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Strategies Employed by Clergy to Prevent and Cope with Interpersonal Isolation

Ryan C. Staley · Mark R. McMinn ·
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Abstract Numerous studies have affirmed that interpersonal isolation is one of the unique challenges clergy face. This study examined the experience of interpersonal isolation among a sample of clergy serving in a senior pastor role by having them complete a modified form of the Social Support Questionnaire, Short Form (SSQSR), as well as six open-ended interview questions. The interview responses of clergy participants were compared based on a median split of the SSQSR satisfaction scores. Analysis of clergy responses revealed several prominent themes in the following areas: barriers to establishing supportive relationships, strategies for establishing and maintaining supportive relationships, lack of support, and coping with loneliness. Identified themes, as well as clergy responses that exemplified these themes, are discussed. Clergy with social support scores at or above the median more frequently indicated that being transparent and vulnerable is a means by which they establish and maintain close, supportive relationships with others.

Keywords Clergy · Stressors · Isolation · Coping

A common finding among clergy is that they often struggle with a sense of loneliness and isolation connected to the unique demands and occupational hazards associated with full-time ministry (Hill et al. 2003; Warner and Carter 1984; Ellison and Mattila 1983). In a profession that requires nearly constant contact with people, it is a distressing paradox that clergy frequently feel disconnected and alone. The objective of this study was to ascertain the types of strategies being employed by clergy to both prevent and cope with the experience of interpersonal isolation.

Positive psychology: fostering strengths

Over the last decade, positive psychology has gained momentum and achieved recognition as an important advance in the science of human behavior. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined positive psychology as “the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions” (p. 410). The focus of study in this burgeoning field is on what works, which provides a much-needed balance to the disease and deficit model which has dominated theory, research, and practice in the discipline of psychology for many decades (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Seligman et al. 2005; Sheldon and King 2001).

The positive psychology movement has potential implications for research with clergy. Research regarding the health and functioning of clergy and their families has steadily increased over the last few decades, even reaching the popular press. For example, two recent *New York Times* articles highlighted salient stressors faced by many clergy today, as well as the adverse impact of these stressors on clergy (MacDonald 2010; Vitello 2010). But the research literature pertaining to clergy and their families has generally focused on problems and deficits. Although the information gleaned from this body of research has provided valuable information regarding the challenges and suffering experienced by many clergy and their families, it lacks an important balance achieved by research that emphasizes the strengths and resources of clergy who are thriving. Determining what works is equally as important as figuring out what is wrong and how to fix it. Accordingly, after a discussion of the various challenges faced by clergy, we will consider the positive psychology construct of coping.

Challenges faced by clergy

Two decades ago Blanton (1992) identified five external stressors with which clergy families are frequently challenged. Based on more recent literature, these five stressors still appear to affect the lives of clergy. These include intrusion on family boundaries, high expectations and time demands, frequent relocation, relatively low financial compensation, and low social support.

Boundary violations Reports of clergy in past as well as more recent studies have revealed that lack of privacy is a serious concern (Gleason 1977; Hill et al. 2003). Clergy and their families often encounter intrusions on private time in the form of work-related phone calls, unexpected visits to their home, and unanticipated encounters with church members in public settings. Lee (1999) found that more than 90 % of his sample of Protestant pastors indicated that they had experienced family and private-time interruptions in the past 6 months. There appears to be little opportunity for clergy to take off their clergy hats and step out of their professional roles. The pressure to be “on” at all times is a major source of stress for clergy and their families. Other studies have confirmed that family boundary violations are a typical struggle encountered by clergy and their families (Gleason 1977; Hall 1997; Hill et al. 2003). Boundary violations have been found to be related to decreased marital, parental, and life satisfaction for clergy and their families, as well as dissatisfaction with family functioning among clergy families (Morris and Blanton 1994; Olander et al. 1994). Boundary violations are negatively associated with clergy wellbeing and serve to impede the process of differentiation in families and individualization of family members (Blanton 1992; Lee 1999).

