members feel uncomfortable being themselves in the presence of the pastor, and some pastors feel uncomfortable being themselves in the presence of church members. Church politics can become a challenge to meaningful relationships with church members. The pastor does not want to appear to favor some church members over others (Blackbird and Wright 275).

Relationships with other pastors can be difficult as well. In a world of competition and comparison, pastors may be reluctant to share personal struggles with other pastors. This difficulty may be especially keen for itinerating clergy in the United Methodist Church. UMC pastors may have difficulty disclosing personal issues to each other because they could be competing for the same appointments. This fear is heightened by the fact that one pastor may eventually become the other pastor's district superintendent. A superintendent's knowledge of another pastor's personal struggles might influence

future appointments negatively. In addition, those pastors who do form close relationships with other clergy often think that they lose these relationships when they itinerate (Proeschold-Bell et al.).

These difficulties are real, and the wise pastor will take them seriously. Humility, trust, and submission, however, are ultimately the keys to overcoming them. The pastor must decide that the need for support outweighs the difficulties. To make this choice is an act of humility. Building a support system means abandoning self-reliance and admitting one's need for others. In addition, choosing to rely on others is an act of trust. Being honest with a clergy support group, a spouse, or a counselor means trusting these persons to handle potentially harmful information with care, sensitivity, and confidentiality. Finally, building a support system means submitting to God's desire that human beings live in community and that Christian workers have adequate support for their ministries.

Pastoral Stress Relief—The Jesus Model

Pastoral stress often results from the Moses model displayed in Exodus 18. In this model, an over-functioning leader assumes all responsibility for ministry, leading to burnout on the part of the leader and unmet needs on the part of the people. Pastors might function in this model because of church members' expectations or because of expectations that they place upon themselves. In contrast, Jesus provides a model of pastoral leadership that returns to the creation themes of Genesis 1-2 (Headley 123, 167).

Boundaries. A good example of Jesus setting boundaries occurs in Mark 1:32-38. After a long night of healing the sick and casting out demons, Jesus arose early the next morning and withdrew to a solitary place for prayer. He set a boundary around this time with his Father. Then, when the disciples found him and exclaimed, "Everyone is looking

for you!" Jesus set another boundary: "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby

villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." Rather than make himself

available to all the people seeking him out, Jesus set another boundary around his time by

communicating and acting on his ministry priority.

Balance and rhythm. The ministry of Jesus displays a healthy balance between

public ministry and private prayer—a rhythm of engagement and disengagement

(Headley 169; Shawchuck and Heuser 46-47). In Mark 6, Jesus sent the apostles out two

by two for a public ministry of preaching and healing (7-13). When they returned from

this ministry engagement, he invited them to disengage: "Come with me by yourselves to

a quiet place and get some rest" (31). In this instance Jesus taught what he had been

modeling—a ministry characterized by balance and rhythm (Headley 177).

Dignity of human beings. Though he was divine (John 1:1; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15-

16), Jesus was also fully human. He never denied his humanity but lived it fully (Headley

38). The Gospels indicate that Jesus took time to enjoy food, friendship, and even

pleasure of the senses. For example, his first public miracle changed water into wine.

This miracle took place during a wedding. In keeping with first century Jewish custom,

Jesus and the other guests would have spent days dancing, feasting and celebrating (John

2:1-11). Further, in Matthew and Mark's stories of the woman anointing Jesus with

expensive perfume, he defended her actions by saying, "She has done a beautiful thing"

(Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9). Despite the symbolism of anointing him for burial, Jesus

enjoyed the fragrance that filled the house and the momentary respite from the pressures

of his last week on earth. Jesus also experienced many human emotions, including anger

(Mark 3:5), compassion (Luke 7:13), amazement (Matt. 8:10), frustration (Matt.17:17),

love (John 11:5; 13:1), joy (Luke 10:21; John 15:11), intense passion (John 2:17), sadness that caused him to weep (Luke 19:41), and deep distress as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33; Luke 22:44).

God created humans in his own image. The Incarnation reveals again the dignity of human beings. Jesus displayed a ministry that embraced rather than denied humanness.

Jeremy Troxler refers to the early Christian heresy of Gnosticism, which viewed physical matter, including the body, as evil. Gnostics taught that the goal of the spiritual life was to escape the flesh. Troxler insists that when pastors deny their physicality by neglecting self-care in order to focus on what they view as spiritual ministry, they become modern-day Gnostics.

When pastors embrace their humanness by accepting limits and caring for their bodies, they are not being unspiritual or displaying a lack of commitment. They are following the example of Jesus.

Human relationships. The discussion of support system practices demonstrated that Jesus turned to others for support. He valued human relationships. He taught that the greatest commandments were to love God and to love people (Matt. 22:34-40). On his last night on earth, he showed his love to his disciples by washing their feet (John 13:1-17). After he had finished, he said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (35). Jesus did not carry out his work in a way that destroyed relationships. Instead, he nurtured and enhanced them. The demands of his ministry never overshadowed the importance of the relationships in his life.

The Jesus model of ministry does not lead to a stress-free life. Jesus certainly faced hardship and suffering, and anyone who follows him will face them as well. The

model Jesus displays, however, relieves stress by providing for the establishment of

boundaries and the setting of healthy ministry rhythms. By dignifying rather than denying

humanness, this model points to the importance of self-care. Finally, by placing a high

value on human relationships, the Jesus model calls pastors to minister in a way that

nurtures rather than damages the important relationships in their lives.

Theoretical Framework

Stress has been labeled "America's number one health problem" (*American

Institute of Stress*). Stress-related anxiety is the most common cause of emergency room

visits due to chest pains (Wilson and Hoffman 106). Medical researchers have linked

stress, directly or indirectly, to seven of the ten leading causes of death in the developed

world, including heart disease, cancer, and stroke (Quick et al. 217). The American

Institute of Stress has estimated that stress costs United States employers over $300

billion each year, through stress-related expenses such as absenteeism, lower

productivity, staff turnover, and health care ("Stress in the Workplace").

Stress Origins

Stress was originally a term from physics that referred to pressure (Cooper and

Dewe 3; Oates 573; Sapolsky 8). From the standpoint of modern psychology, however,

stress is so difficult to define that some researchers have derided the term as useless

(Cohen, Kessler, and Gordon 3; Lazarus and Folkman 11). Early stress researcher Hans

Selye defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand" ("Forty

Years of Stress Research" 53). Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe interpret stress as

events in a person's life (Brannon and Feist 106; Cohen, Kessler and Cohen 4-5). Richard

Lazarus and Susan Folkman define stress as "a particular relationship between the person

and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (19). Each of these definitions reflects one of the three models of understanding stress.

Models of stress research fall into three main categories (Cohen, Kessler and Gordon 3; Brannon and Feist 101). The first model to emerge was the biological model, which focuses on the body's physiological response to a threat. In 1929, physiologist W. B. Cannon identified the "fight or flight" response, in which the release of adrenaline and heightened body functions prepare an animal to defend itself or run from its attacker (Bracha et al. 448; Beary and Benson 119; Brannon and Feist 99; Sapolsky 12). In 1936, endocrinologist Selye identified a similar response. While experimenting with laboratory rats, Selye noticed that injections of almost any foreign substance produced three noticeable results: swelling of the adrenal glands, shrinkage of the lymphatic organs, and ulcers in the stomach. He later discovered that any "noxious agent," including cold, heat, spinal shock, or excessive exercise produced the same three reactions. He named this response the "General Adaptation Syndrome" and later used the word *stress* to refer to the condition that manifests itself in this biological response (*Stress of Life* 38-47; "Syndrome").

Selye later differentiated between *eustress* and *distress.* Eustress is good stress—a state of motivation, excitement or positive emotion. Distress is bad stress—the body's response to a threat—what most people mean when they use the term *stress*. Even though one is positive and the other negative, both eustress and distress place demands on the body and can do damage over time ("Confusion and Controversy" 39).

A second model of stress research is the environmental stimulus model (Cohen, Kessler, and Gordon 4-6; Brannon and Feist 101; Irvine 16-17). This approach focuses on the external factors or events that cause stress. The most widely known example of this model is the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) created by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe in 1967 (Brannon and Feist 106; Cohen, Kessler and Gordon 4-6; Cooper and Dewe 45; Monat and Lazarus 83). The SRRS is a list of forty-three life events that cause change in a person's life. Each event is assigned a number of "life change units" based on the amount of readjustment it requires. Divorce is the most stressful event, rated at one hundred life change units; the lowest rated event, with eleven life change units, is a minor violation of the law. A higher number of life change units indicates greater potential for illness (Cohen, Kessler and Gordon 4-6; Cooper and Dewe 44; Monat and Lazarus 83).

The third model, and the one most accepted by psychologists today, is the interactive model (Cohen, Kessler, and Gordon 6-8; Brannon and Feist 102; Irvine 17-20; Newton and McIntosh 39; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez 498). This model recognizes that stress is the result of an internal transaction between an external event and the person's internal appraisal of that event. Lazarus is the leading theorist in this tradition. He and his colleagues developed a concept of psychological stress that is determined by internal processes of cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal is the process of encountering and evaluating a stimulus in the environment. In primary appraisal the individual assesses whether the stimulus has potential for harm or benefit; in secondary appraisal the individual assesses options for managing the potential harm (or improving the potential benefit). Coping is the process of making cognitive or behavioral

changes in order to manage situations appraised as threatening (Folkman et al. 992-93; Lazarus and Folkman 31-45, 141-78; Newton and McIntosh 39-41).

Another example of this model is Reuben Hill's ABC-X theory of family stress. Hill formulated this model after the Great Depression and the Second World War in an attempt to understand why some families thrived in these difficult situations while others did not (Wilmoth and Smyser 155). In the ABC-X model, the A factor consists of the stressor the family must face. The B factor consists of the social and emotional resources the family possesses for dealing with the stressful event. The C factor is the meaning that the family assigns to the event—their perception of the stressor in light of the resources they possess. These three factors combine to produce the X factor, which is the outcome of the stressful event (Darling, Hill and McWey 265-66; Wilmoth and Smyser 156-58).

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a scriptural example of the ABC-X model at work. Paul finds himself in prison (A), but draws on spiritual resources to deal with his situation (B), and assigns a positive meaning to the situation (C): "[W]hat has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). The outcome (X) is that Paul thrives spiritually and his ministry continues. Philippians 4:6-7 is a famous passage in which the ABC-X model appears: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." In this passage, the A factor (stressor) is whatever might cause anxiety; the B factor (resources) is the power of prayer; the C factor (meaning or perception) is thanksgiving; and, the X (outcome) is the peace of God (Wilmoth and Smyser 158-61).

Cameron Lee and Judith Iverson-Gilbert applied the ABC-X model in a study of clergy stress. Their findings indicate that the B and C factors (resources and perceptions) played a greater role in determining the outcomes (X) than the demands themselves (the A factor). They conclude, "[I]nstead of trying to help pastors by merely reducing the occurrence of external stressors, we should pay more attention to the meaning that pastors give to their experiences" (255). When dealing with clergy stress, internal processes are at least as important as mitigating external demands.

The interactive tradition of understanding stress is the most helpful model for clergy. Stressful demands of one kind or another will always be present in the ministry environment. Clergy who appraise these stimuli as harmful, and fail to cope with them effectively, will experience biological stress responses that can lead to burnout or disease. Clergy who develop effective appraisal and coping skills, however, will be able to survive, and even thrive, in the presence of ministry demands. The three aspects of faith and the three personal practices can help pastors develop the resources, perceptions, and cognitive appraisal and coping skills that lead to positive outcomes in the face of work-related stressors.

Numerous studies have focused on work-related stressors associated with the practice of ministry (Gleason; Lee; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert; McMinn et al.; Malony; Morris and Blanton, "Influence"; "Predictors"; Proeschold-Bell et al.; Rowatt; Weaver et al.). Michael Lane Morris and Priscilla White Blanton researched five main stressors: issues of mobility, financial compensation, expectations and time demands, intrusions of family boundaries, and lack of social support (Morris and Blanton, "Influence"; "Predictors"). G. Wade Rowatt identifies four separate categories of stressors. Vocational

stressors include low pay, unrealistic demands, and frequent relocation. Family stressors include lack of privacy and lack of family time. Social stressors include criticism and lack of support. Intrapersonal stressors for the pastor include high personal expectations and feelings of failure (526).

Rae-Jean Proeschold-Bell et al. identify forty-two conditions that affect the health of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. Many of these qualify as work-related stressors. The participants in the study indicated that four sets of these conditions have the greatest impact on their health. Issues related to constant availability and difficulty in setting boundaries drain the emotional energy of clergy and make self-care practices difficult. Church health issues, such as conflict or toxic relational patterns, lead to an enormous amount of anxiety. The United Methodist itinerant system of deploying clergy leads to frequent moves, which are a major source of stress. Finally, financial strain (low pay) is an issue.

