CLERGY STRESS: THE EFFICACY OF COPING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

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.
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During a turbulent time in my undergraduate years, Almighty God gave me a Bible verse that has been a life anchor for me. “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:18-19, NIV).

I wish to give praise to God for making this journey possible. The completion of this milestone is just another testament of His goodness and provision.

The accomplishment of this degree is dedicated to five heroic people. I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my late father, Rev. Ralph Westafer, and my mother, Marguerite. Even though I was born with a cleft palate, they never treated me any differently than anyone else. They taught me to follow my dreams. Dad, in particular, encouraged me to pursue this degree. Because of the service he gave to his country during World War II, I was able to secure this degree without debt. Both Mom and Dad also inspired me with their many years of tireless devotion to the people they loved in each pastorate. I love you.

My wife, Lyn, and two children, Sara and Aaron, have traveled this long road with me for the past four years. They have been longsuffering and patient. As my constant cheerleaders, they enabled me to achieve this goal as a direct result of their love, prayers, and support. I love you so much!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An appropriate analogy of the stress that clergy experience can be drawn from historian Horne (1993). In his book, *The Price of Glory*, Horne described the ten-month Battle of Verdun which began in February, 1916 during World War I. The fortress of Douaumont was a massively thick bastion, but at the end of ten months of constant bombardment, the shape of the fortress could scarcely be discerned. The area surrounding it had been turned into a thick soup by thousands of shells that had exploded in a single piece of ground and muddied by the constant rain. What at one time had been a majestic stronghold surrounded by picturesque landscape had been transformed to soggy quicksand by the constant strain of combat and the elements. It is a vivid illustration of what may happen to clergy as the direct result of days, months, or even years of professional and personal stress.

Many enter the ministry eager to respond to what they consider a divine call, a response to God’s personal invitation to a life of ministry and service. Just as other professionals enter the field of battle zealous to conquer new territory full of passion, ideals and energy, so do clergy. Greenleaf (1977) characterized clergy as “Servant-leaders” (p. 226). They are those who wish to help others to “a larger and nobler vision and purpose than they would be likely to attain for themselves” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 226). Yet, waiting in ambush behind the rocks and trees surrounding the field of battle in which they choose to engage are the unseen enemies of professional fulfillment that seem to wound, mangle or kill their dreams and the fruit of their
labor. These undetected and often unspoken snipers can prove to be vocationally fatal for the clergyperson that is ill-prepared or uninformed on how to navigate such terrain. Greenleaf (1977) labels the likes of these as an “anti-leader” (p. 228). They choose only to “denigrate leadership” (p. 228).

Greenfield (2001) wrote, “I am a recent trooper from the battlefield of bloody confrontation who tried to be pastors, loving, understanding, reconciling, and redemptive; yet, ended up being shot down and left to die on the battlefield of the church, and there are thousands just like me” (p. 16). That is the impetus for this study since I also experienced the hazards of the profession and left the pastorate after nearly two decades. Reeling from fourteen months of constant battles and crises, attacks directed at my family, and the territorialism of church politics, I resigned to pursue what I thought would be temporary career options. Seven years after the fact, I have embarked on education and research to seek insight into this troubling pattern among pastors and their parishes.

Background of the Problem

Why is there a critical need for this study? Seventy-five percent of pastors report they have had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry (FICG, 1991). These run the spectrum from conflict with a parishioner, a forced resignation or firing, to unrealistic congregational expectations. Seventy percent of pastors say they have a lower self-esteem today than when they started in the ministerial profession (London & Wiseman, 2003). In some instances, shepherds and their flocks appear to be at odds to such an extent that there are constantly unresolved
tensions. Perhaps it is because of a lack of understanding about the extraordinary responsibilities pastors carry or the lack of amenability pastors give to congregational leadership and a church’s history. Friedman (1985), among others, characterized this as the triangles at work in churches involving emotions and families. Consider the first leg of the triangle in many churches as the long-time members whose families may populate the hierarchy of the congregation. By the nature of their leadership position, the second leg of the triangle is the pastor and family, regardless of tenure in the parish. The third leg of the triangle would be the newer congregants seeking assimilation into the worship community and leadership or service roles. When disagreements arise between any segments of the triangle, political tension can wreak havoc in the congregation.

In my last pastorate, the triangles at work were a distinct factor in our premature exit. Our move from a thriving, loving church on the West Coast to an urban parish in the Midwest was a culture shock for our family. I assumed the leadership role in an established church that gave the impression during the interview process that they wanted to grow and be a force in their demographically-changing community. Embedded in the congregation, though, were a few families that through subtle means acted as the gatekeepers for the inclusion of new people into the fellowship or any of their ideas. In the context of Greenleaf’s view of the Church (1977), they practiced “too much defense of something; too little building of a better order of things” (p. 236). If the established families felt their leadership threatened, they tended to discourage the assimilation of new attendees. As the pastoral family, we found ourselves in the dilemma of trying to accommodate the established families,
while encouraging the incorporation of fresh faces and approaches. We found ourselves as the third leg in a triangle which included the established families and the newer ones. This resulted in constant tension while the congregation wrestled with its identity. This challenge permeated financial, personnel, long-range planning, music, and worship decisions. It was a vicious cycle that led to the attrition of new prospects.

As a family, we longed for peace in the parish. We knew we needed to work with the long-time leadership, but understood the church would never grow without the acceptance of new families and more effective approaches to ministry. Eventually, the misunderstandings and lack of acceptance of our own family led to our exit.

Both clergy and congregations would be better served to understand the sources of stress swirling in the parish. Research on the stressors in the profession may be used to educate both and reduce unnecessary anguish so the mission of the church may be accomplished rather than diminished. Hadaway and Marler (2005) estimate there are roughly 331,000 religious congregations in the United States. Of those, about 300,000 are Protestant and other Christian churches and 22,000 are Catholic and Orthodox churches. Lindner (2004) reported an estimated 365,000 people serving as pastors in congregations, including associate or assistant ministers. The total number was 600,000 clergy, including retired ministers, chaplains in hospitals, prisons or the military, and ordained faculty at seminaries serving in various denominations in the United States. The matter of stress among ecclesiastics as they interact with their congregations is an important societal issue, since it touches the lives of millions.
Stress as a malady is common among American society as a whole. Hart (2003) describes stress as primarily a biological phenomenon resulting from too much adrenaline and too much pressure. An individual is using too much energy to perform certain functions. It is an indicator of over-commitment. “Stress is the loss of fuel and energy that often produces panic, phobic, and anxiety-type disorders” (p. 177). The nature, timing, and length of exposure to different stressors can have a negative effect upon those in the helping professions, especially clergy. A pastor must be able to shift at a moment’s notice from administrative duties to the emotional and spiritual work of ministry. Since ministers are in the helping profession, many come to them as a resource of first resort. As much as pastors entered the profession to minister to needy souls, excessive involvement in the help provider role has been shown to be a source of major occupational stress for clergy (Hall, 1997).

Stress is not an uncommon malady for professionals. Quick, Nelson and Quick (1990) emphasized the “occurrence of stressful events is a universal part of life, particularly in the working world” (p. 22). Frost (2003) cited Neuman of the State University of New York at New Paltz who indicated that “job stress is estimated to cost U. S. industry $300 billion annually, as assessed by absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, direct medical, legal, and insurance fees, and workplace violence” (p. 14).

There are a number of stressors that complicate the lives of professionals. For example, “although the process of relocation may favorably affect the attainment of career and financial goals, it is experienced as a stressful situation by many corporate families and may create trauma for individual family members” (Ammons, Nelson, &
Wodarski, 1982, p. 207). Ammons et al. (1982) found the transient nature of the corporate executive’s lifestyle “was reflected by the fact that 66% had lived in their previous residence less than five years” (p. 209). Anderson and Stark (1988) referred to repeated job relocation as “mobility syndrome” (p. 38). Stressors manifested from this include depression, marital discord, loss of support networks, interruption of personal growth and development. They further intimated that teenagers in the home may be negatively affected due to impaired social relationships.

A second category of stress for professionals is related to role expectations and time demands. Marshall and Cooper (1979) identified four pressures that operate through a mix of influences: company structure and practices, restraint of individual independence and control of rewards, form and informal norms against which work performance and social behavior are judged, and the individual’s personality characteristics poorly suited to the job demands. Quick, Nelson, and Quick (1990) noted the “two major sources of stress for an executive are internal and external demands” (p. 10). Internal demands represent the personality and the self-imposed pressures to achieve promotions or achieve specific social status. External demands include elements in the external environments such as customers, interpersonal demands in the workplace, informational demands, and personal demands. This is similar to the triangle of forces that a pastor may face in a church. One CEO characterized these demands “like being the center of an hourglass” where the “pressure pours in” through the top from the board with the leader in the middle and the “open funnel at the bottom pouring out” to everyone else (Frost, 2003, pp. 32-33).
Small and Riley (1990) explored a third variety of stress as the intrusion of work into the family. The effects of four major non-work role contexts were seen as negatively influenced for married male bank executives with children. These included the marital relationship, the parent-child relationship, involvement in leisure activities, and household responsibilities. The processes involved included the amount of time spent at work and away from home, the psychological absorption of the worker, and the physical and psychological challenges of work which fatigue the individual. The data indicated that when work spillover occurred in male executives, it interfered and affected every domain of their personal life equally. Davidson and Veno (1990) studied policemen and found “an interaction with stressors at work being able to affect family life and vice versa, with one often exacerbating the other” (p. 136).

A fourth classification of professional stress is the lack of social support. Marshall and Cooper (1979) believed the two most important dimensions as far as the manager and his or her work are concerned appear to be those of time management and social support. The research of Quick, Nelson, and Quick (1990) indicated that of all the stress prevention techniques suggested by executives, “social support was the one strategy which they argued for vigorously and adamantly” (p. 54). What complicates this for executives is the often transient nature of their lifestyle and their relocation to new neighborhoods. Ammons et al. (1982) posited “one reason members of the community do not reach out to its new members is that they realize many of them will move again in a short time period, and therefore do not think it prudent to become involved with them either civically or socially” (p. 208).
Clergy not only experience these common stressors, but those endemic to their profession. The combination of pressures from unrealistic expectations, parish and family demands, member migration, professional comparisons, dysfunctional people, sexual temptation, loneliness, and financial pressures, along with the ordinary mandates of life, makes ministry a high stress vocation. Even though these nemeses may be common to other professions, they are multiplied for clergy since they are expected to live exemplary lives as a standard for others. "In my early years as a parish pastor, migraine headaches, an upset stomach, fatigue and depression were my daily bread and butter. Today, things are different, to be sure, but I still have difficulty managing the work and responsibility I undertake" (Oswald, 1991, pp. 26-27).

Just like their secular counterparts, the trauma of transition due to the high rate of mobility for the profession can be tough on a pastor’s marriage, as well as the offspring. The spouse may have to resign a job he or she loves and that supplements the family income as a result of a new church assignment and relocation. In turn, the children have to adjust to new schools and make new friends. For example, my father, a pastor, made three moves during my formative years. That meant I attended three different schools, the last relocation took place between my sophomore and junior years of high school. This represented a loss for me. I was involved in sports and during my sophomore year, our cross country team went undefeated during the regular season and succeeded deep into the post-season meets. The move between my sophomore and junior years meant I missed the opportunity to join my teammates in another successful season and the possibility of competing in the state finals. It also
meant moving to a new town, a new school, and trying to crack well-established cliques.

Since many live in church-provided housing as part of their financial package, they neither possess sufficient wealth to purchase a home nor the benefit of home equity. The economic pressures to prepare for retirement, achieve home ownership, and provide a stable material environment for a family can be jeopardized by frequent moves. Since my father was a pastor, we always lived in church-provided housing. This was considered part of the salary package which, in turn, made it difficult for my parents to save enough for a down payment on a house. This was exemplified by an experience my parents never shared until more than twenty years after it occurred. Called to pastor a struggling church of fifty parishioners in the early 1970s, Dad worked side jobs to make ends meet. The church could not afford much in the way of salary, but did provide a nice manse. What I did not learn until nearly two decades later was that when we took a week of vacation, the church required my father to pay the stipend for his replacement speaker. Because of these practices in many small churches across America, pastors must deal with the contrasting expectations of both a family and a congregation. Similar scenarios are far more common for the average pastor than the ephemeral perceptions of wealth and success propagated by some of their television colleagues. My parents were able to purchase their first home well into retirement, made possible by a sizable inheritance from my grandparents who had been successful farmers.

Some comparisons of role expectations, interpersonal demands of the workplace, and organizational pressures faced by executives may be made to that of
clergy. For the workplace, Frost (2003) indicated that the cumulative negative effects of these elements may lead to “organizational toxicity” (p. 14). This is interpreted as “a by-product of organizational life that can have serious negative consequences on individuals and their organizations, unless it is identified and handled in healthy and constructive ways” (p. 14). The malady of suffering from "friendly fire" or criticism as pastors seek to satisfy their approval addiction can be hazardous. A “1991 Survey of Pastors” from Fuller Theological Seminary reported that forty percent of pastors report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.

The subtle traps inherent within the milieu may sidetrack or destroy a pastor’s ministry. A pastor may have to forgive a board member for direct or indirect caustic remarks. He or she is constantly faced with the dilemma of having to work on a day off. Clergy must deal with the perception, whether real or imagined, that one may counsel an attractive person of the opposite sex without fantasizing about him or her. In some cases, counseling has been a land mine for those in the profession when emotional attachments are formed, and they succumb to temptation. Add to this the feelings of professional jealousy when a colleague is invited to pastor a larger church. A negative vote from the congregation may result in leaving a large church with a good salary to a smaller church with less salary or even removed from the pulpit entirely and forced to look for secular work. In a national survey of 593 clergy, LaRue (1996) found that 23% of pastors had been discharged. Of those, ten percent left the pastoral ministry. Further, ninety-one percent of pastors knew an ousted pastor.
Forced exits have become increasingly a source of stress for clergy especially given some of the innocuous reasons for parish conflict. Wood (2001) reported that more than 1300 pastors each month are forcibly terminated without just cause. In Crowell's (1992) survey, three pastors were fired because they were not friendly enough, another because of his wife's attitude, and one because he had children and pets in the parsonage. Other reasons included the pastor stayed too long, congregational politics, sexual sin, doctrine, finances, pastoral staff conflict, and denominational politics.

Along with their secular counterparts, pastors may hyper-focus on work to the neglect of paying attention to a spouse and children. The ministry never has been and never will be an 8-to-5 job. Many pastors routinely register sixty to eighty hour work weeks. When our children were young, I was exhausted from a continual series of events and demands from ministry. Our family decided to have a quiet night at home with both the door and the phone unanswered. We even went so far as to place a sign on the doorbell indicating to any interested party that we would not be disturbed. Despite our best efforts, an elderly lady came to the door and ignored both the sign and the doorbell proceeding to ring the bell repeatedly.

Then there are the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced not only by the secular executive, but pastors as well. Many times pastors do not feel they have anyone close to them in which they may confide. They have a lack of close friends due to the nature of their profession and, in many cases, an aversion to being vulnerable.
As much as ministry is a divine calling, the common hazards of the profession are either not known or generally ignored by American culture. Yet, those invited to participate in this holy calling should not appear to be reminiscent of the fortress of Douaumont which stood so majestically prior to heavy bombardment. Just as in any other profession, pastors should not only expect battles, but survive them, a bit scarred, but still bastions of integrity and true to their calling.

Quick, Nelson and Quick (1990) indicated that “organizations must be concerned about how the executive deals with stress because he/she sets the tone for the way in which individuals within the organization handle stress” (p. 65). Welch and Welch (2008) listed six key business leadership characteristics, one of which was resilience or “the capacity to bounce back after defeat without feeling, well, defeated” because “CEOs regularly get the wind knocked out of them” (p. 88). Frost (2003) emphasized that “even though some hurtful actions and decisions in organizations cannot be avoided, the way the pain is viewed can be changed” (p. 83). This is critical because the “meaning of the experience and the reasons for it can be revisited and given a more helpful and empowering interpretation” (p. 83).

As a result of this study, perhaps ministers and those that train them may be apprised of the heavy price many in this profession are paying due to the stressors common to the vocation. If clergy could be educated about the nature of their particular vocational stressors, and are transparent enough to admit they experience stress in a divine calling, perhaps they could adopt improved coping practices and apply principles that would better enhance ministry so that he or she may enjoy a more fulfilling professional life. In turn, that may extend the influence of a church in
a community and the culture. This importance cannot be understated because “the quality of life within churches…may have more to do with their influence on society than what they teach or advocate” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 239).

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of research from the perspective of clergy that have sustained long-term ministry despite the cumulative effects of significant experiences resulting in stress. Pastors experience strain from the demands of their profession that are self-imposed, congregationally-imposed, community-imposed, and even divinely-imposed. Why do some clergy overcome stress, even embrace it and flourish? Why do others succumb to the strains of the profession and never reach their potential or even leave the ministry altogether?

Congregations appear to be unaware about the hazards of the ministry since many repeat past behaviors that result in truncated pastorates and small constituencies. By providing an appropriate picture of what clergy experience, perhaps pastors will gain proper social capital with society in general and with their parishes in particular that will enable everyone to function in a more amenable environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to interview clergy that experienced significant stress in their personal and professional lives and explore how they coped. The context, extenuating circumstances, and decisions may have worked in concert to
exacerbate inordinate stresses related to an individual situation. It is important to understand why some clergy exhibited certain behaviors as they sought to cope with personal and/or professional trauma. The implementation of multiple coping mechanisms or lack thereof could determine not only the length of ministry in a parish, but quality of life issues. I seek to understand how some clergy encounter severe stress and maintain vitality in the profession while others seemingly succumb to the adversity and feel diminished.

The differentiation in the severity of stressors and the success or lack of coping is worth investigation. I believe the resulting data and analysis will be useful for others in the pastorate as well as for the congregations served. Pastors need to understand that they do not need to walk on water. They can learn from their colleagues how to navigate the choppy seas of the profession. In addition, those responsible for educating pastors may find the research useful to properly equip those preparing to enter the ministry or those already in the profession. At the same time, congregations may be helped by gaining insight into the challenges faced by their leaders which, in turn, may result in improved pastor-parish relationships.

Interviewing clergy will give them an opportunity for critical reflection as they make meaning of their experiences and give society a lens through which to view this highly demanding profession. Ministers experience the pressures of being on call around the clock, yet without the regular off-days or overtime compensation. They are expected to be pillars of virtue, yet when the public views their feet of clay, they are often pilloried and not given the benefit of the doubt. Many lack the business acumen or training to lead a volunteer-driven organization, yet they are looked to as
captains of industry to raise funds, balance budgets, counsel, manage, and inspire people all the while never losing his or her temper and maintaining a perfect family. McBurney (1985) wrote, “Ministers are human beings, and the quicker they recognize their humanity, face their limitations, and get help when they need it, the sooner they begin to escape terrible consequences” (p. 67). A pastor experiencing clergy stressors may have the notion that he or she is the only one experiencing such maladies. Clergy are hesitant to share with others their feelings of isolation, loneliness, and even failure. With my professional experiences, I can empathize with the participants and frame the discussion for in-depth responses. This study should enable clergy to realize they are not in a unique situation and it will help them understand and make meaning of their struggles.

Each month more than 1200 pastors leave the ministry due to stress, church related issues, family issues, or burnout (Wood, 2001). This research may help stem this tide as ministers realize they do not need to maintain a façade of perfection before the public or their colleagues. Instead, by being transparent, they may help not only others in the profession, but their own congregations by revealing practices that enabled them to give meaning to their lives as a result of a stressful experience.

From an adult education standpoint, this investigation should contribute to improved professional practice for ecclesiastics. They will hear the voices of some of their peers and identify and learn from the lived experiences of associates. Seminaries and continuing professional education providers may see the need to create curriculum and train religious leaders in the identification of professional stress and how to best manage it. Perhaps theological educators could help pastors develop
coping skills while still in training so they may cope more effectively while in the actual practice of ministry. This inquiry may provide information leading to improved parish-pastor relationships, educate ministers about the struggles of fellow practitioners, and enlighten congregations embarking upon a fresh relationship with a newly-appointed preacher.

Research Questions

This project seeks to understand the following research questions:

1. What significant stressors do clergy face?
2. What coping mechanisms do they use to moderate that stress?

Significance of the Study

In general, the adult lifespan can be conceptualized as a series of transitions from one status or situation to another. Learning about these transitional periods from adult clergy will enable others entering or in the midst of their own personal transitions to better navigate this experience. It may also provide adult educators with a better understanding of the strains and expectations these transitions place on clergy and their role in assisting with such transitions.

This study was inspired by my own journey. After nearly twenty years in the ministry and eight particular fulfilling years in a suburban Los Angeles charge, I returned with my family to assume the pulpit of an urban Midwestern church. Not only was the physical transition an adjustment, but the culture and factions within the church made for a particularly volatile environment. Within two weeks of my arrival,
the school administrator informed me there was not enough money in the budget to meet the first payroll. I discovered that the church treasurer, who did all the bookkeeping for six figure receipts with a paper ledger, was double-paying some bills and neglecting others. The school clientele wanted to add another grade to the struggling enterprise. This would require facility expansion and additional financial capital. The previous pastor had instituted two completely different worship styles for two different services and created another schism in what was characterized as a traditional church. The professional staff working for the church was more than the church could afford. In addition, the church had undergone a recent renovation to provide for the future growth of the school and the church without the proper resources to sustain either the growth or the monthly mortgage. Trying to tackle these issues along with the every day responsibilities of a pastor led to my predecessor nearly having a nervous breakdown. I lasted only fourteen months after numerous conflicts, recurring nightmares, verbal and emotional assaults toward my family, and the requisite loss of passion for my future ministry in that place. My situation was not unique since in the seven years following my tenure, the church has been through three pastors. As I critically reflect on that experience and those of my colleagues, it gives pause to consider what alternative outcomes may have been possible if we had practiced adequate coping measures.

It is my hope that others will learn not only from my story, but from the stories of my colleagues. Ministers continue to leave their chosen profession and calling in alarming numbers. They feel a huge sense of loss with the personal investment they have made in terms of educational preparation, financial sacrifices,
and professional expertise. Bereft of a sense of purpose, they are left to not only provide for their families with the lack of proper skills at a critical juncture in their lives, but also to reclaim their own self-esteem and direction for the future. Not only that, but individual congregations are left to deal with the loss of a reverend and their own self-identity issues without realizing the often lofty standards they demand of ministers. There are those clergy that enjoy long and productive tenures at a single church while other congregations struggle to close the revolving door where shepherd after shepherd passes because of the dysfunctional pathology of the parish. The former congregations must know how to treat a pastor or the pastor has learned how to navigate the demands of the profession. In the case of the latter, they appear either to be ignorant of the hazards or have no desire to change their methods of operation. Therefore they struggle to keep abreast of a culture changing as rapidly as the people that populate their pulpit, oblivious to the possibility that they may contribute to another servant of God leaving with exit wounds.

Definition of Terms

Clergy – those persons who are ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998).

Stress – “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension…a situation, occurrence, or factor causing this” (Flexner, 1987, p. 1882).

Mobility – the perceived threat or the reality of a geographical relocation of a pastor and his or her family (Frame & Shehan, 1994).
Church – “A congregation, association, community, or organization of persons with Christian beliefs who are banded together primarily or ostensibly for religious purposes” (Moberg, 1984, p. 16).

Social Support – a diverse range of specific helping behaviors including emotional, tangible, and informational (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998)

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

This study will investigate the stress of married Protestant clergy leading a congregation with an average Sunday morning worship attendance between 125 and 1000 attendees. The data will be limited insomuch as it represents the perceptions of individual clergy. Since I have been a pastor, my experiences may serve as an interpretative lens. As a white male, my worldview may contrast with that of the diverse participants. No data will be collected from congregations.

It is assumed that demands placed on clergy are somewhat different than those placed on society as a whole. The findings from this study may inform not only clergy, but denominational leaders, religious educators, and seminary administrators who wish to adjust their institutions to the needs of pastors and stress.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature concerning clergy stress. The introduction provides the nature and scope of the topic. The criterion for the selection of literature is provided. Following the discussion of the literature is a summary which includes recognition of a gap in the research.
Chapter 3 will feature the research methodology. A review of the purpose of the study will introduce the chapter. A description of the methodology will be provided. A design of the study will also be discussed. The parameters for the sample and the source of data will be described. Data collection and other procedures will be presented. The process for how I expect to analyze the data once it is collected will conclude the chapter.

Chapter 4 will contain the findings of the study. This will be a thematic reporting of the data relative to the research question.

Chapter 5 will begin with a summary containing an overview of the study. A discussion of the conclusions will integrate the findings in the fourth chapter. The final section will include recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Thousands of clergy function in what some may consider a stressful occupation. That has encouraged researchers to study this phenomenon for several decades and in multiple contexts. Crowell (1992) indicated empirical studies of clergy and the social dynamics of pastoral ministry date back as early as the 1930s. Duncan's (1932) survey of 111 ex-pastors revealed that about thirty-nine percent left the ministry due to disappointment over the church's inefficient organization and administration, including "the uncertainty of tenure" and "low salary, standards, or practices" (pp. 108-9). From 1932-1966, at least twenty-nine other studies were done on clergy success and/or career change. Sandwiched among these was the pioneering research of Blizzard (1958a, 1958b) on pastors’ role conflicts. In 1970, Mills, Jud and Burch conducted a study of 276 active and 241 former pastors of the United Church of Christ. Three problem areas were exposed: conflict within the congregation, distortion of the pastoral role, and personal problems. In the 1980s, the shift was from ex-pastors to stressed pastors and "burnout" became a buzzword. Myra (1981) surveyed 500 pastors. Sixty percent of them said they had experienced a stressful event in their professional life that was difficult for them to accept. This was followed by Breznitz and Goldberger (1982) who investigated stress research on issues such as the nature of, timing, and length of exposure to different stressors, individual differences among persons under stress, situational factors causing stress and interactions among situational factors, and individual factors.
In contrast, studies released later in the decade found religious professionals experienced significantly less work-related stress than the general population (Fichter, 1984; Malony, 1988; Rayburn, Richmond, & Rogers, 1986). Barna’s (1993) research reinforced those findings to a certain degree, discovering pressures faced by clergy but noted them in contrast to the benefits of being in the ministry. Miller (2001) reported 91 percent of respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their ministry and 71 percent “definitely” wanted to stay in ministry. Carroll’s (2006) research indicated pastors exhibit a strong commitment to their call to be in ordained ministry generally and pastoral ministry in particular.

Despite the positive aspects of the ministry, a review of the literature revealed that stressors may impair the ability of ministers to provide spiritual and organizational leadership to their churches, increase the risk of problem behaviors by clergy, and for married clergy may erode the quality of family life (Henry et al, 1991; Ostrander, Henry, & Fournier, 1994). Since pastors provide moral guidance and are often the first responders in a family crisis, not to mention their stature as leaders in a community, these outcomes alone are reason for concern among those involved in the profession. The numerous studies of clergy stress (e.g., Morris & Blanton, 1994; Ostrander & Ceglian, 1993; Sanford, 1982; Willimon, 1989) can be seen as contributing primarily to our knowledge of stressors.

Peter Drucker, the late leadership guru, believed the four hardest jobs in America were the President of the United States, a university president, a CEO of a hospital, and a pastor (Chun, 2006). Noted in Chapter 1, was the research informing about the amount and sources of stress for professionals. Ministers are no exception.
However, Warner and Carter (1984) found ministers report greater occupation-related stress than the general population.

As discussed in Chapter 1, stress is an ordinary part of work life. For any leader in particular, the stress may be magnified due to the nature of his or her role in an organization. Various leadership theories underscore the importance of the proper organizational and situational matches with the right leader for optimum mutual benefit (Fiedler, 1978; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Vroom & Jago, 2007).

Given the role of a member of the clergy not only in the church, but in the community, it would be ideal for all pastors to be a situational fit for his or her respective parish. As one responding to a divine call, the responsibility to live an exemplary life and perform well in the profession may create enormous pressures. The literature revealed that when ministers encounter stressors indigenous to their profession, they may emerge from disequilibrium as a better person and more effective pastor. Others may see a personal or professional crisis as a trauma too great to overcome, negatively affecting their approach to the ministry or even leading to their exit from the profession.

Criteria

Designing this literature review involved selecting studies that informed clergy and stress. Finding the studies for the review began with using related search terms such as “clergy,” “pastors,” “ministers,” and “stress” on various educational databases and internet searches.
Sources were considered based on discussions of clergy and issues related to stressors and suggested coping mechanisms. The vast majority of the research was culled from academic journals and books. Most of the research referenced was conducted within the past thirty years.

Major contributors to the review include Ostrander and colleagues due to the nature of research contributed on ministers’ families and stress. Barna, recognized as a leading researcher on the clergy and the church, was also a valuable resource.

There were a number of initial topics identified as stressors for clergy. As the research continued, five major themes emerged and the literature was then chosen based on those topics. It appeared the major areas contributing to clergy stress were mobility, financial compensation, expectations/time demands, intrusion of family boundaries, and social support. The discussion of these five themes is the outline for the review of the literature.

Mills and Koval (1971) found the majority of Protestant clergy reported emotional stress that was sometimes severe, spanning the entire length of one’s career. Iverson-Gilbert (2003) revealed later studies that examined an array of pastoral stressors, many of which involve unrealistic and intrusive expectations pressed on clergy by their congregations. Merrill (1985) included a survey conducted by Myra of 500 pastors in 1981. Sixty percent of them said they had experienced a stressful event in their professional life that was difficult for them to accept. In a study of pastors in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Klaas and Klaas (1999) discovered that twenty percent were moderately depressed and another twenty percent were severely depressed and in the advanced stages of burnout. For perspective with
the population as a whole, Hall (1997) cited the findings of Warner and Carter (1984) in a study of pastors and their wives in comparison to lay persons for quality of life. Pastors experienced significantly more loneliness than those in non-pastoral roles. The researchers interpreted the results to indicate that loneliness is caused by both burnout and diminished marital adjustment. Both of these are fueled by the excessive demands of the pastorate.

Paul (1981) segmented the stress a pastor experiences into two types in the process of caring for others. “The first type of stress is the chronic overextension pattern leading to physical wear and tear and emotional exhaustion. The second type of stress involves the neglect of needs, tasks, and crises appropriate to his particular age or stage of life” (pp. 17-18). This would be consistent with the findings of Quick et al. (1990) mentioned earlier concerning both the internal and external demands experienced by executives.

Many pastors face these changes in mid-life. Carroll (2006) noted the median age of a senior or solo Protestant pastor was fifty-one. Along with enduring physical changes, emotional experiences such as career shifts, their own mortality, the deaths of friends and loved ones, and their evolving roles with children, aging parents and spouse may exacerbate a life stage.

A review of the literature indicates there are multiple categories of primary external stressors that affect clergy. Morris and Blanton (1994) and Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) found similarly that mobility, financial compensation, expectations/time demands, intrusions of family boundaries, and social support were chief culprits. Oswald (1991) described aggregate categories that included role
ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, time demands, lack of pastoral care, lack of extra-dependence, geographic relocation, political/economic uncertainty, a helping profession, and loneliness. Krause, Ellison, and Wulff (1998) extrapolated the stressors on clergy from a combination of studies. These stressors included excessive demands, intrusiveness of church members, lack of privacy, and feelings of loneliness. More recently, McMinn, Lish, Trice, Root, Gilbert, and Yap (2005) reported on five different studies and found stressors that included role conflicts, proliferation of activities, discrepancy between amount of time in administrative duties versus pastoral duties, spiritual dryness, perfectionism, no time for study or to be alone, failure of dreams, unwelcome surprise, frustration, feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, loneliness/isolation, and unrealistic expectations of oneself, one’s congregation, and one’s denomination.

Even though there may be different classifications that various researchers have applied in this regard, based on the review of the literature, the stressors could be classified into five categories. These included mobility, financial compensation, expectations/time demands, intrusion of family boundaries, and social support as major sources of stress for clergy (Morris & Blanton, 1994; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003). For the purposes of this study, these five categories will serve as reference points for the discussion.
Five Distinct Stressors

*Mobility*

Mobility has to do with the perceived threat or the reality of a geographic relocation of a pastor. When one moves almost everything changes. London and Wiseman (2003) cited a *Barna Research Online* article indicating that the average pastor has tenure of only five years at a church. That is a three year increase from just twenty years earlier when Merrill (1985) revealed that the average stay was only two years. Adding to the complexities of this issue, Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) mentioned that pastors must be willing to recognize that not all family members share the call to ministry equally; left unrecognized, this may lead to resentment within the family itself when relocation becomes an issue.

