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DWIGHT K. NELSON
**PASTORAL WELLNESS: SIX TIPS
FOR VOCATIONAL HEALTH**

Who decides the role of the pastor in the local church? The conference administrators? The ministerial director? The pastor's spouse? The pastor? Or could it be the congregants of local churches have an outsized part in defining pastoral roles? After all, the pastorate is a unique profession where the care-receivers (parishioners) feel emboldened to tell the caregiver (pastor) how to provide the necessary care. The pastor may have "mastered divinity" at the seminary, but in many cases, parishioners have adeptly mastered the task of informing their pastor what his or her roles actually are.

In our highly professionalized culture, when you hire a lawyer, you do not presume to instruct the attorney how to write legal briefs or how to effectively represent you in court. When you go to a physician, you do not dictate to your medical practitioner how he or she is to provide and deliver your care. Yet there is no hesitation among care-receiving parishioners to inform their pastor how best to fulfill God's calling as their caregiver.

The study "Seventh-day Adventist Clergy: Understanding Stressors and Coping Mechanisms" reports: "Research documents that long work hours, paired with *intrusive and demanding expectations from their congregation* [emphasis added], act as stressors for clergy and their families" (Heck, Drumm, McBride, & Sedlacek, 2017, p. 116). Clearly confusion over role expectations is a significant contributor to that pastoral stress.

Michael McBride (1989a), psychologist and former pastor, describes the wide range of roles church members assign their pastors—"preacher, educator, evangelist, scholar and theologian, administrator, counselor, promoter,

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financier, etc.” (p. 4)—not to mention plumber, grounds keeper, and church school recess coach. McBride’s point is that this professional role confusion can be a significant catalyst for a pastor’s stress:

Role strain appears to be at the very heart of clergy stress. Three aspects of role strain are worthy of attention: role conflict, which occurs when two or more expectations clash or contradict one another altogether; role ambiguity, which results when the worker is uncertain as to what position he is expected to fill; and role overload, which results when the level of stimulation or demand exceeds the worker’s capacity to process or comply with those demands. (1989a, p. 5)

Could it be pastors that are ill-equipped to face down the challenge of parish ministry role expectations and conflict simply because no one has told them or trained them for the role conflicts that are part and parcel of serving as parish pastor? David Tensen (2021), life coach for pastors, observes:

I remember a pastor-friend confessing to me about 6 months into his first senior pastor position that he wished he had gone to business school instead of bible college because of pressure and skills he now needed to run an organization. Insurance, staff, buildings, leases, legals, constitutions, reporting, boards, bookkeeping, A/V, volunteers, finances, maintenance, budgeting, governance, marketing, administration. The list goes on. . . . I can tell you this, a lot of good, called pastors fail to grow and maintain a sustainable congregation because they are simply ill-equipped to keep up with all of the organizational pressures which congregants take for granted when they walk through the doors of a Sunday morning service and it’s all running well. (n.p.)

Add to this role confusion the reality that pastors “must perform their work in positions of high visibility [which] predisposes them to severe stress. Unlike most professionals, the minister is continually under the observation of his role senders [care-receivers]” (McBride, 1989a, p. 5).

Furthermore, consider the dynamics when we view the pastorate as a profession surrounded by a plethora of specializations. The news media incessantly champion the value of “expert testimony,” authorities who offer presumably unassailable views, opinions, and knowledge regarding life and its circumstances. However, in a culture lauding the specialists, the pastor

labors as the last of the generalists, “a jack of all trades and master of none” sort of career. (Even medicine has abandoned the “general practitioner” identity in favor of “family practice specialty,” a nomenclature change in a society clamoring for experts.) In the midst of such expectations, the pastor must minister. Thus, role confusion between the caregiver and the care-receivers only heightens.

How much of this role conflict or role ambiguity can be attributed to the pastor’s own understanding of his or her divine calling? Could it be that confusion over our calling precipitates confusion over our roles? How significant is pastoral perception of being called to ministry? Sharon Aka (2020) “identified the call into ministry as an essential component of pastoral ministry, and that pastors understand what it means to be called” (p. 21). Components for such a calling include

. . . the deep conviction of God’s divine call into ministry as a sense of urgency, powerful, being called out, a spiritual process, knowing or feeling, an unshakable focus, the evidence of God’s impact on the heart, and the ability to sustain efforts in ministry in spite of life’s challenges. . . . In addition, those called should consider other potential influences on the call, such as a Christian upbringing, being a clergy child, prayer life, Bible study, personality type, gifts for ministry, and denominational affiliation. *The experience of the call is significant in the life of a pastor* [emphasis added]. (Aka, 2020, pp. 21–22)

Thus, it is no surprise that pastors who doubt God’s call have significantly worse hygiene and motivation (employee engagement) skills (Aka, 2020). Regarding the calling, researchers differentiate an additional confusion—“the mindset that once they accept a call to pastoral ministry, it is for life”—and describe it as one of the “three primary barriers to leaving pastoral ministry” (Drumm & Činčala, 2021, p. 17).

