Pastoral Burnout:

The Results of a Study Examining the Relationships of Emotional Intelligence and Performance Based Self-Esteem with Burnout among Pastors

Based on Dissertation Research by

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Examining the Relationships of Emotional Intelligence and Performance-Based Self-Esteem with Burnout among Pastors

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Executive Summary

Burnout threatens the emotional and physical well-being of pastors as well as their ability to provide competent and compassionate leadership to their congregations. A total of 263 pastors participated in research conducted by PhD candidate Jeannie Miller-Clarkson on the topic of vocational burnout among clergy. Groups represented include districts of the United Methodist Church, Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Missionary Church, Church of the Brethren, Assemblies of God, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Open Bible Churches and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ.

Relationships were found between emotional intelligence, performance-based self-esteem, and the experience of burnout. Three major findings emerged from the study:

1. Emotional Intelligence was correlated with role conflict to a small, but significant degree. Those pastors with higher emotional intelligence reported less role conflict (feeling stressed by multiple, contradictory expectations from others) than did those with lower emotional intelligence.

2. Emotional intelligence was correlated with personal accomplishment to a large degree. Those pastors with higher emotional intelligence reported a greater sense of personal accomplishment in their ministries than did those with lower emotional intelligence.

3. Performance-based self-esteem was correlated with emotional exhaustion to a moderate degree. Those pastors who based self-worth on their perceptions of success in ministry experienced a greater degree of emotional exhaustion than those pastors who did not.

Vocational Burnout Poses Four Significant Threats to Clergy Life and Success

A comprehensive review of more than 200 research studies on vocational burnout and related topics revealed four serious threats to successful pastoral ministry posed by burnout.

1. The problem of burnout among pastors is significant and has been cited as a major reason for pastors dropping out of the ministry

2. Burnout negatively impacts physical and emotional well-being, as well as family relationships in various helping professionals.

3. Burnout among pastors has been associated with depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and cardio-vascular disease.

4. Burnout threatens the ability of pastors to provide effective and caring leadership to those seeking spiritual guidance and support.

Emotional Intelligence and Performance-based Self-Esteem are related to Burnout among Pastors

Emotional intelligence was found to be related to burnout among pastors. Role conflict occurs when pastors feel torn or stressed by contradictory expectations from others. Those pastors with higher emotional intelligence reported less role conflict than those pastors with lower emotional intelligence. We can speculate as to why this is. It may be that those with higher emotional intelligence were less threatened by contradictory expectations and it may be that these pastors are better able to negotiate
and manage these expectations. Those pastors who had higher emotional intelligence also experienced a greater sense of accomplishment in their ministries and this may buffer the effects of stress.

Those pastors who tended to base their sense of self-worth on perceptions of success or failure in their pastoral ministries were at greater risk for burnout. These pastors demonstrated a greater degree of emotional exhaustion in this study. Those who tend to define themselves by their success in ministry are likely to feel personally threatened by difficulties and to overwork to compensate. This also reduces the ability to remain objective in the face of obstacles.

Brief descriptions of these and related terms are provided below.

1. **Burnout**: The result of chronic job-related stress that manifests in symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

2. **Emotional intelligence**: The ability to reason with emotional information; further defined as the ability to accurately perceive emotions in one self and others, ability to use this information to enhance thought, and ability to manage emotions in one self and others.

3. **Performance-based self-esteem**: Self-esteem that is reliant on one’s performance or perceptions of success within a given role or domain. Pastors with high performance-based self-esteem may define themselves by their role as pastor. When problems arise, they may feel threatened and demonstrate a heightened need to prove themselves.

4. **Role conflict**: Internal conflict that is experienced when attempting to satisfy two or more conflicting or incompatible expectations from others or from one’s one internal standards for behavior. Pastors may experience role conflict when experiencing contradictory expectations from congregational members and/or denominational leaders.

**Pastor’s Responses to Survey Items Demonstrate That Burnout Is a Significant Problem**

The survey consisted of 78 questions rated according to frequency or intensity. The following samples may provide insight into the responses of the total group (263) respondents.

1. 18.3% reported feeling burned out from parish ministry. On the other hand, 68.8% report that they don’t feel burned out.

2. 17% reported being less patient with parishioners that they used to be.

3. 27% report feeling drained by parish ministry.

4. 19.7% report worrying that parish ministry is hardening them emotionally.

5. 14.1% reported feeling like they are at the end of their rope.

In the view of the author, responses to two questions seemed especially serious:

1. Only 2.3% endorsed the item: I feel I am positively influencing other people’s lives through my ministry.
2. Only 2.7% reported gaining a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people.