Frame and Shehan (1994) used a family stress model to identify factors that are associated with successful adaptation to frequent involuntary relocation. The Double ABCX model of coping and adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) proposes that adaptation to crises such as relocation depends on the “pile-up of demands” preceding and following the crisis, available coping resources, and perceptions of the ability to cope with the stresses associated with the event (p. 196). Frame and Shehan (1994) focused on the ministry, an occupation that demands frequent relocation. The pile-up of demands which is pertinent for this study was defined as the cumulative effect, over time, of pre-crisis and post-crisis stressors and strains that face a family when members are attempting to cope with a major life crisis. They discovered that United Methodist clergy and their families, for example, relocate on an average of once every four years. The stressors commonly associated
with relocation include: (a) an altered financial state, due to moving costs and to the loss of the trailing spouse’s employment and income; (b) loss of close relationships and other sources of social support; (c) problems with the new residence; (d) need to establish new recreational and educational patterns for children; and (e) pressure to succeed in the new job (Ammons, Nelson, & Wodarski, 1982). This is similar to the mobility syndrome experienced by executives as noted earlier (Anderson & Stark, 1988).

Frame and Shehan (1994) conducted their study of United Methodist clergy who were ordained in the Florida Annual Conference in 1993. Due to the small number of married clergywomen and minority clergymen who met the relocation criteria, only married white male clergy and their spouses were selected for inclusion in the sample (N=212). In October, 1992, questionnaires were mailed to all of the clergy who met the criteria. Those who relocated within the past five months had significantly more negative perceptions of their relocation experiences, and those with more negative life experiences in the past year also had more negative perceptions of their recent relocation. Stress was added by the financial pressure created by the loss of or sharp reduction in the wife’s income compounded in the short run by moving costs. The qualitative data gathered in this study indicated that seeking professional counseling for their own problems was not a typical coping response for relocating clergy and their families. Clergy felt the pressure to maintain the appearance of a problem-free life. Additionally, among clergymen, the net effects of the individual components of the Double ABCX model were all statistically significant. The individual components include the stressor (A), the family’s
resources at the time of the crisis (B), the family’s perceptions of the event (C), which jointly determine adaptation (X). In addition, because clergy husbands were consumed with their professional responsibilities, they may fail to provide their wives and children with greatly needed emotional and instrumental support. Based on the findings, it appeared imperative that counselors offer stress management training for clergy and other professionals whose pile-up of demands may strongly affect their well-being.

An experienced counselor to pastors, McBurney wrote, "Any kind of move is a loss. It creates a degree of grief, even if you're moving to a better situation or leaving tensions and problems behind. If you pack up the moving van without taking care of emotional closure, you're forgetting something very necessary" (Merrill, 1985, p. 68). This assumption has been proven true for a large cluster of clergy affected by Hurricane Katrina. McConnahughey (2007) reported on the collateral emotional damage experienced by clergy in New Orleans. While clergy cared for the needs of others, they were displaced from their houses of worship as well as their own homes. Episcopal Bishop Charles Jenkins was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. His home was so badly damaged, it was ten months before he and his wife could move back. He has suffered from depression, faulty short-term memory and difficulty concentrating and sleeping.

Given the brief average tenure most clergy experience at any charge and the fact that many live in church-provided housing, the challenge of job insecurity looms. As the minister learns the ropes of the church, a battle for control develops that could put his or her job in danger. If he or she offends the power brokers in the church, the
possibility of job loss and the resulting threat of relocation may cause a minister to be suboptimal in fulfilling his or her proper leadership role. Henry, Chertok, Keys, and Jegerski (1991) discovered that in some situations, serious interpersonal problems in the church could result in the loss of one's home and income. This confirmed the characterization of the triangles at work in churches involving emotions and families (Friedman, 1985).

While many professionals may take home ownership for granted and may establish deep roots in a community, this may not always be the case for clergy. Living in church-provided housing, lacking the material means to accumulate a down payment, and having the threat of regular relocation hanging over a parsonage family can make for uncertain times and, thus, a fair degree of stress.

Financial Compensation

Maces (1980) and Lavender (1983) found that 95% of all clergy are grossly underpaid given their educational level. Clergy rank in the top 10% of the population in terms of education, but rank 325th out of 432 occupations in terms of salary. Morris and Blanton (1994) further noted that many spouses of clergy are often expected to serve as unpaid assistant pastors. Many spouses perform three full-time occupations with the family, church and personal career, and are remunerated for one.

Eaton and Newlon (1990) studied twenty-six female clergy representing six denominations. All but three had earned master’s degrees or above. Most of the women were between the ages of 36 and 55 and forty-four percent reported earning between $15,000 and $20,000 per year. Thirty-two percent did not feel they were
well-compensated for their work. However, seventy-four percent reported that their financial needs were met. Three-fourths of the women had been serving in their current positions for three years or less. Many of the women received what they considered to be inadequate compensation for their work. More than half of the clergywomen earned less than $21,000 per year. That stands in contrast to the median salary of $40,000 for full-time clergy with graduate level education in 1999 (Carroll, 2006).

McMillan and Price (2002) reported that only a small percentage of pastors earn what most Americans would consider a professional level salary. Their findings raise particular concerns over the state of salaries for African-American clergy, the restricted upward mobility of women clergy, and the growing burden of debt incurred by clergy to fund their theological education. Low clergy salaries, they contend, are making it difficult for pastors to be true to their call and are causing many talented graduates to enter other professions or other forms of ministry. To meet financial demands, many are compelled to move up the career ladder to larger congregations. Others are forced to take second jobs or depend on an income-producing spouse. In the same report, Hudnut-Beumler, Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, indicated the ability and willingness of congregations to pay a professional wage for professional services is on the decline.

Using figures from a 2001 national clergy survey, McMillan and Price reported that about sixty percent of Protestant pastors serve in small churches with an average weekly attendance of 100 or less. The median salary, including housing, for pastors serving small churches was $36,000 in connectional churches (those with
central polity organizations such as Methodists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans) and $22,300 in congregational churches (those with local autonomy such as Baptists and Pentecostals). In large churches (351 to 1,000 in attendance), which comprised about five percent of all Protestant churches, median salaries were $66,003 for pastors in connectional churches and $59,315 for pastors in congregational churches. The median salary, including housing, for all full-time pastors in the study was $40,000, hardly a professional-level salary.

The researchers noted that Catholic clergy do not experience the same salary tensions since they have neither spouse nor children to support even though they are generally paid less than Protestant clergy. Rather than being determined by market forces, Catholic clergy salaries are set by the diocesan bishop.

According to Carroll (2006) the median salary for full-time clergy with graduate level education was $40,000 in 1999. This figure included all classifications of ministers including military and institutional chaplains, teachers, pastoral counselors, and denominational executives, as well as associate and assistant pastors. This did not indicate if housing was included for the arrived figure. A more accurate median salary comparison provided by Carroll included housing. The differentiation in median salary ranged from small Protestant churches (attendance less than 100) of $25,034 to mega Protestant churches (attendance of 1000+) of $85,923. These figures include both full and part-time clergy, graduate-educated and otherwise, both ordained and lay pastoral leaders. Small churches paid a median salary of $36,000 in Lutheran and other denominations whose governments included regional authorities,
according to a Duke Divinity School study in 2003. Independent churches paid a median of $22,300.

Smith (2004) reported that church dissension, combined with low pay and long hours is taking a toll on God’s people. Not surprisingly, Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) found that income is a significant predictor of the pastor’s overall well-being. Carroll’s study (2006) confirmed that reasons a pastor might doubt his call is because of the spouse’s resentment over the family’s financial situation. When Carroll correlated the three commitment measures to dissatisfaction with selected aspects of ministry, dissatisfaction with salary and benefits topped each list.

Siburt and Wray (2002) maintained that a flawed belief among congregants is that the minister does not have any real material needs. Therefore many ministers struggle with resentment toward the church for low pay, but they feel guilty to ask for more. They may feel torn between the perceptions of trusting God to provide while asking the church leaders for a raise.

*Expectations/Time Demands*

Exley, Galli, and Ortberg (1994) juxtaposed the high expectations modern era pastors face with those established by Pope Gregory the Great during the sixth century. Gregory wrote a book entitled, *Regula Pastoralis or Pastoral Care*, in which he outlined the ideal pastoral lifestyle. In it, he challenged a pastor to "devote himself entirely to setting an ideal of living...put aside worldly prosperity; he must fear no adversity... He is not led to covet the goods of others...He is quickly moved by a compassionate heart to forgive,...He does no unlawful act himself...he sympathizes
with the frailties of others...In all that he does, he sets an example so inspiring to all others, that in their regard he has no cause to be ashamed of his past." (pp. 15-16)

A reasonable person might agree that these are an impossible standard. Nonetheless, some pastors strive for this type of perfection. Siburt and Wray (2002) cited McBurney who believed many suffer the crisis of vocational identity - trying to fulfill all the myriad role expectations of ministry. The minister must be always available to serve the congregation’s needs. Some ministers balk at the idea of not always being available because they fear rejection from their people. Siburt and Wray (2002) confirmed that ministers believe they must do all things well. Most ministers put this demand upon themselves due to their own insecurity.

Eaton and Newlon (1990) found in a study of Protestant clergywomen that fifty percent of the pastors reported spending more than fifty-eight hours a week performing their responsibilities. Ninety percent of pastors work more than 46 hours a week (FICG, 1991). In Carroll’s research (2006), the median number of hours spent at work each week for all clergy, regardless of denomination, full-time or part-time was forty-eight. For those who work full-time, the median was fifty-one. Compare this to the national mean of 39.8 hours a week in 2005 provided by white collar workers in private industry, state and local government according to U. S. labor statistics (Jacobs, 2007). London and Wiseman (2003) included a 2001 report from LaRue, Jr. indicating that pastors who work fewer than fifty hours a week are thirty-five percent more likely to be terminated.

Ministers report ambiguous work boundaries and confusion of role identity with self-image (Hart, 1984). For Frame and Shehan (1994), adding to the stress is
the underlying assumption that even though the husband is employed by the institution, both spouses are expected to respond to its formal and informal demands.

Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) conducted a study of five Protestant denominations with a sampling of 240 churches. It was not known how well these findings applied outside the United States or to female ministers or those of other ethnic backgrounds. The sample was predominantly male and only twenty-four women responded. The median age was 47. The findings demonstrated that the more demanding the congregation, the lower the pastor’s well-being and life satisfaction, and the higher his or her burnout, which confirmed their expectations regarding the role of stress in pastoral ministry. Results of the regression analyses indicated this was affected by how a pastor interpreted these demands. Instead of trying to help pastors by merely reducing the occurrence of external stressors, we should pay more attention to the meanings that pastors give to their experiences.

Situational meanings are the most directly related to the findings of Lee and Iverson-Gilbert’s study. Consider the earlier references to triangles at work in a church and the hourglass imagery provided by a CEO in discussing the pressures of the position. For the sake of the minister’s well-being and attitude toward continuing in the ministry, a helpful strategy might be to teach clergy how to anticipate criticism, understand what it means personally and professionally, and respond constructively. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) suggested that successful leaders adjust their styles based on the maturity of the followers. Their situational theory was based on the task and relationship behavior provided by the leader and the readiness or maturity of followers willing to cooperate.
Oswald (1991) conducted fifteen years of workshops with clergy and their spouses. He discovered the most stressful issues were role ambiguity when a pastor has an unclear picture of his or her role so he or she worked harder to cover all the bases. Role conflict is created when pastoral expectations often conflict with personal or family expectations. Role overload is in evidence when the pastor becomes overwhelmed by all the expectations of parishioners. Time demands are also a source of tension since clergy are on call nearly around the clock. Then there are the political and economic uncertainties. By nature, much of a pastor’s political/economic/career future depends on his or her relationships within a particular parish.

Henry et al. (1991) indicated pastors provide moral guidance and are often the first one’s called in a family crisis. This compounds the problem many pastors have coping with the stressfulness of their jobs. Consider the awkwardness of a situation in which a pastor may have a serious conflict with a parishioner and then he or she is called to the hospital or the funeral home to minister comfort to that same individual or family.

This study tested a model of ministerial stress in which the history of the congregation and the interrelatedness of its governing body promoted emotional triangles. "Emotional triangles are recurring patterns of interaction that allow two individuals to cope with tension by involving a third party" (Henry et al., 1991, p. 934). A pastor’s unique role in the parish makes it likely that he or she might bear the stress for relationships within the church. He or she is responsible for keeping the peace. The intensity of a pastor's involvement in emotional triangles in the church could affect the amount of stress-related symptoms. A history of pastor-parish
conflict would predict the intensity of the pastor's involvement in emotional triangles. Friedman (1985) observed that clergy are simultaneously involved in a “triangle of families,” which includes their own family, the congregation itself and family units within the congregation. Though each of these families is distinct, their emotional forces interlock.

Several studies have found the individual's participation in other significant relationships should moderate the correlation between emotional triangles and stress response (Cummins, 1988; Ikun, Sandler & Baumann, 1988; Maton, 1989). The model tested proposed that the density of the parish governing body and the extent to which the parish has a history of conflict with its pastors contribute to certain types of interaction, construed here as emotional triangles. These in turn contribute to physical and emotional distress in the pastor. “It appears that stress related to pastors' roles in the church can be buffered by involvement in their families of origin” (Henry et al., 1991, p. 945). Persons out of contact with family-of-origin members might engage in church life with more intensity, resulting in a closer relationship between emotional triangles and stress. Some pastors who find it difficult to cope with these types of complexities may exit the ministry.

Hatcher and Underwood (1990) did a study of 103 Southern Baptist ministers comprised of ninety-five men and eight women. Data were gathered during regional ministers’ conferences in early 1987. Ministers with lower self-concepts tended to have higher trait anxiety levels. A low self-concept could also be a source of stress itself. This might be seen in persons who constantly had to “prove” their worth. Proving one’s worth often leads to placing unrealistic demands on oneself. It would
certainly be logical for ministers who did not feel they were following God’s will to be dissatisfied and to have high anxiety levels. This could be a problem for ministers who have tendencies toward perfectionism. There may be future concerns as more women consider ministry as a career. There is considerable stress for those women because of their nontraditional ordinations. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution opposing the ordination of women in 1984. Hatcher and Underwood (1990) believed that ministry settings that did not require ordination, such as campus ministry, foreign missions, music ministry, and so forth, women seemed to experience a level of stress similar to that experienced by men.

Crowell (1992) noted a 1984 survey, which indicated that 60 percent of terminated Southern Baptist pastors were unaware that the churches that forced them out did the same to one or more of their predecessors. Crowell’s work was the result of a national survey of 836 randomly selected Protestant pastors of whom 386 responded. He found that more pastors age 35-49 endured forced exits than any other age group, and by a very wide margin. McBurney (1985) reinforced this stressor ministers face as the feeling of powerlessness in church situations especially when resigning a pastorate or allowing one's name to be run as a candidate in another.

Miller (2000) cited statistics revealing nineteen percent of pastors indicated that they had been forced out of ministry at least once during their career. Another six percent said they had been fired from a ministry position.

Ellison and Matilla (1983) found emotional well being seems to be negatively related to unrealistic expectations, time constraints, and lack of time. Lenski (1961) revealed that clergy are obligated to conform to the group’s standards even more
faithfully than rank-and-file members because they are viewed as ultimately responsible for the affairs of the church. Any practicing pastor knows that parishioners take their problems and concerns to the pastor. Carroll (2006) noted the lack of agreement over what the role of a pastor is, personal and/or professional criticism from the congregation, excessive demands from the congregation, and experiencing stress as a result of congregational criticism as factors related to doubting one’s call to the ministry.

While pastors are considered executives, the evidence does not indicate that they are their own boss. Instead, each congregant is free to criticize, make suggestions to, or direct the pastor. Though many churches may have governing boards, the church is a volunteer-intensive organism. As such, the pastor feels pressure to keep individual constituents happy. Chief executive officers in the business world at least have the latitude to hire and fire personnel in hopes of making an organization more effective. As servant-leaders, pastors have felt compelled to rise to the expectations and demands of parishioners and in many cases, it has resulted as an increasing source of stress.

Intrusion of Family Boundaries

When boundaries are experienced as ambiguous by the clergy family system, concerns regarding privacy and triangulation complicate the environment. Eighty percent of pastors believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively and thirty-three percent said that being in the ministry was an outright hazard to their family (FICG, 1991). Few churches give their pastor two full days off, thereby losing
fifty-two days of rest that most people relish. They work on holidays – Christmas Eve, Easter, and Thanksgiving – and never have a three day weekend (Chun, 2006).

According to Morris and Blanton (1994) clergy families are subject to occupationally related stressors that place heavy strains and demands on their resources. For instance, they found that marital satisfaction was adversely affected by intrusiveness and was a salient stressor for both husbands and wives. They cited several studies that contended that the ministerial family operated in a unique “built in community” context, with ambiguous separations between their professional and private lives.

Clergy families, like other professional family types are subject to occupationally related stressors that place heavy strains and demands on their resources, which can inhibit the growth of members and satisfaction with intra-family relationships (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Presnell (1977), Hulme (1985), and Lee and Balswick (1989) contended that the ministerial family functioned in an ambiguous context, blurring the lines between professional and private lives. Deluca (1980) labeled the clergy profession a “holy crossfire,” as the clergy person and his/her family attempt to juggle the expectations of self, family, congregation, denomination, and God. McMinn, et al. (2005) believes the parsonage is symbolic of boundary confusion – it is on the church property, it is owned by the church, and at times is even utilized for church functions. McMinn and colleagues drew upon the work of Morris and Blanton (1994) that these boundary intrusions are themselves a predictor of reduced marital satisfaction, parental satisfaction, and life satisfaction in general.
Oswald (1991) believed over-functioning in the parish and under-functioning in the home or marriage could lead to collision points. Ostrander and Henry (1990) reported a lack of time with family and a lack of privacy as stressors. They based a study upon the Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) of family stress. This same model was used by Frame and Sheehan (1994) to measure the relocation effects on a pastor’s family. Families differ from one another in terms of the intensity and kind of stressors or trigger event (the A-factor) and the level of practical and emotional resources (the B-factor) at their disposal to meet demands. Families differ in terms of their perceptions (the C-factor) of both stressors and resources which jointly determine adaptation (the X-factor). Ostrander and Henry (1990) found particular ministers’ families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources, and the definition; the pileup of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation; and coping skills.

Jud, Mills, and Burch (1970) indicated that one-third of those clergy leaving the ministry reported some form of family problem. Carroll (2006) revealed that the ministry having a negative effect on the family was a related factor for doubting a ministerial call. McMinn et al. (2005) discovered that clergy with healthy marriages tend to handle the pressure of time and implement effective boundaries, prioritize time with their families, not move frequently, have spouses who are also employed, avoid the “fishbowl” experience by refusing to accept expectations of a perfect family, manage stress well, and have a strong social support network (Hall, 1997).
Adding to these difficulties, Friedman (1985) reported that many congregations maintain higher standards for their pastor’s family than their own. Parishioners expect the pastor, spouse and children to model exemplary behavior. The parsonage marriage is to be without blemish and a picture of perfect harmony. Any public missteps can be cause for questioning a pastor’s leadership ability. It may not be surprising then that in the Klaas and Klaas (1999) study, many of the most negative criticisms of ministry came in interviews with spouses and children of current and former pastors. Wood (2001) revealed startling statistics including sixty-seven percent of pastors’ wives are dissatisfied with their marriage, seventy-five percent of pastors spend less than one evening per week with spouse or friends, and clergy divorce has risen sixty-five percent in the last twenty years.

The ripple effect from such intrusions as these may result in family turbulence complicated by a rebellious child. Oden (1988) wrote, “Knowing that the dynamics within the parsonage family can spill over into the church, creates pressure – and can foster a sense of guilt – when such spillover takes place” (pp. 3-4). In turn, that may hurt a minister’s chances for career advancement due to a lack of harmony in his or her own home.

**Social Support**

As the leader of a congregation, pastors may often be considered in the context of a celebrity which complicates the formation of intimate relationships. Congregants may develop jealousies if a pastor forms close relationships with only a select few of the members in the church.
Ostrander and Henry (1990) reported that pastors have a lack of personal friends, feelings of loneliness and isolation. Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) revealed that income is a significant predictor of the pastor’s overall well-being, but less so than his or her satisfaction with the support received from family, friends, and congregation. The greater the number of supportive relationships in the congregation and the more satisfied the pastor is with these relationships, the more positive is his or her attitude. This is consistent with the situational leadership model of Hersey and Blanchard (1982). Leaders must understand that they have to behave differently one-on-one with members of their group from the way they do with the group as a whole. A leader or pastor lacking an inner circle of support is most likely destined for a turbulent and, perhaps, abbreviated tenure.

Siburt and Wray (2002) noted another challenge identified by McBurney was that of loneliness and isolation from being put on a pedestal. Some might consider this a walk-on-water mentality. The minister contributes to this problem because he feels that any admission of vulnerability will threaten his control. Many congregations also assume that their leader has no emotional needs. This is due in part to the minister’s fear of admitting his own vulnerability. It may also be due to the congregation’s focus on its own needs rather than the needs of its minister.

Eaton and Newlon (1990) in a study of Protestant clergywomen found that fifty-four percent indicated that loneliness was a problem for them. Only forty-four percent felt satisfied with their social life. Carroll (2006) revealed that feeling lonely and isolated had an effect on pastors doubting their call to ministry.
The lack of support may also be a result of a pastor not wishing to call upon others for help. London and Wiseman (2003) found one study indicating seventy percent of pastors revealed that they do not have someone they consider a close friend. Oswald (1991) believed there was a lack of pastoral care because most clergy do not have a good mentor or solid spiritual advisers, counselors, or friends. He believed there was a lack of opportunities for extra-dependence which meant clergy needed opportunities to de-role and be taken care of. Among his findings while conducting fifteen years of workshops with clergy and their spouses was the fact that just being involved in a helping profession was stressful unto itself. Those in the helping professions burn out more often than other professionals. Pastors suffer loneliness. Beyond fellow clergy, very few persons understand the role of parish pastor or the demands of pastoral work resulting in loneliness and isolation. Oswald (1991) firmly believes that to have a vibrant parish ministry, “we need the strong base provided by good primary relationships, spiritual nurture, and adequate rest” (p. 94). He does not exclude single clergy from this need for social support. They may not experience as many demands from significant people in their lives, but they are just as vulnerable to the consuming nature of parish ministry. In reality, many clergy feel guilty for taking time for their own personal spiritual feeding. Henry, et al. (1991) revealed that pastors need friends and a support group when dealing with emotional triangles in a church.

Reed (1991) found pastors along with others in the helping professions are often called to work with individuals in stressful crisis situations. Helpers in rural areas are faced with the added problem of isolation from support networks and peers.
that are available to urban helpers. The added condition of isolation from help and support of peers contributes to rural helper’s burnout and symptoms of excessive stress. This study was part of a program to help community agencies assist in managing stress among those in the helping professions. The advantage of support groups is evident in this because participants changed eating habits, began regular exercise, and developed a support network. Even though they still experience stress they feel better about it because of these strategies. Manifestations of these tools have been more satisfaction in their work and they are still on the job.

The clergy in New Orleans also have dealt with this issue in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina’s effects. McConnaughey (2007) reported that clergymen struggling to comfort the afflicted in New Orleans are finding they, too, need someone to listen to their troubles. The sight of misery all around them – and the combined burden of helping others put their lives back together while repairing their own homes and places of worship – are taking a spiritual and psychological toll on the city’s ministers, priests and rabbis, many of whom are in counseling two years after Hurricane Katrina. Clergy some times have to “hold it together and put up a great front to give people permission to fall apart, so they can be the great rock that their congregation can depend upon,” (p. A4) said Barney Self who operates a counseling hotline for Southern Baptist ministers. “Roman Catholic priests have not reported any unusual counseling needs,” (p. A4) said the Rev. William Maestri, spokesman for the Archdiocese of New Orleans. He said one possible reason is that priests do not have wives or children to support and protect.
According to a quantitative and qualitative study conducted by Rayburn et al. (1986) of 250 priests, ministers, seminarians, nuns, and brothers, religious leaders experienced lower overall occupational stress and personal strain and evidenced more personal resources than did the normative population. As earlier studies in this review have shown, the fact that priests, seminarians, nuns and brothers were included may skew the results because of a lack of marriage and family issues. Other articles have indicated that Catholic clergy may not have the same issues for family and marital stress as married Protestant clergy experience. In fact, Rayburn et al. (1986) indicated that ministers (50 or 20% of the sample) were shown to have the highest overall occupational environment stress and vocational strain and next to the lowest scores in overall personal resources of the five groups of religious professionals. This study was slanted more toward giving women clergy a voice in the profession, particularly seminarians. The fact that the majority of the sample was single clerics and seminarians skewed this study in regards to role ambiguity, role boundary, responsibility, physical environment, and role overload. For example, ministers, especially those who were sole pastors at their churches, reported that they often felt isolated and had few people to turn to for direction. Priests and seminarians, though, enjoyed a supportive community of those like-minded, as did brothers and nuns.

As far as personal strain, religious leaders may be set up by laity as “the holy ones” and “set apart” from the congregation and certainly from the population in general. They often may be presented with a lonely existence and sense a need to be guarded lest they be perceived as weak and vulnerable enough to slip off their pedestals. They feel a pressure to be super-sacred, a non-secular persona with no
frailties of the species. Researchers found ministers and seminarians to have the most stress within the population of religious leaders than priests, brothers, and nuns (Rayburn et al., 1986).

McMinn et al. (2005) noted the fine points of stressors for those in the called profession. For example, if a clergyperson is attracted to a parishioner, who can be consulted? If the pastor goes to an accountability partner or friend in the church, will it ultimately undermine the pastor’s leadership? The pastor is equally unlikely to confide in another pastor because there is often subtle competition between nearby Protestant churches. This leaves the pastor quite isolated in coping with troubling feelings and thoughts.

Krause et al. (1998) conducted a study that examined the implications of church-based emotional support and negative interaction for psychological well-being among clergy, lay elites (elders), and rank-and-file members affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). The researchers argued a person’s role in the church exerts two potentially important influences on their relationships with coreligionists. They proposed that an individual’s position in the formal hierarchy of the church influences the amount of social support and negative interaction he or she may encounter. They also maintained that the impact or effect of social support and negative interaction on psychological well-being would also vary according to the role people occupy in the church. PCUSA clergy report more negative interaction within the church than other persons, and the pernicious effects of these negative encounters on positive and negative affect were also greater for clergy than for others in the sample. In spite of the hazards of the profession, Miller (2000) found eighty-six
percent of pastors said they would choose ministry as their career if they had to do it over again.

Coping Measures

Although clergy stress may be well-documented, the research on coping mechanisms utilized by those in the ministry is not as abundant. Quantitative studies (Gross, 1989; Rayburn, 1991) identified the need for coping devices. Gross (1989) distinguished between “burnout (disengagement)” and the “stress dimension (over-engagement)” in research with twenty-four Lutheran ministers (p. 29). One conclusion was that there was a “relationship between the ability to cope with bottled-up feelings and the burnout dimension” (p. 30). In a quantitative study of women religious leaders, Rayburn (1991) found that female rabbis experienced the most stress and the least number of coping devices. By contrast, nuns had the least amount of stress in relation to a greater number of coping mechanisms. The study, however, did not provide detail about specific coping measures.

A further review of the literature revealed a variety of specific coping strategies. Hulme (1985) recommended running, swimming, biking, and even brisk walking as aids to ameliorate stress. Karr (1992) echoed that sentiment iterating that “studies confirm that persons who engage in moderate exercise for thirty minutes daily, whether it be walking or gardening, receive most of the health benefits of those who engage in more rigorous pursuits” (p. 23).

Greenfield (2005) advised ministers, particularly those that had been wounded in professional practice, to “seek competent and spiritually sensitive professional counseling” (p. 82). Whitlock (1968) believed counseling or “psychotherapy may be
helpful to the individual in understanding himself in relation to whatever ministry he has to fulfill” (p. 108).

Relationships both inside and outside the church were underscored (Miller, 1988; Mickey & Ashmore, 1991). Hulme (1985) posited the importance of discourse because “the more a stressful event is shared, the less each person appears to be stressed” (p. 52). Greenfield (2005) recommended that, “no pastor should be without a peer support group” (p. 184).

Spouse and family were considered “leading encouragers” in one survey (Miller, 1988, p. 118). When pastors experience conflict in the parish, Mickey and Ashmore (1991) feel it is imperative that pastors be “open to nurture” from family members when he or she has been involved in some sort of dispute (p. 106).

Prayer and meditation were listed not just as spiritual disciplines but as means to survival. Miller’s (1988) survey of 500 pastors from a professional periodical subscription list indicated the necessity of prayer, journaling, or praying with someone. In their nationwide survey of more than 700 pastors from eleven Protestant denominations, Mickey and Ashmore (1991) concluded, “An erosion of spiritual vitality sets in when the spiritual leader does not take care of her/his own relationship with God” (p. 115). Hulme (1985) wrote, “To get our breath we need to hope, and prayer helps us envision that hope” (p. 59).

Vacation was cited as an important component of stress reduction (Miller, 1988). Sixty-two percent of Protestant pastors admitted they set aside at least three weeks for vacation (Miller & Ashmore, 1991). “Routine time off is essential for inner healing and itself is a form of spiritual retreat” (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991, p. 115).
Hansel (1979) recommended “one Sabbath day per week” (p. 123) and a sabbatical “break from ministry that’s longer than the standard vacation” (p. 125).

To be sure, social scientists, counselors, and experienced pastors have contributed to the body of knowledge about preachers and their stressors. However, much is yet to be gleaned from the critical reflections of pastors especially in relation to specific coping measures useful for self-sustaining in the ministry. This project seeks to understand clergy stress and the effectiveness of individual coping mechanisms to ameliorate stress.

Summary

Stress is part of every day work life and the review of the literature revealed that American clergy are no exception to the phenomenon. While the literature did not make a case for pastors to be excused from stressors, it did reveal that there are many they have in common with other professions, but the pressures are exacerbated because of their roles in the community and the church.

Whereas all professionals may face the prospect of having to relocate on a regular basis for career advancement or due to a company caveat, many may have benefits that may aid in a transition that are not ready options for ministers. For example, a company may pay for a professional service to pack and move an executive’s belongings to a new home. Since the vast majority of churches in America average less than one hundred in worship attendance, the financial resources are not substantial enough to warrant this type of service, particularly if a church has a revolving door attached to the pulpit. The result is one less coping measure for the
vast majority of clergy. In addition, an executive usually has the accumulated wealth to purchase a home of his or her choosing in the new location. As mentioned in the literature review, many pastors live in church-provided housing with no choice of neighborhood, schools, or condition of the property. Similar to the plight of other mobile professionals, if a minister has children or teenagers they may be negatively affected by the move. The research indicated that seeking professional counseling for their own problems was not a typical coping response for clergy and their relocating families.

One factor contributing to clergy stress that was not included in the discussion for other professions was that of income constraints. The research indicated that this was a considerable source of consternation for those in the ministry. Although clergy rank in the 90th percentile of the U. S. population in terms of education, they rank in the 25th percentile of occupations in terms of salary. Add to this the subtle pressure for spouses to serve as unpaid assistant pastors and it can lead to marital strain. If the salary provided by the church is not adequate or a spouse simply chooses to pursue a career, the result may be a spouse with three full-time occupations: family, church and career, but remunerated for only one. The research noted that low clergy salaries make it difficult for pastors to be true to their call and may even be a source of disillusionment about one’s call. As a result, some may enter other professions due to the growing burden of debt incurred from a seminary education. Others may opt to enter other professions or other forms of ministry such as the military chaplaincy, theological education, or the parachurch ministry because of a lack of financial stability.
In many cases, clergy have varied role expectations and excessive time demands just as their secular counterparts. Just as one executive described the pressures as similar to being in the middle of an hourglass, other researchers in relation to ecclesiastics discussed the triangles at work in church work. It is the situation and context that makes the expectations upon pastors so difficult. For example, the military has a clear chain of command and businesses are often driven by flow charts. Pastors occupy a unique position in the church because they act as intermediaries between church factions which are often established families, are amenable to a church leadership board and all the while are attempting to attract and assimilate new families. This unique role of ministers has a downside because it may increase their exposure to negative interaction with little if any clear lines of communication for recourse or resolution.