A comparison of the conditions identified by Proeschold-Bell et al. with the stressors identified by other researchers reveals very similar concerns. Two, however, stand out as particularly salient to United Methodist clergy. First, while mobility can be an issue in every denomination, itinerancy is a fundamental principle of UMC polity. One cannot become a UMC pastor without taking a vow to live under the itinerant system. The average UMC pastor will relocate several times during his or her career. Second, while financial compensation can be a stressor for clergy of all denominations, the United Methodist compensation structure adds another layer to this issue. Significant salary disparities exist among UMC pastors. With a limited number of higher-paying churches available, clergy often see themselves in competition with each other for the best

appointments. The fact that district superintendents and bishops determine these appointments can add another set of expectations or requirements to those the clergy already face. Finally, the competition and the perceived need to impress superiors dissuades some UM clergy from seeking support, whether from other pastors, from their district superintendents, or from mental health professionals.

The present study focused on the stressors identified by Morris and Blanton, and by Proeschold-Bell et al. Morris and Blanton's list of five main stressors seems to have become a reference for all subsequent literature ("Influence"). Proeschold-Bell et al.'s work is particularly relevant because it focused on United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. The target population for my study is a smaller sample of this same population.

The quantitative portion of this study, then, measured clergy responses to statements about six categories of stressors. Issues related to expectations and time demands, as well as those related to lack of social support (isolation) appear in Morris and Blanton's list ("Influence"). Church health appears in Proeschold-Bell et al.'s list. Issues related to boundary setting and intrusive demands appear in both lists. Financial compensation and mobility also appear in both lists; however, this study gave attention to the particular ways that these issues affect United Methodist clergy.

Stress Relievers

Studies have shown that the most important stress-relieving practices for clergy are those of a theological or spiritual nature (Darling, Hill and McWey; McMinn et al.). The theological framework demonstrates that spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, and support system practices can help pastors develop a relationship with God characterized by

humility, trust, and surrender. Clinical research also demonstrates the mental and physical benefits of these practices.

Spiritual disciplines as *religious coping***.** A growing body of research demonstrates that religious beliefs and practices are important resources in the process of cognitive appraisal and coping (Pargament, Olsen, Reilly, Falgout, Ensing, and Haitsma; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez; Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, and Wulff; Newton and McIntosh). This research arises from the interactive tradition of stress research exemplified by Lazarus. It shows that religious beliefs directly influence cognitive appraisals. Through these appraisals, they indirectly influence coping strategies, which determine whether a person's encounter with an external stressor leads to a positive or negative outcome (Newton and McIntosh 41).

Studies link religious coping with beneficial outcomes of stressful encounters and with higher indices of overall well-being (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez; Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, and Wulff; Newton and McIntosh). Research has also demonstrated its particular importance to clergy (Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, and Wulff; Proeschold-Bell et al.). These findings underscore the importance of spiritual disciplines for clergy. Scripture study, prayer, and retreat taking are important means of developing the inner resources for religious coping. They are vital stress-relief practices, both theologically and clinically.

Sabbath as *life balance***.** Life balance is an important concept in the fields of stress management, occupational therapy, and organizational productivity (Diddams et al. 311, 317; Diddams, Surdyk, and Daniels 4; Nurit and Michal 228, 232). Psychologically, rest contributes to resiliency, which is the capacity to return to well-being after a stressful

situation. Making a choice to rest contributes to personal agency. Personal agency is the sense that one has some measure of control over his or her own life. Both resiliency and personal agency ameliorate stress (Diddams, Surdyk, and Daniels 317-18). Occupational therapy points to the need to balance life between the four areas of work, play, rest, and sleep (Nurit and Michal 228, 232). Management studies have confirmed that proper balance between life and work leads to greater productivity in the workplace (Diddams et al. 324; Freeman and Shaw 20; Quick et al. 220-22).

Medically, rest is necessary for the body to recover from periods of work. During rest, the body removes toxins built up during exertion. Without periods of rest, the body is unable to regain its essential energy (Nurit and Michal 229). Rest is a holistic experience. Physically, it is inactivity or motionlessness. Mentally, rest is freedom from anything that wearies the mind. Spiritually, it is peace, harmony, and calm. Rest described in this fashion is not the same as sleep (230).

Americans are not resting enough. Juliet Schor calculated that from 1973 to 2000, the average American worker added 199 hours to his or her annual schedule, amounting to five additional weeks of work each year (7). The practice of Sabbath gives pastors an opportunity to rest. Besides its theological importance, this practice provides enormous mental and physical benefits that relieve stress and promote health (Proeschold-Bell et al.).

Support systems as *social support*. Social support is the network of a person's relationships. Numerous studies demonstrate the positive impact of social support on physical and mental health (Balaji et al.; Bennett et al.; Cohen and Janicki-Deverts; Cohen and Doyle). Roy M. Oswald cites several dramatic studies of the power of social

support. Social scientist Eric Lindemaan interviewed the survivors of a devastating local fire that killed 129 people in the 1940s. He found that survivors with higher levels of social support recovered much more quickly; some even reported higher levels of well-being than before the fire. Professor Anton Antonovsky conducted a nine-year study of seven thousand people in Alameda County, California. The study found lower mortality rates among those with greater social support. Epidemiologist Lisa Berkman studied men in their fifties at various socioeconomic positions and with varying levels of social support. Those in poor socioeconomic conditions would normally be at high risk for poor health outcomes; however, she found that these men lived longer than their high-status counterparts if they had higher levels of social support (Oswald and Alban Institute 20-21).

Social support is a basic human need (Balaji et al. 1386). Studies of clergy, however, reveal that lack of social support is one of their main stressors (McMinn et al. 564; Morris and Blanton, "Influence" 190; "Predictors" 35-38; Proeschold-Bell et al.; Rowatt 526; Weaver et al. 396). Authors and researchers who address clergy burnout and stress recommend strongly that pastors prioritize the development of adequate support systems (Oswald 129-39; Oswald and Alban Institute 1-10; Rediger 147-61; Reuter 224-25, 227-28; Rowatt 532-33; Seamands 44-47; Spaite and Goodwin 83-92; Wilson and Hoffman 11). Daniel Spaite and Debbie Salter Goodwin say that the pastor in social isolation is "wired for disaster" (83). Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffman insist that relational isolation is the single most predictive factor in ministry burnout and failure (11).

Oswald describes his own support system. It begins with his marriage and his extended family. He also finds support in a professional association of consultants and trainers and in a smaller group within that association (called the "Phrogs"). He attends a men's awareness group and an adult Sunday school class at his local church. In addition, he has three mentors, a spiritual director, and "more friends than I have time to see" (Oswald and Alban Institute 10-19).

Developing social support is an ongoing endeavor. Oswald and G. Lloyd Rediger recommend that clergy perform a support analysis. In this exercise, the pastor makes a list or a chart of all supportive relationships in his or her life, including spouse, immediate family, extended family, friends, professional associations, and other clergy. Closeness and quality of the relationships are considered, along with geographic proximity and time availability. The clergy person uses this analysis to determine where support already exists and where more is needed (Oswald and Alban Institute 20-30; Rediger 198-99).

Research has shown that peer support groups are an effective source of social support. Carol A. Percy et al. studied the psychosocial effect of a peer support group on women suffering from polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a chronic endocrine condition associated with high levels of psychological distress. The study found that this type of social support decreased the distress of the participants (2046). The group provided both emotional and informational social support (2050-51). Group members reported better self-management and positive health outcomes because of their participation (2051-52).

Ulla Peterson et al. studied peer support groups among healthcare workers in Sweden. Participants had scored above the seventy-fifth percentile in exhaustion on the

Oldenberg Burnout Inventory. Eighty participants formed a control group who did not participate in support groups. Fifty-one participants participated in peer support groups that met in weekly two-hour sessions for ten weeks (508). Seven months later, group participants experienced a significantly higher level of increased development opportunities and participation at work as compared to the control group. Twelve months later, peer group participants experienced more support at work than the control group, and they continued to experience more development opportunities. They also experienced better general health and a decrease in perceived work demands (511-12).

Further, participants reported important benefits of being in a peer group. Talking to others in a similar situation provided validation for their stressful feelings and a sense of not being alone. Participants said they gained needed knowledge and understanding of stress and coping strategies. They reported increased self-confidence and decreased stress, anger, and anxiety. Some participants reported making important behavioral changes because of the groups (512-13).

What is true for healthcare workers and women with PCOS is also true for clergy. Participating in a peer support group with other clergy is a particularly helpful means of developing social support (Proeschold-Bell et al.; Seamands 44-47; Wilson and Hoffman 11-12). Andrew Miles analyzed data from the Duke Clergy Health Initiative survey of 1,726 United Methodist clergy in North Carolina and found that participation in peer support groups is positively related to mental health among these clergy. He attributed this relationship to the fact that these groups are an effective source of social support. Other benefits of peer group participation include a safe space to share feelings, a break

from workday stress, and the gaining of information that improves job performance,

which in turn relieves stress (13).

New research reveals that peer group participation has a positive influence on

both the well-being of clergy and the growth of their congregations. Janet Maykus and

Penny Long Marler surveyed 2,098 participants in pastoral peer groups funded by the

Sustaining Pastoral Excellence initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. They combined

their findings with results from the 2008 Faith Communities Today (FACT) Survey of

Pastoral leaders (N = 2,525). This combined data provides the largest and most

comprehensive study to date of the effect of clergy peer group participation (Austin

Presbyterian Seminary 2-3).

The study found a relationship between pastoral peer group participation and the

numerical growth of the pastor's congregation. Two important characteristics, however,

must be present in the pastor's peer group participation. One is the length of time the

pastor participates. The longer the participation over time, the more likely the

congregation is to grow. The second characteristic is the leadership and structure of the

support group. Congregational growth is most likely to occur when a trained facilitator

leads the peer group using a curriculum (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 8-10).

In addition, this study identified several key benefits to support group

participation. Pastors who participate can discover a feeling of renewed energy for

ministry. Their peer group participation has a positive impact on their family and friends.

Their participation also leads to greater creativity and deeper intimacy with God (Austin

Presbyterian Seminary 22).

Ministry renewal is most likely to occur in groups where certain characteristics are present. These factors include accountability and practical help, a high level of contact between group members, and a group facilitator who inspires confidence. In addition, the group must be cohesive, "like a family;" and must focus on ministry improvement through peer consultation on personal and ministry problems (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 23). The strongest predictor of renewed ministry is the degree of closeness experienced among group participants (24).

Groups that lead to greater intimacy with God must provide "spiritual fuel," accountability, and practical help for ministry. These groups should be flexible but cohesive, and spend time in spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible study, meditation, silence, and theological reflection (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 27).

The researchers identified several characteristics of those groups in which participants expressed the most satisfaction. These groups have a formal covenant and a high quality leader/facilitator. They are denominationally diverse and possess a high level of intimacy and accountability. The groups' practices include creative expression of spirituality through art, music, or literature. Not surprisingly, members attend the meetings regularly (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 28).

The group leader/facilitator plays an important role in the success of clergy peer support groups. Participants in the study indicated that they were most satisfied when the leader/facilitator was a credentialed professional, such as a pastoral counselor or a spiritual director. They were least satisfied with a member chosen by the group as its leader. A high level of satisfaction did exist, however, when the leader/facilitator was a ministry peer with special training (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 28-29).

An aspect of peer groups that is particularly salient to the present study is the support participants receive for other stress-relieving practices:

> [B]elonging to a peer group *legitimizes* [original emphasis] activities that many pastoral leaders knew were necessary for a long and vital ministry, but found difficult to squeeze into their schedules. Time of Sabbath, fellowship with friends, creative endeavors, prayer, and laughter became parts of their pastoral rhythms, and therefore parts of the rhythms of their calls. (Austin Presbyterian Seminary 10)

All of the stress-relieving practices discussed in this study are important, especially the spiritual disciplines. An important feature of peer groups, however, is the role they play in legitimizing, supporting, and holding pastors accountable to the other practices.

Spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, and support system practices are important from both a theological and clinical standpoint. This study also considered three other practices that are examples of healthy self-care: exercise, relaxation, and hobbies.

Exercise. The physical and mental health benefits of regular exercise are well-documented (Saxena et al.; Sothern et al.; Warburton, Nicol, and Bredin). Exercise is a form of self-care that reflects the truth of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

> Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Similarly, in Romans 12:1 Paul calls Christians to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Exercise and other forms of care for the body are necessary to preserve and protect these "sacred vessels" of service to God (Headley 109).

Oswald describes an experience in which he came to his hotel room after a long day of presenting a clergy seminar. He was exhausted but knew that if he went straight to bed he would wake up during the night. Fighting his desire to indulge in numbing

activities such as eating, drinking, or watching television, he went to a health center and began to exercise. His initial commitment to himself was to spend ten minutes on a stationary bike. As he began to exercise, however, his energy level increased. He added another ten minutes to his ride. After fifty minutes, he moved to the rowing machine. His emotional and mental well-being increased as he continued what became an extensive workout. He writes, "I wish all clergy could experience the means of Grace that physical exercise has been for me" (143-44). Rediger also attests to the benefits of exercise, noting that maintaining fitness is actually less difficult than dealing with the consequences of not being fit (166).