High expectations and time demands A related area of concern for many clergy is the myriad responsibilities and sometimes unrealistic expectations imposed upon them. Hill et al. (2003) found that most of the clergy in their study felt overwhelmed by their workload and that the majority worked 60 h a week or more. Additionally, spouses in the study reported that one of the biggest difficulties clergy families confront is the reality that their clergy spouse is constantly on call to handle church-related crises, and as a result little time is left for family activities. Interruptions in personal and family time due to church and parishioner emergencies and augmentation of an already overwhelming workload are common experiences for clergy (Lee 1999). The high expectations placed on clergy and clergy families pertain to perceived character issues as well as availability. Gleason (1977) found that “perfectionism” and the “goldfish bowl” experience were two of the top-rated stressors reported by clergy and their spouses. Spouses in the Hill et al. (2003) study reported that they believed their families were under intense scrutiny. To demonstrate anything less than perfection might incur the disapproval of others—or worse, job loss—for not measuring up to this unrealistic and ideal standard. Various studies provide evidence of the negative impact of unrelenting and unreasonable expectations and demands on the wellbeing, life satisfaction, and functioning of clergy and their families (Hill et al. 2003; Lee 1999; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003; Morris and Blanton 1994, 1998).

Frequent relocation Many clergy and their families are confronted with the challenge of frequent job-related moves that can disrupt family functioning, be a significant source of stress, and adversely affect overall life satisfaction (Morris and Blanton 1994, 1998). Often, relocation pulls clergy families away from relatives and other well-established support systems that provided much-needed relational resources. Hill et al. (2003) found that clergy often reported experiencing extreme stress related to relocation. Establishing strong and secure relationships with a network of friends and relatives is no doubt difficult with frequent moves. Grief and loss, as well as feelings of loneliness and powerlessness, become salient and painful experiences for clergy families who are often on the move (Hill et al. 2003).

Relatively low financial compensation Mace and Mace (1982) reported that clergy rank 325 out of 432 occupations in terms of salary despite being ranked in the top 10 % of the population in terms of education. Unlike other professions in which compensation is often based on years of experience, education, and performance, clergy compensation is frequently determined by other factors such as church budgets, traditions, and the visions of lay leaders (London and Wiseman 1993). The consequences of these financial stressors appear to take a significant toll on clergy health. Goetz (1992) presented the results of a survey of approximately 350 pastors on the broad subject of family matters. Results of the survey revealed that 70 % of the clergy respondents believed their compensation contributed to marital conflicts and 22 % felt forced to supplement their church income. Half (53 %) of the respondents indicated that the level of financial compensation they received affected their self-worth, both positively and negatively.

Social isolation The experience of isolation and loneliness among clergy, as well as its adverse impact on functioning and wellbeing, is a common finding in research (Ellison and Mattila 1983; Hall 1997; Hileman 2008; Lee 2007; Morris and Blanton 1998; Warner and Carter 1984). Hill et al. (2003) reported that clergy participants often felt detached from the

rest of the community, leading to a sense of loneliness and vulnerability. Many clergy in their study asserted that they did not have close friends in whom they could confide and whom they could seek support from in times of need.

In a profession with so many inherent challenges that are often faced without the support and nurturance of a well-established social network of trusted people, it is not surprising that clergy often find themselves exhausted, depleted, and languishing in the throes of burnout. Research has shown that the presence of a well-established system of support is related to lower levels of burnout while, conversely, a lack of social support is linked to increased burnout (Hall 1997; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert 2003; Virginia 1998).

Coping with the challenges of ministry

Given the myriad challenges clergy and their families face, it is critical for them to have effective coping strategies for overcoming the difficulties they typically encounter. Research that directly addresses this issue of coping is critical to enhance the understanding and increase the knowledge of clinicians, church leaders, and social scientists regarding effective strategies for dealing with the unique demands and challenges of clergy. Coping is considered a domain of positive psychology and one that fits well with the study of clergy and clergy families.

Meek et al. (2003) presented data from two studies examining the resiliency of clergy. Many of the respondents in the two studies emphasized the importance of maintaining firm yet flexible boundaries and striking a healthy balance in their lives. Recognition of the need to separate themselves from the role of clergy and preserve independence was also noted by many of the clergy respondents. Other factors that contributed to resiliency and effective coping among the clergy sampled in the two studies were strong family relationships, having extra-familial relationships (e.g., friends, mentors), engaging in spiritual activities, self-awareness, and complete reliance on God.