Little attention has also been paid to the role and social context of pastoral ministry. For example, in one church I had considerable conflict with a man that had been a long-time gatekeeper. In his self-appointed role, we were continually at odds about the direction, decisions, and future of the church. There was palpable tension between us, but he had a long history in the church and was not about to leave for another congregation. I was fresh-faced and eager to succeed in my new charge and the option to prematurely exit was not favorable. Pastors come and go and apparently he thought I would leave soon enough. That was not the scenario in this case. Sadly, he was in a fatal accident and I was asked by his family to conduct his funeral which I did. These are the sort of complexities pastors experience with regularity.
Pastors may become disillusioned with the people of God and how Christians can treat one another. Juxtapose this against the enmity a congregant may have for his or her pastor despite the fact that a minister may have provided counsel in a marriage, dedicated or baptized their child, kept a vigil at the bedside of a sick loved one, or attended countless graduation and birthday parties. The literature indicated that nearly twenty percent had been forced out at least once during their ministry. One study found that pastors in the age range of 35 to 49 endured forced exits more than any other age group by a wide margin. Considering that this age group is susceptible to a midlife crisis only magnifies the problem. One study revealed that excessive criticism was shown to be a cause to doubt one’s call and may lead to leaving the ministry.

A CEO does not have to contend with the ambiguity between his or her professional and private lives. While a CEO may have multiple marriages or a rebellious child, a minister is not afforded that type of fallibility. Mickey & Ashmore (1991) noted a pastor is expected to be “an exemplar of ministry” (p. 91) One study concluded that one-third of those clergy leaving the ministry reported some type of family problem. The literature indicated that if a pastor is not able to take corrective action in his or her own family situations, it can lead to termination of not only a job, but a career. In addition, studies revealed pastoral families differ from one another in terms of the intensity and kind of stressful trigger event, the level of practical and emotional coping resources at their disposal, the difference in perceptions of both stressors and coping resources which jointly determined adaptation.

Beyond fellow clergy, very few persons understand the role of a pastor. That may explain why they have such a paucity of social support. A lack of transparency is
one of the primary culprits. Many congregations assume their leader has no emotional needs, due in part to the minister’s fear of admitting his or her own vulnerability. Seventy percent of pastors revealed they do not have someone they consider a close friend. With no close friends and a lack of a social support network to aid in coping, it is no wonder that so many pastors have difficulty managing stress.

The literature demonstrated that clergy suffer significant stressors. Noticeably missing from the literature was the perspective of clergy and how they cope with these various adversities. One group of researchers observed that “clergy health and coping responses have rarely been the focus of psychological research” (Meek, McMinn, Brower, Burnett, McRay, Ramey, Swanson, Villa, 2003, p. 339).

Perhaps this is due to the expectation that ministers feel compelled to maintain a problem-free life. Pastors are expected to rely upon God, never show weakness, demonstrate faith and exhibit strength. Clergy are supposed to find solace in spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation on the Scriptures.

Yet, what recourse is there for a pastor if his or her marital relationship has deteriorated? How does a preacher cope publicly with a rebellious child? To whom does a minister turn when a congregant or faction is determined to end his or her term in a church? What type of safety net do clergy rely upon if a serious illness or financial disaster cripples the household finances?

From personal experience and the literature review, it is apparent that these events have a significant impact upon individual pastors that is worth further investigation. For some ministers, despite the difficulties inherent with the profession, they seem to endure, overcome and minister from their own wounds. By contrast,
other clergy may encounter a series of setbacks, but his or her coping skills and resources are inadequate or nonexistent. Nouwen (1972) encouraged ministers to reach beyond their respective roles as professionals and heal others from their own wounds. Perhaps this study will add to the body of knowledge by revealing effective coping measures pastors may adapt and improve not only their practice, but their quality of life as well.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Ministers, like anyone else, may be judged by achievements, financial prowess, family status, and station in life. What takes place though when that sojourn to anticipated personal and professional fulfillment is unexpectedly interrupted due to events prompted by vocational turmoil? The behavior of pastors may be affected by the traumatic events they encounter as leaders and as human beings. The literature review established that preachers often experience greater occupation-related stress than the general population (Warner and Carter, 1984; Chun, 2006). These stressors could include mobility, financial compensation, expectations/time demands, intrusion of family boundaries, lack of pastoral care, and loneliness (Oswald, 1991; Morris and Blanton, 1994; Lee and Iverson-Gilbert, 2003). The navigation of these circumstances may be determined by their motivation to change and the strategies they implement based on their new perspectives. This study sought to understand how clergy cope with significant stress in both their personal and professional lives.

Description of the Methodology

The research for this project was an interview-based qualitative study with a descriptive approach. Qualitative research includes a variety of research methods. These include such practices as case studies, descriptive, observation, phenomenology, grounded theory, biographical methodology, and action research. Data collection may be interactive or noninteractive (Schwandt, 2001). Data may be
collected via observation, survey, interview, review of related documents and taking oral histories.

For this particular study, I used the descriptive method with an interpretive approach. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), interpretive research studies are “framed by descriptions of, explanations for, or meanings given to phenomena by both the researcher and the study participants rather than by the definitions and interpretations of the researcher alone” (pp. 31-32). Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) described interpretive research as a “basic form of qualitative research that provides detailed accounts targeted to understanding a process, a phenomenon, or a particular point of view” (p. 634). The objective was to understand the meaning people make of their experiences.

“Descriptive studies describe a given state of affairs as fully and carefully as possible” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 14). Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) note that descriptive research involves answering questions about the current status of the subject of study “assessing the preferences, attitudes, practices, concerns, or interests of some group of people” (p. 11). It is research that “asks questions about the nature, incidence, or distribution of variables; it involves describing but not manipulating variables” (Ary et al., 2006, p. 632). Schwandt (2001) considers it an “account of that which we perceive” (p. 54).

While descriptive research may be implemented for both qualitative and quantitative research, the qualitative approach was selected for this study. Quantitative research emphasizes the view of the researcher. In the case of this study, the goal was to emphasize the view of the participants since descriptive research is
also known as survey research. Survey research uses instruments such as questionnaires and interviews to gather information from groups of subjects. Conducting an interview is an example of an interactive data collection technique. The art of descriptive research includes the crafting of questions that have not been asked previously. Constructing the questions is critical to produce clarity, consistency, and tact. Through the use of a personal interview, the researcher meets the participant in a face-to-face setting and records the answers. The interviewer has the opportunity to observe the subject and the total situation in which he or she is responding. “The advantages of an interview are that open-ended questions can be used with greater confidence, particular questions of special interest or value can be pursued in depth, follow-up questions can be asked, and items that are unclear can be explained” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 12).

According to Gay et al. (2006), when qualitative researchers “interview and observe research participants, they do so primarily to identify what participants believe are the important issues to study” (p. 159). Wiersma and Jurs (2005) emphasize that the researcher operates in a natural setting because of the concern for context and should “maintain an openness” about what will be observed and collected (p. 201). In their view, meaning is perceived by those studied and not imposed by the researcher.
Design of the Study

This was a self-report descriptive research design using semi-structured interviews so that participants could identify the important issues. For this study, I analyzed the effects of stress on clergy.

The purpose of the interviews was to accumulate data that would answer the following research questions:

1. What significant stressors do clergy face?

2. What coping mechanisms do they use to moderate that stress?

Participants were identified with the use of a screening survey instrument asking for demographic information and then a series of check boxes listed 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?” Participants were also identified through convenience sampling and the snowball effect. Colleagues were asked if they knew of an ordained minister fitting the demographic criteria. I then contacted those clergy by telephone, email, or in person and asked them if they would be willing to participate in the study. Once the interview was completed, I asked the participants if he or she knew another minister in the population and geographic ranges that may be experiencing very stressful situations in the profession and might participate in the study.

There was a primary interview with each participant, given the preliminary screening process. The shortest interview lasted sixty minutes while the longest was
nearly ninety. Prior to the start of the interview, a letter of consent was presented to the participant fully explaining the procedure, protections, and the opportunity to decline the interview if he or she chose to do so.

Each subject was interviewed individually in a mutually agreed upon location conducive for the purpose. Six of the interviews took place in the pastor’s church office or church classroom. One occurred in a library and another in a meeting room at an educational facility. The interviews were semi-structured following a written protocol with a series of questions used as prompts to allow the participant to express his or her feelings and views about stressors experienced in the profession. In the first fifteen to thirty minutes, demographic information was reviewed to build rapport. The rest of the session was used to hear the individual stories. At times, participants veered into various subjects tangential to the topic. A second optional interview was pursued with each participant either by email or phone to allow participants to expand their answers. Seven of the eight responded. Only one provided any additional significant information for the study, the rest declined to add anything substantial, but appreciated the opportunity to provide additional insights.

Following are the interview questions used for the primary session:

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been married?
3. How many children do you have?
4. What was your educational preparation?
5. How many years have you served in the ministry?
6. How many churches have you served?

7. How long have you served your current parish?

8. Tell me about stressors in your life.

9. Tell me about your life changing event.

10. How did you cope with the demands of this event?

I used a tape recorder to record each session and augmented the recordings with handwritten descriptive and analytic field notes. Descriptive field notes describe the situation and events as they occur (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). They serve as a record of when, where, and under what conditions the observation and interview took place. Analytic field notes include inferences and interpretations about what was observed (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). These could include accompanying physical or emotional reactions to questions.

Each interview session was then transcribed. All participant names were coded with pseudonyms and their responses were kept confidential. If a participant felt uncomfortable discussing any question(s), then the participant was relieved of any obligation to answer. If the participant at any time felt uneasy with the study, he or she was able to excuse him or herself without harm or penalty from the project. There was no compensation for participation in this investigation or any financial obligations for participants. The IRB protocol including the list of questions used for the interview, recruitment scripts, and informed consent are included in the Appendix.
Sample and Population

Eight clergy participated in the project. The goal was to interview a diverse group of participants in the Midwestern United States. Two of the eight were females. All of the respondents were Caucasian with the exception of one African-American male. Minimum income or educational requirements were not applied. Participants were selected as clergy, past and present, who have undergone a significant stress-related experience that forced them to cope.

The participants in this study were married since a review of the literature revealed that the ministry was a source of stress on pastoral marriages. None of those in the study were divorced. All participants had at least two children, but no more than three. The ages varied from very young to grown children.

This study was limited to Protestant pastors. Even though the literature indicated ecclesiastics from different faiths experience stress, for consistency I felt it best to restrict the inquiry to those of similar church governance. The participants either were or were in the process of being ordained ministers of congregations with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 125 to 1000 attendees. Ministers with churches within this range are generally considered full-time. According to the literature, salary was thought to be a contributing stressor to those in smaller parishes. Once churches reach an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 200 or more, they may have more than one paid staff member. Therefore, the oversight of colleagues may further contribute to stress. The dynamic of churches within this population range and the pastors that lead them are considerable compared to the smaller church. This investigation was limited to those that were ordained pastors in
the Midwestern United States. Chaplains, theological educators, lay ministers, and denominational officers were excluded.

The age range for clergy in this study was forty-two to fifty-nine years of age. A review of the literature indicated the median age of a Protestant pastor is fifty-one (Carroll, 2006). Therefore, this sought to give those presumed to have several years of ministry experience a form of expression. It is also assumed they would have a wide range of life experience at this stage involving marriage or divorce, children, death of a loved one, illness or other events that may have produced stress. Since retirement age is generally accepted as sixty-five years, this study excluded those that were retired from the ministry. It is understood that clergy of all faiths experience some degree of stress. This study was limited to Protestant ministers, but the results may have implications for other faiths.

Data Collection Strategies

A pilot study was conducted in the spring of 2008 to pretest the questions, procedures, and planned analysis. This data was not included in the final study. Two pastors were asked to participate in the study to uncover deficiencies or identify areas for improvement. The pretest group was encouraged to ask questions and make suggestions about the process.

Once the pilot study was completed and revisions made to the proposal, the research commenced in May, 2008. Clergy from fourteen different denominations were solicited as well as those from non-denominational or community churches. These included American Baptist, Christian Reformed, Foursquare, Friends,
Missionary Baptist, Wesleyan, United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical, Reformed, and Protestant Reformed.

A total of forty individuals were contacted either by telephone or email asking them if they would be willing to participate in the study. Potential contacts by gender included twenty-four men and sixteen women. Two participants were identified by both convenience sampling and the snowball effect from the pilot study. Potential participants were suggested by colleagues when asked if they knew of an ordained minister fitting the demographic criteria. As a result, three were selected by convenience sample during the study, one of which was an acquaintance of mine. No participants emerged as a result of the snowball effect.

Three subjects, two of whom were in neighboring states, were identified through church websites as a result of internet searches. I phoned or emailed them to see if they had any interest in participating and if they qualified.

Two potential subject pools were identified by participants during the early interviews. These included the Pastor’s Retreat Network and a pastoral counseling center. Neither of these sources yielded candidates. In addition, the selection survey with my contact information was posted at a denominational convention, but this also did not produce any participants.

Of the forty contacts, eleven did not qualify, eighteen did not respond, and eleven met the selection criteria. Of the three that met the selection criteria, but did not participate, one later did not respond to a follow-up request for an interview and another later declined. The third potential candidate was from a neighboring state, but
responded after I had already made arrangements with another participant in that region for a one day trip.

Once the data collection commenced, it did not take long for patterns to emerge from the interviews. Even though I waited until after the eighth interview to begin data analysis, it was apparent that there was a possible relationship between the number of coping measures and the length of tenure in a parish for pastors. Since the target number of participants was seven to twelve, eight interviews seemed to be sufficient for the purposes of this study.

The data analysis and writing were completed in September, 2008. The defense was scheduled for January, 2009.

Data Analysis Procedures

An overview of each narrative is provided. Data analysis was conducted by systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials accumulated to reach conclusions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Analysis occurred as each succeeding interview was transcribed. I looked for key issues or activities that may become categories of focus to discover any social processes and relationships. I compared responses from the previous interview(s) to note any commonalities and patterns that emerged and dominant themes were coded.

Coding the data is a necessary task which breaks down the data into manageable segments (Schwandt, 2001). It is used to categorize “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). It is subjective as the codes emerge from the data. Major codes,
subcodes, and supplemental codes may be used. Subcodes are more detailed than major codes while supplemental codes are somewhat peripheral to the phenomena being studied (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). I used coding categories based on recommendations by Bogdan & Biklen (2007). These include “Definition of the Situation Codes,” “Perspectives Held by Subjects,” “Subjects’ Ways of Thinking about People and Objects,” “Process Codes,” “Activity Codes,” “Event Codes,” “Strategy Codes,” “Relationship and Social Structure Codes,” “Narrative Codes,” and “Methods Codes” (pp. 174-180). By and large, I allowed the data to dictate the major codes instead of trying to force the categories.

As I moved through the data, I wrote short memos. These memos included field notes, observer’s comments, and coding notes relating text, codes and the literature. Data interpretation occurred as ideas developed about the findings relating them to broader concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The criterion of consistency should be met by comparison of the data to the literature review.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers speak of trustworthiness rather than reliability. To accomplish trustworthiness means the methods are reproducible and consistent, the approach and procedures were appropriate for the context and can be documented and external evidence can be used to test conclusions. This should contribute additional data to the existing body of research and reveal the unique contribution this study has made to the field. It should also provide a context or sense of meaning for fellow
adult education researchers, pastors, theological educators, denominational leaders and continuing professional educators.

Once the themes from the interviews were identified, they were compared to the findings in the literature review. This utilized that which Ary et al. (2006) described as “cross-case comparisons” for the purpose of transferability (p. 507). This is accurate, detailed, and complete descriptions of the context and participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered it “fittingness” or the “degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts” (p. 124). Transferability of a set of findings depends on the similarity between the context of the study and other studies. The qualitative researcher aims to arrive at a rich narrative of the people, objects, events, places, and conversations which results in “descriptive adequacy” (Ary et al., 2006, p. 507).

My personal experiences as a pastor and a human being contributed to my empathy for the lived experiences of the participants. With twenty years in the ministry, my lived experience was a lens through which to view and analyze the data. At the same time, as a social scientist I understood the importance of maintaining a professional distance so as not to influence interview responses or inject premature conclusions. My training enabled me to conduct effective data collection, analysis, and interpretation so as to contribute to the body of research on clergy stress.

Summary

This chapter provided information on the research design. An interview-based qualitative study with a descriptive methodology was implemented. Data collection
strategies as well as data analysis procedures were presented. The premium placed on trustworthiness was emphasized. Descriptions of the criteria and participants are left to the reader to determine the applicability of the findings.

The next chapter offers details of the actual research findings. Every effort was made to fulfill the obligation to provide rich and informative descriptions.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will report how participants were recruited for the study and the demographics of the sample. An overview of the significant stressful event(s) will be presented along with the stories of the participants. A discussion of the major stressors, coping strategies, and meaning making as a result of the interviews will conclude the chapter.

The Initial Contact with Prospective Participants

I began making contacts with a list developed from the pilot study. The survey instrument was distributed by email or explained over the phone to each of the clergy. Participants indicated if they met the criteria and if they had an interest in participating or if their schedule would permit. If the participant met the criteria, I then asked if he or she would be willing to be interviewed for the study. If he or she consented, a time was set to meet at the participant’s office or a mutually agreed upon site.

Demographics of the Sample

The eight respondents in the sample included two white women, one African-American man, and five white men. The youngest participant was forty-two years of age and the oldest were fifty-nine (see Table 4.1). The average age was 51.5 years.
All subjects had been married at least seventeen years with the longest tenured marriage being thirty-seven years. All participants had at least two children and no more than three. All interviewees held a bachelor’s degree although only two majored in religion. Seven of the respondents had at least some graduate education. Of those, four earned the Masters of Divinity and another held a Masters in Health Sciences (see Table 4.2). The least experienced candidate had been in pastoral ministry for nine years. The most seasoned candidate had been in pastoral ministry for forty years. The participants had a cumulative 193 years in pastoral ministry. The average years served was twenty-four. Seven different denominations were represented in the study: Foursquare, Missionary Baptist, Wesleyan (2), United Methodist, Christian Reformed, Lutheran, and Southern Baptist Convention. The participant with the smallest church averaged 130 in Sunday morning attendance. The participant with the largest church averaged 500 in Sunday morning attendance. The average Sunday morning worship attendance was 275 (see Table 4.2). All were Protestant pastors that were serving or had served in the Midwest (see Table 4.2). The participants served in a variety of settings. One served in a suburb, three pastored in urban areas, and four ministered in relatively rural parishes.

All of the participants were ordained with the exception of one individual who had completed the ordination requirements. He was ordained shortly after the interview. All of the participants were serving or had served as a senior pastor. At the time of the interviews, two were not pastoring and one was serving as an associate. Each received a call into the ministry at various stages of life (see Table 4.3). Abe was the youngest when called at the age of twelve. Gwen was called in junior high,
Ben while in high school. Chet, Evan and Frank received calls while in college or as a young adult. Donna was the oldest that responded to a call at thirty-six years of age. She was also married and had two children. Even though Hank sensed a call on his life as a young person, he did not fully respond to it until he sold his insurance business.

TABLE 4.1
Professional Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Pastoral Ministry</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Business/Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34 years</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>34 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26 years</td>
<td>Business/Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY:

“Pastoral Ministry” = Total years as part-time, full-time staff or pastoral role.

“Undergraduate” = Degree or major in college
TABLE 4.2
Congregational Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Sunday AM Att.</th>
<th>Church Setting</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>DNF</td>
<td>Four Square</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>IA/IN*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M. Div.</td>
<td>Missionary Baptist</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>IN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wesleyan</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>MI/IN**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>United Methodist</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>IN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>M. Div.</td>
<td>Christian Reformed</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>MI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M. Div.</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>M. Div.</td>
<td>Wesleyan</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>IN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>DNF</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>IN</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY:

“DNF” – Did not finish graduate school.

“M. Div.” – Masters of Divinity

“Sunday AM Att.” – Sunday morning worship attendance of the largest congregation pastored or current congregation.

* Abe was co-pastor of his largest church in Iowa. His last charge in Indiana was closed by district leadership.

** Chet was senior pastor of a church in Michigan at the time of the accident. He was a staff pastor in Indiana at the time of the interview.
### TABLE 4.3

Distinctive Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Called</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Major Event(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>Age 12</td>
<td>Ordained/Not pastoring</td>
<td>Church was closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Ordained/Senior pastor</td>
<td>Female stalker/Attempted ouster/Building project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>Licensed/Associate*</td>
<td>Accident involving death/injury of staff member’s family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Age 36</td>
<td>Ordained/Senior pastor</td>
<td>Building project/adversarial influential member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Ordained/Senior pastor</td>
<td>Compassion fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Ordained/Senior pastor</td>
<td>Church destroyed by arsonist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>Ordained/Not pastoring</td>
<td>Discrimination/dissonance/staff conflict/disruption of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>Age 18</td>
<td>Ordained/Senior pastor</td>
<td>Contemplated suicide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KEY:**

“Current Status” – The credential held at the time of data collection. Ordained clergy fulfill educational and years of service requirements established by each denomination. Ordination is the terminal credential for trained clergy and establishes eligibility to serve not only in the local church, but hold denominational office as well. A licensed minister is often engaged in meeting the requirements for ordination, but is still qualified to administer the sacraments and serve in a local church.

* Chet completed the ordination requirements prior to data collection and was ordained two months after the interview.

The **Interviews**

The respondents determined the time and location of each interview. After greetings, I provided an Introductory Script/Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) which each subject read and signed. The format was explained to each participant. All interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were taken at all interviews.
Participant Stories

This research seeks to understand how stressful events in the personal and professional lives of pastors can impact their quality of life as they are forced to cope. Each of the participants in the study had significant upheaval occur that caused self-reflection in his or her role as a minister and as a person. Table 4.3 indicates the major event or events that transpired in the life of each participant. Each of the stories is told in the following section.

Abe’s Story

Abe was unaware of the church splits that had occurred prior to his arrival. “When we moved here I felt like I stepped into a hornet’s nest in that church.” He learned that “they had been fighting for many, many years.” By his estimate, three or four pastors had already been forced to leave. As the church began to grow, the “older group just kind of put the skids on” and resisted assimilating new people. Abe admitted “the church just began to split and I could actually see it happening.” Eventually, “about thirty-five people left, …but they were the ones with all the money.” Those that exited had done it before to get their way. Abe stated, “They knew how to work the system.”

Abe invested twenty-four years in the ministry when his church was closed by the district leadership. This happened after he had been promised by the district superintendent that he would be involved in the decision “and then ‘boom’ he just did it without me.” It was an emotional experience for Abe and his wife, “We kind of felt he just kind of came in and took our kids…that was like our baby.” The district
closed the church because “they just got tired of messing with this group of people.” Abe thought an alternative would be to close the church temporarily and pay the bills with the daycare they had started. “Let us have a Bible study for six months. Let’s grow to 30, 40, 50 or whatever and then we’ll have public services again and they just didn’t want to do that.” Abe disagreed with the finality of the district’s decision. “I think they screwed it up ‘cause we could have stayed and re-planted a new church ‘cause we had the property and we had enough money, …but they just closed it.” He lost his job and had no interest in pursuing another church, “I was worn out. I really was just worn out.” He is out of the pastorate and selling insurance “and I feel guilty because I almost feel dead inside I mean as far as the call.” The events surrounding the church closing had a lasting effect: “Used to be I was so clear about everything. I knew exactly what I was going to do…and since this happened, man, I don’t know what to do.” He has lost direction and admitted, “I don’t know what to tell anybody that is looking for direction in their lives.” He still seemed to be struggling, “I’m looking for that passion I used to have for ministry… I feel like I’m fighting an 800 pound gorilla. I can give you all the pat answers. I could tell you all the Scriptures, but I’m not sure it works. It hasn’t been workin’ for me lately.” By his own admission, “I find myself still in the place, you know, where I was four years ago.” He is still going through the process of analyzing the purpose or results of the transformative event: “Have I made a bunch of mistakes? But as I look back, I don’t think I have.” He summarized his feelings: “My biggest problem now is just lack of direction, lack of focus, lack of passion… I feel like it’s been burned out.” His voice grew very quiet when he noted, “I felt since I was 12, I knew what …I was gonna do
but I don’t know anymore so that’s been the biggest deal.” However, when it came to returning to the ministry he had a different view, “I’ve been on the shelf now long enough.” Time has seemed to make him anxious to return to his former profession. “It’s been four years, four and a half years. I’m ready to pick it up and go and I tell that to God. He’s awfully slow. I mean, He’s just slow.”

_Ben’s Story_

Ben had the longest tenure of any of the participants with twenty-five of his thirty-two years in ministry at his present church. Shortly after he arrived at his current charge, a woman joined his church “and then declared that she was gonna be my wife.” She followed him when he spoke at other churches or conferences. She wrote “at least twenty-five to fifty letters over a two year period… to my home trying to intimidate my wife which is very hard to do.” He revealed that she “terrorized our church for three years.” She even went so far as to buy a wedding gown. During this time, Ben’s wife miscarried after about seven months. When Ben told the congregation on the Sunday morning following the miscarriage, “this woman jumped up and shouted, ‘God told me He was gonna kill that baby!’”

This happened concurrently with the attempt to relocate his growing congregation to a new property, “we were in conflict with our new building…building the church.” After three years, the woman finally left, but he still had to deal with resistance from the incumbent leadership in the church. He was able to implement effective coping strategies which resulted not only in his longevity, but the extensive influence of the church in the community. “So now that I’ve been here
twenty-five years and I look back over all this, it made me a better person. I probably needed this to make me stronger or more decisive, more directed.” His approach was philosophical: “That’s the road you take on the road to success – a little bit of stress.”

Chet’s Story

Chet was selected to be senior pastor at the church where he was already serving on staff. Within just a couple of months of his appointment, tragedy struck. His newly-hired youth pastor was supervising a mission project in the local community. The youth pastor’s wife and sixteen-month old son drove to the site for a visit. As they were making the turn onto the property, a delivery truck struck them from behind, killing the baby instantly as the car burst into flames. Nearly two dozen people at the project witnessed the disaster. The youth pastor pulled his wife from the burning wreckage. He suffered burns as a result and his wife was in a coma for three months “with 40% burns from her waist up.” The night of the accident, Chet returned home late and his nine-year old daughter kept asking him how he was doing. “We held each other for a while…that was the first time she’d seen me in the level of stress…I don’t know that she’d ever seen me cry.”

The week after the accident he was attending an ordination class in a neighboring state. He received a call from his worship pastor that “a ten year old boy in our congregation was in the hospital and he had…hung himself and…it didn’t look good.” What was Chet’s response? “I just about, just about lost my mind completely that day.” I asked him if he was speaking figuratively. “No literally. I just, it was the stress, the stress. At that moment, I was wondering how in the world if this
kid dies, how am I gonna deal with this and how are we gonna survive it?”

Thankfully, the boy survived, but when he was preparing for his return trip from the class, a staff member called to inform him of an anonymous letter received in the office criticizing the worship leader. “It was good for whoever wrote it that I was three hours away (laughs) because it gave me three hours to calm down.” However, Chet indicated that something took place internally on the return trip. “The stress of the accident, the stress of this new issue, and the sudden emergence of a non-issue …something within …caused me to make an unconscious intentional decision that I would do whatever it took to protect my congregation and my staff over the next two months with whatever’s going to take place.”

Dealing with the frustrations of an inwardly-focused congregation that was slow to accept change coupled with those in the church that were taking sides on what actions the youth pastor should take in response to the driver at fault in the accident eventually grew to be too much. “There was a combination of things that finally came to a head… I’m not even sure what took place for me to say, ‘You know what? I can’t carry it anymore. I can’t do this.’ I couldn’t tell you what the trigger was, but there was finally a moment when I knew I couldn’t carry it any longer.” The church board graciously granted Chet and his family a three-week sabbatical. It did wonders for his psyche, but upon his return, his secretary greeted him: “There’s a newspaper article on the lawsuit” brought by the youth pastor. “Within an hour, I had a phone call from one of my ‘thorns’.” Chet came to a conclusion: “By Wednesday I came home and said, ‘It’s done. I can’t do this. I just cannot.’ I just knew at that point that I didn’t have the emotional capacity to make it.” Similar to Abe, Chet could not understand
why things had unfolded as they had. He and his wife “wrestled…we wrestled…we wrestled, ‘Why did God give us the certain sense of becoming a senior pastor the last two years?’ …We wrestled.” While feeling a sense that God had called them to this place for this time, they were at a loss with how to cope from a professional standpoint. “We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know how to change.” Chet concluded that perhaps the role of leader was not the best use of his gifts. “I read that second tier leadership role of being in a position where I can be incredible support person for a senior pastor.” This transformative conclusion led to his current role as an associate pastor. He is more comfortable “where I can do what I do best and what my heart and my passion is and that’s people. To do ministry which for that year in the senior pastorate, I didn’t do any of that.”

Donna’s Story

Donna has dealt with both a matriarchal and patriarchal figure at her current parish. Both “give a lot of money.” They have been a constant source of upheaval, especially the male. “He’s a lifelong member. He gets upset.” Lately, “he’s been on the tangent about where the exercise equipment is.” For a fellowship dinner, “he brings a stick and puts it between the tables and if they are not that distance apart, um, just really picky things that are not issues to me and that haven’t anything to do with salvation, but they get blown up at Administrative Board because that’s where he brings his gripes and complaints.” Donna revealed that “he gets cutting.” Although she acknowledges that people have a right to disagree, “he doesn’t do it in that manner. It becomes a personal jab to you and he’s done that to me.” The man gets
angry “in a frightening way.” Donna described it in this fashion: “The first time it happened to me it was like, you know, there was just this dead silence in the room because everyone knows you don’t challenge this man.” Others in the congregation have noticed. “People have come to the Ad board chairman and complained that they felt like I was being bullied.” A building project, the conflict with a handful of members, and families in crises took its toll. “For the first time in my life, I was put on blood pressure medicine about a year ago.” Donna confessed “that was a signal to me that I probably wasn’t handling things as well as I should have because I’m basically a pretty laid back person.” Even her secretary noticed, “I can see you just are not handling things well and I can see it’s affecting who you are.”

She decided to attend a retreat for pastors provided by her denomination. She returned a different person with a renewed outlook for her role. Her transformative moment came when she realized, “I don’t have to be the savior. I come to share the Savior. I am not the Savior.” She also decided, “I’m not the leader. I’m the shepherd and there’s a big difference between the two.” With a laugh she noted, “I’m still on blood pressure medicine, but it did help.”

_Evan’s Story_

In light of the other participants, Evan dealt with the least amount of crises. “What happened about a year and a half ago is the sense I’m getting tired. I’m getting inefficient and I don’t think I’m functioning well and I’m not sure what to do. There’s a thing about being my age. I’ve stopped the dreams, you know?” He was transparent with the pastor elders in his congregation. He admitted that “sometimes I don’t care. I
don’t care.” His long tenure along with the expectations that are both external and self-imposed exacted a price. He was aware of leaders that, in his view, had not finished well both in biblical times and contemporary culture. He did not wish to fall into that trap. His therapist diagnosed him with “compassion fatigue which just means you’re tired.” The therapist was not convinced that he was depressed although he did prescribe an anti-depressant. He used the medication for “about four months and I didn’t notice anything and I quit.” Early in his career, Evan learned the value of implementing a variety of coping strategies as a minister. “I think my salvation was having those resources built into my life ahead of time. I truly believe those are the things that got me through this.”

*Frank’s Story*

The arson of his previous church still left emotional scars on Frank even though it had taken place nearly nine years earlier. “It was a beautiful church. The fire was started in my office.” The building dated to 1906 and the educational wing to 1962. “I lost everything.” This included “stuff that the kids made, stuff that my wife made, stuff that people made. Ninety-nine point five percent of my library and pretty much all that related to basically was incinerated.” As he discussed the events, strong feelings surged to the surface about the arsonist who was never apprehended, the event itself, the loss of the facilities, and the audacity of some adversarial church members to take advantage of a situation to push hidden agendas. “It’s still hard. If you catch me at certain moments it’s still hard to talk about.” He recalled the response of people at the scene: “It’s something how you tie your faith to a facility…seeing
grown men cry that I would have bet a million dollars I never would have seen shed a
tear even at their own mother’s funeral…just seeing the fire move throughout the
building. It was just devastating for everybody.”