Relaxation. Deep relaxation is the opposite of the *fight or flight* stress response, and has the benefit of counteracting its negative effects (Beary and Benson 119). Archibald D. Hart insists that relaxation is necessary on an hourly, daily and weekly basis. He recommends a short relaxation exercise each hour, and thirty minutes of deep relaxation each day. All relaxation consists of at least six basic steps. One should set aside a predetermined amount of time, forestall interruptions, and sit or lie comfortably. A fourth basic step is not to fall asleep; relaxation is not the same as sleep. The last two steps are to remain inactive and avoid thinking troublesome thoughts. Hart offers more specific relaxation techniques that involve stretching, deep breathing, and focusing on relaxing specific groups of muscles (*Adrenaline* 162-70).

Hobbies. A hobby is any pleasurable pastime, such as woodworking, stamp collecting, gardening, or singing. Participatory sports such as tennis, golf, sailing, or horseback riding also fall into this category. Hobbies relieve stress by occupying the mind, allowing one to detach from work pressures, worry, or fear. Television is not

sufficient for this purpose, as it may simply bring worrisome subjects to mind. Oswald writes, "All of us need one or two activities that captivate our minds and energies completely, thus allowing us to detach temporarily from the parts of our lives that are destroying us" (187). Clergy who pursue hobbies will be glad to know that congregations support their involvement in personal interests (Wright and Blackbird 37).

Research Design

This study used an explanatory mixed-methods design to answer the research questions. In this design, a researcher collects quantitative data first and then collects qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results. This design has two advantages. First, it makes a clear distinction between the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, dispensing with the need to integrate two types of data. Second, it incorporates the best features of both kinds of data. The quantitative portion provides hard data on the target population; the qualitative portion provides deeper insight into the data (Creswell 560).

Examples from nursing and health care research illustrate the effectiveness of the explanatory mixed-methods design. Eloise C. J. Carr describes two studies on pain management in which women having gynecological surgery completed questionnaires related to pain and anxiety immediately before and after their surgeries. Telephone interviews took place one week or one month later. The qualitative data from the interviews gave depth to the quantitative findings from the questionnaires. The mixed-methods study provided a better understanding of the human complexity of pain management and resulted in stronger recommendations for caregivers. Lee A. Green et al. used an explanatory mixed-methods design in a study of the institutional review board

(IRB) system for health care research. Their quantitative research consisted of a log kept by staff fulfilling IRB requirements. This data yielded a record of actions performed and staff hours consumed. For the qualitative portion of the study, the researchers discussed the logs and identified recurring themes in the data. Green and his colleagues demonstrated that the IRB system for health care research created costly delays and actually decreased protection of human subjects. These examples demonstrate the value of this design for the present research. The aggregate of quantitative responses to the clergy stress survey will be helpful; qualitative elaboration, however, will be necessary to understand their implications.

Summary

Stress has its origin in the Fall of humanity. To make their way through this stress-filled world, pastors must develop the faith modeled by Abraham: a relationship with God characterized by humility, trust and surrender. Spiritual disciplines, Sabbath rest, and building a support system are personal pastoral practices that are effective in mitigating clergy stress and reflect these three aspects of faith.

Stress is the body's response to a perceived threat. It is the result of an internal transaction between an external event (a stressor) and the person's internal appraisal of that event. Common work-related stressors for clergy include isolation, intrusive demands, and unrealistic demands. In addition, the clergy in this study face issues related to church health, financial compensation, and the United Methodist itinerant system.

Stress-relieving practices for clergy include spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, support system practices, exercise, relaxation, and hobbies. The first three of these practices are

theological in nature, yet they are also beneficial from a clinical standpoint. The second

three are examples of healthy self-care.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem and Purpose

Ministry has never been easy. John Oberlin, an American pastor in the early

nineteenth century, describes the emotional burden of serving a large parish filled with

constant demands:

> The pastor of Waldsbach if he tries to be what he ought to be in this vast
> and most burdensome parish … is a poor dog, a beast of burden, a cart
> horse. He must do everything, watch everything, answer for everything.
> From early morning until bedtime I am occupied, hurried, crushed without
> being able to do half or a tenth part of what ought to be done. A decent
> leisure, which others can enjoy, has long been unknown to me. Who
> cares? Everything rests upon the pastor who meets everywhere nothing but
> hindrances, obstacles, delays and red tape: and not being able to please
> everybody or satisfy those who disagree with each other must fight
> constantly against malevolence. (qtd. in Malony 164-65)

Oberlin's struggles are strikingly similar to the stressors that pastors face today. Clergy

continue to deal with enormous time demands, loneliness, church conflict, and a feeling

of personal responsibility for every aspect of the church's ministry.

Pastors today also face the challenge of ministering in a postmodern, post-

Christendom context. The changing role of the church and its leaders creates ambiguity

and confusion that are stressful. Increasing expectations of church members, coupled

with decreasing financial and human resources, have led to overwhelming emotional

strain on the part of many pastors.

An unfortunate result of clergy stress is a growing number of pastors experiencing

depression or burnout to the extent that they leave the ministry. This study sought to

address the stress of clergy by gathering information and insights that could shed light on

the problem. The purpose of this research was to determine which work-related stressors

and which stress-relieving practices identified in literature are most common among United Methodist clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference in order to provide recommendations to clergy and those who supervise them.

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Research Questions

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Three research questions guided this study towards the fulfillment of its purpose.

Research Question #1

Which of the work-related stressors identified in literature do the clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church most commonly experience?

The instrumentation for this question was the first part of the online clergy stress survey (see Appendix A). This portion of the survey was based on the six main work-related stressors identified in the literature review. The stressors studied were time demands, isolation and loneliness, intrusiveness (ministry demands intruding on personal or family boundaries), church health issues, financial compensation, and issues related to itinerancy. I wrote three statements for each stressor. A forced-choice Likert-type response scale followed each statement with the choices being strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly disagree.

In addition to the Likert-style forced-choice items, a final question in this portion of the survey listed all six of the stressors and asked, "Which of these aspects of ministry has been a source of stress for you (choose all that apply)?" Because this overall question clearly revealed the stressors that were being measured, it appeared last so as not to bias the previous statements.

Research Question #2

Which of the stress-relieving practices identified in literature do these clergy most commonly use to relieve stress?

The instrumentation for this question was the second part of the online clergy stress survey (see Appendix A). This portion of the survey was based on the six stress-relieving practices identified in the literature review. The practices studied were spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, support system practices, exercise, relaxation, and hobbies. I wrote four statements to measure spiritual disciplines: one each on prayer, Scripture reading, fasting, and retreat taking. Three statements addressed support system practices: one for spending time with family, one for developing close friendships, and one for participating in a clergy support group. Sabbath, exercise, relaxation and engagement in hobbies received one statement each. A forced-choice Likert-type response scale followed each statement. Available choices depended on the statement. For example, under the statement, "I engage in physical exercise," the choices were, never, roughly once a month or less, about once every two weeks, once or twice a week, 3 times a week, and more than 3 times a week. Under the statement, "I spend plenty of quality time with family members," the choices were, strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. In addition to the Likert-style forced-choice items, a final question in this portion of the survey listed all of the stress-relieving practices and asked, "Which of these practices have you used frequently as a means of relieving stress (choose all that apply)?" Because this overall question clearly revealed the stressors that were being measured, it appeared last so as not to bias the previous statements.

Research Question #3

What recommendations for clergy and those who supervise them arise from this study?

Answers to this question arose from qualitative analysis of the focus group discussions. I conducted three focus groups. These focus groups met to discuss the findings of the online clergy stress survey. I recorded their comments and coded them for themes. The themes that emerged pointed to recommendations for dealing with the problem of clergy stress.

Population and Participants

The target population for this study was the 206 United Methodist clergy under appointment in the Asheville, Waynesville, and Marion districts of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. Of these 206 clergy, 157 are male and forty-nine are female. Their average age is 52. They are predominately white. Eighty-seven of them are ordained elders in full connection with the Western North Carolina Conference, and another twenty are provisional elders. At least 113 of these clergy are seminary graduates.

These clergy serve churches ranging in size from as small as ten to as large as one thousand members. The vast majority of them are solo pastors. Some of them are solo pastors working with non-clergy staff. A small minority are either associate pastors or senior pastors working with clergy associates. This section of North Carolina is not a heavily urbanized area, so only a few of these pastors serve in urban churches. Most of them are in churches that serve primarily rural and suburban areas.

The sample for this study consisted of those members of the target population who chose to participate. All clergy in the Asheville, Waynesville, and Marion districts who have an e-mail address received an e-mail with a link to the online survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Invitations to participate in the focus groups were extended by postal mail to thirty-six clergy from the three districts. Twenty-five of these clergy attended the meetings.

Design of the Study

This study used an explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative portion consisted of the clergy stress survey. This survey produced numerical data that quantified the most common stressors and stress-relieving practices reported by the participants from the target population. The next portion of the study included the qualitative focus groups that gave richness and depth to the quantitative findings through their discussions and elaboration. This design was appropriate for this study because of its subject matter. Stress is a familiar concept and a common problem; therefore, a wide-ranging survey is effective for measuring attitudes and behaviors regarding this topic. At the same time, stress is a subjective, personal topic. The data yielded by the survey needs discussion and elaboration in order for it to provide its most helpful insights.

Instrumentation

I designed the clergy stress survey to collect data on the first two research questions. Respondents were able to complete the survey online in five to ten minutes. The convenience of taking the survey online increased the response rate. The survey consisted of thirty-two questions. The first part contained nineteen questions dealing with work-related stressors for clergy. The second part presented thirteen questions that dealt

with stress-relieving practices. Each question in the survey was a personal statement, such as, "I feel that the time demands of ministry are overwhelming," or "I practice an intentional Sabbath." The respondents chose one of four to seven responses to indicate how true the statement was for them or how often they engaged in the practice.

I facilitated the focus group discussions using an interview protocol consisting of four to six open-ended questions. I developed these questions after obtaining the results of the survey. Their purpose was to elicit responses from the focus group participants that would serve to elaborate on the survey findings.

Pilot Test

The clergy stress survey went through several phases in its development. I created the first draft of the survey on the Survey Monkey Web site and e-mailed the link to a group of twenty-five people from various professions and backgrounds. The primary aim of this first pilot test was to check the wording of the questions. I asked these persons to complete the survey and make note of questions that were unclear or poorly worded. Their comments revealed that several of the questions were unclear as written.

I revised the wording of the survey according to the suggestions from this first pilot test. Then I asked ten United Methodist pastors who were not from the target population to complete the revised survey and provide feedback on the questions. I also asked this group to make note of the amount of time required to complete the survey.

Finally, I recruited a team of six experts to review the third draft of the survey. All of these persons held Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Ministry degrees. Three of them were United Methodist clergy. Once I received their comments, I made final revisions to the survey.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to the consistency of an instrument's measurements (Creswell 169). A yardstick, for example, is a reliable instrument for measuring length if it yields the same measurements upon repeated use. If it yields different measurements in the presence of heat, cold, or humidity, or upon use by different persons, it is not a reliable instrument.

The clergy stress survey used in this study can claim no reliability. Because it is a researcher-designed instrument, no one has used it in repeated trials in order to test whether it yields consistent results. Nonetheless, I sought to strengthen the survey's potential for reliability by avoiding factors that often result in unreliable data. The survey was administered in a uniform fashion: Every participant received the survey in electronic form and was able to complete the survey on his or her own computer. The convenience of this method ensured that none of the participants would have to complete the survey while nervous or fatigued (Creswell 169).

Validity refers to whether an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Creswell 169). A yardstick is a valid instrument for measuring the length of a board or the width of a desk. It is not, however, a valid instrument for measuring weight or for measuring the volume of a liquid.

The clergy stress survey has face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to whether an instrument appears, at "face value," to measure what it sets out to measure (Jonker and Pennink 162-63). While not scientific, face validity is important because it lends credibility to the instrument. People are not likely to respond to a survey or other instrument if they cannot see how it applies to the subject at hand. I took care to construct

the clergy stress survey with clear, unambiguous questions. The careful wording of the survey's questions helped to ensure its face validity.

Content validity refers to whether experts familiar with the subject matter would judge the items on an instrument to measure what they are intended to measure (Creswell 172; Jonker and Pennink 162). In order to ensure content validity for the clergy stress survey, I asked pastors, as well as educators and practitioners in the social sciences to review the survey items. I also sought to ensure validity by using multiple statements to measure the same concept.

Data Collection

Quantitative data for this study was collected online through Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is a Web site that allows users to create online surveys, collect responses electronically, and analyze the resultant data online. This form of data collection has several important benefits. It is extremely cost-effective because it requires no paper surveys, envelopes, or postage. It is time efficient because the survey goes out instantly and the results are received instantly. It ensures anonymity. Perhaps most importantly, this form of data collection is extremely convenient for the potential respondent, making participation more likely and response rates more positive.

In September 2010, I contacted the district superintendents of the Asheville, Marion, and Waynesville districts and asked for permission to conduct the clergy stress survey. They granted permission and offered the services of their administrative assistants to send out the survey to their e-mail lists.