In another study related to positive coping, McMinn et al. (2008) endeavored to identify positive coping strategies employed by clergy spouses who were determined by a mental health professional to exemplify emotional and spiritual health. Responses of many of the study participants indicated that they attributed their good health to God's love, kindness, and protection. Relationships, particularly with family and God, were also cited as a reason for good emotional and spiritual health. Other strategies for effective coping reported by study participants included interpersonal relationships and spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation), setting limits, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and engaging in activities that promote growth in various domains of life.

Hill et al. (2003), in their study on boundary-related stressors encountered by clergy, identified specific coping strategies typically applied by participants in their study. Some of the strategies presented by clergy included time management, compatibility with church, mentor relationships, time away from the demands of work, and sabbaticals. Clergy spouses reported on the importance of staying connected with others in the community for the purpose of finding support.

Although research seems to support the notion that clergy rely on interpersonal coping strategies to effectively deal with the unique challenges of ministry work, clergy tend to rely more on intrapersonal forms of self-care (McMinn et al. 2005). McMinn et al. (2005) proposed that clergy may be more apt to engage in solitary forms of coping and self-care activities because of their "fishbowl" experience as well as their subtle competition with other clergy. The possible cost of disclosing personal struggles and exposing areas of

vulnerability to others outside the family likely serves as a deterrent to clergy who otherwise might seek the help and support of another. McMinn et al. (2005) did point out, however, that clergy solitary care frequently involves a strong and nurturing relationship with God, further confirming the importance of relational connection to effective coping.

In light of these findings, it is clear that more research is needed to examine the ways in which clergy attempt to deal with and avoid interpersonal isolation. The aim of the current study was to obtain a clearer picture of the ways in which clergy attempt to both prevent and cope with interpersonal isolation, with an emphasis on the specific strategies they utilize to accomplish this end. A grounded theory approach was utilized to glean themes from the responses of participants whose scores on a measure of social support indicate success or struggle in this area.

Methods

Participants

Senior pastors ($n=80$) representing two denominations, Evangelical Friends and Nazarene, completed a modified version of a social support questionnaire and a series of demographic questions online. Of the 80 clergy who completed the questionnaire, 70 % represented the Evangelical Friends denomination and 30 % the Nazarene denomination. An analysis of the demographic data revealed that 86.3 % were male and 13.8 % were female, with an overall mean age of 49.7 years ($SD=11.23$), and that 3.8 % were single, 93.8 % married, 1.3 % divorced, and 1.3 % remarried. With regard to ethnicity, 91.3 % were European American, 1.3 % were Native American, 1.3 % were Asian American, and 7.5 % represented other ethnicities. A wide range of education levels was represented, with 4 % having completed high school, 10 % technical training, 35 % a bachelor's degree, 40 % a master's degree, 10 % a doctoral degree, and 8 % some other form of training. The mean number of years serving as a pastor and mean number of pastors on staff were 18.5 ($SD=12.13$) and 2.0 ($SD=1.37$), respectively. Also, the mean number of years married and number of children were 25.6 ($SD=11.23$) and 3.1 ($SD=1.56$), respectively.

A brief set of six interview questions was subsequently sent via email to all clergy who completed the social support questionnaire. Half of the clergy who completed the social support questionnaire also responded to the interview questions ($n=40$). Demographic data for this group were similar to that of the overall sample of senior pastors.

Instruments

Social Support Questionnaire (Short Form) (SSQSR) The Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) is a factor analytically derived measure of social support comprised of 27 items that require a 2-part response (Sarason et al. 1983). The respondent is asked to enumerate the names of individuals to whom he or she can turn and rely upon in various situations and then rate the degree of satisfaction with these social contacts on a scale ranging from 1 "very dissatisfied" to 6 "very satisfied." Two scores are yielded for each item; the number (N) score represents the number of people listed by respondents, and the satisfaction (S) score is determined using the aforementioned 6-point rating scale. The overall (N) and (S) scores are calculated by averaging the N and S scores across the 27 items. Research on the psychometric properties of this instrument indicates that it is a valid and reliable measure; internal reliabilities for N and S scores are .97 and .94, respectively, and test-retest correlations are

.90 for N scores and .83 for S scores (Sarason et al. 1983, 1987). An abbreviated version of the SSQ (SSQSR) was developed consisting of 6 items, three of which (3, 5, and 11) were used for this study (Sarason et al. 1987).