They had re-roofed the sanctuary a few months previous with fifty year
shingles. “The roof caved in. We had fire fighters (a deep sigh) who were on a
wooden wheelchair ramp and one of the firemen yelled, ‘Get out of there!’ and the
roof kind of came to the center and then bowed out the walls and so all the brick fell
on (long pause) three guys.” All of them were flown by life-flight to a nearby hospital
“and they were fine because the wooden wheelchair ramp gave way. It gave them a
cushion.” Frank had trouble verbalizing the tragedy, “It’s hard to describe. In a way
you visualize it and a way it’s kind of blanked out. Hearing them [the firefighters]
yelling and screaming and getting them out of there, you know, that was bad. That
was really bad.”

The architect recommended the razing of the building and Frank had to lead
the congregation through the grieving process. “I wanted to crawl under a rock and
hide.” The congregation “experienced a death. It was intentional rather than
accidental, salt in an open wound, and seeing the building standing there like seeing a
dead person. Leading them through the burial which is when we razed the building.”

Frank had to deal with his own emotions. “Royally ticked off and that’s
putting it mildly at whoever did this… no resolution – no closure.” He revealed that
“through the process became angry at some of the members of the congregation. The
troublemakers all saw this as a good opportunity to raise trouble in the midst of a
troubling situation.”
Compounding the problem was the fact that Frank had already broached the topic of relocating to another parish with his bishop prior to the catastrophe. “The bishop came to me a few weeks later and said, ‘We can still move you if you want’ and I said, ‘You gotta be kidding me - no way.’”

Frank stayed for another six years while the charred buildings were razed enabling the church to work through the grieving process and the construction of the new facilities. He had several coping strategies in place as he dealt with various issues. He learned as a pastor that you must “take care of yourself” or you are useless to others.

_Gwen’s Story_

Gwen seemed to experience a landslide of events that were predicated on one another. Even though she was a pioneer as one of the first ordained female clergy in her denomination, she experienced discrimination. “There was a professor of New Testament who was overtly against women in ministry.” While in seminary, people at the church she was attending at the time were very affirming. They were under the impression she was going to be a counselor. “When things started turning toward actual pastoring and when I did my internship at that church it was much cooler, much more distant. I think that was probably the first (sigh and pause) deep pain that I felt in being ostracized or disapproved by people that I thought really cared about me.”

Immediately after her ordination, she and her husband were appointed co-pastors of a rural church. “The church never paid us individually. It was a two-fer.”
They experienced “some marriage stressors during that time” because her husband was “living a life incongruent with who he was.” He did not want to be a pastor. After serving as co-pastor with her husband for eight years, she assumed the role of senior pastor and her first year was a success as acknowledged from her district leaders. Sadly, the dominoes were just about to fall.

Two influential families in the church severed their relationship within the church. “That was the beginning of the downturn because people don’t want to be in a church where there’s noticeable tension.”

An immature youth pastor she hired was a source of constant turmoil. “I would spend a lot of time putting out his fires, making him look good.” One of the influential families in the church became sympathetic to the youth pastor. After eighteen months he resigned. She was so relieved she would not have to terminate him. The next week, though, he changed his mind and wanted to stay. “I was too soft. I let him stay.” The next week, “the whole youth group and myself and anybody else that was on his list got an email on a Saturday night” indicating that he was resigning and would not be at church the next morning. “The kids that were not on the email were crushed.” In addition, she had to deal with the collateral damage at church and “almost immediately the rumors started going that I had forced him out and this basically came from that one family.” Gwen’s husband offered to finish the last five months of the church year as the youth pastor. “Well, then that fueled the flame that this was a conspiracy and that not only had I made his life miserable, but [Gwen’s husband] had designs on the youth pastorate at fifty.” She took a long pause and lamented, “It just killed us that people were listening to this garbage.”
At the same time, her son was romantically involved with the daughter of the influential family. Gwen related that this family was telling her son “how awful we were.” While at college with his girlfriend, Gwen’s son noticed that his girlfriend was in a “storm cloud.” He asked her what was wrong and she said, “I hate your parents.” Gwen’s voice caught as she recalled this painful memory. When the youth pastor left, this influential family exited the church as well. As a result, Gwen’s son wanted to go to church with his girlfriend’s family. They conceded to one Sunday a month, but it soon grew to more than that. Her son eventually ran away from home and “we did not know where he was.” Unbeknownst to Gwen, he stayed with a prominent board member. She sighed, “Talk about betrayal.” This was followed by “three torturous years trying to reconcile.” Her son then married the influential family’s daughter, but “didn’t know where it was until we got the invitation.” She and her husband were not included in the wedding plans or the ceremony.

She believed this had a cumulative effect with the church board. “I feel it played a factor in the trust issue as far as so many things being said.” Not long after, the church board gave her a negative vote and her call to the church was not renewed. “One (member of the board) that voted no was a woman that I had literally spent thousands of dollars getting a daycare set up with her and for her to run out of the church. That just blew me out of the water.”

Gwen resigned without receiving an appointment from another church. “Probably the first eighteen months, I did not like to even think about people.” Once she was ready, though, ministry opportunities were scarce. She was dealing with trying to discern “God’s leadership and what’s my trying to make things happen.”
She revealed that “a month ago, I met with a friend who’s a missionary and she worked with me going through a forgiveness exercise.” She was still working through the experiences from her pastorate. “Basically, my prayer was, ‘Lord, help me want to pray (her voice cracks) for them. Help me want to forgive them, because I’m not sure I’m there yet.” Her summation of the events was “God has kept me out of any institution, kept me from killing anybody.”

In speaking of her situation, Gwen concluded, “What I struggle with is was this God’s design, purpose for [her husband] and I to go through all of this? But then I say, ‘What does it matter?’” She began to weep as she characterized why God allowed these events. “This is My will for your life. You need some chastising. You need some humiliation, but then I would say, ‘I’m cool with that.’” She had not pastored since she left her church, but was being considered by a church from a different denomination at the time of her interview.

_Hank’s Story_

As a successful insurance agent, Hank was used to long days and hard work. As a pastor, the long days and hard work never seemed to end. The very strategies he used to grow his business were the very things that helped him as a pastor, but the difference was a lack of separation in roles. “We haven’t had any bad things happen here. I am learning you can overdo a good thing. There are no cutoff hours in ministry. There is always a crisis and I love doin’ it. I love being here. I love being the problem-fixer. Not knowing how to say, ‘No’ those are probably things I’m wrestling with right now.” Hank pointed to his head, “This don’t ever shut down. I
can’t separate. I don’t stop thinking.” He characterized the demands as the same as filling a cup. “You take that thing and you fill it up and there’s just been constant stuff being put in there and at some point when it gets to the top, it doesn’t take a whole lot to kick it over.” As a result, “I am battling extreme anxiety and depression.” He travels two and a half hours to see a counselor.

He decided to seek professional help “when I decided to check out.” The researcher asked him if that meant resigning from his church. “I mean check out of life. I found myself sitting in the dark for the last three hours, staring out the window, totally dumb and decided that I was done.” His wife and kids returned home in time to find him before he used a loaded gun. When he visited a medical doctor he was asked, “Have you ever thought about killing yourself?” Hank said, “I just paused, I couldn’t, how was I gonna answer that? I’m a pastor of a church. I’m a pastor of a successful church. I have all the answers. How do I answer that?” The doctor diagnosed him as “highly depressed” and prescribed medications that did not work initially. He was referred to a psychiatrist who has been adjusting the medications with some success. This harkens back to his “extremely rough childhood” because “at eleven years old I had to grow up.” This was a painful memory for him as his speech slowed and he did not go into detail about his family except, “livin’ mean, jail, drugs.” Exacerbating this problem is his “fear of turning out like that…scared to death.”

Hank attended a conference just a few months prior to the interview and heard a fellow pastor recount “a crash in his life.” This was an epiphany for Hank since the speaker “began to describe the first time what I had been experiencing and was afraid
to say anything about it because I didn’t think they understood and I just began to bawl. I lost it. I mean I just lost it because somebody finally got what I was going through.”

He characterized the irony of his situation, “I mean I was running like crazy. I don’t burnout. Everybody else burns out, but I don’t burn out. And to see me here, right now and to hear things that’s coming out of my head and my mouth would never happen to me.” Except for his staff, “Nobody here has a clue,” but he needs the understanding of his congregation “or I’m probably not gonna be able to make it much longer.”

He characterizes himself as a strong believer in being “authentic.” However, he is not quite comfortable in sharing the details with his congregation. “This is the one issue that I haven’t felt yet that I’m prepared to get out there all the way.” He is not afraid to tell them that “I’m messing up” but “I’m just not ready to deal with it yet.”

Along with the personal issues with which he is wrestling and the responsibilities of his profession, he is also in the midst of a building project to accommodate his burgeoning congregation. His mantra in resolving the issues he faces has been, “I cannot get over that I know God called me.” He has a strong desire to finish the building project and continue in the ministry despite these complications. “I believe it’s a learning time. It’s a time for God to teach me some things about leadership.”
Stressors

The eight interviews revealed a litany of stressors. The consequential impact manifested itself in ways such as a lack of sleep and the intrusion of family boundaries. For example, five of the eight respondents indicated that they “didn’t sleep well.” Half of the participants’ families or family members experienced “hostility,” “anxieties,” “pressure” or felt “robbed” in regard to family time.

As the data were analyzed, six major stressors emerged (see Table 4.4). These included Change, Leadership, Dissonance, Crises, Expectations, and Loneliness. Seven of the participants reported incidents where change they attempted to introduce was met with resistance by individuals or factions. Seven interviewees indicated a struggle for the reigns of leadership, often occurring within the first two years of assuming the pastorate. Six encountered toxic congregants who seemingly were bent on undermining or discrediting the minister. Another six dealt with role ambiguity and/or time demands in regard to internal and external expectations. Four experienced one or more extraordinary events connected to their job that could be described as crises. Loneliness or isolation as a direct result of the vocation was expressed either implicitly or explicitly by four of the participants.
TABLE 4.4
Stressors

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*Change*

Unless a pastor initiates his or her own church, he or she assumes a new role in a parish inhabited by an entrenched population with established traditions and a real or implied hierarchical structure. In the interview process, pastors wish to convey to the search committee not only their qualifications, but their aspirations to lead the church into the future. Congregations may give the impression in the courtship phase that they want a leader that will implement the necessary changes for the church to grow. When the candidate is then invited to assume the pulpit he or she may cling to the notion that the congregation is ready to embrace new initiatives and ideas to spur growth. However, any pastor seeking to move the congregation in a newly-defined direction or introducing an agenda that agitates the status quo is likely to encounter
resistance. A volunteer-intensive organization such as a church is sensitive to change prior to its implementation. Timing, support, and communication are necessary to prepare the way.

Change emerged as a stressor with seven of the participants. This was a source of stress because participants did not gain the proper consensus among the congregation, lacked the necessary support from influential members or made a premature decision to move forward with a new initiative.

While Abe was excited about his new charge, he was uninformed of the numerous church splits that occurred prior to his arrival. As an issue it was either overlooked or hidden in the interview process. Under previous pastors, the church would grow until incumbent members felt threatened. If the pastor did not submit to the demands or whims of the insecure members, they would leave the church taking their substantial financial resources with them. When the disenfranchised pastor resigned, the disgruntled members would return. This pathological behavior would be repeated on Abe’s watch.

Abe was proud of the fact that sixty-seven new people had attended the church in a six month span, but the membership resented the influx of new blood. Abe’s assessment was “a lot of the fighting that took place was how we were going to assimilate these people. They didn’t want to grow because they were going to lose their influence in the church.” Abe was frustrated by his attempts to try different initiatives, but the leaders would not cooperate. “I’d say, ‘What’s your plan?’ ‘Well, we’ve never done that here.’”
Chet’s experience was working with a congregation with a ninety-year history. He had served on the staff when the previous senior pastor resigned to plant another church. After a fruitless pastoral search, the church board decided to offer Chet the position. He “knew going in that they had some of those inward-focused issues that they were unaware of or not willing to deal with.” The previous senior pastor had initiated a “re-focusing” discussion of the church’s mission so that it could become more effective in its outreach, but he left prior to its completion. As Chet tried to address these issues with the church gatekeepers, “there were those that were just, ‘I ain’t gonna change.’” This was a source of frustration to Chet and could not be given his full attention due to the nature of the other events that transpired during his one year tenure.

Ben’s church was growing when adversity surfaced and lasted more than three years as he strove to cast the vision for his congregation. He was engaged in the fundraising for and relocation of a new facility when he met resistance from congregants with animus. For Ben, the relocation of his church was a metaphor, “They didn’t know that they were voting not only to move location, but to change mindset.” Prior to Ben’s arrival, the congregation was limited in its outreach and was basically concerned with being an isolated and insulated entity. Ben was determined to change their outlook and facilitate not only growth in numbers, but impact in the community. Influential members were more comfortable with the familiar and resisted Ben’s attempts to improve the church’s situation.

Donna, Frank, Gwen, and Hank all had been or were going through building projects and inherent repercussions. Renovations or expansion, by definition,
encumber change. There is the demand for capital funds which translates into sacrificial giving on behalf of the congregants. Myriad decisions encompassing everything from size to location must be addressed. Members may allow individual personal preferences for color or décor to take precedence over the common good and then withhold pledges, resign from offices, or leave the church if they do not get their way. Donna’s people felt that since they “have worked a lot of hours or given a lot of money…they somehow believe that entitles that building to be theirs and so you try to introduce new ministry where the building is being used and they complain about the carpet being worn or the walls being scratched.”

Both Chet and Frank dealt with the residual effects of a former pastor that had served the congregation and decided to continue attending the church. Both of these ministers were trying to establish themselves in their new responsibilities, but it led to confusion on behalf of their congregations. People were torn between a sense of allegiance to the former preacher, but knowing they needed to give the new one the opportunity to succeed. In Chet’s case, the former pastor still in attendance had retired after serving the parish for two decades and “they were never gonna let that loyalty go.” Frank’s first charge was exacerbated by his predecessor’s influence and his wife who chose to stay in the community. “He would show up throughout the week…pumping the secretary for information…and I did not realize it was a direct pipeline on what all went on or what I had stated that I thought was confidential.” The result was “the congregation was going through a rough time that first six months.” The former pastor died suddenly at Christmas time and his wife eventually stopped “coming to the church, but of course always kept her contacts. A lot of new ideas she
would try to undermine even though she wouldn’t be there.” The result was that “change was not an operative word…, but a lot of people tried to run things so it was hard to get effective change to take place.” Even though Frank’s tenure lasted eighteen years, “I think if I would have stayed another year, it would have killed me because my vision and the way they wanted to go were two different, two different directions and I was getting at the end of my rope on that.”

Leadership

Generally, pastors are viewed as emissaries from God when they assume their appointment in a local church. Although a minister may have positional authority due to his or her office, a preacher must gain sufficient trust and earn the respect of key stakeholders in order to receive implied permission to exert his or her leadership. The process could take years. The formula for moving to the permission phase requires the development of key alliances or relationships within the congregation as well as competent performance in the pastoral role. Omission of either or both factors could delay or destroy the possibility of assuming the leader’s role.

Seven of the participants that experienced stress related to leadership issues assumed pulpits in well-established churches. As a result, friction occurred usually within the first two years as the new minister found traction and the antecedent leaders perceived a loss of their long-held influence. That is not to say that leadership issues may not arise later in a pastor’s tenure. Ben and Gwen both experienced challenges to their leadership several years into their ministry. Ben was able to survive because of the lay leaders he had developed. That will be discussed in the
coping section later in the chapter. Gwen had not successfully developed the same type of lay leaders and it contributed to her stress as well as her eventual exit.

Abe’s “working with the church council” was a struggle for the reins of the leadership in the church. “When we really started to bring in new people it seemed like that was when all the stuff hit.” One example was the purchase of a program that would enable the church to learn how to assimilate new people. It was only eighty-nine dollars, but the council refused to pay for it. He decided, “I’ll just pay for it myself.” After so many differences of opinion about what he wanted to do and what the council wanted to do, he “de-elderized them, but that was a big stink.”

In Abe’s case, he neglected to develop the necessary relationships both on the church council and within the congregation to propagate his agenda. Abe also revealed that the “de facto leader…in the church was a homosexual and no one knew it.” Abe felt, “He was always at the bottom of all the problems and so he’s strugglin’ with homosexuality and he’s trying to be good, he’s trying to get over it…wherever he’s been, you can track it, you can follow his trail. Wherever he was, the end result was always splits and division.” Abe apparently did not do enough to win the support of the de facto leader and it was a contributing factor to the demise of the church and Abe’s job loss.

As the new pastor, Ben was told by the leaders of the church, “We do all the management. All you need to do is preach and teach and if you do that, you’ll be fine and that was the conflict.” In Ben’s case it was because “some people in your leadership don’t want to move beyond building a nice pretty building so that’s caused some stress.” In his view, construction of a new building “really wasn’t the issue. Uh,
the issue was who was gonna be the leader?” As far as Ben is concerned, “It’s the stress of whose gonna influence the congregation?” Ben made it a point to develop relationships aside from the negative remnant. He also performed competently in his role as the shepherd of God’s flock. It took years to get “into the hearts of the people” and a lot of patience, but the loyal supporters he developed came to his defense when he was attacked.

Over a twenty-year span at Chet’s church, “between lead pastors and staff pastors there were twenty-one people who had gone through that church.” That kind of upheaval lent itself to inconsistent pastoral leadership. Therefore, lay people could assume positions of power. “I got this letter in January from a guy, an older guy I had breakfast with two or three times. Things were good at every breakfast we had and then I got this letter wringing the church out for what we were doing, the direction we were going and all this.” Even though Chet attempted to build a relationship with this gatekeeper, he was chagrined at his response, especially since Chet felt he “hadn’t done anything.”

One way in which the patriarch tried to manipulate Donna and the church administrative board had to do with a construction project. “We were paving the parking lot and he was going to give us $11,000 to do the parking lot.” The individual wanted the job to go to a friend of his. When a member suggested the church receive a couple of bids, “It made him so mad that he wouldn’t give the $11,000.” The patriarch’s continual wielding of financial blackmail and constant bickering was a continual source of consternation for Donna.
Frank admitted that he was “not a natural-born leader,” but stated, “I love visioneering as I call it and seeing what can be done for the kingdom and what can benefit people, the congregation in the community. That can be a source of stress.” In addition Frank acknowledged “another source of stress is little things that people can get caught up in, clergy included, that has nothing to do with really the church world, but are just little agendas.” Reflecting on his experience after the church fire, Frank noted, “I probably had twenty years of leadership learning compressed into three years in all reality and I definitely learned a lot about myself.”

A new “super-talented” couple that arrived at Gwen’s church just two years prior to her exit was a couple “any pastor would die for: ready to be involved, no training necessary, just good to go.” After a long pause, Gwen disclosed “they were kind of a trigger factor of saying I didn’t have a vision.” Gwen did not blame her leadership problems on being a female, but rather “people in small churches, small rural churches that have too much power or maybe have too little power and want more.”

In one sense, Hank is handicapped in his role because “I’m an extreme introvert. I hate public speaking.” He went on to say, “Being in front of people takes a lot out of me. It really stresses me out. It drains me.” As a self-employed businessman, Hank only had to answer to one person. It has been a difficult adjustment making the transition to leading a large congregation because “having 300 people question everything you do is a stress.” Hank, by his own admission, is “an extremely slow decision maker. When I make a decision, I am pretty confident.” He
laughed, “I may be wrong, but I’m confident and then when somebody second-guesses or questions, that really, really bothers me.”

*Dissonance*

Six participants encountered toxic congregants seemingly bent on undermining or discrediting the pastor. In some cases, clergy shared multiple stories of encounters with dysfunctional people, perceived threats to authority, territorialism, and contentious behavior all of which represented dissonance. While some may perceive this as collateral effects from leadership, in many cases it was simply boorish human behavior and mean-spirited people. Surprisingly, it was usually just a small cluster of people or in some cases only one or two individuals that caused so much strife. What exacerbated this all the more for the preachers was the ferocity with which some people acted especially in light of the fact that they were supposedly functioning in the body of Christ.

By the time his church was closed, Abe indicated “we were really worn out from the fighting and dealing with the church people.” He added, “It’s been my experience that if they can’t control it then they’ll gladly destroy it.” Abe even took classes in church mediation and conflict resolution, but it “had come to that place where it’s either you’re gonna do as we say or you’re gonna leave or we’re gonna leave and we’re never coming back and we don’t care if the church burns to the ground.” Abe’s language was somewhat disconcerting, but it powerfully illustrated the intensity of conflict in his congregation.
Ben humorously characterized opposition as dealing with “hard-headed members” and obstinate members that “If you goin’ left, they goin’ right.” In Ben’s case, as he worked on a vision, strategy, and mission for the church and the requisite resources and management team, “that’s where the conflict came.” In his view: “When people fight, they’ll use whatever – if it’s an adversary for the person that they disagree with then they use whatever or whomever.” Ben was even physically threatened in one meeting. “In fact, one man wanted to jump on me at one of my meetings, but it was fine. Now, of course, I’m saved, but I don’t think you need to push me that far… I’ve had guys in my chest as a leader… I believe in turning the other cheek, but I still got some of that other stuff in me (laughs).” Another man threatened to take “thirty percent of the congregation with him.” Ben replied, “Maybe you need to leave. See you later.” The man never left and Ben’s assessment was that “he couldn’t influence thirty percent of my congregation anyway.” Ben blamed this on people who had a “narcissistic perception of themselves.” One disgruntled member even called a local banker and requested that the bank not loan the church any money. Ben humbly intoned, “I preached his funeral. He never knew I knew that he did that.”

Chet admitted that he was working in a church that “was not healthy.” The congregation had “a lot of family roots deep within the church.” As the old guard died off “those families were losing the grip they had for so many years.” He conceded that “every time an issue came, it was one of those families that would be at the forefront of the fighting.” In the aftermath of the fatal accident involving the youth pastor’s wife and son, the youth pastor was meeting with local law enforcement and
discussing the possibility of charges against the driver. “I started getting letters and phone calls of why our youth pastor would want to do this and making assumptions about his character.” The accident happened “right around the time of the Amish onslaught” when several were killed in a Pennsylvania schoolhouse. As far as the assailant, “the Amish were very forgiving to the person.” Chet recalled, “I can’t tell you how many times the driver’s mom called.” Once she spoke to him for two hours. Eventually, “people within the church started taking sides.”

Prior to her arrival at her new church, Donna was unaware of the history of negative behavior exhibited by the matriarch and patriarch of the congregation. It did not take long for both to exert their influence and create animosity. Donna internalized the stress and the physical response manifested itself in a diagnosis of high blood pressure. Once diagnosed, she was and still is taking blood pressure medicine. Donna suggested, “You always have the ones who will complain.” Thankfully, “they’re in the minority.” She estimated she had “about four or five people that it wouldn’t make any difference what you would do, they’ll bring it to the Ad Board and make a big deal out of it.” The patriarch “blew up and said I don’t listen to anybody.” She quietly mused, “I mean it’s just those little things that make you feel (she took her thumb and forefinger and made a pinching gesture). Even though you know that you don’t know what you’re supposed to do – always go away feeling less than adequate” and her voice fades. “And that’s why I say there’s just a few of them, but they are the ones who are the most vocal about things.” She has been wounded, “It still hurts when somebody makes a personal attack on your character.”
Evan gladly confided that he had not experienced animosity and that his current church “has been very, very good.” However, “when I came here twelve years ago there had been conflicts. There had been problems.” For whatever reason, Evan chose not to elaborate on his experience in remedying the points of tension in his church. He only seemed to mention it as an afterthought.

The dynamics at his current church were described by Frank as “healthier” than his previous charge and it has “proven to be a delightful opportunity.” At his first church, it was a different story. Similar to Chet’s experience, Frank had to deal with the presence of his predecessor and spouse. “That created a conflict because he was not ready to let go. It was still his church.” Adding to this is what Frank described as “troublesome people.” The fire brought the congregation and the community together, “but troublemakers are troublemakers and in a scenario like that people were vulnerable including myself.” Tongue in cheek, Frank noted, “One of the lightning rods was building a fellowship hall with a high ceiling – gymnasium!” That caused disagreement about the purpose of the new building. “So there were times in which difficult people made things difficult – enormous amount of stress.” Parallel to Donna’s assessment, at his first church, Frank “loved 100% of the congregation. I liked 98% of them. There are those two percent, I guess, unfortunately.” He added that the “two percent troublemakers” are “uncooperative.” “It could be the second coming of Christ and they would take issue with the Lord and argue.” Frank’s descriptive language was also rather dramatic in the same vein as Abe’s depiction of the contrary few. Frank referred to a friend’s difficulties at another church that were
so strenuous the pastor had a nervous breakdown. “Five tribes ran that congregation and there was constantly tribal warfare.”

The “beginning of the downturn” in Gwen’s church was when two influential families had a disagreement and severed relationship with each other, “but they both continued coming to the church.” This did not make for a healthy atmosphere since “people don’t want to be in a church where there’s a noticeable tension.” This resulted in an “oppressive kind of feeling and I’m in the middle.” Gwen attempted to serve as a mediator, but this was apparently unsuccessful and only seemed to create more animosity. One of the influential families embraced the youth pastor Gwen was trying to terminate. As she tried to resolve these situations with difficult people, it only seemed to magnify the stress. Once the youth pastor resigned, she was then falsely accused of trying to fill his position by appointing her middle-aged husband. Her son became estranged because of the relationship he had with the daughter of one of the negative families. These events happened in sequence as Gwen tried to assuage the hurt feelings between two potent congregational families.

_Crises_

A crisis in this study is viewed as an unexpected circumstance created by an external agent over which the participant initially had little locus of control. Four of the participants shared extraordinary events that created enormous stress for them. Abe’s church experienced a large degree of financial uncertainty. “Church finances fluctuate and …you worry about whether or not you were gonna get paid.” Abe carried the weight of this responsibility knowing that he had alienated the large
givers in the congregation with his emphasis on assimilating new people. When the church was closed, “the biggest deal was we didn’t have any money. No job.”

Ben not only dealt with a member that wanted to be his wife and the relocation of the church, but within six years of his arrival, “nine of them got together…and they were goin’ to put me out.” They wanted to vote him out of the church. The conspirators attempted to do it during a Sunday morning worship service, but “they couldn’t do it because the people, the spirit of the people and the spirit of the worship service.” Later, they recruited sixty people at a Monday night meeting and had two to three pages of grievances. Six weeks later, they had a congregational meeting that lasted four hours. He was accused of “misappropriatin’ funds. That wasn’t true. They were the ones signing the checks.” Ben was amazed at how “mean-spirited people can be.” Ben was prepared though, and is a stickler for details. He had every record from 1983 to 1989 placed on the offering table for anyone to examine. “Well, guess what? They said all the things they wanted to say and we dismissed the meeting and I was still the pastor.” Ben made a decision not to meet with the naysayers anymore. “And by the power of prayer, every one of them left our church.”

Both Evan and Chet had staff members touched by accidents. Evan’s youth pastor “isn’t working right now because three days before Christmas he got hit by a train.” Strangely, he did not elaborate about this event and any adverse effects for him or the church.

Chet noted that from the time of the automobile accident “from September to February, different things began to build into the mix of what was taking place. It was an awesome responsibility that I had to walk people through the grieving process.”
Along with that, the life of the youth pastor’s wife still hung in the balance. “If Julie survived, we still didn’t know if she was going to survive. She had an infection from which very few people survive.” Further complicating matters was the fact that the accident took place in a small town. The driver of the truck and the company for which he worked were acquaintances and friends for years with people in the community. The driver even had done business with a businessman in the church. This pile-up of stressful demands was enormous for a first-year senior pastor.

Donna disclosed that “we are having so many people in crises in their personal lives. I mean I’ve had three marriages in eleven years that I’ve been there that ended up in divorce…a young man who had been in jail, a lot of problems there where you try to counsel with the family who’s torn apart.” Her voice grew quieter when she indicated “that has been very stressful when you see people that you love and their lives are just fallin’ apart.” One couple in the church did not want anyone to know they were undergoing marriage counseling. They asked Donna to attend the weekly sessions with them in a neighboring town. This lasted for six months. “You fall in love with these people” she recounted, “and then when you see that they are hurting so bad and their marriage …did end up in divorce. That’s just real hard for me to watch.” Donna began wondering “if you’re not saying the right things to help them. You’re not doing the right things in ministry to try to feed marriages to be nurturing and encouraging. You start second-guessing yourself.” Donna confessed, “My major in [college] was psychology, but there’s some things I just don’t feel like I’m equipped to handle.”
Frank met two crises, albeit several years apart. He had to conduct the funeral for his predecessor who died unexpectedly before Christmas. As discussed in the dissonance section, the late pastor had not made the transition easy for Frank who was leading his first congregation. The former pastor was “not ready to let go” as the shepherd of the flock. The widow of the former minister only added to the strain. Frank’s first Christmas Eve was “very, very difficult…trying to minister to a person that I did not get along with and I think in her mind I probably was the reason why her husband died even though he was a chain smoker, out of shape and was an accident waiting to happen.”

Years later, this same church experienced a fire set by an arsonist. “When I saw the church burning and I saw people crying and like I said when I saw some of these men cry that I never thought would have, I thought, ‘Good Lord.’” Further complicating matters was that prior to the fire, he had considered resigning. The arsonist was never caught so, in a sense, there has never been closure. Like Chet, he had to lead the congregation through a grieving process, but his involved the loss of a building instead of a person. All these factors combined to make life difficult.

Gwen needed a youth pastor but “that became a major source of stress for me. He made work for me and yet as things progressed, it backfired on me.” The youth pastor was very precocious, but she tried to “put out fires” he created in an effort to salvage the situation. Rather than terminate him, she hoped he would resign. She was thrilled when he gave his notice one week, but soon after he changed his mind. Against her better judgment, she decided to let him stay. The next week, he emailed
his resignation late on a Saturday night and did not appear at church, leaving her to handle the collateral damage and emotions of the parents and teenagers.

This was in addition to her son running away from home and secretly being harbored by a board member. Eventually her estranged son married the daughter of a disenfranchised member. Compounding all of these events, she admitted to a physical malady. “Since 1994, I’ve dealt with fibromyalgia. So in addition to the normal stressors that a person would have in the pastorate, there was this underlying physical disability.” Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition accompanied by pain in the muscles and ligaments. Fatigue is also a common symptom. Her medical problems only contributed to the distractions with which Gwen tried to cope.

*Expectations*

Serving in one of the helping professions, clerics are susceptible to the time demands, role overload, emergencies, and requests of those within his or her areas of responsibility. Even though a preacher is self-employed for tax purposes, he or she feasibly has as many bosses as there are members in a church. Therefore, a minister must not only be willing, but able to respond to the needs of the flock at all times. Otherwise there is the real or perceived risk of jeopardizing one’s tenure.

Abe, Donna, Evan, Frank, Gwen, and Hank all struggled with expectations. These included both intrinsic and extrinsic pressures. These individuals are in this profession because they wish to aid people and some times fall prey to trying to please people. Those included in this section could also be considered driven
individuals. Their internal motivations to succeed could sometimes be a source of considerable self-imposed stress if they failed to meet their own benchmarks.

Abe mentioned, “the pressure to make the church grow was one I could never figure.” In his mind, “I think that was my biggest pressure, …because I felt that’s your success, that’s the measure.” He remarked, “You go to conferences or other conventions and ‘Oh, how big is your church?’ First question!” He went on to detail how “they can’t see faithfulness and they can’t see all the nights you spend in the hospital and they can’t see all the time you put in with the children of the church…teaching them.” He also felt the strain of being the CEO of the church. “You’re in charge of everything and that gives you more pressure.”

Donna went on an Emmaus Walk retreat and one man “was upset that I didn’t take that as vacation.” The patriarch criticized her for taking vacation around the holidays. “He always says, ‘people’, but he will never identify who the people are – were complaining because I was gone during the holidays. I’m always here: Christmas, Christmas Eve services.”

With all the demands of a church, Donna was resigned to the fact that “there are just times when you can’t get around to everybody.” At the time of the interview, graduation was in season and she was expected to attend “all these open houses.” When I asked her how many hours a week she logs, she neglected to designate the number. “If you’re not doin’ it or thinkin’ about it, you’re thinkin’ about the sermon.” She did admit, though, to working six days a week.