I wrote a cover letter for the survey that explained its purpose, its voluntary and anonymous nature, and the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. No

known risks existed. The benefits consisted of the more accurate results obtained by full

participation and the knowledge about clergy stress that was gleaned from these results.

In November, the three district offices e-mailed the cover letter, with a link to the

online survey, to each member of the target population. The survey remained open

through the month of December.

Focus group sessions provided the qualitative data in this study. In January 2011,

I conducted three focus groups. I provided lunch for each group, both as a convenience

and as an incentive for participation. Each session began with a short presentation of the

survey findings. Group members then discussed four to six open-ended questions that

prompted reflection and elaboration on the quantitative data. This method of collecting

data has the benefit of group interaction and synergy. As group members interact and

respond to each other's ideas, themes begin to emerge that help to make the implications

of the quantitative data more clear. The discussions were recorded for later transcription.

In addition, I enlisted the help of an assistant moderator who took careful notes.

Data Analysis

Survey Monkey automatically compiled the responses to each statement on the

stress survey. Simple bar charts illustrated the answers chosen most often for each

question. An examination of these charts revealed the work-related stressors most often

reported and the stress-relieving practices most often employed by the respondents.

The recordings from the focus group discussions were transcribed and coded.

Coding is the process of identifying themes that emerge from the data (Creswell 251).

Similar ideas expressed frequently point to important themes in the data. The themes that

emerged from the focus group discussions led to the recommendations offered by this study.

Ethical Procedures

Respecting the rights of participants is an important ethical procedure. Participants have the right to know the purpose of the study and how the results of the study will be used. They have the right to full disclosure of the potential risks and benefits related to their participation in the study. Finally, they have the right to gain from the study itself (Creswell 11-12).

This study respected the rights of its participants by providing a cover letter to the survey that clearly explained the purpose of the study. The letter made clear that the results would be discussed in focus groups. I clearly identified myself as a Doctor of Ministry candidate and informed participants that they would have access to the results of the study when completed. The letter explained that no known risks were associated with participation in this study. The benefit, however, was that the knowledge gained could be valuable to any clergy person dealing with stress and that participation would contribute to the accuracy of that knowledge.

Another ethical procedure in this study was the care taken to protect the anonymity of survey respondents. In a similar fashion, the focus groups operated under a rule of strict confidentiality. At the beginning of each focus group, I asked participants for permission to record the discussion. I asked for their permission to quote or paraphrase their comments without revealing their identity. I assured them that I would not use their names in my report. Stress is a sensitive subject. Clergy who openly discuss their experiences with stressful events are taking a risk. I took care in this study,

therefore, to ensure anonymity for survey respondents and confidentiality for focus group participants.

Full and honest reporting is another ethical procedure that was important to this study (Creswell 12). I have made every attempt to present the study's findings as thoroughly and honestly as possible.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Problem and Purpose

The "Stress in America 2010" report issued by the American Psychological Association (APA) shows that a majority of Americans live with moderate to high levels of stress—beyond what they consider healthy. They cite lack of time as the primary barrier to effective stress management (5, 11).

The report also highlights the negative effects of parents' stress on children, noting that most parents are not aware of the level to which their stress-related behavior causes their children to feel worry and sadness. Nearly one-third of children surveyed said that they had experienced physical symptoms commonly associated with stress, including headaches, upset stomach, and trouble sleeping ("Stress in America" 8-10).

In a press release related to this report, Norman B. Anderson, PhD, chief executive officer and executive vice president of the APA, states, "Stress could easily become our next public health crisis." He points out that stress is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, and depression and contributes to some of the leading causes of death in this country ("APA Survey Raises Concern").

Clergy stress is a problem in the same ways that stress is a problem for anyone. Stress related to the demands of ministry can lead to serious physical and emotional health issues for pastors. As the APA report shows, clergy stress can also prove damaging to the children and families of pastors. These issues are serious. In considering clergy stress, however, another issue comes into play: the damaging effect of clergy stress on the mission and ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Clergy stress can lead to burnout. Burnout can lead to pastors leaving the ministry. Each month an estimated 1,500 clergy leave their ministry positions due to burnout, moral failure, or church conflict (Focus on the Family 3). While devastating to the pastors, these leave-takings are certainly damaging to the churches as well. Walls demonstrates a correlation between the emotional health of pastors and the spiritual health of the congregations they serve (148). Clergy stress is not only a problem for pastors and their families; it is a problem for the church at large.

I began this study by identifying six work-related clergy stressors that appear in the literature: time demands, loneliness and isolation, intrusiveness, church health issues, financial compensation, and itinerancy. I then identified six stress-relieving practices in the literature: spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, support system practices, physical exercise, hobbies, and relaxation exercises. The purpose of this research was to determine which of these stressors and which of these stress-relieving practices are most common to the clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Participants

The target population for this study consisted of 206 United Methodist clergy under appointment in the Asheville, Marion, and Waynesville districts of the Western North Carolina Conference. These districts cover seventeen counties in the westernmost part of the state. This area is mountainous and contains the highest elevations in the state of North Carolina. It is predominately rural, and the majority of United Methodist churches in this area are small congregations.

One hundred fifty-seven (76 percent) of the clergy in the Asheville, Marion, and Waynesville districts are male and forty-nine (24 percent) are female. The average age of

these clergy is 52, and they are predominately white. Eighty-seven of the clergy in these districts (42 percent) are elders in full connection (seminary graduates ordained to the ministry of word, sacrament, and order). Twenty of these clergy (9.7 percent) are provisional elders (seminary graduates who have been licensed and commissioned but are not yet ordained). Fifty-three of these clergy (26 percent) are local pastors (non-seminary graduates who are licensed to perform pastoral duties in their own settings under supervision of an elder). Of these local pastors, forty-four are part-time and nine are full-time. Twenty-five of the clergy in these three districts are retired clergy (either elders or local pastors) who have come out of retirement to serve. Other clergy in the target population are full connection deacons, associate members of the annual conference, and ministers from other denominations.

Seventy-five clergy from the Asheville, Marion, and Waynesville districts chose to participate in the online clergy stress survey, for a response rate of 36 percent. Twenty-five clergy from these districts chose to participate in one of the three focus groups that discussed the survey results. Seventeen (68 percent) of the focus group participants were male and eight of them (32 percent) were female. Nineteen of the participants (76 percent) were elders in full connection. Five of the participants (20 percent) were local pastors, either full-time or part-time. One participant was a provisional elder. Thirteen of the focus group participants were between the ages of 40 and 49. Ten of them were 50 or above and two of them were in their early 30s.

Research Question #1

Which of the work-related stressors identified in literature do the clergy of the

Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church most commonly

experience?

The first part of the online clergy stress survey asked for responses to statements

regarding the six work-related stressors identified in the literature: time demands,

loneliness and isolation, intrusiveness, church health issues, financial compensation, and

itinerancy. Questions 1 through 18 of the survey consisted of three statements for each

stressor presented in random order. Each statement was a negative statement; in other

words, a respondent agreeing with the statement was expressing an experience of stress.

Question 19 was an overall question: "Which of the following aspects of ministry

has been a source of stress for you (choose all that apply)?" Respondents were able to

choose from any or all of the six stressors (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Overall Stressors Question (N=73)

Stressors	f	%
Time demands	63	87.5
Church health issues	51	70.8
Isolation/loneliness	44	61.1
Intrusiveness	43	59.7
Financial compensation	33	45.8
Issues related to itinerancy	33	45.8

By far, the most common work-related stressor reported by these clergy was time demands. The first question on the survey asked for responses to the statement, "The time demands of my ministry are overwhelming." A majority of those responding to this question (55.4 percent) said they agreed with this statement, and another 14.9 percent responded, "Strongly agree." Only one person responded, "Strongly disagree" (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Time Demands Overwhelming (N=74)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	11	14.9
Agree	41	55.4
Disagree	21	28.4
Strongly disagree	1	1.4

Question 8, "There is not enough time to accomplish everything I am expected to do in my job," received a similar response. A clear majority of 57.5 percent of respondents agreed. Another 21.9 percent of respondents strongly agreed. Only one person strongly disagreed (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3. Not Enough Time (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	16	21.9
Agree	42	57.5
Disagree	14	19.2
Strongly disagree	1	1.4

A majority of respondents also agreed with the third and final statement related to this stressor. Question 18 asked for responses to the statement, "I have experienced stress related to having too much to do in ministry." An overwhelming majority (58.1 percent) agreed; another 23 percent strongly agreed; and, no one at all strongly disagreed (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Too Much to Do (N=74)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	16	23.0
Agree	43	58.1
Disagree	14	18.9
Strongly disagree	0	0.0

The commonality of the time demands stressor was most evident in the responses to Question 19. In response to the question, "Which of the following aspects of ministry has been a source of stress for you (choose all that apply)?" an overwhelming 87.5 percent chose time demands (see Table 4.1, p. 71).

All three of the statements related to time demands (Questions 1, 8, and 18)

received a majority of agree responses. Further, almost 90 percent of respondents chose

time demands as an aspect of ministry that has been a source of stress for them. Clearly,

the work-related stressor most commonly reported by the participants in this study is time

demands.

The second most commonly reported work-related stressor was not so clear.

According to Question 19, the second most commonly reported stressor was church

health issues (see Table 4.1, p. 70). Over two-thirds of respondents (70.8 percent) chose

this stressor as one of the aspects of ministry that has been a source of stress for them.

Responses to Questions 3, 7, and 16, however, painted a slightly different picture.

Question 3 asked for responses to the statement, "There is currently serious conflict

within my congregation." Thirty-three respondents (45.2 percent) chose disagree, making

this response the highest ranked response to this question. Another eight respondents

(24.7 percent) strongly disagreed (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Conflict within Congregation (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	8	11.0
Agree	14	19.2
Disagree	33	45.2
Strongly disagree	18	24.7

Similarly, the highest ranked response to Question 16, "Members of my church

have used gossip, intimidation, or passive-aggressive tactics to oppose my ministry," was

disagree. This high ranking, however, was slim. While twenty-three respondents (31.5

percent) disagreed, another twenty-one respondents (28.8 percent) agreed. In addition,

strongly agree was the third highest-ranking response, rather than the fourth. Seventeen

respondents (23.3 percent) strongly agreed with this statement (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Use of Intimidation to Oppose Ministry (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	17	23.3
Agree	21	28.8
Disagree	23	31.5
Strongly disagree	12	16.4

Question 7, "There are controlling personalities at my church who make my

ministry difficult," was the only one of the statements related to church health to which

agree was the highest response. Thirty-two respondents (43.8 percent) agreed with this

statement. Again, however, this highest response was followed closely by its opposite.

Twenty-five respondents (34.2 percent) disagreed (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7. Controlling Personalities (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	13	17.8
Agree	32	43.8
Disagree	25	34.2
Strongly disagree	3	4.1

Disagree was the highest-ranking response to two out of the three statements related to church health. In the overall question about all six stressors, however, church health issues was the second highest-ranking stressor, with a clear majority of 70.8 percent. Lack of clarity in the three statements could be an explanation for this apparent discrepancy. For example, in Question 3, "There is currently serious conflict within my congregation," the word *serious* is a highly subjective word. Many of the respondents may have had conflict in their congregations without considering it serious. Further, the word *currently* in the same question may have been unclear. What is current for some respondents may be past history for others. In a similar way, the terms *gossip, intimidation, passive-aggressive,* and *controlling* are all open to different interpretations.

Isolation/loneliness and intrusiveness were the third and fourth highest-ranking responses in the overall stress question. A clear majority of respondents chose each of these as an aspect of ministry that has been a source of stress for them (see Table 4.4). While isolation/loneliness was the third highest-ranking response at 61.1 percent, intrusiveness was close behind it at 59.7 percent.

In the randomly ordered questions related to these stressors, a statement in each category received a clear majority of agree responses. These statements were the only remaining statements, other than the ones already discussed, with which a majority of respondents agreed. In the isolation/loneliness category, 56.2 percent of respondents agreed with the statement for Question 13, "Because of my role as a minister, there are only a very few people with whom I feel comfortable sharing my true feelings" (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8. Few People with Whom I Share True Feelings (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	17	23.3
Agree	41	56.2
Disagree	11	15.1
Strongly disagree	4	5.5

The highest-ranking responses were also agree for the other two statements related to isolation/loneliness. Question 4 asked for responses to the statement, "I have few to no close friends with whom I can spend time without having to be 'the minister.'" Thirty respondents (41.1 percent) agreed. Question 11 asked for responses to the statement, "I find ministry to be a lonely profession." Thirty-two respondents (43.2 percent) agreed with this statement. Although these agree responses did not represent a clear majority of 51 percent or more, they do indicate a relatively high level of agreement with all three of the statements related to isolation/loneliness.

A statement in the intrusiveness category was the only other statement in the survey to receive a clear majority of agree responses. Forty-four respondents (60.8 percent) agreed with the statement, "Unexpected ministry demands often interfere with my family or personal plans" (see Table 4.9).

