

2003

# Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy

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## Recommended Citation

Meek, Katheryn Rhoads; McMinn, Mark R.; Brower, Craig M.; Burnett, Todd D.; McRay, Barrett W.; Ramey, Michael L.; Swanson, David W.; and Villa, Dennise D., "Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy" (2003).

*Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 155.

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# MAINTAINING PERSONAL RESILIENCY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT CLERGY

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Despite the prominence of clergy in providing human services, and the work-related stressors they experience, clergy health and coping responses have rarely been the focus of psychological research. We report two studies. In the first, we evaluated responses of 398 senior pastors to three open-ended questions regarding personal coping, structural support for their work, and remediation efforts in times of distress. In the second study, Christian mental health professionals and Christian education professionals identified Protestant Christian clergy who exemplify emotional and spiritual health. Twenty-six participated in individual 30-minute interviews. Respondents emphasized the importance of being intentional in maintaining balance in life and developing healthy relationships. They also value a vital spiritual life, emphasizing both their sense of calling into ministry the importance of spiritual disciplines, and an ongoing awareness of God's grace. We suggest ways that Christian mental health professionals can support pastors in preventive and remedial roles.

Historically, clergy were the professionals sought to help guide communities through the travails of life, with people seeking not only spiritual guidance, but invariably guidance with emotional and family issues as well. Clergy were the equivalent of our modern day therapists, albeit without the title and the specialized training we have today. While there will always be a place for trained mental health professionals in the healing process, for many, religious leaders remain the primary resource for people when they find themselves confronting either spiritual or mental health issues (Priv-

ette, Quackenbos, & Bundrick, 1994; Quackenbos, Privette, & Klentz, 1985). For these people, the clergy person is, and always will be, the therapist on call. Undoubtedly this means that clergy are in a very demanding helping profession (Dilley, 1995; Hall, 1997; Henry, Chrtok, Keys, & Jegerski, 1991), perhaps even more demanding than psychologists given the multifaceted nature of their roles in people's lives (i.e., counseling parishioners, early morning and late evening meetings, being called home from vacations to perform funerals).

Additionally, many contemporary clergy experience family stress and function under unrealistic expectations of occupational and personal perfection—both from parishioners and self-imposed (Ellison & Mattila, 1983)—while also often lacking an adequate extra-familial support system. Family stressors often include financial strain, lack of family privacy, frequent moves, clergy person on call, clergy person busy serving others, and lack of ministry to clergy families, leading to a diminished quality of life for both the clergy person and his or her family (Hall, 1997; see also Warner & Carter, 1984). A survey administered through the Fuller Institute of Church Growth reported striking statistics among pastor respondents: 80% indicated that ministry had affected their families negatively, 50% dropped out of full time ministry within five years, 70% reported not having a close friend, 37% acknowledged having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church, and 12% confessed to having engaged in sexual intercourse with a church member (as cited in Headington, 1997).

A great deal has been reported about ways that psychologists cope with stress and maintain well-functioning (e.g., Coster & Schwebel, 1997; Schwebel & Coster, 1998), but very little research



attention has been given to how clergy are able to maintain resiliency and personal ethics in the midst of such demanding work. Sadly, most of the psychology literature on clergy life has been focused on impairment (Meloy, 1986; Von Stroh, Mines, & Anderson, 1995), burnout (Grosch & Olsen, 2000), and misconduct (Berman, 1997; Brewster, 1996; Davies, 1998; Ruzicka, 1997). This literature has been helpful in identifying challenges facing clergy, but has largely ignored the more positive aspects of clergy life and functioning. For example, what is going well for the 20% whose family life is not negatively affected, the 50% who remain in ministry after five years, the 30% who have been able to develop close friendships, and the 63% who are maintaining strong sexual boundaries within their congregations? How can we as mental health professionals learn from these pastors and become advocates for others by communicating an expectation of personal and professional success, encouraging them toward spiritual and emotional health, and educating them about those who have walked before them and have maintained well being under stressful and demanding conditions? What can we tell their organizations and parishioners about how to protect and sustain these people who will work so diligently to protect and sustain so many others? Finally, how can we effectively restore them in times of distress?

