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Pastoral Health: What We Know and What We Need to Know

One of the central tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the health message. As Adventists, we place a high value on health believing that our bodies are the temple the Holy Spirit. As a result, Adventist church members, on average, enjoy longer and healthier life spans. However, recent actuarial data indicate that this “Adventist advantage” may not apply to SDA pastors.¹ What is contributing to this trend among SDA pastors? What do we know that may contribute to pastoral longevity, and what do we need to know for the leadership of the NAD to make strategic interventions to turn this trend towards a more healthy pastorate?

Pastoral Physical Health Status

On the whole, Adventist pastors report good health. The preliminary findings of a study conducted by Day and Gemmell (2019) discovered that 89% of participants believe their health is either good or excellent. However, 11% of pastors report that their health is only fair; less than 1% feel their health is poor (Day & Gemmell, 2019).

When it comes to diet, Adventist pastors—regardless of ethnicity (black v. non-black)—are more likely to maintain a vegetarian diet than non-pastors (Fraser, 2019). Additionally, pastors are more likely to be thinner than non-pastors ($p=.04$) (Fraser, 2019).

Pastoral Stressors

While physical health may not be the greatest concern of Adventist pastors, there are many other stressors that contribute to a pastor’s wellbeing. The primary areas in which Adventist pastors experience stress include: financial, emotional, relational, spiritual, and through stressors in the workplace (Aka, 2019; Day & Gemmell, 2019; Dudley, 2013; Fraser, 2019; Sedlacek, 2014). We examine each of these areas, supported by previous research findings.

Financial Stressors

Financial stressors appear to be one of the biggest stressors for Adventist pastors, as well as their families. In 2013, Dudley revealed that 73% of Adventist pastors felt they were fairly paid. However, today, while many pastors feel that they are paid fairly (37.2% “agree,” 21.7% “strongly agree”) and paid similarly to other Adventist employees (59.2% “about the same”), the preliminary results of Aka’s 2019 study reveal that a

¹ Conversation with Ivan Williams, September, 2019

majority (69.2%) of pastors believe they are paid somewhat or much less than pastors in other denominations (Aka, 2019).

Pastors of all ages report having extensive debt (Day & Gemmell, 2019). Sedlacek (2014) reports that pastors and their spouses experience income challenges, as well as expense challenges. These expenses challenges include mandatory moves; unpaid duties – both in the ministry role and the pastoral spouse role; the perceived obligation for their children to attend Seventh-day Adventist schools; and the social expectations for pastors and their families (Sedlacek, 2014).

Much of pastors' financial stress appears to be linked to their preparation for the future, that is, preparing for retirement. On average, pastors put aside \$6,000 a year for retirement, while the average total amount set aside is about \$150,000 (Day & Gemmell, 2019). In addition, a number of pastors opted out of social security because of religious convictions and therefore have no guaranteed government retirement income (Day & Gemmell, 2019).

Many pastors report that they do not understand their retirement plan. Only 13% report having a "great understanding" of their retirement plan, with another 55% sharing they have "some understanding." With that being said, 65% of pastors admitted that they have financial concerns about how they will survive during retirement (Day & Gemmell, 2019).

When it comes to alleviating financial stress, both pastors and their spouses reported their desire to have greater financial literacy (Sedlacek, 2014; Day & Gemmell, 2019), as well as the desire to receive help with overall budgeting and personal finances (Day and Gemmell).

Emotional Stressors

Being a pastor brings with it many emotional stressors. Over half (57%) of participants in a recent study reported "frequently" or "sometimes" feeling inadequate in their work (Day & Gemmell, 2019). Additionally, when asked to respond to the statement, "Sometimes I feel like I would like to leave pastoral ministry," 40% "agree" or "strongly agree" (Aka, 2019). When asked what factors might cause them to leave pastoral ministry, pastors shared it could be because of burn out (13.3%), health issues (12.5%), church politics (10.9%), or financial reasons (9.4%) (Aka, 2019). Three fourths (75%) of pastors report "frequently" or "sometimes" feeling at the point of mental and physical

exhaustion (Day & Gemmell, 2019). Nearly half (49.1%) of respondents in another study report experiencing depression or anxiety (Sedlacek, 2014).

Setting clear boundaries and practicing self-care appears to be an area of weakness for many of those in ministry and, instead of utilizing healthy coping mechanisms to deal with stressors, many turn to unhealthy means. Sedlacek (2014) reports that nearly one-third (32.6%) of pastors reported using pornography, 44.8% admit to having a media addiction, and over half (54.3%) shared they eat unhealthy foods.

Relational and Social Stressors

It is not uncommon for pastors to feel that “nobody seems to care.” Aka’s (2019) preliminary results show that over a third (35.2%) of pastors admit to feeling this way at times. This number has grown significantly since 2013, when only a quarter (25%) of pastors indicated that they felt this way (Dudley, 2013).