Table 4.9. Ministry Demands Interfere with Personal Plans (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Strongly agree	13	17.8
Agree	44	60.3
Disagree	16	21.9
Strongly disagree	0	0.0

Interestingly, responses to the other two questions in this category seemed to oppose each other. Thirty-two respondents (43.2 percent) disagreed with the statement for Question 9: "I often get ministry-related calls at inopportune times (during meals, late at night, etc.)." At the same time, almost half of respondents—47.9 percent—agreed with the statement, "Being on call 24/7 is a source of stress for me."

The lowest-ranked work-related stressors in the survey were financial compensation and issues related to itinerancy. In Question 19, the overall stressors question, thirty-three respondents (45.8 percent) chose each of these aspects of ministry as a source of stress for them (see Table 4.1, p. 70). These two stressors are particularly salient to the clergy in this study because of the United Methodist appointment system. Clergy in this system must often move from one church to another, and financial compensation is often a major factor in both the decision-making process surrounding the move and the clergy person's satisfaction with the move. The fact that financial compensation and issues related to itinerancy ranked lowest as sources of stress is somewhat surprising.

The financial compensation category contained the only statement in the survey with which a clear majority of respondents disagreed. Question 17 asked for responses to

the statement, "My salary will not support a reasonable standard of living." Forty-two respondents (57.5 percent) disagreed with this statement. Similarly, 45.8 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement for Question 2: "My financial compensation is inadequate to meet my needs." Apparently, most of the clergy responding to the survey feel that their compensation is adequate. In a somewhat surprising twist, however, almost half of respondents (45.2 percent) agreed with the statement for Question 10: "I need a salary increase."

Other stressors. The final question on this part of the survey was Question 20. This open-ended question followed the overall question, and asked, "What other aspects of ministry are stressful for you?" Eighteen respondents chose to answer this question. Four of them pointed to expectations from the annual conference as a source of stress. Three respondents expressed frustration with congregations that seemed unwilling to move forward. Other sources of stress included paperwork, parsonage living, feeling responsible for others' spirituality, difficulty with the pastor's own spiritual growth, and concerns about who the pastor can trust in the congregation. One respondent answered, "When children die and consoling parents." These answers reveal the varied and sometimes painful nature of the many sources of clergy stress.

Summary. The work-related stressor that survey respondents most commonly experience is time demands. An overwhelming majority of respondents (87.5 percent) cited this aspect of ministry as a source of stress. The next highest-ranked stressor is church health issues (70.8 percent), followed by isolation/loneliness (60.1 percent), and intrusiveness (59.7 percent).

Research Question #2

Which of the stress-relieving practices identified in literature do these clergy most commonly use to relieve stress?

The second part of the online clergy stress survey asked for responses to statements regarding the six stress-relieving practices identified in the literature: spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, support system practices, physical exercise, hobbies, and relaxation exercises. Questions 21 through 32 of the survey consisted of statements related to these practices presented in random order. Response choices to the statements varied. Unlike the response choices for the statements on stressors, which all ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree, the response choices for statements in this section indicated a level of frequency of engaging in the practice being considered.

Question 32 was an overall question: "Which of these practices have you used frequently as a means of relieving stress (choose all that apply)?" Respondents were able to choose from any or all of the six stress-relieving practices. According to this final question, the most common stress-relieving practice is spiritual disciplines, with 83.1 percent of respondents indicating that they use this practice frequently (see Table 4.10).

Statements within the survey measured engagement in four specific spiritual disciplines: personal prayer, Scripture reading or study (other than for sermon preparation), fasting, and retreat taking. Almost half of respondents (48.6 percent) indicated that they "intentionally set aside time for personal prayer" every day. Another 25 percent indicated that they do so two to three times per week. For the statement, "I set aside time to read or study Scripture (other than for sermon or teaching preparation)," the two highest responses were every day (26.4 percent) and 2-3 times a week (26.4 percent).

The second highest response to this statement was 4-6 times a week chosen by 18.1 percent of respondents.

A high percentage of respondents also engage in retreat taking at least once per year. In response to the statement, "I take a spiritual retreat—one or more days away from my ministry setting for spiritual renewal through prayer, study, reflection, or spiritual direction," 40 percent responded, "Once a year," and 11.4 percent responded, "Once a quarter."

Interestingly, only one statement in the stress-relievers part of the survey received a majority response of any kind. This response was to a question regarding one of the spiritual disciplines, and it was never. A majority of respondents (52.8 percent) indicated that they never practice "fasting (abstaining from food for spiritual purposes) as a means of drawing closer to God."

According to Question 32, the second most common stress-relieving practice is physical exercise (see Table 4.10). The statement within the survey that measured engagement in this practice was, "I engage in physical exercise (e.g., running, aerobics, weight-lifting, cardiovascular conditioning, etc.)." The two highest responses were 3 times a week and once or twice a week at 25 percent each. The next highest responses were more than 3 times a week and about once every two weeks at 16.7 percent each. These responses would indicate that many of the respondents to this survey are engaging frequently in regular physical exercise.

Hobbies are the third most common stress-relieving practice. Forty-six respondents (64.8 percent) indicated on Question 32 that they use this practice frequently (see Table 4.10). Question 29 within the survey asked for responses to the statement, "I

engage in one or more hobbies or sports (e.g. woodworking, gardening, fishing, golf, tennis, etc.)." The highest response was roughly once a month or less at 29.6 percent. This response by itself would indicate a low frequency of engagement in hobbies on the part of these clergy. Other responses to this statement, however, indicate otherwise. Nineteen respondents (26.8 percent) indicated that they engage in hobbies once or twice a week. Another 16.9 percent indicated that they engage in hobbies about once every two weeks. A significant percentage of respondents—11.6 percent in all—indicated that they engage in hobbies three times a week or more than three times a week.

Table 4.10. Overall Stress Relievers Question (N=71)

Stress-Relieving Practice	f	%
Spiritual disciplines	59	83.1
Physical exercise	48	67.6
Hobbies	46	64.8
Support system practices	42	59.2
Sabbath	37	52.1
Relaxation exercises	25	35.2

The fourth most common stress reliever is support system practices. According to Question 32, 59.2 percent of these clergy engage in this practice. The questions within the survey reveal, however, that the respondents do not engage in each of the support system practices on an equal level. Questions 23, 27, and 30 dealt with three specific support system practices: clergy support groups, time with family members, and time with close friends. Question 23 asked for responses to the statement, "I participate in a

support group or a lectionary study group with other clergy." The highest-ranked

response, at 33.8 percent, was never (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11. Participation in a Support or Study Group (N=71)

Responses	n	%
Never	24	33.8
Once a month	14	19.7
Once a week	10	14.1
Once a quarter	9	12.7
Every other week	8	11.3
Once or twice a year	6	8.5

Question 27 asked for responses to the statement, "I spend plenty of quality time

with family members." Almost half of respondents (47.9 percent) agreed with this

statement. Interestingly, the second highest-ranked response was disagree at 40.8 percent.

Seven respondents (9.9 percent) strongly agreed, and only one respondent strongly

disagreed (see Table 4.12).

Table 4.12. Quality Time with Family Members (N=71)

Responses	n	%
Strongly Agree	7	9.9
Agree	34	47.9
Disagree	29	40.8
Strongly Disagree	1	1.4

The final question that related to support system practices was Question 30, which asked for responses to the statement, "I get together with close friends around whom I can be myself." The two highest-ranking responses were once a month (32.9 percent) and once a quarter (30.0 percent) (see Table 4.13).

Table 4.13. Get Together with Close Friends (N=73)

Responses	n	%
Once a month	23	32.9
Once a quarter	21	30.8
Several times a week	7	10.0
Once a year	7	10.0
Once a week	6	10.0
Never	6	8.6

Comparing the ranking of support system practices in the overall question with the responses to Questions 23, 27, and 30 paints an interesting picture of where these clergy find support. According to Question 32, the overall question, a solid majority of these clergy (59.2 percent) say that they use support system practices frequently as a means of relieving stress. According to Question 23, however, many of the respondents never participate in a support group or lectionary study group with other clergy. Responses to Questions 27 and 30 indicate that time with family and time with close friends are the more commonly used support system practices.

Sabbath is the fifth most common stress-relieving practice. Responses to Question 32 indicate, however, that a majority of respondents (52.1 percent) use this practice

frequently. Question 22 within the survey asked for responses to the statement, "I practice an intentional Sabbath—a full day off each week to rest from work." The highest-ranking response was every week, barring emergencies at 35.7 percent. Never was the lowest-ranking response at 2.9 percent (see Table 4.14).

Table 4.14. Intentional Sabbath (N=70)

Responses	n	%
Every week, barring emergencies	25	35.7
Less than once a month	16	22.9
3 times per month	11	15.7
2 times per month	8	11.4
1 time per month	8	11.4
Never	2	2.9

The sixth most common stress-relieving practice was also the only one used by less than a majority of respondents. Responses to Question 32 indicated that 35.2 percent of these clergy use relaxation exercises frequently as a means of relieving stress. Question 31 within the survey asked for responses to the statement, "I use relaxation exercises to relieve my stress (e.g., deep breathing, stretching, imagining myself in a favorite place, tensing and relaxing muscles in progression, etc.)." Just under half of respondents (49.3 percent) answered, "Never."

Other stress-relieving practices. The final question on this part of the survey was Question 33. This open-ended question followed the overall question, and asked, "What other practices do you engage in that relieve stress?" Fourteen respondents chose

to answer this question. One respondent answered, "Holding my wife is my greatest source of stress relief other than being in the Spirit." Sadly, another respondent answered, "None. I really don't ever come out from the stress." Other answers included reading, journaling, shopping, chopping wood, online browsing, and dancing.

Summary. A majority of respondents make frequent use of five of the six stress-relieving practices measured in this survey. Listed in order from highest ranking to lowest, the practices are spiritual disciplines, physical exercise, hobbies, support system practices, and Sabbath. The most frequently used spiritual disciplines are personal prayer and reading or studying Scripture. Fasting is not a significant spiritual discipline for the participants in this study. As for support system practices, time with family and friends is more common than participating in a support or study group with other clergy.

Research Question #3

What recommendations for clergy and those who supervise them arise from this study?

I conducted three focus groups to discuss the results of the clergy stress survey. Twenty-five pastors from the target population participated in the three groups. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. Three major themes emerged from the discussions: church health, support, and preparation and training.

Church Health

Focus group participants told story after story of church health issues that led to major stress in their lives. At one time or another, they had all dealt with conflict, power struggles, controlling personalities, personal attacks, and dying churches. One pastor said,

"Right out of seminary you get sent to the meat grinder." Others agreed that their first appointments were to particularly unhealthy churches.

Participants shared stories of power struggles and controlling personalities in churches they had served. One pastor told of a conflict between two small but controlling groups in his first church. If one group liked the pastor, the other group did not. The group that liked him did not like his predecessor or his successor. This conflict between the groups had nothing to do with the pastors themselves.

Another participant spoke candidly about the role of "controlites"—her term for church members who fight for control and oppose change. She called them, "a big stressor for pastors." For many of these people, she noted, the church is the only place in their lives where they have some power and authority. They resist change because of the threat that it represents to their sense of significance.

The term *bully* came up often in these discussions. One pastor said, "I think if every one of us were very open we would say that in our churches there is at least one church bully … who uses gossip to spread their need to put down the pastor." Other participants agreed, except for one pastor who stated that his church had no bullies. Another pastor in the group, however, quickly pointed out that he had served that same church previously. This pastor shared that the church had an "extremely aggressive" bully who left the church during his pastoral tenure. The bully's leaving had a noticeable effect on the life of that small church: "It changed the whole demeanor of that church immediately when he left." The church bully is now in prison.

Another pastor shared a frightening experience with a church bully:

> At my last church, there was a bully who had been bullying the last six
> pastors. Intimidation, disruptful behavior, these kinds of things. I wasn't

going to put up with it. It was deteriorating the church. Meetings would get hijacked and when I confronted him, we'd tangle. On the one-year anniversary of my being at that church, my middle child was assaulted by him. I was assaulted by him, and I received a death threat from him.

Bullies in the church are a serious church health issue that creates enormous stress for pastors.

Dying churches are another church health issue that participants discussed. They wondered whether the churches they serve would still exist in twenty years, and what they should do to keep them alive. One participant said, "It's hard to sit and look at a group of people who you know are just waiting to die." One pastor actually presided over the closing of a church. The time she spent with that congregation was extremely stressful. Seeing the church close was also difficult: "When [the conference treasurer] came in to change the locks and take the [United Methodist] insignia down, that was the most painful thing you'll ever see." The aging and decline of local churches is a source of stress for clergy.

Focus group participants offered some suggestions for dealing with church health issues. They pointed to clergy teamwork and support from superiors as important means of helping pastors face the pain of church health issues. They also noted the value of understanding a church's health condition before arriving as pastor. One participant shared that when the cabinet appointed him to a church in conflict, they were completely honest about the situation. He said, "I loved knowing what I was getting into." The honesty and support that he experienced are an example of dealing with church health issues effectively.