Open-ended questions Study participants were asked in a separate email correspondence to complete 6 open-ended questions that followed the demographic questionnaire and the SSQSR items. The purpose of the questions was to gain qualitative information regarding each participant's perceptions of the barriers to establishing and maintaining social connection with others, ways in which each copes with loneliness, ways in which each interacts with identified supporters, and experiences of a failure to receive expected social support, as well as the strategies each employs to establish and maintain close, supportive relationships.

Procedure

Denominational leaders from both the Evangelical Friends and Nazarene denominations were emailed, explaining the purpose of the study and requesting assistance with participant recruitment. Denominational leaders who responded with a desire to assist in the recruitment process were asked to co-author an invitation letter with the primary investigator of this study, which was then sent to prospective participants via email. The letter contained an explanation of the purpose of the study, notification of each participant's eligibility to win a \$50 gift card should he or she choose to participate in the study, as well as a link to an online survey which included the three SSQSR items, demographic questions, and requests for the email addresses of both the clergy and (if married) his or her spouse. A similar invitation letter was subsequently sent to the spouses of clergy who completed the online questionnaire. Clergy who did not provide a separate email address for their spouse were sent a subsequent email thanking them for their participation in the study and encouraging them to invite their spouse to view the invitation letter attached to the email. Only three spouses responded to the interview questions, so the spousal data were not included in the analyses.

A follow-up email correspondence containing the 6 open-ended interview questions and instructions for responding was sent to the clergy and spouses who completed the online survey. Each participant was given the option of either sending his or her responses in a reply to the initial email or completing a phone interview. One participant opted to respond to the questions in a phone interview, while the others preferred email. A final follow-up email was sent to clergy and spouses who had not yet responded to the interview questions, thanking them for their time and encouraging them to respond. Denominational leaders and study participants were given the option of being provided with a summary of the aggregate data. Once all data were collected, the names and emails of participants were removed from the data file.

Results and discussion

The lead researcher, using grounded theory, reviewed participant responses to the interview questions. Coding categories were established and a codebook developed based on this review. Two coders, the lead researcher and a research assistant, then rated the interview responses, and a kappa statistic was applied to calculate the level of agreement between the two raters. Results of this calculation yielded an average kappa coefficient of .71 with a kappa coefficient range from $-.04$ to 1 ($SD=.23$). Variables with extremely low kappa coefficients raised some concern, though an overall average of .71 is acceptable for

qualitative research. Categories with low kappa coefficients were not considered equally credible due to the low reliability.

Participants who completed the online questionnaire were divided into two groups based on a median split of the S scores for each participant (Median=5.33). Because the relationship between perceived availability of support and satisfaction with that support may vary based on factors such as individual personality and recent experiences, it was decided that the satisfaction score would be a better indicator of how participants were doing in the area of social support (Sarason et al. 1983). Further examination of the interview responses was conducted to ascertain whether or not there were any differences between the responses of participants whose satisfaction score was at or above the median and those whose satisfaction score fell below the median in terms of the themes that were identified. In most cases, differences between clergy with high and low social support were not identified. Still, common themes found among many respondents (regardless of their perceived social support) can be identified from this study.

Barriers to developing and maintaining close relationships

When asked about barriers to fostering close, supportive relationships in their professional roles, respondents emphasized 6 primary themes: time, expectations, transparency/vulnerability, relational boundaries, relocation, and trust/confidentiality.

Time Many of the respondents ($n=14$) indicated that time demands were a significant barrier to establishing and maintaining close relationships with others. This finding is consistent with research that speaks to the tremendous amount of time clergy often spend engaged in activities related to their professional roles (Hill et al. 2003; Lee 1999). Examples include:

The main barrier I face in attempting to establish close relationships is time—time for me to make contacts and a good time for the contact to meet with me. I am a bi-vocational pastor and that really makes it difficult.

Relationships take time. Most of us don't have time to form/maintain close relationships outside the congregation or we feel guilty about taking that time from away our congregation and/or families.