In Evan’s interview, he spent a great deal of time discussing “the expectations of the job.” He was frustrated with “all the things I could do and am not getting done.
Number one because there isn’t enough time.” He determined, “It is in many ways self-imposed.” There are always “people wanting you to do things, people inviting you places.” He cited the example of this year’s Vacation Bible School, which was a cooperative effort among a number of churches. “I’m doing nothing with Vacation Bible School other than promoting it.” Then he received a letter the week of the interview from the committee in charge. He quoted, “We’re encouraging the pastors of supporting churches to be present at the school Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evening.” He surmised, “Okay, I don’t really have to do anything. They just want me there from six to nine on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday unless of course I can’t come.” With a modicum of sarcasm he intoned, “But if I can’t come, I certainly can’t be sitting in the backyard because I can’t, you know. That’s … expectations that I produce, but they are also the expectations that people have.”

In addition to his daily routine, Evan works Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings and also works on Saturdays, but “I stop earlier.” Like Donna, Evan shares the need to attend “high school graduation open houses.” Another expectation revealed by Evan was a hypothetical case. “Pastor, my cousin’s daughter, they’re close to us, are going through marriage difficulties. They don’t have a church and my cousin is faithful to church, but they really don’t think their pastor is very good. Would you see them?” Evan pastored one of the larger churches in the study. The last thing he would need is another couple to counsel, but this was an illustration of how members can place unrealistic expectations on their minister. Evan would not want to disappoint a parishioner requesting an extra-church favor, but he also has to
balance that with his congregational priorities. If multiple members make these sorts of demands upon him, then it robs time he should spend on his congregational duties for which he is held accountable.

Frank was on the receiving end of a not-so-subtle set of expectations from the “mutual ministry committee.” “They wanted me fired because there I was at two o’clock in the afternoon dressed in my clerical collar and all this, pushing my son in a stroller when I should have been working even though it was my lunch hour. Of course, they didn’t bother to ask that.” Apparently, this was fueled by one individual. “This person, of course, as such people cannot be happy with life, not happy with their own life, not happy with anything and so that was readily handled by the appropriate people.” Frank works “on average fifty-five” hours per week, “definitely over fifty – never under fifty.” Just prior to the interview, Frank recalled for “six months we were on a real tear between my preaching and teaching schedule, leadership stuff, surgeries, funerals, it was just unreal and then of course with the added Advent and Christmas, Lent and Holy Week schedule. The staff was even just aghast, “When is the merry-go-round going to slow down here?”” He characterized it as “a full moon for six months.”

With all the demands, Frank admits that a major source of stress is “work and family, trying to prioritize.” Take, for example, the holiday pressures to which he and Donna spoke. Churches can be tight-knit communities. The members often expect their pastor to attend, if not participate, in special events, Sunday School parties, and may often be invited to individual family gatherings during these special seasons. With a minister’s own family needs, it adds a weight that can be difficult to bear.
As a female in ministry, Gwen faced role expectations due to her gender. She experienced a lack of affirmation and encouragement from a professor of New Testament in seminary who was “overtly against women in ministry.” This sentiment was more subtle in the church in which she and her husband were active. She “found it interesting early on in seminary and especially when it was gonna be a counselor kind of thing – the people at the church we were attending at the time: ‘Bravo! Bravo! That’s great!’” When she decided to pursue the pastorate instead, the response “was much cooler, much more distant.” She sadly stated, “that was probably the first deep pain that I felt in being ostracized or disapproved by people that I thought really cared about me and that I cared what their opinion of me was.”

Since Hank does not have a seminary degree and is uncomfortable as a public speaker he finds himself “over-preparing, over-studying. I probably spend way too much time studying.” He overcompensates to make up for his perceived lack of pastoral training. This is not uncommon for clergy since their constituents may consciously or subconsciously compare their minister to those featured on television and radio broadcasts.

As far as a work schedule, Hank has had a much different experience than in the business world. As an insurance agent “you could separate. You had your work hours whether they were ten hours a day or twelve hours a day or six hours a day you still had your hours. I would go to church and not deal with that. I could go to the ball field and not deal with that.” The ramifications for a pastor are much different. “Here, this is all you are. This is your work. This is your church. These are your friends. There is no separation. There is no release.” He does not engage in activities such as
golf or racquetball. “I don’t feel like I have the time to do those things.” For Hank, a “day off just meant I wasn’t in the office. I was doing it somewhere else.” It is a relentless practice, “I can be sittin’ there watchin’ TV and I don’t have a clue what’s goin’ on TV and my mind is goin’. It’s figurin’ out the next stage.”

**Loneliness**

A lack of relationships both inside and outside the congregation may contribute to feelings of loneliness. The four people featured in this section also had experienced upheaval in their personal and professional lives. Neither Abe nor Gwen were pastoring a church at the time of the interviews and had truncated tenures compared to most of the other participants. Chet only spent one year as a senior pastor and returned after a brief respite as an associate minister. Even though Hank was still engaged as a senior pastor, this was a contributing factor in his near decision to nearly “check out of life.”

Even though Abe was happily married, he lacked a consistent means of social support. He does have a brother that is a pastor with whom he sought counsel and some men with whom he ate breakfast regularly, but he did not appear to have any allegiances in the church. The latter probably contributed to his premature exit since he did not make mention of friendships with any of the antecedent gatekeepers. He also did not appear to have strong supporters from the new families, whom he tried to assimilate. Since he is still wrestling with the effects of his last failed charge, it appears the breakfast group to which he referred is not sufficient as a means of
discourse to work through his feelings. He did not mention any hobbies or clubs to which he has any interests, only that he attends a good church.

With the cumulative impact of the events in his church, Chet determined through an “unconscious, intentional decision to protect my family, to protect my church, to protect my staff, and chose, really chose at that point to carry privately whatever I needed to carry throughout it.” Chet determined to isolate himself and that proved detrimental. In the turmoil of all that took place, “I didn’t share. I didn’t share much with my wife. I didn’t share much with um with the board. I didn’t share much with the staff…and I was miserable.” He admitted, “I had a support group. I just didn’t utilize them.”

Gwen appeared to have an absence of relationships while actively pastoring. In her interview, she never made mention of friends that came to her aide or a support group to which she turned in the midst of her turmoil. This only heightened her distress since she apparently had no confidantes. The ultimate evidence of this is the fact that the first year after her exit she “stayed away from people as much as I could.” That seemed an interesting strategy to work through her pain.

Hank was enjoying his work as a first-time senior pastor, but was not accustomed to ever being able to separate his professional life from his personal self. The loneliness was overwhelming. Even though his church was growing and he was leading the construction of an addition to the church facilities, he suffered from extreme anxiety and depression. One night he found himself sitting in the dark alone for three hours while he contemplated ending his life. Hank noticed a large gap in relationships since moving from business to the ministry. As a successful
businessman, “you had a certain respect.” He illustrated now as a pastor when he introduces himself, “Voop! (He motions with his hand) there’s a wall that goes up and it is very hard to find real relationships. This has got to be one of the …loneliest jobs that I have ever had in my life.”

What bothers Hank is “a lot of people want you, but usually it’s because…they’ve got something bad happening. It’s never about ‘what can we do with you or help you or for you.’ It’s always in need of and it’s always with a problem.” Hank added, “Just having a real relationship with a friend is just almost impossible.” He even has gone so far to try and find an older pastor to mentor him, but “they’re hard to find. I found a lot of older pastors, but not that are still vibrant and going.” Apparently, the loneliness and isolation has taken its toll on the vast majority in this profession. Hank’s disappointment at not being able to find a seasoned colleague to serve as a competent mentor is a testament to some of the unfavorable consequences of serving in such a demanding vocation without the proper survival techniques.

Coping Strategies

All of the pastors mentioned some form or type of coping strategies. These were skills or contingencies implemented as best practices to mediate the stress of their personal and professional experiences. Analysis of the data indicated eleven strategies that seemed to emerge from the interviews. These are listed in descending order from those mentioned more frequently and include Calling, Family, Prayer,
Relationships, Retreats, Scripture, Reading, Counselor, Exercise, Day Off, and Leadership Development.

Closer examination of the repetition of coping measures revealed that the first five listed were quite common with six of the eight participants. Beginning with Scripture and the remaining six strategies, they are mentioned more frequently by those with the longer tenures. Ben, Donna, Evan, and Frank not only reported many of the first five schemes, but they noted at least three or four of the latter compared to three or less with the others. Even though Chet mentioned three from the lower portion of the list, he was sorely lacking devices from the top section as was Gwen. Those with the longest tenures had at least nine coping instruments and appeared better equipped to handle the stress.

Evan emphasized, “The advice that I would have to pastors is put those things in place and there’s more than one.” Frank echoed that sentiment: “Self-care is absolutely paramount. If I don’t take care of me no one’s going to take care of me and if I’m not in good shape then what good am I to anybody?”

The one measure mentioned by all of the participants was their divine call into the ministry. This appeared to be a bedrock principle upon which to combat the strains of the profession. Six of the participants emphasized the sustenance provided by their nuclear family and the strength culled from a strong marriage. Three-fourths of the respondents saw the value of regularly spending time in prayer with God. Half a dozen placed a priority on relationships outside their immediate family as a means of relieving stress. Retreats or extended time away from the rigors of the job were effective in restoring energy and gaining perspective in the midst of difficult times for
six respondents. As might be expected, five sought solace and strength from the Holy Bible, although it was surprising that this was not mentioned by all of the interviewees given the nature of the profession. Half of those in the study enjoyed reading as a change of pace or source of inspiration while dealing with stress. Four used the services of a professional counselor to work through issues related to the demands placed upon them. Exercise proved effective in alleviating stress for four of the subjects. A day off refers to the regular time set aside each week to be relieved of the daily schedule. Only three mentioned that they do this as a regular practice. Three participants took advantage of leadership development to build a cadre within the congregation that could share the load and thereby reduce stress.

**TABLE 4.5**

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<th>Coping Strategies</th>
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**Calling**

While many professionals, such as surgeons or teachers, may view their vocation as a calling, ministers perceive theirs as a divine edict. For most, this event takes on almost mystical dimensions, but is necessary to endure the uncertainties of
the ministry. Each of the eight participants made reference to his or her divine calling and was an artifice of stability when each faced uncertainty.

Abe felt called when he was twelve years old. “I knew…what I was gonna do.” Ben was called to preach while in high school. Chet came to the realization that “being involved in ministry is more than just serving as a pastor in a church…that’s helped me in creating who I am today as I seek to equip people.” Donna acknowledged that her call late in life “was really gonna upset life as we knew it.”

Frank, Evan and Hank mentioned that they were not anxious to follow the call initially, which is not an uncommon experience for some pastors. Evan initially resisted the call with the dismissive thought of “what a way to ruin your life.” Yet, “it’s like God won’t leave me alone” and he eventually pursued his chosen vocation. He was happy in the decision because “life’s been very smooth.” His life experiences have assured him that he is in the proper career and his work has been affirmed by the fruit of his ministry.

Frank was not warm to following in his father’s footsteps. While in Scotland and after experiencing a performance of Handel’s Messiah in St. Mary’s Cathedral, he went for a walk while it was snowing. He was rather wistful as he recollected with such fondness. While he reflected on that snowy evening, he “really felt God’s touch, God’s calling saying, ‘You need to go into the pastorate.’” He pondered that for “about fifteen, twenty seconds and then said, ‘Nah.’” He laughs while recalling the memory, but when he returned to college he took a course in Basic Christian Teachings that was pivotal in his life: “I felt a fire lit within me that I had not felt
before.” In his senior year of college, he decided to attend seminary. His ministry as well, though difficult at times, has affirmed his gifts and his call.

Gwen responded to the call on her life in junior high, but did not actively pursue it until young adulthood. She did not necessarily resist, there were just other priorities in her life and to actually engage in the practice as a female minister would be to serve as a pioneer in her denomination. Not many of her gender were making it a point to become a pastor. Even as she described the pain of her experience at her church, she refused to deny the call on her life and try another line of work. At the time of the interview, she was being considered as a pastoral candidate for a church in a different denomination.

Hank was called as a teenager, but only worked in churches as a volunteer or part-time while establishing a successful career in business. “To some degree it was a lot easier as an [insurance] agent, but I was miserable,” he laughed. Despite his struggles in the profession, “I cannot get over that I know God’s called me.” Despite the pressures of his burgeoning church and leading his first building project with no experience in such an endeavor, his call spurred him not to quit. He went on to add, “I have a confidence. There was a stake. It was driven in the ground ‘cause I knew the time of doubt would come and that stake is in the ground and I know God’s in it.”

Despite the individual trauma they experienced, each of these pastors courageously endured because of a core belief that God called him or her not only into the ministry, but to the particular place of service. If God was faithful to call them, then He would be faithful to sustain them.
Family

For Protestant pastors, a strong marriage and the support of a loving family are not only paramount for sustainability, but credibility in the community of faith. It is particularly strenuous for a parsonage family because they are under such close scrutiny. In the study there were reports in some cases of a spouse or the children caught in the crossfire of enmity targeted toward the participant or simply dealing with the effects of catastrophic events. Yet, seventy-five percent of the ministers in the study made reference to the efficacy of support from a spouse, children, parents, and siblings.

Even though Abe and his family endured a great deal in such a troublesome parish, both his marriage and family emerged intact. This was particularly important to Abe because he was raised in a home where his father abandoned the family early in his formative years. Abe was proud of the fact that “I have a very good marriage.” His wife not only supported him during the trials at the church, but during the time of unemployment, and his current situation. He’s also “happy the way my kids turned out so I give God all the glory for that.” As far as he is concerned, “the big parts of my life, to me the important things, are very good.”

It was a mutual decision by Chet and his wife to assume the senior pastor vacancy at the church where he was on staff. When Chet talks about his brief time as the lead pastor, “my wife and I had no doubt that we were the ones that God had called to be the senior pastor during that year…” It was an anchor for him in the midst of the immense pressure they faced together. Part of what he did to cope during that time was to take the family on “an extra long weekend over Thanksgiving.” He
shared that prior to stepping into his critical role, “my wife and I had for three years, four years been consistently dating every week, every other week.” He also dated his kids every “four to six weeks, every single one of them.” As senior pastor, though, he “let some stuff begin to slide” and that included the dating ritual. In retrospect, Chet saw the value of spending time with family to mediate stress. “If I hadn’t done it during the healthy times, I possibly would not have survived that period. If I continued it during that period, we still may be there today.”

Donna had no hesitation about a sustaining factor for her in the midst of professional demands. Donna unequivocally states that, “if I have to take a choice between my church and my family, I’m taking my family! There’s no question. I guess it’s just finding the boundaries and saying, ‘This is where I won’t move.’” She added, “I give them 100% of who I am and then I draw the line with family time.”

One of the more creative approaches to making time for family was explained by Evan. He will leave the office in the middle of the day to spend time with his wife. “I will routinely go home not just for lunch, but wander home in the morning, wander home in the afternoon, visit a little bit. We’ll go take a walk in the middle of the day.” He and his wife “started having our main meal at three to three-thirty in the afternoon” about “five years ago” since their kids were grown. When his kids were still in school he would return home in the afternoon to greet them. “They’d …get out of the bus oh, by say, 4:15. I’d be home by 4:15 – shoot baskets with my son, talk.” They would not eat until later, but “then right after supper I’d go back to church if I had something in the evening.” He looked at it as “one of the plusses of ministry scheduling.” In his view, “it has made life seemingly in many ways more relaxing.”
Frank would affirm Evan’s position about “ministry scheduling” because it creates “time for vacations, time to be able to take time off to go to a certain event and such. The kids understand that that’s an advantage versus Daddy working a three to eleven shift and can’t go to any of the school functions. So it’s give and take.” Due to the location of his first parish, Frank was within a short drive of his parents. “We were close enough we could just get on the interstate and ‘boom’ we were where I grew up and so that was a real gift from God for eighteen years.” Frank was resolute in guarding his family. “You can pick on me, family is off limits. You start pickin’ on that turf, we got some real problems.”

Like Abe, Hank was raised in a dysfunctional home. In his family, drug use, alcohol, prison, and his father abandoning the family cast a pall over his youth. Yet, he drew strength and understanding from his wife. After Hank had been in counseling for some time for his depression, his wife went to visit his counselor with him for the first time. In fact, this took place just one week prior to our interview. She learned what she could do to help him. Rather than condemn him for his feelings or express dissatisfaction, she empathized with him. As they left the meeting she said, “I know you but I really didn’t understand what all’s really goin’ on inside you.” That was an immeasurable response for Hank. He expressed gratitude and underscored the importance that she knows “how to work with me.”

Prayer

Not only did characters in the Old Testament of holy writ enter into a dialogue with Jehovah, Jesus taught his disciples to pray as recorded in the New Testament.
Therefore, ministers are expected to not only teach Christ-followers how to pray, but they should be regularly engaged in the practice as well. What was rather startling about this mechanism was that only six clergy mentioned it as a resource.

Unequivocally, Ben admitted that he did “a lot of prayin’.” Not only did he practice personal prayer time, but “prayer is really what did something to the atmosphere of our church…developing the culture of prayer.” They offered a plethora of intercessory events, which included all-night and all-day prayer vigils and forty days of fasting. The latter was also a method of personal discipline. “I did a lot of fasting. I fasted at least three days a week, every week. That was a cleansing kind of thing for me. It cleaned me out emotionally. My mind was clear. It gave me a calm spirit and, of course, I felt better.” It enabled him not to return the vitriol aimed in his direction, but instead to rise above the fray and maintain a proper perspective.

Before he became the senior pastor, Chet “was consistently not only spending my personal time with the Lord, but I was consistently getting away – a half day or a day a month of refueling and refreshing and reevaluating my ministry.” He admitted that prayer time was very important to him, but as he became more engrossed in the calamities surrounding the church, he allowed this priority to slide. Looking back, he realized it was a mistake not to spend more time in intercession.

Two of the respondents mentioned that they pray at different times and are not limited to just kneeling or finding a secluded place for prayer. Donna and Frank both indicated they pray while driving. Donna conceded, “I find myself thinking about those things and being in prayer.” Frank divulged that the location is immaterial. He will pray if he wakes up early “just lying there in bed or when I’m waiting to go to
sleep, when I’m sitting at the desk, sometimes in the sanctuary.” He will even pray while he is exercising. Whether it is lifting weights, using an elliptical machine, or practicing forms in karate, “that is excellent prayer time for me as well.”

One of the pastors with multiple coping strategies was Evan and his usually involved people. Even though he did not stress personal prayer time, Evan meets with a small group of pastors to intercede every Wednesday morning for an hour.

Journaling is Hank’s form of speaking and listening to God. “The only way that I really have found … prayer to be most effective is through journaling, through actually writing out my prayer.” He does it before and after he reads the Bible in his devotional time. Like his counterparts, Hank viewed prayer as integral to surviving in the ministry. Traditional forms of kneeling or being in a secluded place were not as important as the simple use of prayer to mediate stress.

**Relationships**

Relationships in this study are perceived as those persons with whom clergy may rely upon for moral support, advocacy, or advice either inside or outside the congregation. Six of the participants discussed relationships as a sustaining factor.

Abe has eaten breakfast with a group of “three other guys” every day for the last six or seven years and “two of them aren’t even Christians.” These individuals have been important for Abe for the purposes of conversation, as he has worked his way through the closing of his church, unemployment, and current position in insurance. His was probably the least developed support group of those listed in this
section and it was noteworthy that he did not mention relationships inside his former church or the current church which he is attending.

The former pastor’s son was “one of my greatest supporters” responded Ben. This would be considered unusual since former pastors, their spouses and family members who remain in the congregation can often be hostile to the new pastor and the inherent changes. Chet and Frank bore witness to how that added to their stress, but in Ben’s case the former pastor’s son was an ally. There was also a gentleman who served as the “chairman of the board of deacons who loved me and my family” and an older wealthy lady who hosted Ben and his family many times and served as a confidante. Ben also relied upon colleagues and friends living outside the state for advice from time to time.

Donna has “a group of about three gals that have been real good in a covenant group. We meet on Wednesdays for prayer for about an hour and I do a study with them occasionally, a book study.” What is “unusual” is these are members of her congregation, but “it’s a safe place.” She intimated that they “see a lot of things because they are very active in the church and they have kind of smoothed sometimes hurt feelings.” Donna has no hesitation about being vulnerable with these ladies. Their value has not only been in prayer and moral support, but they have intervened on her behalf with members of the congregation that did not agree with her.

Evan has formed various connections. “Through a grant in the denomination” he along with four others submitted a “proposal for continuing education” to the Lilly Foundation. The two-year grant paid for lunches and books in a retreat setting. “The typical format was for about four hours we’d have a presentation and we talk. We talk
about issues.” Even though the grant expired, “we just keep meeting.” In this group, they are transparent enough with one another to ask, “How are you doing…personally, spiritually, and professionally?” He has another small group of former church members with whom he meets every Thursday morning. Like Donna, he has no qualms about his transparency even though these latter individuals no longer attend his church. For both Donna and Evan, these groups have been places of refuge not just to vent, but for solace in the midst of difficult circumstances.

At his first church, Frank “built a lot of trust, a lot of solid relationships, a lot of key ‘circle the wagon’ people as I call them that would keep a lot of the alligators, troublemakers, under control.” This proved a valuable practice in his toolbox when he made the transition to his new church. In his first three years at his current parish, “we worked very hard to build a lot of trust in relationships and a foundation for what needs to transpire in the future.” Frank’s antidote for stress is “I like to talk over with people.” He has “friends who are not pastors who are not in this community that I, that I can call.” At his first church, Frank had “key people and key influencers who really kept her [the previous pastor’s wife] and others pretty much at bay.” He explained that when he moved to his new parish, “I had a buddy that I met when I moved here and we hit it off and it will be nine days, one year he died of brain cancer. He was about five years younger than me – wife and two children – kids are roughly the same age as our older two so very, very hard - yeah.” Since Frank sees the imperative of establishing and maintaining relationships, this loss was still very fresh in his mind.
Sadly, Gwen did not appear to have any key relationships during her tenure as a senior pastor. However, once she left the pastorate and was working through her grief, she gradually added relationships. Gwen now has a female accountability partner with whom she meets “every other week and that’s mutual. She shares her garbage with me and at least that makes me feel purposeful in helping another person.” She is also part of a “women in ministry group” in her home denomination “as well as one that’s multi-denominational.” These ladies are able to share their experiences and empathize as well as offer advice on moderating stress as a female in ministry.

Retreats

A retreat in this inquiry is viewed as a change of pace and venue from the regular work schedule of the participant. This could include out-of-town conferences or extended personal enrichment opportunities, even vacations. Six members of the study took advantage of conferences or retreats or sabbaticals, which proved advantageous in moderating stress. Abe and Gwen neglected to mention this as a part of their experience. They were also the two that seemed to be struggling the most emotionally with the consequences of their stressful experiences.

A meaningful experience for Ben during a critical juncture in his ministry was attending a conference entitled, “Inner Healing Prayer” over the course of five days. His assessment of the material covered was “out of sight.” He purchased a number of CDs from the conference “that I could play over and over again.” It not only enabled
him to adopt personal disciplines, but provided creative fodder which he could apply to his ministerial situation.

In the midst of his turmoil, Chet and his spouse attended a pastor’s and wife’s retreat where the well-known Christian author, Richard Blackaby was the speaker. “It was a phenomenal two or three days.” Though they were ready to resign, the insights gained and the fresh perspective encouraged them to revisit the possibility of staying and working through the stressors. On the heels of the retreat, Chet felt he needed additional time “to disengage.” The church board granted Chet and his family three weeks away, which was a wonderful tonic for them. Even after they left on the vacation, Chet needed time to unwind from all of his thoughts and obligations. It took him a few days before he was finally able to relax and feel reinvigorated.

When Donna’s secretary noticed that she was not handling the stress of her job well, she encouraged her to attend a class provided by her denomination. It was designed “to help you deal with stress in a way that doesn’t ruin your health.” The three day retreat helped her “learn to say, ‘No’ and not feel guilty about it.” She disclosed, “Since I’ve taken that class I’ve started to handle things different.” This included learning to delegate and changing one’s mindset. “You want everybody to like you. There are gonna be people in the church that don’t like you and that’s okay.” During the event, “they brought in people that showed you how to do relaxation techniques.” Admittedly, the breathing techniques were met by Donna with some skepticism. “At first I thought they were really kind of goofy because I’m not into that kind of stuff, but it really does help to just get off in a place and do that deep breathing and kind of prioritize your day.” She also enjoyed the transparent sharing
with other pastors. “It was good talking with other people because you sometimes feel like you’re the only one that’s going through this.” Knowing she was not alone in her struggles enabled her to place into perspective self-doubt, performance guilt, or any stringent expectations she had internalized.

Five years prior to our interview, Evan was approaching burnout. The president of the church council “took the bull by the horns” and granted him a sabbatical. “We wrote a policy” and he was given three months. He took “half of it one summer and half the next.” The first summer he “went to Cedar Lake Retreat” in Wisconsin, part of the Pastor’s Retreat Network. There are two additional sites in Texas and Ohio. The only requirement placed on him while at Cedar Lake was that he and his wife had to share one meal a day with the other clergy and spouses. Otherwise, he was free to do what he wished with his time whether that was reading or engaging in recreation or any other pursuits. The next summer, a member of his congregation offered him the use of a secluded lake home. The only request made of him by the owner was to mow the grass once a week. Both of these experiences were beneficial for Evan because he was able to restore his creative energies and was motivated to return to his work with renewed zeal.

Scripture

The Holy Bible is a resource for Christ-followers in general and for preachers in particular. The Bible has been a chief means by which people have learned not only how to fellowship with God, but to gain a richer understanding of life and the imperfect world in which they live. Expositors of the Word must be able to
communicate these truths to their congregations on a weekly basis. It is not only necessary to communicate its truths, but to set an example in both word and deed of following its precepts. While one might think all of the respondents would mention this as a coping measure, only five referred to the Scriptures as a means of insight or comfort when working through trials.

While Abe continues to process the events and awaits the opportunity to return to the pastorate, he cited a Bible verse “that ‘God will perfect the things that concern me’ and I believe that.” Because he had such a close relationship with God, Abe was not ready to blame God for his circumstances. The Bible was a lens through which he viewed his present experience and was willing to accept his lot at the moment.

Ben subtly credits his longevity with the character studies, “because a lot of biblical models of people just stay through the battle and whatever happen they stayed.” The Bible is full of those that were persecuted for various reasons. Job lost his fortune and most of his family even though he was a righteous man. He did not forsake his spouse, friends, or God and his faith was rewarded. Daniel was throne into the lion’s den for following his beliefs. He refused to denounce the king that placed him in such a predicament, was protected and then promoted. How could Ben do any less than the examples set for him in the Bible he preached every week?

As Donna prepares for a sermon it’s “the weekly Scripture that I live and that’s what I meditate on and think about as I’m puttin’ a sermon together.” Donna did not separate her personal devotional time from her sermon preparation. For her,
the two were inexorably linked. If a passage speaks to her in a significant way during the week, then that is her inspiration for her message on Sunday.

In the past year, Frank admitted that he needed to revisit “devotional reading” for his personal well-being. He felt that he needed to be “a little better disciplined” in spending time separate from sermon preparation in the Bible. When he has had something “that’s burdening me”, he refers to a verse in Proverbs which advises, “the wise seek the counsel of many.” Living by that credo has proven “to be very helpful.”

Hank sees his devotional time as separate from his sermon preparation. The Scriptures have been effective in helping him with the effects of stress. It has served as a source of wisdom for him. Hank unequivocally stated, “I can’t imagine what would happen if I didn’t have God’s Word, …if I didn’t have the relationship.”

**Reading**

Mental cultivation through the reading of books and periodicals proved stimulating for four of the participants. Reading served as a pleasant diversion from work especially since theological works were not always included.

Ben reads a variety of good books. He does not limit himself to theology, but also consumes tomes on counseling, relationships, prayer, and leadership. He liked the “motivational” aspects they provided. He came into the habit early, because early in his ministry, “we didn’t have a whole lot of money to be doing a whole lot of vacations” so reading was a form of escape.

Chet disclosed he also is a reader. While he was going through such a turbulent year, “I continued to allow myself to, you know, step away on occasion by
reading.” However, he did not elaborate on the types of books he consumed, just that it helped to moderate the stress.

Evan received an invitation from a “neighboring pastor” to join a book club. His response was, “I was happy he invited me.” They also read non-theological books, “although books that have some relevance to the theological issues” and they meet once a month. It has endured for “close to twelve years and that has been great.” He was also part of a continuing education grant provided by the Lilly Foundation in which he and two colleagues read books on specific topics for one year. The first year they read about leadership and the second year focused on the “emerging church.” Each session lasted four hours and they would take turns presenting on particular issues related to the reading. Even though the grant expired, “we just keep meeting.”

When Gwen was asked about her coping mechanisms that helped her during her difficult pastorate, she mentioned that one of her “escape mechanisms” was “reading fiction.” She did not express any particular authors or titles, but just enjoyed the opportunity to stimulate her mind. Another closely related exercise in which she engaged was doing crossword puzzles. Anything to refresh her mentally seemed appropriate to alleviate her stress.

Counselor

A counselor in this project is defined as a professional therapist. Some clergy may associate a certain stigma with visiting one trained in the mental health realm. This may be seen in the fact that only four took advantage of these services. It may be perceived as a weakness in one’s nature. There is also the possibility that some
simply could not afford the care. Given the gravity of some of the situations, it is surprising that more did not turn to this option. In any event, those that utilized the help afforded by a trained professional reaped or are reaping the rewards.

In the aftermath of the car accident that took the life of the youth pastor’s son, Chet’s young daughter was traumatized. The tragedy took place in the entrance to their driveway, but the family was not home at the time. However, when the family did arrive home, emergency personnel were still on the scene examining the evidence. Her bedroom was located in the front of the house and almost immediately she was unable to sleep as she dealt with the aftermath. Neither Chet nor his wife were prepared to help her work through the trauma. “We actually brought her to a local counselor for a few months just to walk through to help her deal with things.” Eventually, they moved her bedroom to the rear of the house and things began to improve. It was a great asset in lessening one more stress on Chet in that year.

Evan met a therapist through a pastor’s gathering. The therapist was inviting a group of ministers to meet twice a month through the school year and it was free. There was a three-year commitment. Each pastor took a turn at discussing any issues and “that allowed me to take care of myself, to be emotionally involved with people.” He did not participate because he was emotionally unstable. It just provided a safe place for him to vent and share with other pastors.

When asked how she coped with the incredible series of events life had thrown her way, Gwen conceded, “I’ve gone to a counselor.” For her, it started when her son ran away from home. She has been to see the counselor “at least once a month.” Later she humorously stated, “God has kept me out of any institution” and
“kept me from killing anybody.” Apparently she would characterize her sessions as a success.

Hank was “a little leery” of seeking help initially. His situation was so severe as he battled “extreme anxiety and depression” that he eventually decided to see a counselor and then “they refer to a psychiatrist for the medication.” He has been in counseling for two and a half months and the process has been helpful “as far as how to deal with situations, how to deal with stress and things.” The fact that he is in therapy, “it’s not public yet.” He travels two and a half hours to see his counselor. He is not ready to reveal to his congregation this part of his life. In part, he is working through issues related to his “rough childhood.” His opinion is that “its work” to get through difficult times and “you can’t do it by yourself.” He has not worked through it yet, but he is making progress.

**Exercise**

Exercise was viewed by the participants as physical activity. Their methods included simple cardiovascular routines such as walking or golfing to more intense workouts such as bicycling, lifting weights, and karate. Fifty percent of the subjects mentioned exercise as a form of relief.

Ben proclaimed, “I do a lot of exercise…exercised at least six days a week. I walked at least five miles. That helped me relieve some of the stress.” Ben does not use headphones because he also uses the time to pray. “I like the morning time.” He did his walking “when it’s cool and not too many people out there.” He walked year round. He will even walk in “fifteen degrees outside ‘cause I don’t like walkin’
inside.” He is disciplined about maintaining his regimen and it shows. Even though he was one of the older respondents, Ben was very fit and energetic.

In contrast, Chet was frustrated because during his year as a senior pastor he was in a state that was not conducive to year round outdoor cycling. “I was a bicycler, but by September, October, the weather changes and so I wasn’t getting out.” He underscored the importance of physical activity: “For me to get out on my bicycle for an hour after experiencing a day of stress is just huge. People drain me. I have to have that time.” It was apparent that Chet had continued this practice at the time of the interview since he also looked fit. Not being able to bicycle was a lost resource for him when he was undergoing such enormous stress and may have helped sustain him if he had been able to engage in it more consistently during the fall and winter months. Coincidentally, that was when the major stressors started to emerge in his situation.