Support

Focus group participants expressed concern about the responses to Question 23, which indicated that a large percentage of the clergy surveyed never participate in a support group or lectionary study group with other clergy. One participant referred to support systems as something that clergy "desperately need." She commented, "There are so many people not in a clergy group and not having that support. It's scary. It's really scary." Other participants agreed that support groups are essential for clergy well-being.

Participants across the groups shared their own positive experiences in clergy support or study groups. One pastor shared how her lectionary group helped her deal with a very difficult church in a previous appointment. Another told of her involvement in an ecumenical group that included a Roman Catholic priest, an Episcopal rector, a Lutheran pastor, and herself. During Advent, this group brought their churches together for joint Wednesday night services. Other pastors affirmed the value of various groups in which they were involved.

The focus group participants noted the many obstacles to participation in a clergy support or study group. They pointed to time demands, the highest-ranked stressor on the survey, as one of the main reasons for lack of participation. As one pastor said, "You feel guilty if you take time away [from ministry] to do that." Another pastor is a member of two different support groups—one that meets weekly and one that meets monthly. He has difficulty, however, finding time to attend either one.

Geography was another obstacle to participation. The mountain districts in which these clergy serve are larger in area and more sparsely populated than the districts in the North Carolina piedmont. One pastor pointed to the greater distances between churches

and said, "It is hard in that district to connect with other clergy." Another pastor agreed: "It just takes so long to drive anywhere here." Two other pastors noted that when they both served in a district in the piedmont area, most of the clergy were located in one city. They felt that this close proximity contributed to the success of the clergy support groups they attended when they served in that district.

Trust was another obstacle to participation in a clergy support or study group. Some focus group participants pointed to the concern that a member of a pastor's support group might later become his or her district superintendent. This aspect of the United Methodist system may discourage pastors from participating in a group where honest sharing of difficulties is the purpose. In addition to this concern, trusting other clergy seemed to be an issue in general. One pastor commented, "Why get in a clergy support group when I can't really be myself? When I can't really share anything personal anyway?" Not all participants voiced this level of distrust. They did agree, however, that clergy sometimes have trouble trusting each other.

Some participants stated that they would like to be in a clergy support group but were unable to find one. One participant was a trained facilitator in the conference's Clergy Peer Groups program but had been unable to find other clergy willing to participate. Another participant noted that he found a lectionary study group he wanted to join, but they meet on Wednesdays and he customarily completes his sermons on Monday or Tuesday.

In all three focus groups, discussion of the support theme went beyond clergy support groups to clergy teamwork. They lamented the general lack of connectedness among United Methodist clergy. One participant commented, "I think there is that Lone

Ranger mentality that if we can't figure it out on our own, that we're somehow weak,…

and we've got to get over that." Another participant in the same group agreed, and added,

"In the years I've been in, I've sensed an increasing tendency of clergy being the Lone

Ranger." Focus group participants expressed strong desires to see pastors working

together in some fashion.

One participant offered an example of how pastors could work together. He

shared that his clergy support group planned to bring their churches together for joint

events so that they could get to know each other's congregations and then fill in for each

other when one of them is away. "There is no reason that we can't know everybody's

congregation," he said, noting that the five churches together would form a congregation

of less than five hundred members that these pastors could easily cover by working

together. A pastor in another focus group proposed a similar idea, suggesting that small

church pastors could work together to complement each other's strengths and

weaknesses: "I wouldn't mind preaching at two extra churches every Sunday if I had

somebody to take care of the pastoral duties that I'm not so good at." Other participants

agreed that clergy from different churches should find ways to work together.

Participants also applied this theme of support to pastoral transitions. They saw a

need for more teamwork between outgoing pastors and their incoming successors. Some

participants described positive experiences with a predecessor who worked hard to share

important information and make the transition successful. One stated, "It really helped

me. I knew who my bully was going to be when I got there, which helped me be prepared

when they first tried to be a bully." Conversely, other participants lamented that they had

to "walk in blind" to a new appointment.

The support theme extended to support from the district and conference. Participants expressed a desire to know that their superiors were behind them, especially in difficult church situations. One pastor noted that in his spouse's business a district manager supervises twelve branches. He compared this number with the seventy to eighty local churches that a United Methodist district superintendent must supervise and pointed out that supervising that number of pastors is almost impossible.

An exchange that took place at one of the focus groups illustrated both the need for clergy support and the difference that it can make. A young pastor, speaking of a previous appointment, shared how he longed for support in a difficult situation:

> When I was in that really poisonous church for two years, all I really wanted was for some of my clergy colleagues to walk in at those meetings where they nightly crucified me and just take me down. We just don't have a way to let that happen. I felt if it's failing, it's because of me, and I am totally alone in my failure out here. To have other clergy come in and say to me, "This is not entirely your fault," and to say to the people, "This behavior is not okay." You know, we're supposed to be connected. I never felt that in that bad situation. Another clergy person never entered that church in the two years that I was miserable there.

The young pastor noted that he did not think he was allowed to invite other clergy into his parish. A more seasoned pastor responded that, in fact, he had invited other clergy to come into a meeting at his church. During a time of church conflict, a meeting took place that he knew would be difficult. Anticipating negative behavior from some of the meeting attendees, he asked two of his colleagues to attend, simply to witness the meeting and provide a calming presence. This pastor told the focus group that the presence of other clergy changed the atmosphere of the meeting.

Preparation and Training

A third major theme that emerged from the focus group discussions is preparation and training for ministry. While discussing stressful aspects of ministry, especially those related to church health, participants expressed the feeling that seminary had not prepared them for the realities of life in the parish. They also called for ongoing training and mentoring to fill the "huge gap between seminary and practical ministries."

Participants pointed to this gap in their training as a source of stress. "I'd definitely say that a lot of the stress is lack of preparation," one pastor said. This pastor described being "blindsided" by the realities of "church politics" that she encountered in her first appointment. She stated that at the time she did not understand the dynamics of the situation and the real reasons why some church members called for her removal. A participant in another group noted that while seminary provides good training in "the technical aspects of being a minister," it does not prepare pastors for the relational aspects of life in the local church. Other participants agreed.

Clergy in the focus groups suggested that seminary training should include classes in leadership. One participant noted that the annual clergy profile in this conference asks pastors to describe their leadership style. "The question never came up in seminary," she said. "If you put it as a requirement, then it needs to be taught." These pastors thought that pastoral ministry requires leadership skills that they had not learned in seminary.

Focus group participants also discussed the role of boards of ordained ministry in preparing candidates for the realities of parish life. Some expressed concern that their board interviews, especially on the district level, were superficial. A participant who serves on a district board, however, shared that the board's procedures were changing.

Another participant had recently met with this board and was positive about his experience.

One pastor commented that boards of ordained ministry should do more to help ministerial candidates explore whether they truly love people. He felt that a lack of desire to spend time with people was a source of stress for some clergy.

Participants suggested ongoing training as a means of addressing the gap in clergy preparation. They recommended training in topics such as leadership, interpersonal relations, and conflict resolution. A second career pastor who had come to the ministry after a career in business shared some of his experiences in training sales staff. He spoke of the value of ongoing training, especially in leadership skills. One participant recommended that pastors be required to attend an annual "boot camp" that would include training in both physical education and current theological trends. Other pastors in the groups mentioned how much they had learned from their experiences with Plowpoint, a ministry that provides conflict resolution interventions for local churches. One said, "I probably learned more about ministry from Plowpoint, having them come into the church, than I did from anything in seminary." These pastors had brought Plowpoint into their churches to conduct conflict resolution, but had found that the intervention was also an excellent source of ongoing training.

A particular facet of ongoing training that received frequent mention was mentoring. Second career pastors in these groups noted the important role that mentors had played in their previous careers. "When I was an engineer," one participant said, "I had a mentor in every job I had." This pastor described the value of these mentors, both in checking her work and providing support. She commented, "Corporate America did a

lot better job of taking care of me than the church has." Other participants noted that mentoring relationships of some variety could provide both the support and the ongoing training that pastors need as they deal with the stressful aspects of ministry.

Summary

Church health issues, support, and ministry training were major themes emerging from the focus group discussions. To address church health issues, focus group participants recommended clergy teamwork and support, as well as open communication with incoming pastors about the state of a church's health. Participants highlighted the importance of support systems as a stress-relieving practice. They recommended that clergy participate in support groups. They also recommended teamwork among clergy, especially during pastoral transitions. Finally, to address issues of ministry training, participants recommended more practical ministry training in seminary, and ongoing training after seminary. They especially recommended training in skills such as conflict resolution, which are necessary for dealing with church health issues. Finally, participants in the focus groups recommended mentoring as a means of providing ongoing training and support for clergy.

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Summary of Major Findings

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This study produced the following major findings.

1. According to the **clergy stress survey**, time demands are the work-related stressor that these clergy most commonly experience.

2. According to **focus group discussions**, church health issues may be the work-related stressor that has the most impact on the well-being of these clergy.

3. According to the **clergy stress survey**, spiritual disciplines are the stress-relieving practice that these clergy most commonly use.

4. According to **focus group discussions**, support system practices may be the stress-reliever that can have the most impact on the well-being of these clergy.

5. According to **focus group discussions**, ongoing training is an important need for these clergy.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Major Findings

Clergy stress can be debilitating and damaging to the mission of Jesus Christ.

Pastors experiencing high levels of stress in ministry can become ineffective due to

depression, disease, or burnout. This research sought to address the problem of clergy

stress by determining the stressors and stress-relieving practices most commonly reported

by United Methodist clergy in the Western North Carolina Conference. The study was

carried out through an online clergy stress survey and a series of focus groups. This

chapter contains a discussion of the major findings of this study.

Time Demands

Time demands are the most commonly reported work-related stressor for the

clergy in the target population. This result confirms the 2002 Austin Presbyterian

Theological Seminary study, which also showed that time demands are the highest-

ranked stressor among the clergy surveyed (Jinkins 12; Jinkins and Wulff 4).

In the clergy stress survey, a clear majority of respondents agreed with all three of

the statements related to time demands. Further, 87.5 percent of respondents indicated

that time demands are an aspect of ministry that causes stress.

Focus group participants indicated that these responses aligned with their own

experiences. They noted that the time demands of ministry often prevented them from

pursuing stress-relieving practices such as hobbies, Sabbath, or support group

participation.

In response to the time demands results, another participant asked, "Where have we gone wrong as the church, and as leaders in the church?" One answer to his question is the expectations issue discussed in the theological framework. Pastors face unrealistic expectations both from their congregations and from themselves.

The solution to the problem of unrealistic expectations is to develop, communicate, and carry out biblical priorities for ministry. H. B. London and Neil B. Wiseman point out that laity and clergy often understand effective ministry differently. Pastors, therefore, must take the lead in defining ministry (75). Spaite and Goodwin assert that a pastor's primary calling is "to know God and make him known" (73). They further insist that the biblical priorities of a pastor's ministry are to pray and preach the Word of God (74). London and Wiseman encourage pastors to pray, study Scripture, and consult with key leaders in order to determine and then clearly articulate ministry priorities to the congregation (75-76).

Delegation of responsibility is another means of dealing with time demands. The theological framework discussed the Moses model of ministry displayed in Exodus 18. After Jethro chided Moses for carrying the burden of ministry alone, he instructed him to delegate some of the responsibility to "capable men" who could serve as "officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens" (Exod. 18:21). Jethro pointed out that this plan would lead to two good results: "[Y]ou will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied" (Exod. 18:23). Headley states that God actually desires this type of delegation, noting that the role of pastors is to equip church members for ministry rather than to control it all themselves (50-51).

Acts 6:1-7 provides another example of effective delegation. A dispute arose over distribution of food to widows. In response, the Apostles defined their ministry priorities as "prayer and the ministry of the word" (v. 4), and they delegated responsibility for the food ministry to a group of seven trusted, Spirit-filled men. The church grew as a result.

Delegation is not without its stresses. Focus group participants shared many frustrations related to equipping lay ministry. Some laypeople may not possess the competency to carry out needed tasks. They can be unreliable, either due to lack of commitment or because of a legitimate need to be somewhere else. Some laypeople stay too long in a job for which they are not suited, and pastors have difficulty asking them to step down. Pastors find themselves depending on the same small group of willing lay ministers. In addition, equipping lay ministry becomes a time demand in itself. While noting these difficulties, the participants agreed, however, that delegation is an important means of alleviating the stress of time demands.

Church Health Issues

While time demands was the most commonly chosen stressor on the **survey**, church health issues received much more discussion in the **focus groups**. This finding is significant in that it may point to church health issues, and not time demands, as the most important work-related stressor faced by the clergy in the target population.

Focus group participants agreed that a church's health or lack of health could be the most significant factor in the pastor's level of stress. A pastor who had been in an unhealthy church said, "When I changed churches this year it was like, 'Wow, this is what it feels like not to be under that stress.'" Another pastor agreed. He had spent five years in an unhealthy setting and then moved to another church. When he moved, his

style of ministry did not change, but his experience of ministry was much less stressful. Other participants also described having less stress when serving healthier congregations. More than one referred to their current appointment as "a breath of fresh air."