Expectations Another significant barrier identified by several of the respondents ($n=11$) related to unrealistic expectations and standards often imposed on clergy. Respondents shared about their experience of being put on a pedestal by others. For example:

There is definitely an expectation that Pastors are different or live at a higher standard than everyone else.

We had gone on a couple vacations with some parishioners, but they'd say things like, "Oh, we'd better not, our pastor is here." They were joking, but it just reminded me that we can never have an equal relationship; I will always be "one up" on them.

Transparency/vulnerability The clergy in this study often shared about the difficulty they had being open and honest with others, as well as the tendency of others to stay guarded around them ($n=11$). Without the ability to disclose personal information on a deeper level, relationships are unable to reach close and intimate levels. Two respondents shared the following:

I think many churchgoers don't want to think about the fact that their pastor has junk. On the flip side I think that people have a hard time being real with pastors . . .

Pastors are afraid to be real people; sometimes people are afraid to let pastors be real people.

Relational boundaries Because clergy often find themselves assuming the clergy role in most settings, it can become difficult to establish close relationships with others apart from that role. Respondents in this study shared about this challenge in their response to the question of barriers. Examples include:

It's good to work with friends, but requires emotional nimbleness on my part to switch hats when a "friend" suddenly places me in the "pastor" role.

I am always the "pastor" and as such feel a certain pressure to fulfill that kind of role in that relationship.

Relocation The research literature on stressors often faced by clergy has clearly established relocations as a common stressor, often with adverse consequences, faced by clergy (Morris and Blanton 1994, 1998). The challenge relocation presents in terms of building close, supportive relationships was mentioned by several respondents in this study ($n=7$). For example:

The fact that we had to move here and uproot relationships means we start over. Never fun or easy.

. . . often I have felt like an outsider coming into a church/community where roles and friendships were already established.

Trust/confidentiality Several respondents commented on their struggles with the issues of trust and confidentiality ($n=8$). Trusting others to be discreet with information disclosed during conversations was something pastors believed was a challenge for them as well as for those with whom they interact. The following is what one clergy person shared about this topic:

I try to have positive relationships with people in the congregation and do several things on a social level with them, however, it can require a lot of discernment to know how much to share with each one about your thoughts and feelings on a variety of issues. We have a church with several members of the same families and you always have to think about how far you are willing for your comments to go.

With so much pressure to be exemplars of virtuous living and spiritual health and maturity, it is understandable that clergy may be reluctant to share about personal struggles with a congregant. Again, such a disclosure, should it be revealed to the wrong person, may result in adverse consequences.

Other less prominent barriers to establishing and maintaining close relationships with others were also mentioned, and these included competition among clergy ($n=3$), favoritism and jealousy on the part of congregants ($n=4$), fatigue ($n=2$), conflict ($n=2$), and a perceived lack of need for clergy to develop close relationships ($n=2$). Further analysis revealed no significant differences in the responses of clergy who fell in the top or bottom half of the median split.

Strategies for developing and maintaining close relationships

Clergy responses to the question of how they go about establishing and maintaining close relationships yielded 4 predominant themes: intentionality, participation in groups, vulnerability, and common interests/activities.

Intentionality A large proportion of the respondents (62.5 %) indicated that being intentional about making time for and meeting with others was an important part of developing and maintaining close relationships. The paucity of free time available to clergy because of high expectations and time demands can make this a challenging endeavor (Hill et al. 2003; Lee 1999). Here are a few thoughts shared by respondents regarding the importance of intentionality:

I am intentional about sustaining long distance relationships with colleagues or former colleagues. It takes time and effort. I call them. I also maintain and work to build close relationships with several people in my church and in my city.

Due to our time crunch, it's important for us to schedule our social lives and each month we identify people we want to spend time with and schedule time to be with them.

Being intentional about setting up regular meetings and creating opportunities to engage with others requires time and effort. Unfortunately, as many of the clergy in this study noted and the research indicates, clergy tend to have little free time. With this in mind, it seems that making relationships a priority in terms of time and effort allocation is an essential part of being able to foster close relationships for clergy.

Participation in groups Another prominent theme that emerged in response to the question of how clergy go about establishing and maintaining close relationships involved the importance of participation in groups ($n=8$). The following are examples of respondents' comments on this topic.