The recent interest in positive psychology, marked by a special issue of *American Psychologist* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), reminds psychologists that the profession is larger than identifying and treating dysfunction. This more positive vision of psychology invites us to move beyond a pathology focus to understanding and promoting healthy functioning. While thoroughly investigating healthy functioning in pastors will require multiple studies over a prolonged period of time, we attempted to begin the process with two studies, both of which utilized a narrative methodology in which we directly asked clergy themselves to educate us. These studies are part of a larger research program on clergy-psychologist collaboration (Benes, Walsh, McMinn, Dominguez & Aikins, 2000; Chaddock & McMinn, 1999; Edwards, Lim, McMinn, & Dominguez, 1999; McMinn, Chaddock, Edwards, Lim, & Campbell, 1998; McMinn, Meek, Canning, & Pozzi, 2001; McRay, McMinn, Wrightsman, Burnett, & Ho, 2001). If psychologists are to work effectively with clergy, it will first be important to understand something of the work challenges and rewards that clergy experience.

## STUDY 1

### METHODS

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study were senior pastors of a particular evangelical Protestant denomination within the United States. In the United States, this denomination has 874 local churches in 45 states. Organizationally, a Board of Bishops oversees the churches, with each bishop guiding a large, multi-state area. Each area is comprised of conferences guided by a superintendent. At the local level, each church is led by a senior pastor with support from a board of laypersons. Depending upon the size of the local church, an assistant pastor may be present as well. A total of 874 senior pastors received a survey packet, and 398 provided responses, resulting in a response rate of 45%.

Of the 398 respondents, 94% were male and 6% were female. Five participants did not report ethnicity, and of those who did 76% were of European descent, 3% of Asian descent, 2% of African descent, 2% of Hispanic descent, and 17% of multiethnic or other descent. Most respondents (94%) indicated that they are currently married, and most were highly educated (32% with an undergraduate degree; 49% with a masters degree; 8% with a doctorate). Respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 78 years, with an average age of 47. Participants were also asked to indicate how many of 13 major responsibilities they fulfilled throughout the past year (preaching, administration, teaching, counseling, visitation, financial oversight, church growth planning, clerical, evangelism, small group leading, time in prayer, custodial, and worship leading). The mean number of major areas of responsibility was 8.2. The average total salary (including compensation, housing, benefits) was \$33,600 with a range of \$0 to \$114,000.

#### *Instruments*

This study was a subset of a comprehensive burnout assessment conducted by Brower (2001). For the Brower (2001) study, an idiographic questionnaire was developed to assess demographics, environmental demands, levels of social support, and levels of church conflict. Burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Third Edition (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Because we were interested in hearing directly from the pastors themselves



regarding their experiences of stress, coping, and proposed solutions, responses to Brower's (2001) qualitative questions form the basis of this article:

1. What is the most important thing you do to prevent experiencing high levels of exhaustion and stress in your work as a pastor?
2. What is the most important thing the denomination could do to prevent its pastors from experiencing high levels of exhaustion and stress?
3. If you or a fellow pastor were adversely affected by high levels of exhaustion and stress, what would be the most important way your church or the denomination could help?

Responses to these three questions were evaluated using the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD\*IST 4, 1997) software package for qualitative analysis. NUD\*IST 4 provides a structure for individual responses to be categorized, thereby allowing the researchers to identify themes in the data.

### *Procedure*

Permission was obtained from the Board of Bishops of the denomination to mail a survey packet to each participant. Each individual received an envelope that included a cover letter, the MBI, the questionnaire developed for this study, and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The cover letter introduced the purpose of the study, gave instructions for completing the assessments, and explained informed consent. A letter from the bishops and leadership development staff, encouraging the clergy to participate, was included with the cover letter. To increase the participant response rate, participants were informed that if they completed and returned their assessments within two weeks, they would be entered into a drawing for one of five \$20 gift certificates.

