The purpose of this study was to interview clergy that experienced significant stress in their personal and professional lives and understand the coping mechanisms implemented to mediate the stressors. Although an abundance of literature exists which addresses the problem of clergy strains, there is limited academic research provided through the lens of seasoned clergy which reveals coping strategies related to sustaining ministry.

The sample consisted of eight Protestant ordained clergy in the Midwestern United States who had led a congregation in the range of 125 to 1000. All were married with at least two children. Two of the eight were females. All of the respondents were Caucasian with the exception of one African-American male. Participants were selected as clergy, past and present that had undergone a significant stress-related experience that forced them to cope. Clergy from fourteen different denominations were solicited. The ages of the participants ranged from forty-two to fifty-nine years of age. Participants were identified with the use of a screening survey instrument listing a variety of stressors in response to the query: “Have you experienced stress similar to any of these listed?” An additional question followed: “Have you gone through a significant learning or life changing experience related to your role as a clergy member?”
This particular self-report qualitative study was undertaken using the descriptive method with an interpretive approach. The intent was to understand the meaning people made of their experiences and provide useful information for those in this chosen profession.

Analysis of the data revealed six major stressors categorized as change, leadership, dissonance, crises, expectations, and loneliness. Eleven coping mechanisms were identified. These included exercise, prayer, leadership development, reading, retreats, counselor, calling, family, day off, relationships, and scripture. The data analysis resulted in the participants being classified into one of three categories based on the number of coping strategies implemented. Those with five or less were designated passively engaged, participants with six mechanisms were deemed moderately engaged, and those using eight or more coping devices were considered competently engaged. Further examination revealed there may be an association between the degree of stress, the number of coping strategies and the effects both have on whether clergy remain in a parish for an extended period of time or even remain in the profession.