A participant in a different focus group also felt that the health of the church is a determining factor in the pastor's experience of stress. He said, "The stress caused by the congregation varies wildly depending upon the congregation. Some are far more stressful than others." The other participants in this group all agreed.

Proeschold-Bell et al. found that church health is, in fact, one of the major conditions that affect clergy health. They identified three specific church health situations that negatively affect the pastors they studied. The first situation is when a pastor encounters a small group of church members who oppose any change they suggest, even small ones. The second is when two groups within the church constantly oppose each other. The third is when one or more church members use gossip, intimidation, or verbal abuse to oppose the pastor's ministry. These situations lead to significant clergy stress and have negative impacts on pastors' overall health.

Rediger states that mental, spiritual, and physical abuse of pastors is on the rise, and he attributes this phenomenon to an increasing lack of church health (20). He notes that while dissension, vindictiveness, and abuse are more prevalent than ever before, effective conflict management on the part of congregations or denominational structures is rare (47-48).

The focus group discussions revealed that church health issues may be the most significant work-related stressor for the clergy in this study. Unfortunately, this stressor is probably the most difficult one to address. For example, pastors in Proeschold-Bell et

al.'s study expressed frustration with the level of support they received from denominational leaders when dealing with unhealthy churches. At the same time, district superintendents in Proeschold-Bell et al.'s study lamented the difficulties of improving church health and the low level of resources they were able to commit to this problem. These discussions seem to indicate that church health issues are a systemic problem that is beyond the capacity of any one person or group to solve.

Effective interventions, however, do exist. One such intervention is the *Longing to Belong* conflict transformation process offered by Plowpoint Ministries (Crissman). The mission of Plowpoint is "to break ground for the seed of the gospel through ministries that transform churches and church leaders" ("About the Ministry of Plowpoint"). Reverends Beth M. and Kelly Crissman, clergy members of the Western North Carolina Conference, founded Plowpoint in 2003. Since then, Plowpoint has served over five hundred churches. They have worked with church leaders in sixteen different denominations and twenty-nine states, and have a significant ministry with pastors in Liberia ("About the Ministry of Plowpoint").

Plowpoint was born out of Crissman's experience serving as pastor of a highly conflicted church in southern Georgia. According to Crissman, this conflict had been present in the church for fifty years. The church's nickname was "a good place to eat and a good place to fight." Church members identified themselves by which side they took in the conflict. Crissman believed that her ministry was to help the church members reclaim their identity as the body of Christ. As she consulted with an older pastor about the church's situation, the pastor used the metaphor of farming in southern Georgia. Before planting seed, farmers must plow the hard red clay and uncover the good soil that lies

beneath it. This pastor said to Crissman, "Sister, God's called you to a plow point ministry" (Personal interview).

A number of clergy in the target population for this study have brought Plowpoint into their churches, including many of the focus group participants. Plowpoint's conflict transformation process includes four phases. Phase one is a seminar based on Crissman's book *Longing to Belong: Learning to Relate as the Body of Christ*. In this six-hour seminar, led by a certified Plowpoint consultant, church members learn biblical principles for healthy relationships. In a session entitled, "Choosing to Belong," for example, they learn from Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 that certain behaviors are not appropriate for members of the body of Christ. These behaviors include lying, using harsh words or abusive language, slandering others, and allowing anger to control one's actions. From these same passages, they also learn behaviors that are expected: for example, forgiving, encouraging, being kind, speaking the truth in love, and making allowances for each other's faults (60-63).

Phase two is the development of a relational covenant. Through a process of brainstorming, participants work together to create a document that expresses their commitment to relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. While allowing participants to shape this document for their particular church, the consultant makes sure that it includes some mention of Jesus' process of reconciliation outlined in Matthew 18:15-20 (Crissman, *Longing to Belong* 150-53).

Phase three in Plowpoint's conflict transformation process is Christian conferencing. Now that participants have learned biblical principles of relating in phase one and established boundaries for relating in phase two, they are ready to move into a

time of airing their concerns, dealing with their hurts, and moving towards healing. In this phase, participants sit in a circle. One at a time, they answer two questions: (1) "What is God's future for this church?" and (2) "What are the obstacles that stand in the way?" Speakers may have as much time as they need to answer these questions, and other participants may not interrupt them. The consultant takes careful notes, reflects back to each speaker what he or she has said, and when necessary, enforces the boundaries of the relational covenant. After these sessions have concluded, the consultant prayerfully studies his or her notes to uncover key issues for the congregation to address (Crissman, Personal interview).

In the fourth phase of the process, the consultant meets with the church to explain and teach on the key issues. A service of closure and healing may occur. The consultant then meets with the leaders of the church to plan strategies for addressing the key issues. The process concludes with the consultant preparing a summary report, reiterating the sessions, the key issues, and the strategies agreed upon by the leaders. Throughout this process and beyond, the consultant provides leadership coaching for the pastor (Crissman, Personal interview).

Plowpoint's conflict transformation process has been effective in churches throughout the world, including many in this study's target population. Based on her experience leading this process in hundreds of churches, Crissman has said that the most important church health issue is "boundary violations"—the lack of clearly articulated and enforced boundaries of appropriate behavior for members of the body of Christ. The goal of the *Longing to Belong* seminar and relational covenant is to develop these boundaries. Crissman went on to say, however, that the most important predictor of

whether a conflicted church can become healthy is the willingness of the leaders to establish and enforce the boundaries (Personal interview).

Conflict management strategies such as the Plowpoint process are important steps toward church health. Focus group participants pointed, however, to an additional consideration: spiritual warfare and the presence of evil in the church. As one pastor said during a discussion of church health, "What we are really hitting on is that there is evil that lives in the church that is seeking to destroy the church." Other participants responded, "Amen!"

In the classic Scripture passage on spiritual warfare, Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). Pastors dealing with stressful church health issues must keep this truth in mind. In addition to developing conflict resolution skills and contracting with ministries like Plowpoint, pastors must heed Paul's instructions to "put on the full armor of God" (Eph. 6:13) and "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Eph. 6:18). These verses lead to the importance of spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer are the most commonly reported stress-relieving practice for the clergy in the target population. In the clergy stress survey, 83.1 percent of respondents indicated that they use this practice frequently as a means of relieving stress.

Focus group participants also pointed to the importance of spiritual disciplines, especially for dealing with church health issues. In the discussion of evil in the church,

one pastor stated that spiritual disciplines are the means of receiving power to resist evil. He pointed to the example of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness and emphasized the importance of confronting evil with Scripture and prayer. Other participants agreed.

The pastor whose child was assaulted by a church bully told how that unhealthy situation drove him into a deep depression. He said that the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and private worship helped bring him out of depression.

Focus group participants expressed concern about the responses to the survey questions on personal prayer and Bible reading. They were concerned that more respondents did not pray every day and that 12.5 percent of respondents said they never read their Bible other than for sermon or teaching preparation. Participants also noticed similarities between the numbers of survey respondents who participated in personal prayer, Bible reading, retreat taking, and Sabbath. They wondered if these respondents were the same people. They also speculated that these respondents' stress levels are likely to be lower than the stress levels of respondents who do not use these practices on a regular basis.

Support System Practices

While spiritual disciplines were the most commonly reported stress-relieving practice in the survey, support systems received much more discussion in the focus groups. Participants discussed support in terms of clergy support groups, teamwork among pastors, support from the district and conference, and support from other clergy in dealing with church health issues. Their comments indicated that they would like to develop or receive much more support in these areas. Interestingly, they made little mention of support from family and friends, which were the two highest-ranking support

practices in the survey. Apparently, participants were relatively satisfied with the support they had developed or received in these areas.

The focus group discussions indicate that support system practices may be the stress-relieving practice that can have the most impact on the well-being of the clergy in the target population. This finding does not negate the importance of spiritual disciplines. The fact that participants discussed support so extensively does not indicate that they do not practice or value spiritual disciplines. Instead, their frequent and extensive discussion of this topic reveals an unmet need in this area.

An important starting point is participation in a clergy peer support group. Clergy in the target population of this study have a unique opportunity for support group participation. In 2008, the Western North Carolina Conference of the UMC approved a conference-wide program to develop covenant peer groups (CPGs). The advisory committee for this program outlined four purposes for these groups: resourcing and idea sharing, encouragement and support through covenantal relationships, deepening of spiritual practices, and accountability for self-defined goals ("Covenant Peer Groups: An Overview").

In 2009, the conference contracted with Russ Moxley, a professional leadership consultant, to coordinate the CPG program. One of Moxley's tasks is to train conference clergy as CPG facilitators. These facilitators must be skilled in deep listening, asking evocative questions, and guiding the process ("Covenant Peer Groups: Roles"). As noted in the Austin Presbyterian Seminary study, this training is vitally important. Further, Oswald insists that the presence of a skilled facilitator is necessary to prevent these

groups from degenerating into forums for complaining and comparison (Oswald 137; Oswald and Alban Institute 91-95).

The CPG advisory committee worked hard to ameliorate some of the support system difficulties discussed in the focus groups and in the theological framework. District superintendents are not involved in the formation of groups. CPG participation is not mandatory, and neither the bishop nor the district superintendents will know which clergy choose to attend. The committee created this intentional separation between the Covenant Peer Groups and the administrative arm of the conference in order to ease clergy concerns about their participation or nonparticipation affecting their future appointments. In addition, these groups operate under a strict covenant of confidentiality ("Covenant Peer Groups: FAQs").

Ongoing Training

A final theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was that of preparation and training for ministry. Group participants believed that seminary had not prepared them adequately for the realities of life as a pastor. They expressed desires for ongoing training in practical ministry areas such as leadership and conflict resolution.

Gary McIntosh and Robert Edmondson cite inadequate training as one of the major sources of stress for today's pastors (8). In their survey of pastors who resigned, 17 percent said they resigned because of inadequate training (117). Rather than decry seminaries, however, McIntosh and Edmondson offer a helpful perspective on this issue. They argue that seminaries exist not only to train pastors for contemporary ministry but also to preserve and propagate the doctrines of the faith (42). Further, they point out that

with the rate of change in today's world, a seminary education that focused primarily on practical ministry methods would quickly become obsolete (51).

McIntosh and Edmondson do recommend that seminaries update their curricula to include subjects that are more practical. They point to seminaries such as Talbot School of Theology and Asbury Theological Seminary that are working to strike a balance between biblical and theological studies and practical ministry. Seminaries like these are also emphasizing field education more than they have in the past. In addition, some seminaries are opening satellite training centers where students get specialized ministry experience and some large churches are founding seminaries of their own (47-48).

More important than upgrading curricula, however, is embracing lifelong learning as a new paradigm of theological education. McIntosh and Edmondson call for pastors and seminaries to invest in continuing education that adds changing methodology to the non-changing theological foundation laid in seminary. A pastor should expect to be a student for the rest of his or her ministry (48-51).

An important consideration in this new paradigm is the support of churches. Congregations must allow pastors to set aside time for continuing education. Further, they must make continuing education a priority in the budget. McIntosh and Edmondson insist, however, that these costs are not an expense but an investment that benefits the church through better-equipped pastoral ministry (52).

Clergy peer groups can meet the need for ongoing ministry training. In fact, they may be more effective than traditional models of continuing education. D. Bruce Roberts directed the Indiana Clergy Peer Group Study Program (PGSP) from 1999 to 2006. This program funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., involved 115 Indiana clergy in peer

groups. The groups chose their own plans of study and met regularly for three years. Trained facilitators led the groups. They studied topics such as clergy self-care and healthiness, spirituality, family systems theory, and transformational leadership. Each group took a major trip in keeping with their learning objectives. Some groups, for example, traveled to Europe to study various phases of church history. Others visited mission sites in Asia or Latin America. Some visited the Holy Land. One group studying transformational leadership visited South Africa to witness how transformation was taking place in the wake of Apartheid (Roberts and Reber 3, 8).

Responses to the PGSP were highly positive. One participant said, "[T]he best continuing education I've ever had, for sure!" Many other participants agreed. Aspects of the program that appealed to them were the freely chosen study plans, the supportive nature of the groups, and the travel (Roberts and Reber 30-31).

D. Bruce Roberts and Robert E. Weber describe the value of peer study groups and the features that make them successful :

> Different models must be developed for delivering and sustaining continuing theological education and professional development over time. We in the church are not alone in struggling with this matter. Studies have been done of other professions that indicate that most ongoing courses, workshops and seminars make very little difference in the quality of practices in those professions. Through the PGSP program we have learned that if you want to make a difference people need to be in some kind of peer group setting that involves self-selection, designing their own learning objectives, accountability, adequate resourcing, continuing feedback, and the help of an outside facilitator in the initial stages. (61)

Peer study groups combine social support with relevant learning in current ministry issues. They are an excellent model for ongoing ministry training.

Implications of the Findings

This study found that church health issues may be the most significant work-related stressor for the clergy in the target population. Church health issues are systemic. Individuals working alone cannot address them adequately.

