

# THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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## How to Avoid Pastor Burnout

Francis, a nurse, works in a neonatal intensive care unit. Caring for high-risk infants and dealing with their concerned parents makes her job extremely stressful. Yet she loves it and cannot imagine doing anything else. Although she is exhausted when her shift ends, she is also happy because she knows that she has made a difference for her patients and their families. How can she handle the high stress *and* experience high job satisfaction—at the same time?

### What Causes Pastor Burnout?

Many people believe that experiencing high stress levels causes burnout and drives pastors away from ministry. In fact, most pastors can—and do—deal with high levels of stress. Unfortunately, a few pastors fail in their efforts. One in ten pastors considers leaving their church each year. But what about the other nine pastors? If pastors love what they do *and* experience high levels of satisfaction with ministry, then they can deal with a great amount of stress.

What can pastors do to increase their ministry satisfaction and reduce stress? What can church members do to help?

### Ways to Increase Ministry Satisfaction

New research findings show how pastors can invest in their ministry to experience a higher level of satisfaction in their calling and vocation.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Spend a larger share of time in ministry tasks that match ministry strengths.* For some pastors, time spent in sermon preparation, preaching, and worship leadership is highly rewarding. For others it might be visiting with prospective members or pastoral care for current members. Finding ways to spend more time on the joy-filled items is key to greater satisfaction in ministry.

2. *Achieve a sense of accomplishment in ministry goals.* Pastors want to feel like they are accomplishing important goals for the congregation and its ministries. Experiencing frustration and walls of resistance from

members stand between a pastor and the sense of a job well done. Pastors who feel like failures eventually look for something else to do where they can make a difference. It's important for pastors to set personal goals and to share these with their members so that successes can be seen, and celebrated, by all.

3. *Nurture a spiritual life.* In the midst of taking care of members and church responsibilities, pastors can neglect their own spiritual growth. Drawing from the spiritual well without replenishing leads to faith stagnation. The most satisfied pastors are also highly satisfied with their growth in faith.

4. *Seek quality relationships with lay leaders and members.* Pastors who invest in developing deep and trusting relationships with members also find higher satisfaction in ministry.

5. *Find support and resources from other clergy and the denomination.* Pastors with high levels of ministry satisfaction reach out to other clergy for new ideas, sermon and teaching resources, and support. Many highly satisfied pastors also cite their denomination as a critical partner in their long-term ministry effectiveness.



BY MATCHING MY MINISTRY STRENGTHS WITH MINISTRY TASKS, I'VE AVOIDED EMCEEING THE "LOUD FOR THE LORD" YOUTH GROUP EVENT.

6. *Pursue continuing education.* Effective clergy are life-long learners. New ideas for education, worship, ministry, and evangelism come from opportunities beyond the congregation. These include personal study of new books and materials, attending conferences and talks, and staying engaged with local educational institutions.

Churches that provide for their pastor are demonstrating care and respect for them and their ministry. Pastors who express high satisfaction with ministry also report that they receive adequate salaries, housing allowances, healthcare benefits, and pensions to sustain them and their families.

### Ways to Reduce Ministry Stress

Reducing stress is the other half of the equation for maximizing long-term health and well-being in ministry. Pastors can reduce stress if they:

1. *Participate in a clergy peer group.* A national study of participation in these groups reveals that pastors benefit in multiple ways. They gain from a community that engages in self-directed learning—a level of support and accountability not found elsewhere. Pastors who participate are more likely to promote a church “culture of involvement” that actively assimilates newcomers and promotes member leadership.<sup>2</sup>
2. *Spend time with family and friends.* Many pastors feel that people in the congregation make too many demands, leaving them little time for a private life. Pastors who are committed to finding support from family and friends, creating good memories, and engaging in nonmember friendships reduce stress.
3. *Get regular physical exercise.* Good physical health and strong emotional health go hand-in-hand. Pastors can combine activities with family/friend time.
4. *Establish boundaries between ministry and personal time.* Set aside specific periods each week to unplug electronically (emails and phone use) and spend this time with family or doing non-work-related activities.
5. *Take a day off each week.* Job stress is lower for pastors who regularly take a day off each week.
6. *Pursue a relaxing hobby or interest.* The options are infinite, but leisure interests such as fishing, painting, or cooking keep pastors from becoming one-dimensional and offer another way to relate to members.

Congregations can assist in stress reduction by offering a pastoral Sabbath for sustained rest, renewal, or extended study. The average Sabbath period is three months. Members should also understand how allowing for the above stress-reducing activities will enable their pastor to become *more* engaged with the congregation.

### Who Is Responsible for Clergy Care?

When the minister experiences constant negativity from a small group of members, the pastor feels psychologically pressured to leave the ministry position. About one in four pastors will experience this type of forced termination from their congregation at some point during their ministry service.<sup>3</sup> Those who have been terminated are more likely to experience burn-out, depression, and physical health problems.

Consider involving the pastor and congregation in a discussion based on the following group exercise.

- Ask the pastor to look through the two lists above. First, ask the pastor to circle the number of each item that he or she believes they can *control* (the pastor exercises maximum responsibility and control over the outcome). Second, have the pastor underline words or phrases in the descriptions where the pastor believes he or she can *influence* the outcome.
- Ask the church board or a small group of members to review the two lists in the same way—circling the number of each item that they believe members’ can *control* and underlining words or phrases in the descriptions where members’ believe they can *influence* the outcome.
- Ask the pastor and members to compare their responses. Which factors are the pastor’s responsibility, the congregation’s responsibility, or the responsibility of both? How can the pastor and members be more proactive in taking responsibility for the long-term ministry effectiveness of pastoral leadership?

### The Bottom Line

Pastors need ongoing support from the congregation, their peers, their denomination, and seminaries. Congregations that adequately support clergy receive far more in return. Reasonable expectations from members assist pastors in time management and appropriate self-care. How pastors spend their time reflects their priorities. If good communication and a common vision exist, the pastor’s time investments will mirror the church’s priorities.

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1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church: What Kind of Pastor for What Kind of Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012).

2. “A Study of the Effects of Participation in Pastoral Leader Peer Groups,” Austin Presbyterian Seminary, 2010, [http://faithandleadership.com/programs/spe/pdf/SPE\\_report\\_2010.pdf](http://faithandleadership.com/programs/spe/pdf/SPE_report_2010.pdf).

3. M. N. Tanner, A.M. Zvonkovic, and C. Adams, “Forced Termination of American Clergy: Its Effects and Connection to Negative Well-Being,” *Review of Religion Research* (2012) 54:1–17.