Evan goes “golfing with a good friend every Monday morning in the summer.” He did not differentiate if he rode in a cart or walked and carried his bags, but it was a stress moderator for him. The fact that he goes with the same individual every week and on the same day during the summer reinforces the idea that Evan is very disciplined and consistent in his stress reduction program. It also underscores the fact that he does not like to be alone when engaged in these practices. He and his wife will also regularly go for a walk in the middle of the day. Earlier, Evan mentioned the advantage of creative scheduling as a pastor. He is not a slacker and works diligently in his profession. He has learned at his age and with his experience to arrange his
schedule in such a fashion that he can handle the stress in his own time and in his own fashion.

“Exercise is enormous for me,” said Frank. He will exercise three times a week. In addition, he participates in karate twice a week. “Martial arts is a very spiritual thing for me.” To him, “it’s a form of prayer and that is extremely helpful.” Similar to Ben, he will pray while he is exercising and also feels closer to God. “I feel and do have connection with the Lord” when he spends a half hour on the elliptical machine or lifting weights. “When we do katas or forms in karate, that is excellent prayer time for me as well.” Frank was another preacher that appeared trim as a result of his regimen. In fact, he humorously added, “Some day I’ll give Arnold Schwarzenegger come competition.”

As a contrast to the preceding four participants, Hank did not feel he could justify the time it took to exercise because of his schedule. “I have to work to have fun. My only reality right now is probably a motorcycle.” Whether due in part to his lack of exercise as a coping scheme or not, Hank was one that was battling anxiety and depression.

*Day Off*

Clergy are often the brunt of a repeated joke that they only work one day a week. By implication that means since they only preach on Sunday they have a pretty easy schedule. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are on call seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. Chet tried to conduct a wedding and later attended a continuing education seminar. In both cases, he was contacted about
tragedies that occurred involving members of his church family and had to make a
decision about returning. Donna was pressured by a member for not being around
enough during the Christmas holidays. Evan works in the office on Saturdays and at
least three evenings a week. Frank confessed to never working less than fifty hours a
week. Both Donna and Hank admitted that they are always thinking about their jobs.
Add to this pressure the fact that clergy rarely receive two days off during a week like
the vast majority of the workforce. Not to mention the idea that a three-day weekend
is often foreign to them.

A day off in the context of this discussion is considered time away from the
office and escaping the regular responsibilities for a pastor. Only three respondents
designated that they took a regular day off.

“Tuesday’s my day off and I do honor that because I have a new grandson,”
beamed Donna. This was consistent with Donna because she makes spending time
with her family a high priority. Even though her husband holds two jobs and does not
have Tuesday’s as his day away, she has reduced the number of evenings she is at the
church and works her schedule to be more available with him on the weekends.

Evan stated, “I never work on Monday unless it’s an emergency. I never work
on Friday night unless it’s an emergency.” Interestingly, part of his practice is golfing
on Mondays during the summer. He wife does not seem to mind. His children are
grown so he has much more control over his personal schedule and that is an
advantage. Saturdays are often final preparation days for ministers for their big day
on Sunday. It is noteworthy that Evan protects Friday nights for his personal time. In
that way, he is able to concentrate on Saturday for his delivery of services on Sunday.
Frank also does not work on Monday. Like Evan, Frank is very disciplined about the mechanisms he utilizes to resist the effects of stress. His father was a pastor and Frank has only fond memories of his upbringing. The example set by his dad in using these types of methods to keep life in balance apparently made an indelible impression upon him.

Chet cautioned about the dangers of ignoring this aspect of a plan to reduce stress. Prior to accepting the role of senior pastor, he took a regular day off, but once he was engaged in all the demands of the lead pastor, that contrivance drifted in the distance. “I know the importance because of the fact that number 1, I’ve experienced the time we did that and number 2, I’ve experienced the time when I ignored it completely.” It did not cost him his health, his marriage, or his family, but it contributed to his decision to resign after one year so that he could, in part, regain some control over his schedule and restore equilibrium to his life.

*Leadership Development*

Leadership development in this study involved assessing, recruiting and training individuals to assume a wide variety of duties within the congregation. The intent was that the functions of the church would become more effective and efficient while easing the burden on the pastor.

Ben, Donna and Frank were the three ministers that learned the value of this approach. Their years of experience and training as well as the necessity of delegation to ease the stress bore fruit. This trio also happened to have three of the longest tenures at any one church of those in the study.
Ben admitted that, “leadership development caused stress.” This was due to “change in leadership.” He was trying to not only move a congregation from one property to another, but to raise the necessary funds to build the new facilities. All of this entailed changing the “mindset.” “The point was to build for additional ministry.” As mentioned in the earlier stressor section, leadership causes stress and in Ben’s case it was “who was gonna be the leader?” He began with specific plans and a vision “to have women’s ministry, youth ministry, ministry to men and the families, evangelism, discipleship, all those kinds of things to develop people.” He met resistance, because “the plan was not where some of my leaders were.”

As a result, “I started developing leadership around me.” He would invest himself in “three, ten or twelve men and women, teenagers, whoever.” His idea was to influence them to do ministry. He was always spending time with people. One of the key areas where he developed leadership was in prayer ministry. “Prayer is really what did something to the atmosphere of our church.” People began to join the church and, in turn, it grew. He also worked in small groups where they “minister to you as well as you minister to them.” In his view, he kept on doing the same things he felt were “the right things to do.” Ultimately, “that motivated me, encouraged me and relieved a lot of the stress because I saw life change, behavior change, in a lot of people” and that gave him “peace.”

After nearly twenty-five years at his current church, Ben is still excited about leadership development. His “greatest joy” has been in developing leadership. He expressed satisfaction, “You know, this is what I always wanted my church to be, total ministry to total man…to the total person.” His years of investment are paying
great dividends not only for his church, but for the community. Those that have been raised in his church have gone on to be school teachers in the local system, attorneys, and doctors. “I have kids who are really contributing to the fiber of America and that’s the kind of stuff that motivates me to continue.”

“I would be so uptight and couldn’t sleep,” said Donna. Just a year prior to the interview, she attended a continuing education seminar for pastors in her denomination. Among other things “this class helped me learn to say, ‘No.’” Since taking the class “I’ve started to handle things differently.” Donna came to the conclusion, “I don’t feel that I need to be at every meeting. That’s why you have committees and chair people for and so I stopped some of that.” In reference to a meeting, Donna had one of her leaders tell her, “Don’t come. You don’t need to be here. You know, if there’s anything that needs to be taken care of we will tell you.”

As far as ministry in the church is concerned she suggested, “You find people that have those gifts and graces and you give that responsibility to them.” She reasoned, “There are things I can do well and there are things I don’t do well and there are other people in the church who do them well. So why am I trying to do it and not being very successful?”

As a big believer in continuing education, Frank sees the importance of learning leadership development from experts. He has attended seminars by Eason Bandy and John Maxwell.

Frank credits his grandmother who lived with he and his family for nineteen years in understanding the “older generation.” Those lessons served him well as a rookie in his first church with a number of elderly parishioners. Frank “built a lot of
trust” and “a lot of key ‘circle the wagon’ people as I call them.” He was grateful for their support because they “would help keep a lot of the alligators, troublemakers, under control.”

One of Frank’s main antagonists was the widow of the former pastor who lived in the community and stayed connected to the church. “A lot of new ideas she would try to undermine even though she wouldn’t be there.” Thankfully, Frank “had key people and key influencers who really kept her [the former pastor’s wife] and others pretty much at bay so that what good things did happen happened.”

In his current church, Frank is the only pastor, but has a parish nurse to whom he delegates a lot of responsibility. “She has been a true blessing as far as hospital visitations, things like that.” This individual also has a team of volunteers whose responsibilities include ministry to shut-ins. He has made it a point to build “a foundation for what needs to transpire in the future.”

Meaning Making

Time has a way of casting new light on past circumstances and allowing one to “place experience in a meaningful framework” (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 25). Meaning making allows participants to come to terms with the significance of their adversity (Gottlieb, 1997). This self-reflection may take the forms of social comparisons, humor, new perspectives, reduction of expectations, and accepting life in a larger sense. Each of the respondents was given the opportunity to share any additional thoughts he or she would pass along to fellow clergy especially in regard to coping with the stress of the profession.
Chet could not understand why he felt God had called him to a senior pastorate role when everything then seemed to collapse. Chet confided that he and his wife “wrestled” with why things took place as they did. “Why did God give us the certain sense of becoming a senior pastor the last two years?” Chet decided he would be more effective as an associate pastor since it would play more to his strengths. While he did not eliminate the possibility of serving as a senior pastor, he realized that he would be a better fit in the role of a staff minister “where I can be incredible support for a senior pastor.” He is content to serve as an associate in another church in a different state.

Gwen felt betrayed by the board member that harbored her estranged son without telling her. Even at the time of the interview, she pondered alternatives once her son married, “Sometimes I think we should have resigned as soon as he left. You know, we can’t keep our own family in line so according to First Timothy, we’re not fit to be pastoring.” She still struggles with forgiveness toward the people that inflicted hurt upon her. For eighteen months following her forced exit, Gwen secluded herself in her home because “I did not like to even think about people.” She still struggles with “God’s design, purpose.” She still seems to be recovering from the cumulative effects. As she concluded her interview, her voice caught and she shed tears, “If God felt I needed some chastising, some humiliation then I’m cool with that.”

Abe wanted to find something else to do because “I was worn out.” Abe was still reeling, “I can give you all the pat answers. I could tell you all the Scriptures, but I’m not sure it works. It hasn’t been workin’ for me lately.” He has not pastored
since, but seems conflicted about returning to the pulpit. Sadly, following the death of
the church “I don’t know what I want to do…so I guess that’s the biggest casualty
that I think I’ve suffered since leaving my last church is just a loss of direction.” He
still struggles with the aftermath, “I find myself still in the place, you know, where I
was four years ago.” Despite the hurt and pain he would tell Gwen, “Whatever you
have to do to get over it, get over it. Move on. Forgive.” He harbors no bitterness
toward God. “God’s will is always best. God’s direction is always right so God never
makes mistakes.”

Ben’s determination was evident when he said, “I’m a person that likes to
finish things.” Even though he encountered adversaries in his church, “the success of
my ministry was good therapy for me.” His was a philosophical approach. “If you are
going to be successful as a leader, there’s a price you’ve got to pay and stress is one
of them.”

Hank believes in being “authentic.” He is also “not afraid to say I’m having
problems. I’m not afraid to say that I make mistakes.” Hank became so desperate to
deal with his anxiety that he decided to see a counselor. He is determined to see the
building project through to completion. “I made a commitment to God, not
necessarily to the church, to God that I would be here barring something unforeseen.”

Donna also had realized a new perspective, “I’m just comfortable with who I
am and I don’t have to please everybody. I think that’s where stress can ruin us.”
Donna was forced to face her situation while on a retreat to learn the art of managing
her stress. She concluded, “I’m not the leader. I’m the shepherd and there’s a big
difference between the two.”
Donna offered that her time as a minister has been “a positive experience for me, but I know it has not been that way for all female clergy.” Gwen could certainly identify with the latter portion of Donna’s assessment, “What I struggle with is was this God’s design, purpose for [us] to go through all of this or was it evil at the hands of evil Christians, if there is such a thing.”

Frank keeps an obituary of a pastor friend who suffered a nervous breakdown and then left the ministry. “I refuse to become another statistic in clergy world. When you’re getting pulled into it more and more and you want that congregation to succeed on your watch, whatever that means, what is it that really matters?”

Evan expressed a reduction in expectations when he admitted, “There’s a thing about being my age. I’ve stopped the dreams, you know?” He also added though that “I need to take care of me spiritually, personally, emotionally and the best way for me was contact with other pastors.” Evan would advise fellow clerics to find the time even if one cannot justify it. “You just do it. You do it. You do it because it’s a survival.” Frank affirmed that approach. He strongly emphasized the need for self-care. “You don’t take care of yourself, you can’t function. If you can’t function, you can’t pastor.”

Summary

This chapter described the initial contact with prospective participants and the demographics of the sample. The eight transcribed interviews revealed that each respondent experienced significant stress. As the stories unfolded, each shared the event, events or cumulative effects of stress, which had a profound impact upon him.
or her. These revelations led to the emergence of six dominant stressors: change, leadership, dissonance, crises, expectations, and loneliness.

Each respondent dealt with these stressors in his or her own fashion. This appeared to suggest eleven major coping strategies as follows: calling, family, prayer, relationships, retreats, scripture, reading, counselor, exercise, day off, and leadership development. The respondents also indicated that they had engaged in some sort of meaning making as a result of the experiences.

The next chapter will present interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations. The findings will discuss a possible relationship between the number of stressors and the number of coping strategies as a determinant in the duration of a pastor’s tenure. The research will be examined in relation to the literature. Recommendations will be provided not only for continuing religious education, but for further study of this phenomenon as well.
CHAPTER 5
INTERPRETATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study sought to understand the following research questions: What significant stressors do clergy face? What coping mechanisms do they use to moderate that stress? The intent was to explore why some clergy are able to overcome stress and sustain or even excel in their ministry while others succumb to the strains of the profession. Meek, et al. (2003) concluded, “clergy health and coping responses have rarely been the focus of psychological research” (p. 339).

This chapter will seek to interpret the significant stress faced by clergy and the efficacy of coping strategies utilized by the participants to moderate the stress each experienced. Conclusions will then be presented in the context of the dominant stressors based on the data analysis and compared to the literature. The coping mechanisms revealed by the participants will be examined in relation to the literature. The possible association discovered between the number of coping mechanisms used by clergy and their effect on parish tenure will also be considered. Finally, recommendations for further study and how the lives of clergy may be improved will be offered.

Interpretations

Efficacy of Coping Strategies

The eight participants had a cumulative total of 194 years of pastoral experience. An average of twenty-four years of ministry was represented by those
involved in the inquiry. Their experiences were diverse, providing a rich backdrop to examine not only the types and magnitude of stress clergy face, but how they are able to mediate its effects. Both acute and chronic stressors were evident in the lives of those in the study. Acute stressors are point-in-time noxious blasts while chronic stressors are on-going and extended in our daily existence (Gottlieb, 1997). The narratives revealed that it is possible for acute and chronic stressors to interact.

From a demographic viewpoint, race was not an issue, although only one African-American was interviewed. However, gender differences did have a bearing on stress. Both Donna and Gwen bore the brunt of discriminatory practices which none of the males encountered. In fact, Gwen’s negative experiences as a woman in a male-dominated profession seemed to be a thread woven throughout her story which she still had not resolved and therefore contributed to her stress. Donna, by comparison, appeared to have overcome discrimination through a combination of competence in her profession as well as self-actualization. None of the participants were the victims of age-ism.

All had been married for at least seventeen years and none had a marriage in jeopardy or wayward children. Neither marriage nor children appeared to contribute to the stress of the participants except for Gwen. She was the only individual that reported an event with an estranged child as a result of her church experience, but she has since reconciled with her son.

Of the eight participants, only Abe and Ben held an undergraduate degree in religion. However, their experiences were diametrically opposite. Abe moved from church to church and had been absent a pastoral position for nearly five years at the
time of the interview. In contrast, Ben only pastored three churches, and he had served his latest one for nearly twenty-five years. It is interesting to note that Ben, Evan, Frank, and Gwen had earned the Masters of Divinity while Donna had not only earned a graduate degree, but was just a few credits shy of holding the Masters of Divinity. This may lend credence to the value of an advanced degree in religious studies as sound preparation for ministry. Gwen was the only one of the four that did not hold a longer tenure in her respective parish. However, she did lack affirmation during her graduate studies from both a prominent professor and her home church.

Neither Chet nor Hank had religious degrees. Abe did not finish his graduate studies in ministry. Abe, Chet, and Gwen all experienced truncated pastorates. Hank was still in the pulpit, but suffering severe anxiety and depression. The lack of either advanced or formal religious training may have been a confidence factor contributing to clergy stress for Abe, Chet and Hank. The lack of affirmation from both a significant faculty member and her home congregation may have also dulled the luster from Gwen’s dream of becoming a senior pastor and consequently affected her confidence.

Arguably, denominational policy and congregational size could have been stress factors. Abe lost his church because of a decision by his denominational supervisor. Gwen did not receive a supportive vote from her local church board and was pressured to resign by her denominational supervisor. Abe was the only one to mention that finances were a source of stress because of the size of the parish. None of the other participants seemed to make an issue of either denominational ramifications or congregational size. Both Gwen and Abe may not have had a healthy
relationship with their respective supervisor, which may have contributed to some of their problems.

All of the participants experienced the cumulative effects of chronic stress while all but Donna and Evan experienced an acute event. Abe encountered immense conflict in his church involving a cluster of individual’s that had caused the church to split in the past. Despite his best efforts, the church was closed by the district leadership without consulting him, leaving him unemployed and without a pulpit five years after the fact. Ben was stalked by an amorous female member and dealt with “hard-headed members” while relocating the congregation to a new property and expanding the ministries. Chet had been promoted from an associate position to senior pastor, but within three months of his appointment, his newly-hired youth pastor’s wife and son were involved in a fatal car crash in the driveway of Chet’s home. A young boy in the church also hung himself within a week of the accident. It was almost more than Chet could bear. He resigned within a year and is now serving as an associate. Donna was diagnosed with high blood pressure in response to the turbulent relationships she had with both the matriarch and patriarch of her parish. After several years serving in his current church, Evan felt a loss of creativity and energy. All the demands on his schedule had taken an emotional toll and he was diagnosed with compassion fatigue. An arsonist destroyed Frank’s church by starting the fire in Frank’s own office. Not only did he and the members of the congregation watch the beloved facilities burn to the ground, but the perpetrator was never apprehended. Frank had to lead the congregation through a difficult period of mourning for the loss as well as rebuilding the facilities. Gwen not only dealt with an
immature staff member and false charges of nepotism, but endured the turmoil of her son running away from home and marrying into an adversarial church family. She lost credibility with the congregational leaders and was eventually forced to resign. Hank saw his church double in size, but the accompanying stress from growing a church and building a facility to accommodate that growth took its toll on him. With no means of relaxation or without the ability to disengage from his work, he sank into such a deep depression that he considered ending his life.

These stressful events were significant because each participant recalled the magnitude of the occurrences. All of these were circumstances that in some way broached a participant’s threshold for pain. The situations incurred stress to such a degree that it could not be ignored. The response of each participant was self-directed cognitions that resulted in the adoption of coping mechanisms. The number of coping processes adopted by each one was a direct factor in attempting to blunt the effects of the stress.

Further interpretation of the results led to the classification of the eight participants being segmented into three categories. The first category would be those with brief tenures in a parish and the fewest coping mechanisms. The second segment would be those with extended tenures and the most coping strategies. The third classification contained one participant with more strategies than the first group, but was engaged in a shorter tenure than the second group. For the purposes of discussion and their application of coping behavior, these will be referred to in a triad of passively-engaged, competently-engaged, and moderately-engaged.
Abe, Chet and Gwen would be considered passively-engaged. During his twenty-four years in the ministry, Abe served seven churches and none longer than four years. Chet served ten years in seven different churches and his lasted no more than four years. Gwen’s first sixteen years as a pastor were spent in the church where she served the first eight as a co-pastor with her husband who was not comfortable in the pastoral role. After assuming the senior pastorate for eight years, she has been on hiatus for the past three years while doing interim work for several churches as well as working as a chaplain. These three participants have been marked by a certain degree of instability during their ministerial careers. They also happen to be the three subjects with the least number of coping strategies to mediate the large amount of stress they encountered. Even though they applied certain coping schemes, they were not actively seeking means to moderate stress. Therefore, they were passively-engaged in the use of coping strategies.

Ben, Donna, Evan, and Frank are termed competently-engaged. Ben has served only three churches, one of which has received the benefit of his experience for nearly twenty-five years. Donna’s two decades of ministry have taken place in only three locations and the most abbreviated was four years. She has invested ten years in her current charge. The thirty-four years Evan has given to his profession have been spent in four churches. His shortest span in a pastorate lasted five years while his longest is his current assignment, thirteen years. Frank has only led two churches. The first lasted eighteen years. He moved to his current post just three and a half years ago. These individuals had, by far, more stability in their occupation. It is worthy of note, that they are also the same quartet that had exhibited no less than
eight coping measures and thereby the most instruments to alleviate stress. As a result, they were vigilant in preparing, detecting, and responding to stress and were noted as competently-engaged in coping.

Hank is a solitary figure in the category of moderately-engaged. The twenty-six years Hank has served in the ministry was largely spent moving from church to church as part-time staff while engaged in the business world. In fact, he was enlisted by two churches twice. His full-time service of the past seven years was divided between one church for two years as an associate and his current pulpit for the past five. His current tenure is longer than most of those in the first category, but among the shortest of those established in the second. The former is a positive sign for his future. Hank falls between the other two groups as far as the number of coping schemes with six and that may determine his destiny with his current congregation. In his interview, Hank was transparent enough to admit that he needed help. He gave the impression that he did not want to desert his assignment, but at the same time he underscored the urgency in finding means to mediate his stress. He enlisted the services of a counselor just a few months prior to the interview, something he would never have considered previously. He acknowledged that he needed to develop more leadership within the congregation to share the responsibilities. He also admitted that he is lacking in close relationships, but that is something he sorely covets. He has made attempts to take a day off and his only exercise is riding a motorcycle. The emergence of any two of those four as more dominant coping devices would move him to the latter category with the potential to sustain his current ministry. He was not considered passively-engaged since he acknowledges the need for adaptive behaviors.
Yet, he is not as confident or committed to certain processes and is not, then, competently-engaged. Since he is amenable to new cognitions and recognizes the need to deal effectively with stress, Hank is classified as moderately-engaged. His future decisions in light of dealing with acute and chronic stressors will determine if he moves into passive-engagement or competent-engagement.

Conclusions

The criterion of consistency is emphasized by the comparison of the data to the literature review. Themes from the interviews were identified, and the following discussion utilizes cross-case comparison for the purpose of transferability.

Stressors

Consistent with the literature, the study found that clergy not only have stress similar to that of other professionals, but they also experience those indigenous to their vocation. Further exacerbating this situation is the phenomenon of “stress-induced analgesia” occurring in some professionals, including those in this study (Spaite, 1999, p. 21). According to Spaite (1999), when an individual is subjected to a painful stimulus such as stress, the brain responds by secreting endorphins and thereby decreases the ability to sense pain. A professional, in this case a minister, may work him or herself into a state of pain relief or “stress-induced analgesia” (Spaite, 1999, p. 21). Therefore, when an individual is under stress, he or she may not sense it or at least acknowledge it. However, the cumulative effects of not dealing appropriately with chronic or acute stress may prove disastrous as revealed in the
study. Evan was the only participant with one stressor. The other participants had at least four. Regardless of the number or severity of the stressors, it is possible that all the participants were victims of “ministry-induced analgesia” (Spaite, 1999, p. 23).

Six major stressors emerged from the interviews. These included Change, Leadership, Dissonance, Crises, Expectations, and Loneliness. These codes bore some similarities to the categories embodied in the literature. While all the participants experienced significant stress in their lives I did not try to force their narratives into the designations from other research. Instead, the themes were allowed to develop.

*Change*

Managing or introducing change was one of the leading causes of turmoil. Since pastors assume a new role in a parish inhabited by an entrenched population accustomed to certain traditions and an implied or stated hierarchy, introducing change while establishing a new direction for the congregation can be hazardous for clergy. While a congregation may want a leader that will stimulate growth, he or she must deal with the realities of tradition and territorialism and the fact that idealism does not match reality. According to Drucker (1999), in order to affect change rapidly, a leader “needs close and continuous relationships” (p. 90). Abe, Chet, and Gwen were lacking in that department. Therefore, ministers can grow frustrated in working with a congregation especially if a pastor has unrealistic expectations for that congregation (McMinn et al., 2005). Common mistakes made by church growth
leaders include moving too rapidly, failure to communicate, and lack of follow-through (Rainer, 1994)

“Perhaps because we have relatively little experience in renewing organizations, even very capable people often make at least one big error” (Kotter, 1999, p. 88). Although error may be a strong term for some of the situations, it is worthy of note that change was at the center of many problems. Abe “de-elderized” the church board rather than work through the disagreements. Chet forced the issue of “re-focusing” the mission of the church in the midst of congregational grief over tragic accidents involving church members. Ben, Donna, Frank, Gwen and Hank all dealt with building projects, which created conflict and the resultant stress. Building projects by definition encompass change and usually signify growth. Growth may threaten the influence of senior gatekeepers who therefore voice increased criticism of the pastor. If incumbent members see a pastor as a temporary citizen in their community, they are less likely to support change and his or her new agenda.

Kotter (1999) believes there are certain priorities a leader needs to follow in order to successfully implement change. These include establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, communicating a vision, removing obstacles to the new vision, creating short-term wins, and anchoring the changes in the corporate culture. Wheaton (1997) identified structural constraints as a source of chronic stress in a social structure and that is exactly what a pastor must overcome. One has to deal with the “disjunction between shared goals and means to achieve goals” (Wheaton, 1997, p. 59).
If Kotter (1999) and Wheaton (1997) are accurate in their views of affecting change in an organizational structure, then Abe and Ben are contrasts in how to successfully implement change while encountering resistance. Both were confronted with the realities of structural constraints and both established a sense of urgency. Abe’s church needed finances to survive and Ben’s congregation needed a larger facility in order to accommodate the growing crowds and replace an inadequate building. Abe failed to create a guiding coalition. Ben did not have one initially and his future was somewhat tenuous until he was able to develop leaders that supported him. Abe did not communicate a compelling vision while Ben articulated not only a change in location, but a change of “mindset” for outreach. Ben was able to support his vision with successful fundraising while Abe alienated those of means within leadership positions. Ben had a visual aid illustrating the amount of funds that were being raised for the new building and the membership celebrated not only reaching the capital funds goal, but saw tangible evidence of changed lives in the community and a vibrant growing congregation. Although Abe had sixty-seven new people in a span of six months, these individuals were not welcomed by the incumbent membership. A revolving door resulted and attendance and the atmosphere were stagnant. The corporate culture in Abe’s church was one of distress and conflict. After several years, Ben’s corporate culture moved from an inward congregational focus to one of outward community focus.

As the seven participants identified with change encountered this stressor, it was usually in the context of trying to motivate a congregation to accept a new direction. Drucker (1999) cautioned that doing anything differently always runs into
unexpected difficulties. Knowing what to abandon and when to abandon it has to be practiced systematically otherwise they will always be postponed due to a lack of popularity of new policies. This often seemed to heighten tensions for a minister as he or she tried to introduce or force change. Chet continued to push for a refocusing of the church’s mission before the members had effectively dealt with the emotional toll of the tragedies experienced within the congregation. Frank attempted to innovate at his first church, “but change was not an operative word” amongst the older congregation and he grew increasingly frustrated. Gwen introduced change overload, which included the resignation of an ineffective youth pastor, poor handling of the replacement, and the building of an addition to the church. Even though Hank’s church doubled in attendance, he was unable to build the proper leadership infrastructure to handle the added responsibilities. The failure to properly introduce or manage change led to stress for the participants in the study.

Leadership

With the exception of Evan, all of the participants had their leadership challenged. While this may not be uncommon for a professional, the context of a religious setting creates a bit of an enigma. “The church is a volunteer organization, and there’s no more difficult group to run” (Miller, 1988, p. 72). Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman found when commanding volunteers, “I never did like to serve with volunteers because instead of being governed, they govern” (Miller, 1988, p. 72). A congregation calls a preacher with the intent of following that individual as their designated spiritual shepherd. That relationship may be challenged and even
deteriorate if established stakeholders feel threatened by the charisma or success of the pastor.

Both Oswald (1991) and McMinn et al. (2005) reported that role conflicts were a source of stress. Since ministers are considered a transient population for a local church and often are the newest members of the parish, there is often a lack of agreement over the role of the pastor (Carroll, 2006). Ben mentioned early in his tenure, that the elders in his church told him directly that all he needed to do was preach and teach and they would handle everything else. He definitively stated that their view of his role would need to change because he saw himself as the leader. His philosophy was a contributing factor in an unsuccessful coup attempted later with the intent of removing him as pastor.

Greenleaf (1977) characterized the type of individual that challenges pastoral leadership as an “anti-leader” and one who chooses only to “denigrate leadership” (p. 228). Krause et al. (1998) argued a person’s role in the church exerts two potentially important influences on their relationships with congregants. An individual’s position in the formal hierarchy of the church influences the amount of social support and negative interaction he or she may encounter. Since all of the pastors in the study were new to the formal hierarchies in their respective churches, their leadership styles were challenged based on the maturity level of the membership.

The Hersey-Blanchard situational model (1982) suggests successful leaders adjust their styles based on the maturity of the followers. With that in mind, Hersey and Blanchard proposed four leadership styles: delegating, participating, selling, and
telling. The model postulates that leadership styles can be adjusted as followers change and mature or grow over time (Schermerhorn, 2005).

“Telling” is for low maturity people who are both unable and unwilling to take responsibility to do something and are not competent or confident (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 153). It defines roles and requires directive behavior. Abe, Chet, Gwen and Frank were forced into this approach based on the low maturity levels of their respective congregations. None of the four was able to move his or her congregation beyond this style based on the embedded traditions and entrenched hierarchy and this was a chronic source of frustration.

“Selling” is for low to moderate maturity (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 153). These people are unable but willing to take responsibility and are confident but lack skills. Ben and Donna’s situations would fit into this category. Ben inherited a group that had low skill sets. He was able to not only motivate them, but developed the requisite skill sets in various groups to engage the fulfillment of a shared vision. Donna respected the influence of the matriarch and patriarch of her church. She knew they intimidated the rest of the gatekeepers. Encountering the power of these two individuals was painful. She assumed the style of selling as she learned to work through her Administrative Board.

“Participating” is for moderate to high maturity people (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, p. 153). At this maturity level, they may be able but unwilling to do what the leader wants. They possess a motivational problem. The leader needs to practice double-loop learning to support the followers’ efforts so that the leader and followers share in decision-making. While Hank’s leadership was successful in growing the
numbers of attendees, he detested the idea of having his leadership decisions second-guessed by 300 people. There was a disjunction between their ability, which was evident in the growth of the church and their willingness to move forward to accommodate the growth.

“Delegating” is for high maturity people both willing and able to take responsibility (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982, pp. 153-154). This level requires little direction or support. Since Evan did not mention leadership as a stressor in his interview, it is assumed that his situational leadership style would fit this level. After twenty-five years and the change he fostered in the culture of the congregation, Ben is now operating in this style.

If a pastor is unable or unwilling to adapt his or her leadership style according to the church situation, it could result in acute stress. Miller (2000) cited statistics revealing nineteen percent of pastors indicated they had been forced out of ministry at least once during their career and six percent said they had been fired from a ministry position. Since Abe and Gwen represented twenty-five percent of the respondents and were forced from their pulpits, this was consistent with the literature.

As I reflect on the stories of each pastor, it is interesting to compare each one’s journey and note subtle nuances that may have made a difference at one point or another. It is important to note that preachers are not perfect. This investigation does not seek to project clergy as infallible and incapable of making judgment errors. As a researcher listening as objectively as possible to the narratives, it was not always difficult to see how a participant made a critical leadership error. In that sense, some of the stress reported by the participants was self-inflicted. Both Abe and Chet
impatiently forced their agendas despite a low maturity level exhibited by the followers. Gwen continued apace with little regard for the continual upheaval in her church and her personal life. The two became inexorably entangled. Hank was so intent on increasing the attendance at his church that he neglected to build the proper institutional infrastructure and found himself overwhelmed with responsibilities. It would have been refreshing to hear these individuals admit a mistake, but that was not always forthcoming.

*Dissonance*

Six of the eight respondents shared stories of conflict and difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Hepburn, Loughlin, and Barling (1997) reported these are the types of chronic workplace stressors “associated with detrimental psychological, psychosomatic, and organizational outcomes” (p. 349).