I meet with two different men's groups during the week. One is for my accountability and the other is to invest in the lives of some younger guys. I've been meeting with one of these groups for 8 years and I can be pretty transparent with them.

Right now I meet regularly with two groups of pastors for the purpose of support and prayer. I am new to this community and this position so these relationships are new as well. It will take some time but I would say that at this point, these are my primary supportive relationships outside my family. I have to be intentional about engaging in these kinds of relationships or they won't happen for me. That is the reason I meet with those groups.

As McMinn et al. (2005) suggested, clergy tend to rely more on intrapersonal forms of coping, making it difficult to find support in group settings. It is encouraging that at least some of the clergy in this study seem to be establishing relationships with other clergy who are not involved in a shared ministry or who may not answer to the same denominational authorities.

Vulnerability, authenticity, and transparency Several respondents in this study ($n=10$) indicated that being able to communicate openly and allow for vulnerability with others was important to fostering intimate relationships. The following are examples of responses regarding openness and vulnerability as a means of promoting intimate relationships.

To be who I am, genuine, not portraying someone I'm not. Just because I pastor or preach does not mean I have to always look or speak "holy" things.

Typically I am pretty much an open book, so I think it helps when folks realize that if I can be open and honest maybe they can too.

By being open and honest with who I am. I find relationships that are based on truth and honesty to be the most beneficial for support.

A willingness to be open and reveal oneself is required for developing intimate relationships with others. This can be a challenge for most people to varying degrees, but it may be particularly difficult for clergy because of the high expectations and demands often imposed upon them to be exemplary.

Common interests Several respondents ($n=8$) reported that finding interests and activities they have in common with others is a way they cultivate close relationships. For example:

We find that doing the activities that we have in common are excellent ways to develop close relationships and it also helps set healthy boundaries around those relationships. For example, there is one man that I go snowmobiling with. It is our thing and we expect to play in the snow. There is a group that enjoys camping and fishing once a summer but the snow mobile man is not in this group.

Less prominent strategies that emerged in the responses of clergy included use of social networking technology ($n=3$), establishing relationships with people outside of the church served by the clergyperson ($n=3$), fostering relationships with mentors/accountability partners ($n=2$), and being generous and forgiving toward others ($n=2$). A significant difference between respondents with S scores at or above the median (5.33) and those with scores below the median was found, $\chi^2(1)=4.8, p<.05$. Specifically, clergy with S scores at or above the median more frequently indicated that being transparent and vulnerable is a means by which they establish and maintain close, supportive relationships with others.

Lack of support

Clergy in this study were asked to report on experiences in which they expected support from others and did not receive it. Prominent themes that emerged in the responses to this question included self-disclosure, no examples, expecting a lack of support, church issues, and decisions.

Self-disclosure Several respondents ($n=5$) shared about experiences in which personal self-disclosures resulted in unsupportive and, in some instances, critical responses from others. For example:

On one occasion I shared with an elder that I was going through down time/struggles and asked for prayer. The elder said I needed to just toughen up.... just needed to have a thick skin. This doesn't happen often and most stand with me. This was one of the most hurtful moments as a pastor.

I was leading a book club study that had about 8 people attending (some followers of Jesus and others not yet). One "friend" of mine that was there had been in my home, and we had been in theirs. We played racquetball regularly, prayed together, shared thoughts about parenting etc. The book was by an author who was questioning a lot

about the faith of his youth; how many things he was raised to believe just didn't make sense anymore. I made the comment about how many of the things the author was saying I could identify with. After the study, he cornered me and told me how, as a pastor, I am held up to a different standard than others and that even if I did have some doubts, I should never speak them because of how others would take it. That was the last night we talked.

The experiences described by these two respondents illustrate the challenge many clergy face regarding high expectations (Baker and Scott 1992). To reveal personal information carries with it the potential risk of evoking criticism from others for not meeting the "different standard" to which pastors are often held.

No examples Other respondents ($n=5$) could not recall a time when they expected support and were surprised when they did not receive it from others. Most of the clergy who responded to the interview questions ($n=36$) reported being at least a little satisfied with the level of social support they were receiving, as evidenced by their satisfaction scores on the SSQSR items. This seems to indicate that the experience of no support was likely an infrequent occurrence among respondents who completed interview questions. For some, however, a lack of support may not be surprising, and it was even expected by some of the clergy in this study.