## **STUDY 2**

### **METHOD**

The purpose of our second study was to learn about the positive functioning of clergy by selecting exemplars of health and learning from their stories. We identified exemplar Christian clergy in two ways. First, the following request was posted on a listserv of Christian mental health professionals:

Much has been written on clergy misconduct and failure, but very little has been reported on those clergy who thrive... We are looking for clergy who exemplify spiritual and emotional

health—coping effectively with the challenges of their work, and demonstrating balance in various aspects of their personal, interpersonal and professional lives. Our plan is to contact pastors by letter, ask them to participate in a 30-minute telephone interview, conduct the interview, and then give a \$20 gift certificate as an expression of thanks after the interview is over. So if you know a particularly healthy pastor, please let me know.

Second, several additional names were provided by faculty members of the Christian Formation and Ministry Department of Wheaton College. Together these two methods resulted in 46 names of exemplar clergy, all from Protestant Christianity.

Potential exemplars were contacted by mail and given information about the study. Those willing to participate returned postcards and were contacted by telephone to arrange an interview time. Interviews were also conducted by telephone and recorded with permission of the participants for later analyses. The semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately 30 minutes per respondent, consisted of the following areas of inquiry derived from the results generated in Study 1 as well as from previous literature on clergy health:

1. How did you make the decision to become a pastor?
3. To what do you attribute your spiritual and emotional health?
3. What have been some of the challenges and obstacles to remaining healthy as a pastor?
4. What relationships have been most significant in supporting and empowering your ministry?
5. What else do you think is important for us to know regarding your spiritual and emotional health as a minister?

Twenty-six (26) completed interviews were obtained. Our exemplars ranged in age from 31 to 70 (average of 52), 24 were male, and 2 female. Congregational size of the pastors' churches ranged from 65 to 7300, with an average size of 2075. Pastoral staff size ranged from 1 to 22, with an average of 8.5. Twenty of the exemplars were senior pastors or sole pastors of their congregations, and six were in various other pastoral roles. Unfortunately, our method of obtaining names generated an ethnically homogeneous pool, and most of the minorities that were identified did not elect to participate in the study. Among the 26 exemplars that we interviewed, 22 identified themselves as Caucasian/White Americans, 3 as British, and 1 as Chinese-American. Most (20) described their congregation as predominantly Caucasian, 4 described their congregation as multi-



ethnic, and 1 as primarily Asian (one additional respondent was no longer pastor of a church, but had moved to a position of supervising other pastors). Each interview was transcribed and coded using NUD\*IST 4 software for qualitative analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the many lessons we learned from pastors in these studies, two central themes emerged that communicate the essence of their personal resiliency. Our hope is that this research will represent a small step toward a larger goal of understanding clergy health and functioning. It is a small step, as there are several limitations that prohibit any broad conclusions about the personal resiliency of protestant clergy in general. The sample in Study 1 is homogeneous as the clergy represent a single denomination, and our methods of finding "exemplar" clergy in Study 2 relied on a one-step nomination process by mental health professionals that did not allow for systematic scrutiny of the nominees. In addition, while considered a very good response rate in psychological literature, not all invited pastors chose to respond to our request for information (45% in Study 1 and 56% in Study 2). Finally, in order to hear directly from the pastors themselves, we chose to rely on a qualitative methodology so as give them as much freedom as possible in their responses. While this adds richness to the data that cannot be obtained through purely quantitative methods, it also adds additional subjectivity to the process of analyzing the data. Despite these limitations, we believe that the lessons we learned from our pastor respondents can contribute to the development and refinement of programs specifically designed to aid clergy and those they serve.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### *Lesson # 1: Intentionality is Essential*

***Intentionally Balanced.*** How do pastors manage a career in which they enter believing they will minister to people through preaching, evangelism, perhaps some pastoral care, and find that their job description may also include managing leadership conflict, cleaning the fellowship hall bathrooms, balancing the church budget, and fielding 3 A.M. crisis calls? A senior pastor of a very large church described, "It's not the things in ministry that kill you, it's the things you don't get done...every night you leave you know that there's another twelve people you should call,