In another study, pastors and pastoral families (pastor spouses and children of pastors) shared their need for ongoing, intentional, and confidential social support (Sedlacek, 2014). However, there are many barriers to getting the support that pastors and their families need. Although the barriers differed, depending on the member of the family, one theme emerged: “The participants felt there was insufficient support available to them” (Sedlacek, 2014).

While setting boundaries is an area where pastors note that they need to develop, their families also experience the same need for setting clear boundaries. Sedlacek (2014) reports that, “the most common thread of spiritual life challenge for pastors and for spouses of pastors centers on developing and maintaining personal and family boundaries.”

In terms of social needs, almost half (48.8%) of recent survey respondents shared that they desire wider fellowship with other Adventist pastors and 41.7% indicating they would like more fellowship with other clergy in their community (Aka, 2019).

Spiritual Stressors

As spiritual leaders, pastors have an increased responsibility to “practice what they preach.” However, when it comes to maintaining healthy spiritual practices, pastors admit that they struggle to make time for personal devotions (66.6%), have difficulty

with personal prayer (55.9%), have trouble maintaining a personal connection with God (53.9%), and struggle with keeping the Sabbath day holy (40.3%) (Sedlacek, 2014). This research points to pastors struggling with being intentional about and benefitting from spiritual practices.

Stressors in the Workplace

Outside of all these other areas, the job of being pastor has many stressors in and of itself. In one study, 22.4% of pastoral participants “disagreed” to one extent or another that the amount of work they are expected to do is reasonable, and almost two in five (38.8%) “disagree” that they have enough time to complete necessary tasks (Aka, 2019). The majority of pastors (86.9%) report it is easy to become absorbed in their jobs (Aka, 2019). This very well may tie in with the need for better boundary-setting.

Church conflict is another area of on-the-job stress that pastors have to manage. Sources of stressful conflict included conflicts with the local church and conflict with church leadership, and included issues such as church discipline, worship styles, dietary choices, jewelry in church, women’s ordination, and church politics (Sedlacek, 2014). Pastors also shared they feel there is a lack of appropriate conflict resolution within the Church; relocating pastors in times of conflict rather than addressing the problem/ resolving it seems to be a common practice (Sedlacek, 2014).

Finally, nearly half (45.67%) of the pastors in one study shared that they desire more training or in-service education, and 44.09% believe they need greater support from their local conferences (Aka, 2019).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report points to a corporate picture of a group of individuals who report fairly high levels of physical health (including weight management and following a vegetarian diet), yet are not enjoying the benefits of the Adventist health message in terms of longevity. Thus, it is important to look to other factors that often impinge on physical health, such as emotional and relational health indicators.

Several concerning trends have been noted through several studies with pastors. First, pastors are very concerned about their financial situations and desire help with getting their finances in order. Second, the collective studies depict a pastorate that holds significant emotional, relational, and social stress. In addition, pastors have shared that they are dealing with these stressors in very harmful ways.

Another sobering finding focuses on the spiritual health of study respondents. With over half of the pastors sharing that they struggle to make time for personal devotions, have difficulty with personal prayer, have trouble maintaining a personal connection with God, this paints a picture of a pastorate in crisis. This indicates that our spiritual leaders are not experiencing rich spiritual health.

Finally, pastors report that working for the Church is stressful. More and more pastors are sensing the overwhelming nature of being a pastor with few tools to manage these demands. When there are Church conflicts (in both the local and corporate levels), pastors report being at a loss to know how to handle them.

Although these data note documented needs for improved pastoral health, we are still missing information about the kinds of barriers that pastors face when trying to alleviate stress in these identified areas. Likewise, we do not know what facilitates change or motivates pastors to make changes to improve their health in these areas. What educational outreach to pastors is needed, providing tools for emotional health improvement? What types of learning or delivery formats would pastors be most amenable to full participation and buy-in?

Based on these findings, we recommend conducting focus groups that gather essential knowledge about pastoral preferences for corporate intervention. Focus groups should be held in each Union of the NAD, with 7 to 9 pastors each. The focus groups should be composed of very diverse participants. For example, ideally, the participants should differ in age, length of time in ministry, educational preparation for ministry, ethnicity and culture, immigrant status, and gender.

The type of questions that the focus groups should address should come from each area of concern listed above. The questions should be designed to discover the following about each area of concern:

1. What have pastors tried to alleviate stress in this area?
 - a. What has helped? What avenues have not worked for them?
2. How open are the pastors to try new ways to address this stressor?
 - a. Offer research-based or evidence-based approaches to see what is compatible/palatable to the participants.
3. In what types of interventions would pastors not participate (willingly)?
4. What formats of learning to pastors prefer?
 - a. In person workshops
 - b. Online education

- c. Individual study and application
 - d. Coaching or mentoring
- 5. What are the barriers to following a health-improvement plan?
 - a. How can these barriers be addressed and overcome?
- 6. How much do family members need to be involved in these health-improvement efforts?
- 7. How can the NAD best use its resources to assist pastors to improved emotional, relational, spiritual, and financial wellness?