Hoge and Wenger (2005) surveyed former pastors who identified five top issues resulting in conflict. These included pastoral leadership style, finances, changes in worship style, conflicts among staff or clergy and new building or renovation issues. The six respondents in this investigation reported contention in one or more of these arenas. Further, thirty-nine percent of the respondents in Hoge and Wenger’s (2005) study had major conflicts in the last two years of their parish ministry. Consistent with the data collected for this inquiry, mismanaged or unrequited dissonance may lead to termination, resignation, or even an exit from the vocation.
Abe, Ben, Donna, and Gwen were caught in unfavorable social triangles in their churches. Triangles may involve the pastor’s own family, the congregation, and family units within the congregation (Friedman, 1985). Henry, et al. (1991) discovered that in some situations, serious interpersonal problems in the church could result in the loss of one’s home and income and that certainly was the case for both Abe and Gwen. A pastor’s unique role in the parish makes it likely that he or she might bear the stress for relationships within the church. He or she is responsible for keeping the peace. A history of pastor-parish conflict would predict the intensity of the pastor’s involvement in emotional triangles. Gwen certainly was a prime example of this phenomenon as she found herself intertwined with feuding families and an unstable youth pastor. Ben characterized it as dealing with “hard-headed members” and Frank considered the “two percent” that are likely to cause problems. Insurance agents encounter the same sort of stressors with a small representation of customers. Agents are trained that “no matter what you do, approximately 5 percent of your insurance clients aren’t going to be happy. So don’t sweat them” (Miller, 1988, p. 85).

The presence of constant strife may be a reality in any entity, secular or sacred. Frost (2003) labeled this phenomenon “organizational toxicity” (p. 14) and Frank further referred to it as “tribal warfare.” Smith (2004) reported that church dissension takes its toll on pastors. Abe was so devastated by the conflict in his last congregation that he has yet to return to the pastorate.

Acerbic members may take exception to anything a pastor does. As the study revealed, Frank’s job was threatened simply because he took his child for a stroll in
the middle of the afternoon. Ben was falsely accused of malfeasance of church funds. One member distorted the amount of time Donna spent away from church responsibilities with her family. Gwen and her fifty-year-old husband were shocked that members would misrepresent their motives when he volunteered to serve as the interim youth pastor. Her pain was evident, “It just killed us that people were listening to this garbage.” These examples provide further evidence of the misunderstandings and distortions ministers encounter that add to chronic stress.

**Crises**

Seventy-five percent of pastors report they have had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry (FICG, 1991). Tichy & Bennis, (2007) believe good leaders anticipate crises. Further, they “prepare themselves and their organizations to respond effectively and efficiently when they do” (Tichy & Bennis, 2007, p. 210). Half of the participants found themselves in the middle of some sort of crisis over which they had no immediate control. Ben, Chet, Frank, and Gwen were caught in unusual circumstances that were induced by external forces. As in any profession, a leader must have the capability not only to personally cope with the ripple effects of such circumstances, but have the capacity to help people navigate the situation successfully. The ability to be adept at both may determine a lengthy or truncated pastorate.

Important to note in this discussion is the emotional responses of the participants as they processed acute stress induced by a crisis. Karr (1992) indicated that common reactions to trauma among caregivers include depression, self-blame,
guilt, shame, anger, or even aggressive behavior. Ben’s anger was veiled in his “I’m the wrong person to bluff” statement when disgruntled members tried to remove him as pastor. Both Chet and Frank admitted to feelings of anger as well. On the heels of the fatal auto accident and the accidental hanging, receiving news of an anonymous complaint about the worship pastor sent Chet over the edge emotionally. He had a long drive home since he was away at a continuing education seminar and had time to think and deal with his emotions. Frank’s anger at the unknown perpetrator that torched his former church was still evident years after the event. In the aftermath of the fire, Frank had to deal with his own raw emotions as he saw “the building standing there like seeing a dead person. I wanted to crawl under a rock and hide. I think it’s because there was an individual who really destroyed or attempted to destroy something which people held near and dear.” He also acknowledged that he was “royally ticked off” at the arsonist. Since the arsonist was never found there was “no resolution, no closure.” Gwen wrestled with self-blame and guilt over the circumstances involving both the former youth pastor’s exit and the circus surrounding her son that ran away. Even though a great deal of time has passed and she reconciled with her son, she still second-guesses the decisions she made.

Additionally, Paul (1981) recognized the stress a pastor experiences with “crises appropriate to his particular age or stage of life” (p. 18). In the data collected, not only did Abe lose his job, but his wife and daughter lost theirs since they were employed by the church. Ben was a young, virile, and successful pastor when a woman made him the target of her affections. Chet dealt with the aftermath of the fatal accident not only in the church, but with his young daughter as well. Gwen’s
crisis engulfed her college-age son who fell in love with a member of one of the tribal families. Hank’s anxiety and depression came as he entered mid-life.

By the nature of their profession, pastors often live from crisis to crisis with their members since they are often the first ones called (Henry et al., 1991; Reed, 1991). Regular runs to hospitals, funeral parlors, or to a home where a family is in dire need of comfort, creates an enormous demand on a preacher. The unknown requires clergy to be ready psychologically, emotionally, physically, and spiritually to handle any situation with calm, tact, and aplomb. Lost in the turmoil is how a minister is handling his or her own emotions as a result of the event. Whether clergy are directly or indirectly affected by a crisis may determine their ability to moderate the stress. If crises are concurrent which was the case in some of the interviews, it may lead to acute stress, which in turn could produce stress-induced analgesia (Spaite, 1999). The pastor will continue to operate in a world driven by chaos with the potential for disastrous personal results.

Expectations

All of the participants expressed consternation over the claims placed upon them as clergy. Each described in some respect the responsibilities placed on a pastor’s time such as hospital visitation, counseling, sermon preparation and attendance at both church and extra-church functions. Only three admitted to taking a regular day off and that should speak to both the expectations and the time pressures as the pastor of a congregation. Ellison and Matilla (1983) found emotional well-being seems to be negatively related to unrealistic expectations and time constraints.
Ministers report ambiguous work boundaries (Hart, 1984) and again nearly all of the participants mentioned that they are rarely clear of their obligations. Role ambiguity, role overload, and not knowing what’s expected for adequate performance contribute to stress for professionals (Hepburn, Loughlin, & Barling, 1997). Quick, Nelson, and Quick (1990) noted two major sources of stress for an executive are internal and external demands. Donna, Evan, and Hank all admitted to succumbing to the burden of internal as well as external demands. Siburt and Wray (2002) confirmed that ministers believe they must do all things well and must always be available. Nearly all of the pastors revealed that this is presumptive in their vocation. Evan cited the example of the cooperative Vacation Bible School in his community as an illustration of the synergy between internal and external expectations. Since his church was participating and there would be more than enough workers to handle the load, he would not be obligated to attend this year. However, he received a letter in the mail from the directors of the enterprise inviting all clergy to participate in the final night of activities on Friday. There was also an invitation to be present on each of the other nights at some time between six and nine in the evening. Evan reflected on the example and noted that he could succumb to the pressure to attend every night or he could sit in his backyard each of the evenings and feel guilty about not supporting the cooperative outreach venture.

Drucker (1999) admonished, “It is a sound principle that one person in an organization should have only one ‘master’” (p. 13). That is simply not the case in most pastoral situations. Iverson-Gilbert (2003) revealed studies that involved unrealistic and intrusive expectations pressed on clergy by their congregations and the
more demanding the congregation, the lower the pastor’s well-being and life satisfaction, and the higher his or her burnout. Paul (1981) found in the process of caring for others that one of the first results for clergy was that of “chronic overextension” leading to exhaustion (p. 17). The literature revealed that expectations, time demands, and role overload were all culprits when a pastor becomes overwhelmed (Oswald, 1991; Blanton, 1994; Krause, Ellison & Wulff, 1998). Abe was frustrated that his congregation never saw the time he invested in ministry to children. Donna felt pressure to always be available and had trouble saying, “No” to any parishioner. The constant stream of expectations contributed to her diagnosis of high blood pressure. Hank pointed to his head and confessed, “This never shuts down.” The demands placed upon him by both himself and his congregation was overwhelming. Similar to Donna, Hank forthrightly admitted His biggest issue right now is “not knowing how to say, ‘No’” to the demands of his congregation. It contributed to his severe anxiety and depression and contemplation of suicide. Evan was so intent upon satisfying the expectations of others that he found himself stale, lacking energy and creativity. He conceded that about a year and a half ago, “I’m getting tired. I’m getting inefficient and I don’t think I’m functioning well and I’m not sure what to do.” After visiting his physician, he was diagnosed with “compassion fatigue” a product of the excessive demands he was trying to meet on a daily basis.
Loneliness

Research has provided evidence that loneliness may be lethal. McClintock, a University of Chicago psychology professor announced, “The increase in morbidity with social isolation is equal to that of cigarette smoking” (Dingfelder, 2006, p. 111). Although none of the participants in this study expired as a result of loneliness, nevertheless feelings of isolation compounded chronic stress for half of the interviewees.

In one study of ministers, Gross (1989) reported that, “feelings of isolation were closely associated with the stress dimension” (p. 30). Loneliness may accompany the role of leadership, and for fifty percent of the respondents, it had a deleterious effect. Even though Abe had relationships outside the church, his inability or neglect to develop compatriots inside the parish may have proved an impediment to a longer stay. Chet made a conscious decision to handle things alone and his tenure lasted only a year. Though Gwen did not emphasize relationships she had while in the role of senior pastor, it was apparent that she chose a nearly solitary existence for eighteen months in the aftermath of her ouster. That may be a factor in why she has not been able to fully recover from her experience. Hank admitted that serving as a pastor was the loneliest job he ever held. The literature supported this as a common malady among clerics (Oswald, 1991; Krause, Ellison, & Wolff, 1998; McMinn et al., 2005). Eaton and Newlon (1990) found in a study of Protestant clergywomen that fifty-four percent indicated that loneliness was a problem for them. Pastors are reported to often have a lack of personal friends with accompanying feelings of loneliness and isolation (Ostrander & Henry, 1990; London & Wiseman, 2003).
Miller (1988) explained that there is “a tension felt by every minister: the tension between being a pastor (filling the role, performing) and being a person (relating to people as I am within, apart from what role I take or work I do)” (p. 113).

Further exacerbating the problem is the effect pastoral constraints have on clergy marriages. Hall (1997) cited the findings of Warner and Carter (1984) in a study of pastors and their wives in comparison to lay persons for quality of life. Pastor’s experienced significantly more loneliness than those in non-pastoral roles. The researchers interpreted the results to indicate that loneliness is caused by both burnout and diminished marital adjustment. Both of these are fueled by the excessive demands of the pastorate. Hank, in particular, noted that both he and his wife did not experience this when he was an associate, but it emerged once he assumed the leadership role of senior pastor. Gwen and her husband were uninformed about their estranged son’s whereabouts even though he was living with a prominent church member. They only discovered where he was living more by accident than intentional disclosure, evidence of their lack of close relationships within the church community.

Noticeable by its absence was the lack of discourse in the midst of stress among ministerial colleagues in this study. Different participants were hesitant about sharing with others because they do not trust others when they are vulnerable. Ben asked, “Who do you trust?” Chet chose to internalize his struggle. Apparently, Gwen had no one in which she confided until nearly eighteen months after her resignation. A significant number of clients seen by Hank’s counselor are pastors. “That irritates the hound out of me. Why can we not trust each other and talk about it? If we would just, if we could just trust each other.” Hence, the frustration is only compounded as
clergy search for appropriate means to cope with both acute and chronic stress indigenous to their profession.

*Coping Strategies*

Dialogues with the participants revealed eleven coping strategies. These included the Calling to the Profession, Family Support, Prayer, Relationships, Retreats, Scripture, Reading, Visiting a Counselor, Exercise, Day Off, and Leadership Development. Embodied in the literature were coping mechanisms similar to those discovered through analysis of the data.

This study revealed a variety of ways in which clergy may moderate the effects of professional strain. It also indicated that clergy may be engaged at different levels in response to the use of coping behaviors. As presented earlier, three in the study that discussed five or fewer coping processes were classified as passively engaged. These were individuals that may have been uninformed about the value of coping strategies or chose to ignore them. The result was difficulty moderating stress, thereby increasing personal strain with the potential to abruptly end one’s ministerial career.

The second category suggested from the research was the group of four with at least eight coping schemes. They were identified as competently engaged. As pastors, they recognized the value of moderating stress aggressively and appropriately. From his years of professional experience, Evan learned to structure coping devices into his life. Even though he was diagnosed with compassion fatigue, “I think my salvation was having those resources built into my life ahead of time.” He
further emphasized, “I need to take care of me spiritually, personally, emotionally, and the best way for me was contact with other pastors.” Frank concurred, “at age forty-seven, it’s finally sinking into my thick head that self-care is absolutely paramount.” His credo is self-care “because if I don’t take care of me no one’s going to take care of me and if I’m not in good shape then what good am I to anybody?”

A third class deduced by way of data analysis was populated by a solitary figure. Hank practiced six coping methods, had longer tenure than two in the passively engaged segment, but was slow to adopt as many coping procedures as those in the competently engaged section. Therefore, someone at this stage may be characterized as moderately engaged. A minister at this juncture must eventually decide if the coping contrivances bear value or if they are wasted effort. The actions taken will determine if he or she moves to passively engaged or competently engaged in regard to coping instruments.

While the participants may not have control over the stressors they encounter, they certainly have opportunity to develop coping methods. One team of researchers suggested primary prevention as well as secondary and tertiary interventions to mediate stress (Hepburn, Loughlin, & Barling, 1997).

Primary prevention is that which reduces actual stressors in the workplace and are anticipatory actions. For the purposes of this discussion, leadership development and relationships fall into this designation. Pastors that developed leadership teams and benefited from these relationships were more apt to have staying power. The two frequently worked in concert to deflect criticism of the pastor and afforded delegation of responsibility, thereby lessening the time and work constraints on the minister.
Secondary interventions refer to individual stress management. These include the calling to the profession, prayer, Scripture, reading, exercise, and a day off. A church board did not determine the preceding. Others do not exert influence to interfere or deny any of the practices. None of the participants reported denial of a day off or religious standards that abhor exercise. Any of the subjects had to make daily decisions about whether or not to participate in any of these. Obviously sickness or an injury would prevent exercise and an emergency could delay a day off, but that did not preclude restoring or modifying either discipline. Secondary interventions were a pastor’s choice and were stabilizers or corrective in nature.

Tertiary interventions are stabilizers or corrective actions, which a minister may not have readily available, but are still within reason of appropriating. Six pastors mentioned the affirmation of a supportive family. While family may be a source of stress, their value to the participants as a source of encouragement was important. Churches may not be able to afford to send their minister on a retreat or to a conference. Those in the study that took advantage of the opportunities reaped great benefit. The same may be said for a counselor. Some may not have considered this because of a certain stigma attached to it and others may simply have not been able to afford it. The participants that decided to engage in therapy were not disappointed.

The impact of the decision to adopt a particular coping program may have a bearing on a minister’s future in the profession. A closer examination of Table 4.4 and Table 4.5 reveals a possible association between the amount of stress and the number of coping mechanisms utilized. The higher the number of stressors and the lower the number of coping mechanisms may trend toward an abbreviated tenure in a
parish or even an exit from the profession. Based on the research, Table 5.1 illustrates the tendency toward a longer pastorate may be connected to a greater number of coping strategies.

It is noteworthy that Chet, Abe, and Gwen implemented the least number of coping methods and were thereby passively engaged. This resulted in three of the most abbreviated terms of service. Coincidentally, each of them left the senior pastorate. Chet is serving as an associate and both Gwen and Abe had been without assignments for a significant length of time.

By contrast, Donna, Evan, Frank, and Ben employed a plethora of behaviors to manage stress. Since they were competently engaged, the result produced a sustaining effect on the corresponding clergy’s ability to endure in the midst of both chronic and acute stressors of the profession.

As the sole practitioner of moderate engagement, Hank exercised more mechanisms than the passively engaged and was still in the pulpit. He confessed to a desperate need for help to mediate the excessive demands of his vocation. If he continues to add more coping defenses to his arsenal, in all likelihood, he will become competently engaged and extend both his current tenure and his professional career.

Calling to the Profession

In the Protestant tradition, “the church-directed ministry is considered as Christ’s gift to the church for the sake of good order” (Whitlock, 1968, p. 21) The one coping strategy in place for all of the participants was their divine call into ministry. This cannot be understated since Whitlock (1968) emphasized, “The Biblical record
includes the foundation for the concept that a man is ‘called’ or ‘appointed’ to the ministry by God himself” (p. 29). Miller (1988) wrote, “A sense of divine call is the great slab of bedrock upon which ministry rests” (p. 46). Abe, Chet, Evan, Frank, Gwen and Hank mentioned the importance of their call as a factor for enduring the stressors they encountered. In fact, Hank referred to “the ultimate sacrifice” when he responded to the call because he “actually began to follow God now.” His first two years in the ministry, he was invited repeatedly to return to the business world. One in particular was a lucrative offer paying well into six figures. He described a conversation in which God asked him, “Are you gonna do what you’re comfortable with or are you finally gonna trust Me and step out there and preach and be the pastor that I’ve called you to be?” He determined that day to “surrender” and “give it everything I’ve got. I’m gonna work as hard as I did when I started my business.” He has held true to that decision despite some very trying circumstances. “Those truly called understand the conflicts of the Abrahamic call and live their vocation faithfully in spite of pressures” (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991, p. 30). This particular vocation is not described as a job, “but as a way of life or opportunity for unlimited spiritual fulfillment” (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991, p. 34). Evan affirmed that since he followed God’s call, his “life has been very smooth.”

Abe and Gwen were both forced from their assignments, but the sacerdotal onus was so strong on their lives that they wished to return to the pulpit because of their respective calls. “For both the person who stays in pastoral ministry and the person who leaves, God’s call means he is leading them and wants to use them to extend his kingdom” (Miller, 1988, p. 207). In regard to God’s will for his life, Abe
thought he had been “on the shelf long enough.” Gwen wondered if the series of difficulties in her life was God’s way of telling her she needed some “humiliation.” For Abe and Gwen, insight from Greenfield (2005) is worth noting: “For some the call will remain the same; for others there will be a new direction in ministry” (pp. 200-201). None of those in the study, regardless of circumstances, revoked his or her call. This is consistent with Greenfield’s (2005) approach that if one’s call was “valid and real in the beginning, it is still valid and real today. It may simply need reworking, redirecting, and renewal” (p. 201). Chet could certainly attest to this since he recognized that his gifts were better suited in the role of an associate rather than senior pastor.

Carroll (2006) confirmed that reasons a pastor might doubt his call is because of the spouse’s resentment over the family’s financial situation. This, however, never appeared to be a factor in this study. Without exception all of the respondents indicated a clear call to their profession. This appeared to be a sustaining factor despite difficult circumstances. Each of the participants would in all likelihood agree with Ogilvie (1984), “I’ve never known a person to have a nervous breakdown doing what the Lord wills. He never asks us to do more than He is willing to provide strength for us to do” (p. 125).

*Family Support*

All of the participants seemed to have a grasp on the reality that over-functioning in the parish and under-functioning in the home or marriage could lead to collision points (Oswald, 1991). Chet realized during his tumultuous one-year
adventure that he was not giving his family the time they required. To his credit, he took corrective action so that the situation would not deteriorate. Ultimately, he decided it would be not only in the best interests of the church, but of his family if he resigned.

The importance of family support was very evident. Since all of the participants had been married for a substantial amount of time and all had at least two children, it stands to reason they would rely upon the affirmation of a supportive spouse and the respect of their children. This is considered a tertiary intervention since the pastor needs the support of his or her family. Miller (1988) emphasized the role of the minister’s family and spouse as the leading encouragers and simply “loving us as we are” (pp. 119). Mickey and Ashmore (1991) found pastors need to be “open to nurture” from family members particularly after involvement in a church dispute (p. 106).

A leader in the marketplace may experience a failed marriage or have estranged children. Clergy are held to a higher standard because of established biblical mandates to serve as an example to the flock. A divorce may abruptly end a pastor’s career. Ben rebuffed the advances of an enamored female member that would have ravaged his credibility in his church. In Gwen’s case, she and her husband were experiencing marital stress early in their co-pastorate and in counseling realized that her husband was uncomfortable in his professional role. This led to her assignment as the senior pastor and, it may be inferred, saved their marriage.

The same principle is true in regard to the children of the minister. Gwen mentioned the difficulties that arose from her rebellious son and considered resigning
because of the benchmarks established for church leaders in the Scriptures. Those called to shepherd God’s flock should be able to lead their own home and if not, they are disqualified for leadership. “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (I Timothy 3:4-5, NIV).

Six of the subjects referred to the importance of family and the literature confirmed, “that stress related to pastor’s roles in the church can be buffered by involvement in their families of origin” (Henry et al., 1991, p. 945). Ostrander and Henry (1990) based a study upon the Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) of family stress. Stressors were defined as the A-factor; practical and emotional resources were assigned as the B-factor; family perceptions of both stressor and resources equaled the C-factor; which, in turn, jointly determines adaptation or the X-factor. Ostrander and Henry (1990) found that families respond based on the particular stressor, family resources, definition of the stressor, the pileup of strains, and coping skills. Donna’s husband attended Administrative Board meetings to defend her against any unjustified remarks. She noted that he “came up for air” at one meeting because of something that was said about her.

McMinn et al. (2005) discovered clergy with healthy marriages tend to handle the pressure of time, implement effective boundaries, and prioritize time with their families, and refuse to accept expectations of a perfect family. No one in the study confessed to an unhealthy marriage or family at the time of the interview. Any ministry-induced stress in these facets of their lives appeared to be under control.
Prayer

Given the nature of the profession, it was surprising that only five of the eight respondents mentioned intercession as a means of mediating stress. The practice of prayer is encouraged for every believer in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Bible, Luke 5:16 records that Jesus would often get away to a solitary place and make supplication. King David, the apostles, and others in holy writ believed prayer to be part of the main business of life. Early church pioneers such as George Fox, Adoniram Judson, and John “Praying” Hyde were all practitioners. “It was the most serious work of their most productive years” (Foster, 1978, p. 34).

Even though a majority of the participants mentioned prayer as a coping strategy, the fact that it was not a unanimous practice was a revelation and would be considered a secondary intervention. The need for personal spiritual devotion is not considered the same as the professional need to prepare for Bible studies, sermon construction or Sunday School discussions (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991). In an examination of professional managers and how they moderate stress, prayer was a means of mitigating stress (Iwasaki, Mackay, Mactavish, 2005). Gottlieb (1997) found stress is a catalyst for an increase in religious behaviors such as prayer. Bishop (2007) explored the relationship between participation in adult religious education and coping resources used by 126 African-American women from Protestant churches in southeast Mississippi. The purpose was to determine if there was a relationship between stressful life events, certain demographic variables, and the use of coping resources. Results from the qualitative data revealed that church
involvement, reading the Bible, and prayer all played a major role in sustaining these women following significant stress. In another qualitative study of 333 African-American women and how they coped with racism and sexism, researchers found a major resource upon which the women relied was prayer (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Some research uncovered that at least twenty minutes of meditation is necessary to reap the full benefits (Leatz & Stolar, 1993). For those in the study that acknowledged the practice apart from professional performance, there was no particular standard mode or length of prayer stipulated by the practitioners. Among the participants prayer took place in a variety of settings such as in the car, while exercising, and even while lying in bed. This was consistent with a study of seventy-eight counselors, doctors, nurses and volunteers who worked in Arizona hospice programs. Researchers found there was little tendency to adopt a fixed position or particular location, but that it was a significant activity of everyday life, “an act of communication with a higher being on a very personal level” (Schneider & Kastenbaum, 1993, p. 476).

Items discussed or considered in a time of prayer were not delineated by the participants in this study, but it was deemed a necessary practice. Miller (1985) discovered the necessity of prayer for ministers in whatever form, whether journaling or praying with someone. Hank mentioned that his most effective means of intercession is through journaling. He is able to think more clearly as he writes his prayers to God. “Discouragement over their ministry…has for some pastors become the first item on the prayer agenda” (Miller, 1985, p 116).
Hulme (1985) cautioned that “the stress that clergy feel, like the stress that others feel, can block one’s awareness of God” (p. 60). That is a particularly dangerous position for a pastor since a minister is considered God’s spokesperson. Prayer helps clergy to focus on the positive because “to get our breath we need to hope, and prayer helps us envision that hope” (Hulme, 1985, p. 59). Prayer and meditation improve both concentration and creativity (Leatz & Stollar, 1993; Foster, 1978). Ben was driven to prayer because of the chronic and acute stressors he faced in his church. Ben stated, “We built in the culture of our people a prayer base and it was through this stress that sent me to that position.” So Ben not only considered intercession a priority, he enlisted and trained members to engage in the same practice. He even engaged in fasting several days a week to increase the intensity of his prayer times. He confessed that it “cleaned me out” emotionally so that he did not attack those that were attacking him.

Frank’s approach to prayer and meditation may have been a bit unorthodox, but it worked for him as he sought perspective in the midst of troubling times. As a practitioner of karate, “katas” or the various forms and movements in karate, are a “very spiritual” time for him to pray. Hulme (1985) reminded ministers facing stress: “Meditation is a way of listening to the Spirit, of observing God’s hand in our life, of slowing the frenetic pace of our minds, of being still in the presence of God” (p. 72).

**Relationships**

Relationships whether inside or outside the congregation were significant for sustaining the quality of life and ministry for six participants and this should be
qualified. An absence of relationships inside the parish led to a lack of advocates for both Abe and Gwen. Even though they are listed in Table 4.5, Abe’s moderating relationships were outside the congregation and that was a mitigating factor in his abbreviated tenure. Gwen also did not mention sustaining relationships within the membership, although she now has an accountability partner and participates in a multi-denominational as well as her own denomination’s women in ministry groups. It should be noted that these additional resources are aiding in her recovery.

Several studies found an individual’s participation in other significant relationships should moderate the correlation between emotional triangles and stress response (Cummins, 1988; Ikun, Sandler & Baumann, 1988; Maton, 1989). Quick, Nelson and Quick (1990) mentioned of all the stress prevention techniques suggested by executives, social support was most critical. Similarly, the greater the number of supportive relationships in the congregation and the more satisfied the pastor is with these relationships, the more positive is his or her attitude (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003).

It seemed a necessity for clergy with extended parish tenures to have persons both individually and collectively upon whom they could rely for moral support and advice. This was also designated as a primary prevention technique. Donna has a group of ladies with whom she meets weekly and they are members of her church. She has no reservations about transparency with them. She considers it a safe place to share her thoughts and feelings. Evan has a range of groups that include a book club to fellow pastors that meet for prayer. He also participated with pastors in group therapy unafraid to inform their colleagues of any difficulties they might be facing.
Frank considers his wife and parents his primary means of social support. When an individual is engaged in a high stress environment, affirmation from friends, family and neighbors is necessary to provide support and nurture (Leatz & Stollar, 1993; Gottlieb, 1997). Other researchers have found strong evidence for the priority of social relationships. Social support is an important buffer to blunt the adverse effects work stress may have on one’s health (Quick, Quick, Nelson & Hurrell, 1997).

Not all of those included in a cleric’s inner circle were necessarily from his or her church or even in the same town. Ben has friends in whom he confides that are mostly out-of-town confidantes. In fact, a lack of trust was mentioned amongst ecclesiastics as well as a factor in why some did not confide to people in their congregations. Hank was the only one that did not mention any extra-familial relationships, but yearned to be mentored by an experienced, successful pastor. This could be interrelated to the onset of loneliness as a stressor (Oswald, 1991). The literature revealed the need for a pastor to have some form of social support in order to maintain his or her well-being (Henry, et al., 1991; Oswald, 1991; Miller, 1988; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003).

For those participants that either did not have a network of care or did not have a fully developed coalition in which to confide, they may have lost an opportunity to reduce their level of stress particularly from a decision-making perspective. The importance of trusted advisers and a social network cannot be underestimated (Greenfield, 2005; Tichy and Bennis, 2007). Miller (1988) concluded that clergy need several people that will provide counsel as empathetic listeners and express as well as practice loyalty. With a colleague present with whom to vent and
facilitate even critical self-examination, some of the participants may have accepted blame rather than projecting anger or fault towards another individual or circumstance. Frost (2003) understood the value of this because the “meaning of the experience and the reasons for it can be revisited and given a more helpful and empowering interpretation” (p. 83). The value of venting in a safe place or to a trusted confidante cannot be understated for preachers. Ben, Donna, Evan, and Frank were the ministers in the study with the longest tenures and they were also the ones with healthy relationships either in the congregation or outside the congregation or both. Engaging a trusted confidante in discourse about self-doubt, important decisions, or critical self-assumptions was advantageous in alleviating stress.

**Retreats**

Taking vacation, some sort of retreat or attending a conference had a positive effect on more than half of the subjects in blunting the noxious effects of stress. This may indicate that just a change of pace is helpful for a minister to recuperate, receive inspiration, or gain perspective.

Those involved in care-giving professions are under heavy mental and emotional demands. Gottlieb (1997) reported that family caregivers who use respite services are able to return to a state of emotional equilibrium. Taking advantage of this practice may involve a number of cognitive devices, but it is important to escape the offending stimulus. This provides a temporary altering of one’s circumstances to ignore the tensions.
Recalling the discussion of the stress-induced analgesia phenomenon by Spaite (1999), clergy under stress may have worked themselves into a state of pain relief without realizing it. Once a pastor finally does go on vacation two days may pass before the endorphins dissipate and then overwhelming fatigue emerges. In one survey of pastors, taking vacations was listed in the top three factors important for staying power (Miller, 1988). Frank was one participant in particular who unequivocally stated that he jealously guards his vacation time with his family because of its restorative powers. Chet also mentioned that a timely and lengthy vacation reconnected him with his family following an extended period of chronic stress. In a survey of 700 pastors from eleven Protestant denominations, eighty-one percent set aside a block of time for vacation. Of those, forty percent took a month away while twenty-six percent took a three week vacation (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991). Leatz and Stolar (1993) revealed a growing trend among business people to take several two or three-day breaks instead of the traditional one or two longer vacations each year.

Oswald (1991) believed there was a lack of pastoral care due to a lack of opportunities for extra-dependence, which meant clergy need opportunities to de-role and be taken care of. They need spiritual nurture and adequate rest. It is worthy of note that most of those utilizing this practice experienced some type of epiphany or was given some sort of strategy to help manage stress. At a five-day conference on prayer, Ben was exposed to principles that he adopted as a regular practice. His zeal was so great, he purchased materials from the conference that he reviewed repeatedly and had been a great source of strength and wisdom for him. A series of both acute
and chronic stressors had grown nearly unbearable for Chet and his wife. Though, he was ready to resign, he and his wife reconsidered because of the encouragement they received from a renowned inspirational speaker. He returned to his church with renewed vigor. Donna learned techniques she could implement to manage stress and also adopted a new approach to her role as a pastor. When she attended a stress management retreat, she confessed that it was good to hear other ministers were dealing with similar struggles. The experience proved beneficial because she decided to “quit internalizing everything as though it’s your fault.” She not only appropriated techniques in how to relax, but also learned to say, “No”, and decided to start delegating responsibilities to the membership.

Part of Hank’s catharsis occurred when he attended a conference and identified with a seminar speaker. Hank burst into tears at the conference when the facilitator confessed to the same feelings and anxieties Hank had suffered. It was a valuable revelation because he no longer viewed himself as a pariah. The conference provided a variety of materials that were instrumental in educating him about mediating stress and seeking the help he desperately needed.

Sabbaticals have long been a part of university life for the purpose of rest, reflection, and revitalization (Quick, et al., 1997). Hansel (1979) recommended that pastors be given the opportunities for a sabbatical as a break from ministry that is longer than the standard vacation. Evan participated in two sabbaticals that restored his energy and creativity. The pastoral elders granted him several weeks of leave to be used at his discretion. He determined that he would divide the time between two summers. The first summer, he and his wife went to a clergy retreat center in the
Midwest where they had no responsibilities. The only requirement was to eat one meal a day with the rest of those at the retreat center in the dining hall. Otherwise, they were free to pursue whatever means of rest or relaxation they preferred including a variety of outdoor activities. The second summer, Evan was provided the use of a friend’s home on a lake in a secluded portion of the state. The only request made by the home-owner was that Evan would mow the grass while he stayed at the home. Both of these extended leaves were redemptive in terms of renewing his energy and restoring his passion. Since sabbaticals and in some cases retreats would often require the approval of a church administrative body, this strategy would be classified as a tertiary intervention.