This study also found that support system practices may be the stress-reliever that has the most impact on the well-being of these clergy. Support systems are crucial because they provide encouragement and accountability that helps pastors carry out other stress-relieving practices.

These findings imply that clergy cannot deal with the stress of ministry in isolation. Exercise, rest, hobbies, and spending time alone with God are vitally important. These individual practices are likely to fall short, however, without some form of support from other people. Similarly, effective strategies for dealing with stressors such as time demands and church health issues will require help from others. Perhaps a comment from one of the focus group participants sums up the implications of these findings: "Don't be a Lone Ranger!" The need for support system practices may be the most significant implication of this study's findings.

Limitations of the Study

This study included only clergy from the westernmost districts of the Western North Carolina Conference. These districts are mountainous and rural. Cities and towns are far apart, roads are narrow and windy, and churches are typically small. While these churches include persons from all over the United States who have moved to the area for its natural beauty, a rural mind-set still prevails in many of them. The characteristics of this area, and the fact that the study focused on clergy working in this area, may be

limitations. Results might have been different if the study had been conducted in the more populated districts in the Piedmont section of the state.

Unexpected Observations

In the work-related stressors portion of the online survey, the two lowest-ranking stressors were unexpected. Financial compensation and issues related to itinerancy were selected for this study because of their particular relevance to United Methodist clergy, both in the literature and in informal conversations with UMC pastors. Interestingly, however, the responses to this survey indicate that the UMC clergy in this study are not overly concerned about these issues.

In the stress-relieving practices portion of the online survey, an unexpected observation was the overwhelming number of respondents who say they never fast. This discipline was of major importance in the spiritual life of Wesley, and UMC publications such as Steve Harper's *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* speak of it frequently. I did not expect that a large number of respondents would fast on a regular basis, but I was surprised to see how many said they never fast. Focus group members pointed out, however, that some pastors cannot fast because of diabetes and other medical conditions.

Recommendations

Part of the purpose of this research was to provide recommendations for dealing with clergy stress both to clergy and to those who supervise them. Following are some recommendations that arise from the major findings of this study.

Time Demands

Clergy can deal with time demands by abandoning the Moses Model of ministry. Rather than try to meet every expectation placed upon them, they must define ministry

for themselves based on prayer, study of Scripture, and consultation with church doctrine and church leaders. Having defined ministry according to biblical priorities, they must then communicate these priorities to the congregation. One of these priorities should be the equipping of the laity for ministry, following the example of Jethro's advice to Moses in Exodus 18 and the Apostles' choosing of the seven in Acts 6.

Those who supervise clergy, whether district superintendents or lay committees, can support pastors in the task of defining ministry. Rather than use their power to impose more unrealistic expectations, they should join the pastor in prayer and reflecting on Scripture to set and articulate biblical priorities for ministry. Further, they can support the pastor's efforts to delegate. This recommendation is especially important for lay committees who may need to interpret the biblical concept of equipping the saints to congregations that expect the pastor to do everything.

Church Health Issues

A pastor in an unhealthy church situation must develop self-differentiation and then stay in touch with the congregation. The pastor must define himself or herself in terms of values, beliefs, and goals and, at the same time, stay connected to the congregation. In this way, the pastor becomes a non-anxious presence in the church's emotional system. Differentiating oneself while staying in touch, however, can be very difficult. The pastor must seek help from God through spiritual disciplines and from others through support system practices.

Pastors in conflicted churches should contract with Plowpoint or a similar organization to conduct conflict transformation. Continued enforcement of the boundaries

defined by the conflict transformation process is crucial. Pastors, therefore, must work with church leaders to address boundary violations.

Those who supervise clergy must also be willing to enforce the boundaries. Church members intent on abusing their clergy will only continue to do so if lay committees and district superintendents do not support pastors in enforcing relational covenants.

Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines must be a priority in the pastor's schedule. Jesus says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Through practices such as prayer and reflection on Scripture the pastor accesses the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome stress. Further, the strength, comfort, guidance, and power of the Holy Spirit are essential for real ministry.

Those who supervise clergy should encourage, even insist, that they spend time alone with God through spiritual disciplines. Lay committees and district superintendents do not usually discuss this area with pastors. Evaluations usually focus on visible activities and measurable results. Instead of ignoring the importance of this critical unseen foundation of ministry, those who supervise clergy should use these opportunities to legitimize and prioritize spiritual disciplines.

Support System Practices

Clergy must seek out support. They cannot wait for support to come to them, nor can they let the obstacles to support system participation deter them. They must take the time, make the effort, take the risks, and involve themselves in support systems. Support systems, such as peer study groups, are important for the social support that clergy

desperately need. They are also important because they help clergy stay faithful to the other stress-relieving practices. *This recommendation may be the most important step clergy can take in response to the findings of this study.*

Those who supervise clergy should consider how they might become a source of support. Without abdicating their supervisory responsibilities, district superintendents and lay committees should ask themselves whether the clergy they supervise feel supported by them. They should look for ways to encourage and build up the pastors under their care. A further recommendation along these lines relates to the structure of the United Methodist Church. District superintendents must be relieved of some of their administrative duties so that they can truly support the pastors in their districts.

Ongoing Training

Pastors must become lifelong learners. The best model for continuing education is peer study groups. These groups provide ongoing training combined with social support. They have been highly effective throughout the country, bringing benefits both to pastors who participate and to their congregations.

The corresponding recommendation for those who supervise clergy is that they provide the necessary time and funding for these experiences. Churches must see ongoing training not as a luxury for the pastor's benefit but as a necessity for the health of the congregation. In a rapidly changing world, continuing education is no longer an option.

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Postscript

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This study has been a very personal journey. I have struggled with stress since I entered pastoral ministry twenty-two years ago. I have personally experienced most of

the work-related stressors discussed in the literature. I have wanted to walk away from ministry many times.

I am grateful that I did not walk away. This project has reminded me of my call and helped to renew my passion for ministry. Working on the theological framework brought me face-to-face with my own pride, lack of trust, and refusal to surrender to God. I saw that I could have less stress if I would put aside prideful concerns about success, trust that God had indeed called me to ministry, and allow him to direct the course of my life. I also found myself driven to more prayer and deeper reflection on Scripture.

The theoretical framework gave me a completely new perspective on stress. I am learning to use cognitive appraisal and, specifically, religious coping to moderate my stress responses. Further, I have been more faithful to regular exercise since beginning this project than before. I have unlocked the power of support by hiring a personal trainer, and under her guidance, I have lost almost twenty pounds. Pursuing physical fitness has been one of the greatest stress relievers I have ever experienced.

Surveying clergy and moderating focus groups provided two personal benefits for me. The first of these was the feeling of not being alone. The second was the joy of helping other clergy deal with their stress. I could tell that the focus groups were a stress reliever for the participants. They enjoyed the opportunity to share their feelings, tell the stories, and feel supported. I was happy to be able to serve them in this way.

Moderating the focus groups was an exhilarating experience for me. I hope to find more opportunities to provide this kind of group facilitation in the future.

Finally, I believe that this project has exposed me to a wealth of excellent ministry resources. I am grateful for the books and articles that I might never have read

had I not been involved in this study. Likewise, I am grateful for new ministries and

programs I have encountered, and new friends I have met.

APPENDIX A

CLERGY STRESS SURVEY

Cover letter (e-mail):

Dear colleague:

My name is Claude Kayler, pastor at Covenant Community UMC in Asheville. I am conducting a survey on clergy stress as part of my dissertation requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree. You are receiving this e-mail because you are a clergy person under appointment in the Asheville, Marion, or Waynesville Districts.

Clergy stress is becoming a serious problem. The New York Times recently ran an article on "growing evidence of clergy burnout." PBS did a story on clergy stress just this month that featured our own Lynda Ferguson from the Marion District.

I have a passion to help with this problem, but I need your help.

The link below will take you to a "clergy stress survey." It's very brief, it's completely confidential, and it should only take 5-10 minutes to complete.

A benefit to you of participating in this study is that I plan to make the results available once my research is complete, and your participation will make those results more accurate. No known risks are involved with participating in this study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 828-298-8955 or ckayler@charter.net. *Please e-mail me if you would like to participate in a focus group to discuss the results of this survey.*

Thanks for your help!

Claude Kayler, Covenant Community UMC

Clergy stress survey

The purpose of this survey is to identify work-related stressors and stress-relieving practices reported by United Methodist clergy of the Western North Carolina Conference.

The survey consists primarily of multiple-choice questions. It should take somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes to complete. Your answers are completely anonymous. The researcher and others who view the information will only see the totals for each response.

Part 1: Work-related Stressors

The following items have to do with aspects of ministry that can lead to clergy stress. After each statement, please choose the one response that is most true for you. Remember that your answers are completely anonymous.

1. The time demands of my ministry are overwhelming:

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

2. My financial compensation is inadequate to meet my needs.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

3. There is currently serious conflict within my congregation.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

4. I have few to no close friends with whom I can spend time without having to be "the minister."

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

5. Moving from one appointment to another has been hard on me (and my family, if applicable).

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

6. Unexpected ministry demands often interfere with my family or personal plans.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

7. There are controlling personalities in my church who make my ministry
difficult.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

8. There is not enough time to accomplish everything I am supposed to do in my
job.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

9. I often get ministry-related calls at inopportune times (during meals, late at
night, etc.)

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

10. I need a salary increase.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

11. I find ministry to be a lonely profession.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

12. I have experienced stress because of a recent move, or an expected move.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

13. Because of my role as a minister, there are only a very few people with whom I feel comfortable sharing my true feelings.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

14. I have experienced stress related to having too much to do in ministry.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

15. Being on call 24/7 is a source of stress for me.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

16. Members of my church have used gossip, intimidation, or passive-aggressive tactics to oppose my ministry.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

17. My salary will not support a reasonable standard of living.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

18. The possibility that I might have to move to a different church is a source of stress for me.

    ___ strongly disagree

    ___ disagree

    ___ agree

    ___ strongly agree

19. Which of the following aspects of ministry has been a source of stress for you (choose all that apply)?

___ Time demands

___ Isolation/loneliness

___ Intrusiveness (ministry demands intruding on personal or family time)

___Church health issues (conflict, controlling personalities, dysfunctional relational patterns)

___ Financial compensation

___ Issues related to itinerancy

20. What other aspects of ministry are a source of stress for you?

Part 2: Stress-relieving practices

The following items have to do with personal practices that can relieve stress. After each statement, please choose the one response that is most true for you. Remember that your answers are completely anonymous.

21. I engage in physical exercise (e.g. running, aerobics, weight training, cardiovascular conditioning, etc.)

___Never

___Roughly once a month or less

___About once every two weeks

___Once or twice a week

___3 times a week

___More than 3 times a week

22. I practice an intentional Sabbath—a full day off each week to rest from work.

___Never

___Less than once a month

___1 time per month

___2 times per month

___3 times per month

___Every week, barring emergencies

23. I participate in a support group or a lectionary study group with other clergy.

___Never

___Once or twice a year

___Once a quarter

___Once a month

___Every other week

___Once a week

24. I intentionally set aside time for personal prayer.

___Never

___About once a week

___2-3 times a week

___4-7 times a week

___Every day

___More than once per day

25. I set aside time to read or study Scripture (other than for sermon or teaching preparation).

___Never

___About once a week

___2-3 times a week

___4-7 times a week

___Every day

___More than once per day

26. I practice fasting (abstaining from food for spiritual purposes) as a means of drawing closer to God.

___Never

___Once or twice a year

___Roughly once a quarter

___About once a month

___Around twice a month

___Once a week

27. I spend plenty of quality time with family members.

___Strongly Disagree

___Disagree

___Agree

___Strongly Agree

28. I take a spiritual retreat—one or more days away from my ministry setting for spiritual renewal through prayer, study, reflection, or spiritual direction.

___Never

___Once every 2-3 years

___Once a year

___Once a quarter

___Once a month

___More than once a month

29. I engage in one or more hobbies or sports (e.g. woodworking, gardening, fishing, golf, tennis, etc.)

___Never

___Roughly once a month or less

___About once every two weeks

___Once or twice a week

___3 times a week

___More than 3 times a week

30. I get together with close friends around whom I can be myself.

___Never

___Once a year

___Once a quarter

___Once a month

___Once a week

___Several times a week

31. I use relaxation exercises to relieve my stress (e.g. deep breathing, stretching, imagining myself in a favorite place, tensing and relaxing muscles in progression, etc.)

___Never

___Around once every two weeks

___Roughly once a week

___A few times a week

___Once a day

___More than once daily

32. Which of these practices have you used frequently as a means of relieving stress (choose all that apply)?

___ Spiritual disciplines (e.g. prayer, Bible reading, etc.)

___ Sabbath rest

___ Support system practices (e.g. participating in a clergy group, spending time with family, cultivating close friendships).

___ Exercise

___ Relaxation techniques (e.g. deep breathing, tensing and relaxing muscles, etc.)

___ Participating in hobbies or sports

33. What other practices do you engage in that relieve stress?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for completing this survey! Your responses will help us learn more about stress in the ministry and how clergy are dealing with it.

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