another three books you should read, another eight people that you need to visit in the hospital." A major theme running through our research is that regardless of the expectations of the organization or parishioners, pastors find that they need to intentionally protect themselves, their marriages, and their families. This is consistent with Hall's (1997) review of the literature. He found that clergy with healthy marriages tend to handle the pressure of time and implement effective boundaries, prioritize time with their families, not move frequently, and avoid the "fish-bowl experience" by refusing to accept expectations of a perfect family (Hall, 1997). Thirty-two percent (32%) of pastors in Study 1, and 46% of pastors in Study 2 spontaneously mentioned the importance of being intentional about creating balance and maintaining strong, but flexible, boundaries in their lives. This includes maintaining some separateness from their role as pastor and preserving their independence (e.g., "I avoid becoming financially or emotionally dependent on the church"). With the recognition that they have signed onto a career in which part of the job description includes intrusions into their personal lives, they still guard their right to have a life outside of their vocation by prioritizing their lives, crafting time away from their pastoral duties, and refusing to be pressured into workaholism. A senior pastor of a large church put it this way:

You've got to take the long view with your ministry. You have to make priorities that are simply on top, like raising your own children and loving your own wife is more important than anything else you are doing. So you kind of set those priorities and don't make apologies for it.

This intentionality comes in several forms. While some spoke of vacation and other down time, others mentioned never bringing work home to avoid the temptation, and still others spoke of placing as much control and structure into unavoidable "extra" duties as possible.

***Intentionally Connected.*** Isolation is a prominent theme for pastors as evidenced by the data indicating that 70% report not having a close friend (as cited in Headington, 1997). Clearly, finding mutually edifying support is challenging given the fact that pastors are in highly visible leadership roles. Because finding meaningful egalitarian relationships within one's congregation is challenging for multiple reasons, pastors often see their families, primarily their spouses, as their principal support system. Twenty five percent of respondents in our first study and 62% in our second study identified the importance



of family relationships (spouse and/or children) in maintaining their emotional and spiritual health, making it essential to protect and nurture those relationships. A wide variety of factors were mentioned for ways that the pastors' spouses specifically had contributed to their health and stability. First, some pastors identified explicit spiritual activities that were part of the marriage: praying together, praying for one another, and reading the Bible together. Second, some referred to the difficult role of being married to a pastor and fielding all sorts of unrealistic expectations from parishioners. One pastor described the importance of his wife's role aptly, "And then my wife, too, when she sort of sees me listening too much to the people that think I'm great, she says to me, 'Hey pal, you ain't so much. Or if I listen too much to the people who say I'm the reason for all the problems, she says, 'Hey, you're a good guy, doing your level best.'" Third, some mentioned emotional support. One pastor stated, "I have a best friend wife . . . We laugh together, we play together, we pray together." Fourth, some pastors identified their spouse's capacity to provide balance by providing a life outside work, and by speaking the truth about work when it needed to be spoken.

Extra-familial relationships also emerged as a crucial element for clergy in the second study with 42% spontaneously identifying the importance of friendships with others outside their family and 35% emphasizing the importance of mentoring and accountability. This was not as prominent a theme for pastor respondents in Study 1 with only about 8% mentioning friendships and 9% mentioning current mentoring and accountability relationships when asked about efforts to prevent exhaustion and stress in their work. However, when these same pastors were asked what the most important thing the denomination could do to prevent its pastors from experiencing high levels of exhaustion and stress, approximately 45% mentioned a need to be mentored and/or known by others. Enthusiasm, vision, and ability to cope tend to wane with isolation. One respondent summarized it this way:

We pastors need to know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves and that we, together, are called to a great destiny...we need leaders who are themselves excited, themselves energized, themselves passionate about the mission of our church and then personally, enthusiastically communicate that mission to us.

Ultimately, clergy want to be known. They are usually the counselors, the mentors, the teachers, and the

encouragers. With their overwhelming responsibilities, clergy need to feel that they are not alone, that they are part of a bigger partnership with those who will stand by them. Essentially they expressed a need for an advocate who will not only listen and understand, but who will walk beside them in viewing and solving the problems at hand: "give unmistakable evidence of concern and care," "[Provide] active support not in words but in deeds," "be available," "carry some of the load," "listen," "get involved when the occasion calls for it," "assure us of our value," "take time to notice the signs of stress or burnout."