Expecting a lack of support Some respondents ($n=4$) conveyed, either explicitly or implicitly, that they expect a lack of support from others. For example:

I really don't have too many expectations, and tend to be fairly independent anyway. So support is not something I depend on. I am surprised more often in the other direction.

No. I do not expect the support of others. In fact, I am surprised when I hear that other pastors are surprised by their lack of support.

Again, the research has clearly established isolation and loneliness as a common stressor faced by many clergy (Hall 1997; Hill et al. 2003). The experience of these respondents seems consistent with what research has shown regarding the level of social support among clergy.

Conflict/challenges within the church Some clergy in this study were surprised to experience a lack of support related to challenging issues occurring within the church ($n=4$):

When I thought there was true loyal friendship, a church issue or decision on my part proved otherwise.

On a few occasions (primarily as a result of situations of conflict or challenge within the churches I have served), I've been surprised to discover that other ministerial peers and colleagues have been unwilling (or incapable) of maintaining a public relationship with me because it may not have been politically expedient for them to do so. The surprise of this to us was to learn that those we had perceived as friends and colleagues turned out to be competitors in the sense that apparently their leadership capital or stock was considered to be on the rise if my own was in decline.

How clergy respond to or deal with issues that may arise within the church likely has implications for both their personal and professional relationships with church leaders and members.

Decision-making Because of the leadership role clergy assume in their churches, they are often called upon to make important decisions or assist church leaders in a decision-making process. Some clergy ($n=4$) shared about their experiences of feeling unsupported by others when they made a decision individually or as a member of a group of individuals involved in a decision-making process.

More often than not this happens when we make uncomfortable but necessary decisions. Occasionally those who are your top supporters and appear to be mature ministry partners can turn on a dime when things don't go their way.

I have been surprised how quickly some can turn on you when making a decision they do not agree with even if you have been very supportive of that person through some difficult times.

These experiences can be accompanied by hurt and a sense of betrayal, and the impact is likely amplified when the clergy person has established both a personal and professional relationship with the unsupportive individual. Both relationships may be adversely affected, possibly leading to a sense of increased isolation.

Other less salient themes reported by respondents included lack of support from significant others (i.e., family/friends) ($n=3$), periods of loss or personal crisis ($n=2$), communicating expectations/vision for church ($n=2$), and church events/social gatherings ($n=2$). There were no significant differences found between clergy in the top and bottom half of the median split.

Coping with loneliness

Respondents were also asked to report on the specific ways in which they cope with loneliness. Five prominent themes emerged in their responses, including interaction with family and friends, hobbies and recreational activities, withdrawal, spiritual disciplines, and entertainment.

Friends and family Over half of interview respondents ($n=24$) indicated that they spend time with family and friends as a way of coping with feelings of loneliness. The following are a few examples of what respondents shared about the use of this approach to coping with loneliness.

My wife, parents, and 2 close friends (other pastors) are my closest friends. I hang with them when I am feeling lonely and in need of people. It is not uncommon for me to go hang at my parents' house for a night and to begin the night by stating that church conversation is off limits because I need a break.

I used to have a pity party for myself because I didn't really have friends that were close. I would isolate and spend time feeling sorry for myself. That got old and I grew tired of being discouraged and ineffective. Now I make the calls to friends when I need to. Friendships are stronger and I don't struggle with discouragement as much.

The propensity to value time with family is consistent with what research has demonstrated on the topic of coping among clergy (Hill et al. 2003; Meek et al. 2003).

Hobbies and recreational activities Several clergy in this study ($n=8$) reported that engaging in hobbies and other recreational activities was a preferred way of coping with feelings of loneliness.

Do things that energize and encourage me. Take a little extra time to do something for me such as, golf or hunt. Things that give me inner peace and strength.

I also find that investing time in some of my energizing personal hobbies (as a musician, writer, outdoorsman, etc.) can help me re-frame my sense of emotional health.

In a profession where scrutiny is high and feelings of inadequacy are common, engagement in activities that can provide needed distraction, as well as potentially enhance one's sense of mastery, competence, and vitality, is important (Gleason 1977; Ellison and Mattila 1983).