**The Study Provides a Comparison of Burnout and Emotional Intelligence among Pastors in the Survey to Other Groups**

263 senior pastors from various denominational districts, mainly from the Midwestern United States, participated in the online survey. There are no exact scores for what constitutes high or low burnout or high or low emotional intelligence. One may, however, compare mean scores among groups for reference and comparison.

The following chart compares the incidence of the three components of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and the absence of a feeling of personal accomplishment) among the surveyed pastors to four other populations. Definitions of the three components of burnout are provided below.

1. **Depersonalization**: Cynicism or distancing towards clients or those served. Pastors who are burned out may feel impatient with or callous towards congregants; whereas they previously felt engaged and compassionate.

2. **Emotional exhaustion**: Depletion of emotional energy; exhaustion. Pastors who are emotionally exhausted may feel drained, experience a loss of energy, and feel as though there is nothing left to give.

3. **Personal Accomplishment**: Self-perception of competency and achievement. Pastors experiencing a lowered sense of personal accomplishment feel they are not effective in their ministries and that they are not making a positive difference.

*NOTE: Personal Accomplishment is reverse scored; i.e. higher scores represent lower sense of personal accomplishment.*
The next chart compares the levels of emotional intelligence (as previously defined in this paper) among surveyed pastors as compared to five other populations.

* Schutte et al., (1998) study providing a comparison group

Steps Can Be Taken to Reduce the Debilitating Effects of Vocational Burnout among Pastors

The following are the summarized steps necessary to reduce burnout among clergy recommended by the author of the study. Please contact Jeannie Miller-Clarkson for specific resources.

1. Pastors will benefit from increasing their knowledge about burnout: how to recognize it, how to remediate it, and how to prevent it. Congregations will also benefit from increasing awareness about pastoral burnout and creating a plan for supporting their pastor in such a way as to reduce the likelihood of burnout.

2. Pastors will benefit from increasing emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence training programs are available and may be beneficial. Adapting these programs specifically to pastors may also be beneficial. Increasing emotional intelligence will not only benefit by reducing some tendency towards burnout, it will also increase pastor’s ability to effectively lead their congregations and work with people.

3. Pastors will benefit from addressing performance-based self-esteem in order to reduce it and develop a well-balanced sense of self-esteem. No programs currently exist to address performance-based self-esteem, but these may be developed. In the meantime, pastors may benefit from reading material and assessing their own tendencies towards basing their identity and worth heavily on perceived performance in the pastoral role. Personal counseling may also be beneficial in addressing performance-based self-esteem.
4. Pastors and congregations will benefit from addressing and negotiating role conflict. Pastors and congregational members often have very different ideas about what the pastoral role consists of and how to pursue the mission and goals of the congregation. Assisting pastors in making implicit expectations explicit and negotiating these expectations with congregational members will benefit both pastors and congregations. Assisting pastors in successfully managing these differences in expectation should not only serve to reduce burnout but also reduce conflict and teamwork towards congregational goals.

5. Denominational leaders need to be educated on burnout among pastors and the resulting detriment to ministry, how role conflict impacts burnout, and the importance of emotional intelligence and performance-based self-esteem for enhancing success and reducing tendencies towards burnout for pastors. Denominations may benefit from providing access to resources and training to address burnout, increase emotional intelligence, address performance-based self-esteem, and manage role conflict.

6. Denominations may consider providing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that provides brief counseling free of charge to their pastors. This could encourage pastors to address problems and find solutions as they surface rather than allowing problems to build up and potentially lead to burnout.

7. Seminaries may consider adding emotional enhancement training and education about performance-based self-esteem to their curriculum.

8. Those organizations that utilize assessment of ministers prior to placement or credentialing may consider adding a measure of emotional intelligence and performance-based self-esteem to the assessment. The results could be used to provide feedback and recommendations to candidates.

Follow-Up Discussions and Resources

A web-page, www.ChristianCareConnection.com/pastoral-burnout-study is currently under development to provide further discussion about the study. Follow-up program development to address the recommendations is planned. The first webinar to discuss the study is planned for late June.

Conclusion

As the findings of this study indicate, enhancing emotional intelligence and reducing performance-based self-esteem are important to reducing burnout among pastors. Pastors who tend to base their self-esteem on perceptions of success or failure in their ministry are at greater risk for burnout, according to this study. Pastors who exhibited higher emotional intelligence also exhibited a higher sense of personal accomplishment in their work. A sense of personal accomplishment serves as a buffer against burnout for these pastors. Pastors who exhibited higher emotional intelligence also perceived less role conflict, and therefore, will be expected to experience less stress. Future researchers should focus on confirming and understanding the link between emotional intelligence and role conflict as well as the development
of programs to enhance emotional intelligence and reduce performance-based self-esteem among pastors.

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