### *Lesson # 2: God is Important*

*Sense of Calling.* Choosing to be a pastor in the Protestant tradition often involves a sense of spiritual "call," which makes the pathway to a life of ministry somewhat distinct from other careers that people choose based on income potential, prestige, work conditions, and so on. Forty two percent (42%) of respondents in Study 2 experienced a distinct moment of calling, whereas the other 58% described a more gradual, developmental sense of calling that developed over time, such as: "My call to be a pastor was something I sort of grew into." One senior pastor of a large evangelical church put it this way: "I think the most prominent feature of being a pastor is not choosing the profession but being called of God." This was a theme repeated by most respondents, even to the extent that some experience a call that is contrary to their desires, "Kicking and screaming. It was nothing I was raised to want to be."

*Spiritual Disciplines.* Despite the great importance our pastor respondents place on their original "call" into the ministry, as they are in the midst of daily demands, they may forget how and why they ended up where they are. What they will be aware of is their tremendous responsibility to understand God's truth and communicate it as best they can to their congregations, again drawing them back to their relationship with God for hope and inspiration. Throughout history the Christian life has called followers to certain practices, or "disciplines," of faith (Foster, 1988). Thirty three percent (33%) of clergy in Study 1 and 66% in Study 2 spontaneously mentioned engaging in such spiritual activities as retreat/solitude, reading Scripture, journaling, fasting, and prayer. In the face of stress and extreme difficulty, clergy and other religious people often find strength and purpose through releasing personal



control and trying to work under God's empowering guidance. Self-efficacy did not appear to be a central goal for these pastors. Rather, they have attempted to rest their identity in the character of God, thus acknowledging their own weakness and relying on one whom they perceive to be stronger and more capable, making daily connection through spiritual disciplines essential. Psychologists have unfairly maligned these Christian beliefs in years past (e.g., Ellis, 1983), but there now appears to be growing recognition that these beliefs can be healthy.

**Self-awareness and God's nature.** Whether it be reconnecting in some way with their original mission, vision, and call into the ministry or engaging in spiritual activities such as prayer or studying Scripture, our pastor respondents seem to find great strength in the notion that despite their own failings and apprehensions, God is propelling them forward and will honor His promise to sustain them. When great difficulties arise, pastors may be more likely to recognize their own limitations and realize that some situations are beyond their human capacities to solve.

The theological presuppositions of Christianity include the paired beliefs that all humans are sinful, but that God loves us nonetheless and makes grace and forgiveness available (Hoekema, 1986). John Calvin (1559/1997), one of the leaders in the Protestant Reformation movement, begins his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the paradoxical assertion that we cannot fully know God's grace unless we understand our sinfulness, and that we can never fully acknowledge our own sinfulness until we have contemplated the character of God. Pastors in our second study were specifically asked, "To what do you attribute your spiritual and emotional health?" One prominent theme, spontaneously identified by 54% of clergy respondents in Study 2, might best be described as self-awareness. This was not just an analytical sense of self-awareness, but a humble self-appraisal paired with an understanding of God's grace and forgiveness. It was if they were able to perceive their sin because they had a powerful awareness of God's forgiveness, and they were able to experience God's forgiveness because they were aware of their personal weaknesses and needs:

I see myself as carrying a whole bag of inherent contradictions. That's human nature. I am someone who is in the process of being saved who fights many battles and has yet to be realistic about that as the truth... There's no sin of which I'm not capable of even now. . . I am a sinner recovering by the

grace of God and if I forget that, I'll probably be denying something that's very important.

The exemplar pastors in Study 2 spoke about their utter reliance on the power and presence of God to fulfill their responsibilities. They appear able to recognize the power they hold in the lives of their parishioners and have learned how to manage the temptation to fall into what some call a "messiah complex" through a humble awareness of their humanity. They know their limitations, and regardless of the expectations from above or below, they are able to maintain a realistic appraisal of themselves and communicate this to others. They are also keenly aware of God's ongoing work in their lives, the reality of His power in whatever successes or failures they experience, and their need for God's forgiveness and mercy (e.g., one respondent stated, "I have a friend who says, 'I don't know what the heart of a bad man looks like, but I do know what the heart of a supposed good man is like and it makes me quiver.'").

## THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Pastors live unique lives. In many cases, both their organizations and their parishioners have great, and sometimes divergent, expectations of them, leaving them with the pressure of pleasing all people at all times. Mental health providers that desire to serve pastors need to both understand the unique stressors inherent in pastoral work as well as respect the monumental importance pastors place on their calling and God's sovereignty in their work. Because of the great demands pastors face, there will undoubtedly always be a need for counseling. However, what we are learning from our research is that it may be even more important to sustain and protect them at both the organizational and individual levels prior to their having a need for restoration.

**Organizational Prevention.** Psychologists who wish to aid in this process can become advocates for pastors long before they might see them in their offices. Prevention begins at the seminary level by supporting seminaries in their efforts to foster an atmosphere of openness in which all aspects of the pastorate are discussed, including the problems of dealing with difficult people, managing feelings of sexual attraction, protecting one's marriage, seeking out supportive friendships and mentoring relationships, noticing signs of distress in oneself and one's



colleagues, and seeking help in times of distress. Prevention is also crucial at the denominational level after seminary. It is unfortunate that many of our pastor respondents in Study 1 came to experience a lack of organizational support over time and believe that their primary value is expressed in church growth. Respondents expressed frustration over their perception that the denomination measures church health and pastoral success by church growth. One respondent wrote, "[I would like] in seminars and conferences a sense that my value was more in relationship with Jesus than in my skills and success in putting up good numbers." One went so far as to state that the emphasis on attendance numbers and financial health is so overpowering that clergy are in danger of losing their jobs if their numbers aren't steadily increasing.

Like all professionals, pastors need communication, support, mentoring, vision-casting, and friendship. They need to know that they are not alone, that they are part of something bigger and have mentors that remind them of their calling. Like those they serve, pastors need a pastor to listen and take notice of signs of distress, perhaps even before they are aware of it themselves. Organizational leaders need to be with pastors from the idealistic beginning, through the hills and valleys, to the end of a career. Pastors are asking their organizations to set the stage by first rethinking basic job requirements and then educating congregations and support staff about the many responsibilities and needs of the pastor. Some believe that the constant demands make it almost impossible for them to set the boundaries themselves, so they need their organizations to help them by setting standards that model a well balanced life for parishioners. Being on call constantly necessitates almost a forced resting time, whether mandatory days off or periodic sabbaticals.

**Individual Prevention.** At the individual level, whether one-on-one or in group or seminar format, mental health professionals can help pastors engage in realistic appraisals of their situations and respond in proactive ways, they can help them to re-connect with their original vision, and tell their stories. Helping pastors to tell their stories, engaging with them in their progression through the joys and struggles of being a pastor likely serves two functions. First, it allows them to go back to the beginning and re-connect with their original vision and calling, and second it validates the realities of their difficult situations. We do not expect pastors to complain. Quite

the contrary, they are expected to be constantly joyful, full of faith, and confident that God will provide for them and their families regardless of their circumstances. It is immensely comforting for pastors to be able to tell of their struggles and be understood rather than judged. Validation also serves as a source of empowerment. Once the words are spoken, truth is told and they are then in a position to take proactive steps to balance out their lives. Mental health professionals can aid in this process by educating pastors about the vast resources available to them and encouraging them toward greater health through self-advocacy, support-seeking, and living a healthy lifestyle.

**Remediation.** For mental health professionals who wish to aid those pastors who find themselves in need of psychotherapeutic services, the first basic requirement is familiarity with pastors' unique challenges and respect for the importance of their faith. In addition, while cost and issues of safety are important to everyone seeking counseling, pastors are often unique in that they may need organizational funding and release time in order to seek services. Not surprisingly, there is great fear of negative reprisal. Will it be perceived as weakness or professional incompetence? Will it be a sign to others that God is not enough? Pastors are especially concerned about who will have access to the information, making confidentiality an issue of paramount importance. Because the marital relationship is so crucial, where it is warranted, the pastor's spouse needs to be a part of treatment.

## CONCLUSION

We need our pastors. They also have needs. As with most professionals, pastors enter into their first job full of eager anticipation, excited about the ministry that lies before them, and committed to serving their God, yet they are at risk. What a blessing to them, and to the many that they will serve, when we as Christian mental health professionals make a concerted effort to listen to their words, acknowledge their pain, rejoice with them in their calling, and commit ourselves to take the protection and sustenance of God's shepherds seriously.

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