Withdrawal Some clergy in this study identified withdrawal and solitude as a coping strategy they often used in response to feelings of loneliness ($n=7$). For example:

My default is to get discouraged and withdraw. . .

Short periods of withdrawal followed by reaching out to trusted friends.

Responding to loneliness with disengagement from others may provide opportunities to reengage and rediscover aspects of self, personal values, and interests that can bring renewal and revitalization. Additionally, this strategy may also offer opportunities to strengthen connection with and reliance on God. Enhanced self-awareness and reliance on God has been shown to be associated with resiliency and effective coping among clergy (Meek et al. 2003). However, when withdrawal involves complete disconnection, its use as a way of coping with loneliness, or other stressors, becomes potentially problematic.

Spiritual disciplines The use of spiritual disciplines was another approach to coping with loneliness that was identified by respondents ($n=6$). Specific disciplines mentioned included prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and solitude. Examples of comments include:

I find myself drawing closer to God through prayer and meditation and usually I will be directed to some book or reading that fills some void that centers in the loneliness.

I go to the Lord in prayer for strength. . . .

I guess my primary way to cope is to pray. God knows my heart and my needs and so I seek him.

The use of spiritual activities and intrapersonal forms of coping to deal with the stressors, such as loneliness, commonly encountered by clergy has been established in past research (Meek et al. 2003; McMinn et al. 2005).

Entertainment Clergy in this study ($n=5$) also indicated that engaging in various forms of entertainment was a way in which they coped with loneliness.

When I feel melancholy, I like to escape through reading or video games.

I distract myself by listening to music, reading, or watching a movie.

Other less prominent themes that emerged included eating ($n=4$), engagement in physical work ($n=3$), shifting one's focus to others ($n=3$), and exercise ($n=2$). Also, several clergy ($n=10$) indicated that loneliness was seldom experienced or not an issue for them. No significant differences related to coping with loneliness were found between respondents based on the median split.

Limitations

The original intent of this study was to include an examination of clergy spouses' experiences in the area of social support. Unfortunately, only a small number of spouses responded, hence these data could not be included in the final analysis. Developing an effective recruitment strategy involving direct contact with prospective spouse participants will likely be important for future studies of clergy and clergy spouses. Another limitation of the study relates to the fact that only two denominations were represented. Obtaining information from clergy and clergy spouses from diverse denominational backgrounds could have strengthened the present study by providing an opportunity to examine possible qualitative differences in the responses of clergy and clergy spouses from various denominations. The relatively small sample size, as well as the possibility of response bias, limited the degree to which comparison could be made between individuals who demonstrated success or struggle in the area of social support. Only a small portion of the participants (10 %) interviewed scored less than a 4 on the SSQSR, indicating dissatisfaction with their current level of social support. Future studies that compare two more clearly distinct groups of clergy participants—those who demonstrate struggle or success in terms of social support—may provide an opportunity for clarity regarding possible differences in the ways members of these two groups attempt to prevent and cope with interpersonal isolation. Finally, the qualitative nature of the present study limits the generalizability of the results to a wider, more diverse population of clergy. The information obtained in this study represents the ideas and experiences of a small sample of clergy and likely does not completely or sufficiently represent the experiences of most clergy. Future studies with more representative clergy samples in which social support can be operationalized more precisely using quantitative methods would improve the sophistication with which the topic of social support among clergy and clergy spouses could be studied.

Conclusion

As the body of literature on the topic of clergy and their families continues to grow, more is understood about the struggles and challenges faced by individuals in these unique roles and circumstances. To date most of the research conducted on clergy and their families has emphasized problems and deficits, with little attention being paid to what helps individuals in these challenging roles thrive. While the present study highlights various social support challenges experienced by clergy, it also suggests that many clergy have found effective ways to cope with these challenges. Being intentional about forming friendships, participating in groups, finding safe places to be vulnerable and authentic, and keeping company with those who share common interests may all be effective ways of enhancing social support among clergy. When experiencing loneliness, as invariably happens for most clergy, respondents in this study spent time with family, engaged in hobbies, strategically withdrew to spend time alone, engaged in spiritual disciplines, and found distracting forms of entertainment.

Challenges facing clergy can be monumental at times. It is heartening to see that many clergy have found effective ways of dealing with the social support challenges that come with the calling.

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