Scripture

Another startling insight from the study was that only five of the participants mentioned the consumption of scripture to alleviate stress. As with prayer, the devotion to Bible reading which has been the guidebook for Christ followers for centuries would seem a given. When it comes to stress, even researchers acknowledge it causes an increase in religious behaviors including scripture reading (Gottlieb, 1997).

Donna and Frank combined devotional time with sermon preparation. Neither of them expressed a necessity to combine the two for expediency. It just seemed to be a personal preference. Donna thinks about a particular passage of scripture that she gains from personal meditation and allows that to marinate during the week. Eventually, she develops that into her sermon for the Sunday service. Foster (1978)
among others cautioned against this practice for ministers. “In the study of Scripture a high priority is placed upon interpretation: what it means. In the devotional reading of Scripture a high priority is placed upon application: what it means to me” (p. 69). Bridges (2003) recommends beginning each day with thirty minutes devoted to reading the Bible “to allow it to minister to me” (p. 276). This exercise is meant not only to foster but express dependence upon God (Bridges, 2003). “An erosion of spiritual vitality sets in when the spiritual leader does not take care of her/his own relationship with God” (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991, p. 115).

Abe, Ben, and Hank appeared to understand the priority of personal cultivation of Scripture knowledge separate from scholarly preparation for the congregation. It was mentioned as a separate source of inspiration or guidance. Foster (1978) would agree since “the most difficult problem is not finding time but convincing myself that this is important enough to set aside the time” (p. 70). Therefore, this is considered a secondary intervention. It would seem that all of the clergy interviewed would refer to the Bible as a source of strength in times of difficulty, but that was not the case.

Abe appeared to be an enigma in regard to the effect Scripture had in helping him. At one point he confessed, “I don’t know what to tell anybody that is looking for direction in their lives. I can give you all the pat answers. I could tell you all the Scriptures, but I’m not sure it works. It hasn’t been workin’ for me lately.” He followed that comment with “there’s a Scripture in the King James that ‘God will perfect the things that concern me’ and I believe that.” It was clear that Abe was still
working through his pain especially since he was no longer in his chosen field of work. What is notable is that he had not forsaken the Bible as a resource.

Hank confessed that if “I find myself getting weak, find myself not being in the Word” then all the expectations and demands of his profession “can drive me absolutely insane.” Sandwiched around his journaling time, Hank spends time “reading the Word before and after.” He went on to say, “I can’t imagine what would happen if I didn’t have God’s Word, if I didn’t have the journaling, if I didn’t have the relationship” with God. Considering that this participant nearly took his own life, it is remarkable the power that the Holy Bible had in causing him to reconsider his decision.

**Reading**

Another secondary intervention for individual stress management was reading. Reading extra-biblical material was noted as a release and a source of practical knowledge for Ben, Chet, Evan, and Gwen. Tomes consumed included those on theology, counseling, relationships, leadership, prayer, and fiction.

Ben made it a point to read good books to alleviate stress. He emphasized that reading was a regular practice, but he perusing religious books was his preference. They “were motivational kind of things” that inspired him in his work. Maxwell was one of his favorites because of the practical leadership principles offered as well as general advice for success in life and the profession. Bonhoeffer was another favorite of Ben’s. He viewed reading as an escape because when he and his wife were first
married “we didn’t have a whole lot of money to be doin’ a whole lot of exquisite
vacations.” As a result, he started reading as an economical diversion.

Like Ben, Evan is a voracious reader. Shortly after he arrived at his current
parish, a neighboring pastor invited him to join a book club. The club was comprised
of other pastors with a similar interest in reading non-theological books, “although
books that have some relevance to the theological issues.” They started meeting once
a month at a local restaurant to discuss the books and that has continued for nearly
twelve years. “That has been great.” In addition, Evan along with four other pastors
applied for and was awarded a continuing education grant from the Lilly Foundation.
For two years, they would go to a retreat setting, eat their lunches, and discuss for
four hours the assigned topic. “The first year we studied leadership. The second year
we studied the emerging church.” Though the grant expired, they still keep meeting to
discuss the books they read and “that kind of contact was good.” He receives ideas
and motivation from his reading as well as stimulating discussion with his colleagues
that breaks the routine of work.

Even though Chet and Gwen mentioned reading, they did not seem as zealous
about the practice. Nevertheless, Chet classified himself as a reader. It was an
alternative activity to get his mind disengaged from the demands of his profession,
“step away on occasion by reading.” Gwen uses “escape mechanisms like doing
crossword puzzles or reading fiction that kind of thing.” As simple as it may sound,
poring over books is an inexpensive and stimulating diversion from the strains of
work.
Leatz and Stolar (1993) found reading to maintain appropriate health for those in a high-stress environment. Consuming various forms of literature was viewed as one of life’s “guilty pleasures” (p. 183). This also included solving crossword puzzles. Reading books, magazines, even pamphlets are recommended as a stress management skill (Bobo, 1987; Thames and Thomasson, 2002). Portman (1985) reported on a study conducted among 132 psychological consultants on occupational stress. In response to the survey, the consultants revealed they were very successful alleviating consulting-related stress with reading and listening to music as the most frequently reported methods.

A national study of 128 superintendents from urban schools and college of education deans investigated strategies for coping with stress through self/inner development (Metzger, 2003). Self/inner development was defined with such terms as balance, self-actualization, and personal improvement. Six common practices were identified with reading rated as the second most frequently mentioned diversion. The diversity of interests included not only some of the same topics as the participants in this study, but biographies, news, and poems as well. The purpose was to discover ways to blunt burnout among leaders.

Counselor

McBurney (1985) wrote, “Ministers are human beings, and the quicker they recognize their humanity, face their limitations, and get help when they need it, the sooner they begin to escape terrible consequences” (p. 67). Frame and Shehan (1994) found seeking professional counseling for their own problems was not a typical
coping response for relocating clergy and their families. Clergy felt the pressure to maintain the appearance of a problem-free life. Based on their findings it appeared imperative that counselors offer stress management training for clergy whose pile-up of demands may strongly affect their well-being.

Chet, Evan, Gwen and Hank all sought counseling help either for themselves, on behalf of their family, or for their marriage. All of them were inclined to visit a counselor as a reaction to difficulty.

Evan initially took advantage of the opportunity to participate in a therapy with a group of fellow pastors. It held great value for him since he felt it was a safe place to vent to colleagues and all of them were able to address various issues in their lives. He later sought guidance when he sensed that he was losing momentum in his work and suffering from a lack of creativity. Any stigma attached to seeking professional help was not a factor for Evan and his long tenure at his current church lends credence to this coping method as a valuable resource to mediate stress.

Chet’s benefit was rather indirect since he sought help for his nine-year-old daughter. She had trouble coping with the aftermath of the accident involving the youth pastor’s family, which took place in the driveway of Chet’s home. Even though the family was not home at the time of the tragedy, his daughter’s bedroom was in the front of the house nearest to the road and she just could not sleep and began to “just withdraw.” She was “wrestling with the death of the sixteen-month-old child which she just [was] beginning to know.” He took her to a local counselor for a few months to help her process all that had happened. The day of the accident, Chet did not return home until late in the evening. Amazingly, his daughter was still awake and kept
asking Chet how he was doing. They held each other and Chet admitted “that was the first time she’d seen me in the level of stress…I don’t know that she’d ever seen me cry.” He surmised that it was that moment that “really pushed her over the next few months” and resulted in the need for professional therapy.

Gwen and her husband visited a counselor for assistance with “some marital stressors” during their time as co-pastors. The counselor diagnosed that her husband was “living a life incongruent with who he was.” Gwen’s husband admitted that he did not want to be a pastor, but succumbed to what Whitlock (1968) phrased the “self-coercive subduing of the reality of his own limitations” in church ministry that could prove disastrous for both a pastor and the congregation (p. 109). To his credit, he stepped aside as co-pastor and Gwen assumed the senior pastorate. Apparently, the positive result of that experience gave Gwen confidence to engage the services of a counselor after her son’s absence. She has continued to make monthly visits to ameliorate stress.

The topic of stress in the pastorate was so personal and relevant to Hank he admitted that was why he was willing to participate in this study. “That reason is such an issue to me right now” because for the last two and a half months he has been in “counseling for burnout.” In his battle with extreme anxiety and depression, he was considering a thirty day sabbatical and “nobody here has a clue.” He “travels two and a half hours to see somebody” and has yet to work through the issues. He was motivated to see a psychiatrist after two significant events. The first was attending a conference where a colleague emerging from an episode of severe stress recommended the value of professional help. Next came the night when “I found
myself sitting in the dark” with a gun for three hours, “staring out the window, totally
dumb and decided that I was done.” He admitted, “I started feeling stupid.” He could
not comprehend how everything could go so well, “it makes no sense to me.” The
therapist has helped him work through his family history of depression, bipolar
issues, and suicide. As he began to talk about these areas, he understood not only the
spiritual aspects but that “there can be an illness” even a “chemical issue.” Even
though he was “a little leery” he sees a counselor and is referred to a psychiatrist for
medication. When I spoke with Hank in a follow-up discussion, the sessions as well
as the medication were efficacious in moderating his stress.

As a tertiary intervention, some pastors may be averse to visiting a
professional therapist due to some stigma. Whether short or long-term, private or
group, “nothing is shameful or weak about deciding to explore therapy as an option –
in fact, it is a sign of strength and self-protection” (Leatz & Stolar, 1993, p. 198). It
should be considered a safe place with the opportunity for new cognitions. “Most
counseling is aimed at reducing or controlling the stress response by providing
information and insight about the stressor or the individual’s reasons for perceiving a
certain condition as a stressor” (Quick, et all, 1997, p. 260). Whitlock (1968) posited
that psychotherapy has value for a minister in helping to understand oneself in
relation to the ministry assignment. For a wounded minister, such as those in this
study, Greenfield (2005) recommended “competent and spiritually sensitive
professional counseling” (p. 182). Gross (1989) asserted that pastors suffering stress
need the services of a professional counselor as part of a program to cope with
“bottled-up feelings and the burnout dimension” (p. 30).
Exercise

Reed (1991) found among those in the helping professions in rural areas that beginning regular exercise among other coping mechanisms brought more satisfaction in their work and helped to sustain them in their jobs. As a secondary intervention, fifty percent of the participants mentioned the need or use of exercise as a mechanism for handling stress.

Ben and Evan both mentioned the regular discipline of simply walking. Ben walks outdoors year round despite the snow and cold of the winter. He enjoys going early in the morning before anyone else is on the street. It invigorates him. Evan takes advantage of his flexible scheduling as a pastor and will escort his wife on a walk in the middle of the day. This serves multiple purposes. It gives him an opportunity to not only exercise, but clear his mind, and spend quality time with his wife.

Chet spent hours on his bicycle to alleviate stress, but was frustrated by his inability to ride during months dominated by inclement weather. The lack of opportunity to cycle was a factor in his not being able to manage his stress well. He neglected to explain why he did not purchase either a stationary bike for his home or a gym membership for the winter months especially if exercise was a favorite release for him.

Frank acknowledged that “exercise is enormous for me” in his holistic approach to self-care. “Martial arts is a very spiritual thing for me. It’s a form of prayer and that is extremely helpful” in coping with stress. He will spend a half an hour on the elliptical machine and then lift weights and lists exercise as one of his main coping mechanisms.
In a series of studies on the effects of jogging or brisk walking on depression, it was found that regular exercise can sometimes work as effectively as antidepressant drugs (Servan-Schreiber, 2004). It is curious that Hank did not mention this as a recommendation from his therapist. He admitted that he could not justify the time for exercise because of his schedule.

An increase in one’s fitness level has multiple benefits such as increasing energy level, lower blood pressure, increase stamina, improve one’s outlook, decrease appetite, and reduce excessive stress (Cotton, 1990; Leatz & Stolar, 1993). Quick, et al., (1997) credited physical fitness with improved feelings of self-worth, improved memory, decreased absenteeism, improved performance, and lower attrition. Neither excessive hours nor intensity are prerequisites to receive the benefits of exercise. Studies confirm that those who spend thirty minutes daily in activities such as walking or gardening receive most of the benefits of those engaged in more rigorous diversions (Karr, 1992; Metzger, C., 2003).

**Day Off**

Only three of the preachers reported a regular day off as part of his or her routine. It would seem that a regular day away from work would be considered a primary prevention, but in this study it appears to be a secondary intervention. The fact that five of the participants neglected this discipline is alarming. This may be another contributing factor to abbreviated pastorates. Since the shepherd is on call for the flock twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, it appears the
pressures are inescapable in the ministry. Yet, even Jehovah rested after creating the world in six days and commanded His followers to follow suit in Exodus 20:8-11.

It may go a long way toward lengthening ministerial tenures and improving quality of life issues, if congregations understood the need for boundaries in this area for their pastor. Few churches give their pastors two full days off and ministers never have a three-day weekend (Chun, 2006). Both Donna and Hank admitted that they are always thinking about their work. It is unfair to ask or expect any professional to work constantly. The mind and body simply cannot function properly under those impossible demands. Wood (2001) reported that seventy-five percent of pastors spend less than one evening per week with spouse or friends. It is inconceivable that any professional would be expected to maintain that pace of life indefinitely. Gross (1989) suggested that pastors should negotiate with their church leaders a day off each week. Hansel (1979) designated it as “one Sabbath day per week” (p. 123). The idea that this practice is even called into question for a preacher instead of an understood benefit gives insight into the demands placed upon clergy.

Hank’s narrative is a prime illustration of the disastrous consequences of one’s system suffering from overload. He did not list a day off as part of his stress reduction regimen and he paid the price. Only Donna, Evan, and Frank took advantage of this practice and they guarded it jealously. Coincidentally, they also had three of the longest pastorates in the study. “Routine time off is essential for inner healing and itself is a form of spiritual retreat” (Mickey & Ashmore, 1991, p. 115)
Leadership Development

The final coping mechanism mentioned by only a trio of pastors was leadership development, but it should be considered a primary prevention. This component may be tied to the importance of relationships inside the church and as a resolution to leadership issues on the stressor side. Based on their study of thousands of leaders, Tichy and Bennis (2007) emphasized that, “winning leaders are teachers. They drive their organizations through teaching, and they develop others to be leaders/teachers” (p. 51)

Ben made leadership development a priority when he arrived twenty-five years earlier. Any group he could gather regardless of gender or age, he invested time and energy to birth his vision and cultivate leaders. It paid dividends in a thriving church and a cadre that now works together to impact the local community and beyond. Tichy and Bennis (2007) characterized this as Teachable Points of View. “TPOVs are what enable leaders to take the valuable knowledge and experience they have stored up inside their heads and teach them to others” (p. 51). It contributes to enlisting and energizing others to make the proper decisions and fulfill the vision. Greenleaf (1977) characterized clergy as “Servant –leaders” who wish to help others to “a larger and nobler vision and purpose than they would be likely to attain for themselves” (p. 226).

Since the church is considered a non-profit organization comprised primarily of volunteers with varying levels of commitment as well as skill-sets, it represents challenges for the most experienced leader. Leadership should not be considered an individual work because in the church that can prove to be a mortal mistake. Abe,
Chet, and Gwen were all victimized by neglecting leadership development and the result was tumultuous and perorated pastorates.

A minister must understand that when he or she assumes the pulpit of a local congregation, he or she is only granted the position as the leader. Developing leadership allows the pastor to gain currency more quickly among the membership as he or she invests in the production of leadership teams. Frank is an illustration of this principle. During his college days, he was a foreign exchange student and in seminary he served an internship in eastern Pennsylvania. In both instances, Frank learned to respect traditions and “learn the language.” Those experiences served him well as an “outslander”, to coin a Dutch term, and those principles carried over into his ministry. He learned the value of building “circle the wagon” people and working with “key influencers” to move the congregation in the proper direction. Dym and Hutson (2005) characterized this type of effective leadership “more as a mobilization of organizational or community resources to achieve collective ends” (p. 10).

Returning from her retreat, Donna realized the importance of delegation. As simple as it sounds, Gross (1989) recommended sharing the workload with the congregation. Donna realized immediate benefits since it resulted in her attendance at fewer committee meetings and releasing responsibility to others in the areas of their giftedness. It has made her life much more enjoyable and her ministry more effective.

Based on the data analysis, Table 5.1 illustrates a trend toward a longer pastorate may be connected to the utilization of a greater number of coping strategies to mediate stress. Those clergy with the least amount of coping schemes experienced abbreviated tenures.
**TABLE 5.1**

Association Between Coping Strategies and Length of Tenure

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#CS = Number of coping strategies.

Tenure = Years of service at church.

G* = Gwen served eight years as senior pastor after serving eight years as co-pastor.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Five issues worthy of further examination surfaced as a result of this inquiry.

The first of these is the tenuous nature of a pastor’s first two years. Donna, Evan, and Hank seemed to escape major difficulties in this critical span. However, the rest of the
participants faced a severe crisis or conflict within the first year or two that was an early test of their leadership instincts. Ben, Chet and Frank took divergent paths based on their respective responses to dire straights in their rookie year. Abe and Gwen both saw their leadership tested in the second year and the negative ramifications dealt their respective influence a blow. While Ben and Frank experienced substantial pastorates; Chet, Abe, and Gwen were unable to overcome the severity of their circumstances. Inquiry into practices of long-tenured clergy and how they develop relationships within the congregation may prove beneficial. Denominations would do well to understand the fragile nature of the first two years of the call. If pastors do not want to keep relocating and congregations do not want to keep searching for a new preacher every two years, then steps should be taken to see that both entities are aware of the delicate balance required to develop a healthy relationship and long-term commitment.

A second item that warrants further study is how a pastor’s spouse responds to clergy stress. This may provide needed insight that would help others in the same circumstance. Since this study included the perspective of female clergy and their male spouses, further exploration may provide valuable information for those in a profession that has its own unique marital pressure points.

Third, consideration of what determines a proper pastor-parish match may be worthy of investigation. Two participants were unaware of the poor intra-church relationships existing in the congregation prior to their arrival. A third interviewee was selected pastor as a means of convenience. These actions resulted in difficult situations for both the pastor and the congregation. Crowell (1992) noted a 1984
survey, which indicated that sixty percent of terminated Southern Baptist pastors were unaware that the churches that forced them out did the same to one or more of their predecessors. An examination of what constitutes proper procedures and vetting of candidates as well as matching the temperament and history of the church body may prove useful across denominational lines. Helpful insight for more successful pastor-parish matches may come from an examination and application of Hersey and Blanchard’s Situational Theory. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) suggested that successful leaders adjust their styles based on the maturity of their followers. Their situational theory was based on the task and relationship behavior provided by the leader and the readiness or maturity of followers willing to cooperate.

A source of difficulty for five of the participants was the leadership of a building project. A fourth area of research should be the best practices for those that have led, endured, and completed one or more building projects with the same congregation. While clergy may be trained in saving souls and building a congregation, many seem ill-equipped for the rigors of a building project to accommodate growth or to replace antiquated facilities. Research into how the dynamics of a congregation changes to assimilate growth, raise capital funds, and accomplish the formidable task of construction would be compelling.

Finally, further investigation into the correlation between the number of coping mechanisms and how it affects the length of a pastor’s tenure at a congregation or continued involvement in the profession may be informative. Providing the necessary resources to cope with clergy stress for every pastor benefits the entire congregation. Quick, Nelson and Quick (1990) indicated that
“organizations must be concerned about how the executive deals with stress because he/she sets the tone for the way in which individuals within the organization handle stress” (p. 65). Local congregations are culpable since they are contributors to clergy stress. Providing education to parish populations about simple and cost-effective practices such as guarding the pastor’s day off or allowing a minister to take occasional breaks from work that are not considered vacation time would benefit both the minister and the members. Since many of the pastors in this study were refreshed by significant breaks in the schedule, it would stand to reason that a congregation interested in professional competence would allow their pastor regular breaks from the routine. This enables the minister to gain proper rest, maintains perspective, and allows other pursuits that stimulate creativity.

It should be the goal of each denomination to inform their clergy of books, internet sites, counseling centers, retreats, or instructional videos and provide guidance for managing clergy stress. Denominations have a history of emphasizing competence in the pulpit and statistical growth often to the detriment of the mental, emotional, and physical toll of its practitioners. Reed (1991) reported on a program to help community agencies assist in managing stress among those in the helping professions. The advantage of support groups, changed eating habits, and regular exercise manifested itself in such a way that professionals gained more satisfaction in their work and stayed on the job. Provision should be made to not only educate preachers about the value of self-care, but underscore its value in building long-term parish relations. The ministers in this study with the least amount of coping strategies appeared to experience the most contracted tenures.
Seminaries and religious institutions should recognize the critical nature of this phenomenon and create curriculum to inform pastors about the nature of clergy stress. Both Donna and Frank admitted that their ministerial training did not prepare them for the unique situations they faced in their profession. Shelley (1985) quoted a pastor with a similar sentiment after a forced exit: “In seminary I learned how to discuss infra and supralapsarianism, and yet in thirty years of ministry, I’ve never had to use that knowledge. But I’ve encountered lots of unreasonably angry people, and I was never ever warned they’d be out there” (p. 13). Continuing educators would do well to create seminars and materials to assist practitioners in the art of handling clergy stress. A helpful strategy might be to teach clergy how to anticipate criticism, understand what it means personally and professionally, and respond constructively.

This study illustrated that ministers must have a significant coping program in place in order to survive and mediate the effects of stress. The neglect of such a practice would surely have been of benefit to avoid the nervous breakdown suffered by Frank’s friend who then eventually left the vocation. Frank wished to avoid that fate and “become another statistic in clergy world.” Perhaps even more telling is the assessment Hank made when looking for a seasoned pastor to serve as his mentor: “They’re hard to find. I found a lot of older pastors, but not that are still vibrant.”

Summary and Final Notes

This chapter interpreted the plausibility and efficacy of coping strategies to moderate stress in the lives of eight participants. Six primary stressors were discussed
as well as eleven coping strategies implemented by the participants in the context of
the literature review.

Three categories of clergy and the number of coping measures implemented
were deduced. Participants were classified as passively engaged if they practiced five
or less artifices, competently engaged for using eight or more, and moderately
engaged with six coping mechanisms. A possible relationship was shown between the
number of stressors and the number of coping strategies implemented by participants.
Those which took advantage of fewer coping strategies appeared to experience
shorter terms in their respective churches.

Five recommendations for further study were provided. These included
suggested explorations into improving the first two years of a pastor’s relationship in
a new assignment, moderating stress for a clergy spouse, increasing the success rate
of pastor-parish matches, and informing best practices for capital projects. Finally,
further investigation into the association between the number of coping mechanisms
and their efficacy in moderating clergy stress and extending pastoral careers is
warranted.

This has been a cathartic journey for me as a social scientist. As a pastor, I felt
empathy with much of the pain and passion of the respondents. I was also stunned by
the recalcitrant behavior on the part of congregants as well as the uncontrollable
events these participants endured. This study revealed that neither churches nor their
pastors are perfect. While that may seem like a simplistic statement, it would behoove
both to extend more grace to one another. In the great scheme of things, the church
was created to be an extension of God Himself, not a battleground for ideologies,
man-made ritual, or personal aggrandizement. My hope is that this study will provide insight that will assist the academy and clergy in gaining a new perspective on coping with the inherent strains of the profession and improve the quality of life for ministers.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on April 9, 2008 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record.

Editorial notes:
1. In your Informed Consent document, you state that "your interview will be written and edited for a graduate class project." Please clarify if by written you mean transcribed. Please clarify if this study is being conducted solely for a class project. If so, this study does not need the definition of "research" and does not require IRB approval.
2. If you plan to disseminate your findings (i.e., contribute to generalizable knowledge through publication or presentation of your findings beyond the classroom), it will be meet the definition of research and will require IRB approval. If so, your study will be considered for exemption under the second exemption category, as you propose to conduct surveys/interviews/observations with adults either in an anonymous fashion or on a topic that will not reveal sensitive information about the participants that could place the participants at risk.
3. In Section 2.3, you state that "the cognitively impaired and prisoners will be excluded." Please clarify how you will assess for these exclusion criteria. You might consider including a statement to that effect in your introductory script to allow potential participants meeting those criteria to self-select out of the study without disclosing this information to the researcher.

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project. Please contact Melanie Morris at (765) 285-5070 or mlmorris@bsu.edu if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

cc: Michelle Glowacki-Dudka
Institutional Review Board

DATE: November 25, 2008
TO: William Westafer
FROM: Ball State University IRB
RE: IRB protocol # 86414-2
TITLE: The Transformative Effects of Clergy Stress
SUBMISSION TYPE: Modification/Amendment
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: November 25, 2008

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on November 25, 2008 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project. Please contact Amy Boos at (765) 285-5034 or akboos@bsu.edu if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.
NARRATIVE FOR EXEMPT PROTOCOL

SECTION I – TITLE, PURPOSE OF THE STUDY, AND RATIONALE

1.1 **Title.** “Clergy Stress: The Efficacy of Coping Strategies.”

1.2 **Purpose of the study.** The purpose of this qualitative study is to interview clergy that have experienced significant stress in their personal and professional lives. This investigation seeks to understand how clergy cope with significant stress in their lives.

1.3 **Rationale.** It is important to understand why clergy exhibited certain behaviors while undergoing personal and/or professional trauma. The differentiation in the severity of stressors and the success or lack of same in coping is worth investigation. Some clergy encounter severe stress and continue in the profession while others succumb to the adversity and leave the profession. Interviewing clergy will give them an opportunity to make meaning of their experiences and provide their perspectives while giving society a lens to view this highly demanding profession. The resulting data and analysis may be useful for others in the pastorate. In addition, those responsible for educating pastors may find the research useful to properly equip those preparing to enter the ministry or those already in the profession. At the same time, congregations may be helped by gaining insight into the challenges faced by their leaders which, in turn, may result in improved pastor-parish relationships.

SECTION II – DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECT POPULATION

2.1 **Number of subjects.** The target number for this project will be 7-12 participants.

2.2 **Describe the subject population.** The study is concerned with a diverse group of participants in the Midwestern United States. The goal of the sample is to include at least one female as well as people of color. Participants will be identified as clergy, past and present, that have undergone significant stress that has made them cope.

2.3 **Describe any specified inclusion/exclusion criteria.** The participants will be those that are or have been ordained Protestant clergy between the ages of 35-65 years living in the Midwestern United States. The Sunday morning worship average attendance for participants will be or will have been between 125-1000. He or she may be married with at least one child; the child or children may be adults. Minimum income or educational requirements will not be applied. He or she will have experienced stress similar, but not limited to the following: forced exit from a parish, serious illness, divorce, congregational animosity, rebellious child, midlife crisis, financial crisis, or discrimination. Participants will have gone through a significant learning or life changing experience related to his or her role as a clergy member. The cognitively impaired and prisoners will be excluded. Any subject that does not adhere to the protocol once the study has begun will be eliminated.
SECTION III – SUBJECT RECRUITMENT

3.1 **Describe the method of subject recruitment.** The Principal Investigator will identify participants with the use of a screening survey instrument detailing the inclusion/exclusion criteria and then a series of check boxes listing a variety of possible stressors in response to the query: “Have you experienced stress similar, but not limited to any of the following?” An additional question will follow: “Have you gone through a significant learning or life changing experience related to your role as a clergy member?” Participants may be identified through convenience sampling and the snowball effect. Professional colleagues of the Principal Investigator will be asked if they know of an ordained minister fitting the demographic criteria. Clergy ascertained to be engaged in clergy stress will be contacted by telephone, letter, email, or in person by the Principal Investigator and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. Once the interview is completed, participants will be asked if he or she knows another minister in the population and geographic ranges that may be experiencing very stressful situations in the profession and might participate in the study.

SECTION IV – METHODS AND PROCEDURES

4.1 **Describe the methods and procedures to be used.** The Principal Investigator will interview each subject individually in a convenient setting mutually agreed upon by the Principal Investigator and the participant. The time allotted for the interview will be one to two hours. A second optional interview may be a follow-up via email, phone, or in person to allow participants to expand their answers if they so choose. The primary interview will be semi-structured with the following questions and the latitude to pursue tangents:

**Interview Questions:**
1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been married?
3. How many children do you have?
4. What was your educational preparation?
5. How many years have you served in the ministry?
6. How many churches have you served?
7. How long have you served your current parish?
8. Tell me about stressors in your life.
9. Tell me about your life changing event.
10. How did you cope with the demands of this event?

These questions will be the basis upon which to answer the following research question:

1. What significant stressors do clergy face? What coping mechanisms do they use to moderate that stress?

SECTION V – ANONYMITY/CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA
5.1 **Describe how data will be collected and stored.** The Principal Investigator will interview each subject, tape record and take notes. Responses will be kept confidential with a substitute code for each participant. The Principal Investigator will keep the notes in locked, private files at his private residence and on his private computer with a user login. The data will be retained for a period of one year following the conclusion of the study then it will be destroyed in a paper shredder.

**SECTION VI – POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS**

6.1 **Describe the potential risks and discomforts.** The research will be of minimal risk since the participants will only be describing their own personal life experiences.

6.2 **Describe how the risks will be minimized.** All participants will be coded and responses kept confidential. If a participant feels uncomfortable discussing any question(s), then the participant will be relieved of any obligation to answer. If the participant at any time feels uncomfortable with the study, he may excuse himself without harm or penalty from the project.

6.3 **Describe the potential benefits.** The participants will be given the opportunity to discuss their own experience. This, in turn, should be able to help other clergy gain key insights into coping with significant stress so that they may construct meaning for their own lives and minimize their stress and anxiety for this season of life.

**SECTION VII - SUBJECT INCENTIVES/INDUCEMENTS TO PARTICIPATE**

7.1 **Describe any inducements/incentives to participate that will be offered to the subject.** Not applicable. There is no compensation for participation in this investigation.

**SECTION VIII – OTHER FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

8.1 **Describe any financial expense to the subject.** Not applicable. There is no financial expense for participants in this investigation.

8.2 **Describe any provisions for compensation for research-related injury.** Not applicable.
APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument

CLERGY STRESS INTERVIEW
Would you be interested in participating in a 1 to 2 hour interview concerning clergy stress? This data will be used for a dissertation research project on clergy stress.

If you have an interest, you must meet the following criteria:
( ) Protestant pastor between the age of 35-65 years living in the Midwest
( ) Sunday morning worship average attendance between 125-1000
( ) Married with at least one child; the child or children may be adults
( ) Have you experienced stress similar to any of the following events?
   ( ) Forced exit from a parish
   ( ) Death of a loved one
   ( ) Serious illness
   ( ) Divorce, separation, marital infidelity
   ( ) Church split or animosity
   ( ) Rebellious child
   ( ) Midlife crisis
   ( ) Financial crisis, bankruptcy
   ( ) Discrimination
   ( ) Other_________________________
( ) Have you gone through a significant learning or life changing experience related to your role as a clergy member?

If you wish to participate in the research or if you know of a fellow clergy member that may fit this criteria, please contact Bill Westafer, 765-668-8548 or email wkwestafer@bsu.edu. There will be no financial remuneration. All information will be used with pseudonyms to protect participants.
INFORMED CONSENT

“The Transformative Effects of Clergy Stress”

The purpose of this research project is to interview clergy that have experienced significant stress in their personal and/or professional lives. This project seeks to understand the context, extenuating circumstances, and decisions that may have worked in concert to create inordinate stresses related to your profession and any coping mechanisms. For this project, you will be asked a series of questions about your stressful experience(s) and your opinions and reactions regarding issues related to the stressful experience(s). The initial interview will be approximately one to two hours in duration. A second interview is optional and may be conducted by phone, email, or in person.

All data will be maintained as confidential. Data will be stored and secured in the researcher’s home. Your interview will be written and edited for a graduate class project. A substitute code will be used for your name.

The foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study are minimal. There is a small possibility that answering some of the questions may evoke some feelings of anxiety. Should you experience any feelings of anxiety, there are counseling services available to you through the Counseling Practicum Clinic in the Teachers’ College, (765) 285-8047. You may also defer from answering any questions, discontinue the interview, and/or remove yourself from the study without harm or penalty.

One benefit you may gain from your participation in this study may be a better understanding of clergy stress and how other clergy have coped. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent form and beginning the study, and at any time during the study.

For one’s rights as a research subject, the following person may be contacted: Coordinator of Research Compliance, Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070.

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I, _________________________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “The Transformative Effects of Clergy Stress.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

Participant’s Signature _________________________________ Date ________________

Principal Investigator’s Signature _________________________________ Faculty Supervisor: _________________________________
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