How stressful is such “call confusion?” The renown 20th-century psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1979) described the cognitive dissonance many pastors carry into the pulpit with them:

“What can I say that will reach these worriers [parishioners]?” broods the poor clergyman. He knows about many of the anxieties in the pews, but how about his own? He, too, is worried and troubled. His salary is small, his younger daughter is unhappy, the clerk of the session is disagreeable,

the “ministry of music” is presumptuous, and there are dissident factions in the education department. Each Sunday morning there are more empty seats. Is he at fault or is it the times? Nevertheless, he must go on and preach and really say something. (p. 227)

Clearly confusion over one’s calling to ministry or to the pastorate impacts the pastor’s ability to perform professional duties, engage in professional skills, and/or fulfill professional roles. Furthermore, the “lack of social support, job stress, guilt about not doing enough work” combined with “doubting one’s call to ministry are . . . significantly associated with depression and anxiety” (Heck et al., 2017, p. 117).

Was Frederick Buechner (1983) describing today’s pastors?

There was a kind of sad gaiety about the way they went about their work. The sadness stemmed, I suppose, from the hopelessness of their task—the problems were so vast, their resources for dealing with them so meager—and the gaiety from a hope beyond hope that, in the long run if not the short, all would in some holy and unimaginable way be well. (p. 29)

It is the “sad gaiety” wrung from a hard-pressed life of seeking to be faithful to one’s calling and obedient to the roles assigned by one’s parishioners and judicatory administrators—all of whom seem too far removed from the pastor’s daily survival to understand either the vast problems or the meager resources. But shall we settle for “sad gaiety?”

The pressing question facing today’s pastorate is, “How then shall we live?” In the midst of role conflict and ambiguity as well as divine calling uncertainties, are there specific steps to remedy the cognitive dissonance? Consider these time-tested, practical next steps Michael McBride offers the pastor to grow beyond the dissonance and confusion. (Added to these suggestions below are selected portions of the commentary McBride offers in his essay for each of these steps.)

- **Negotiate with Role-senders (Care-receivers):** To overcome role and calling confusion among the pastor, congregants, and administration, let the pastor arrange a meeting with leaders of the parish, and later with conference administrators, to solicit their perceptions about the pastor’s role and invite them to rank the roles in order of importance. The fact there will not be agreement for the role rankings will allow the pastor to

“discuss the issue of ambiguity and role conflict and call attention to how their confusion reflects his or her ministry” (McBride, 1989b, pp. 8–9).

[Research has] discovered that when clergy and laity discuss the minister’s role in this way, consensus concerning that role increases both between minister and laity and among the laity themselves. They discovered that generally the more those involved discussed a given role subject, the more agreement developed—but that the increase in agreement was limited to the subjects discussed. The largest changes came in the laity’s understanding of the importance of study to the minister, the necessity of reduced emphasis on routine visitation, and the importance with which the minister regarded the training of lay leadership. (McBride, 1989b, p. 9)

- **Avoid Withdrawing:** How do you handle conflict when it arises? Do you face it head on or do you, instead, shut down and withdraw? McBride (1989b) writes: “Rather than running away from the personal discomfort that role conflicts and ambiguity bring, pastors must reduce the pressure through communication” (p. 9).

- **Know Yourself Well:** McBride (1989b) writes:

Pastors who want to minimize ambiguity in the expectations others have of them must also minimize it in themselves. Confusion tends to breed confusion. Those who are not clear as to who they are, what they believe, what their understanding of the church and ministry is, what their goals are, and where their strengths and weaknesses lie are not well prepared to evaluate or relate to the expectations of others. (p. 9)

- **Get Sufficient Exercise:** While we all know that exercise has many benefits, it’s easy to neglect personal health and care during stressful seasons. “As pastors undergo the general stresses of the ministry and of specific tensions and conflicts related to roles, it is critical that they implement a regular program of physical exercise to guard against the physiological effects of stress” (McBride, 1989b, p. 9).
- **The Supervisor’s Role:** McBride (1989b) recognizes there are strategies the pastor cannot implement to minimize vocational stress. “They

must be implemented at the administrative level of the church. These strategies relate to the role of supervision.” Then follows this sage advice for administrators: “By giving pastors a degree of professional autonomy, administrators can assist them in minimizing the effects of role conflict and ambiguity. And conversely, by stifling their pastors’ autonomy, conference administration or local church leadership subject them to increased stress” (McBride, 1989b, p. 10). That is, let the pastor initiate perspectives and preferences for the roles under discussion, and grant pastors the professional authority and personal responsibility that come with autonomy in working through these conversations with both parish leaders and administrators.

- **Spiritual Stress Reducers:** McBride (1989b) concludes:

The primary spiritual focus [of the pastor] must be the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the role model for ministry, and thus He serves as the paragon upon which pastors pattern their personal and professional behavior. Since Jesus knew role conflict, ambiguity, stress, and pressure during His earthly ministry, we may gain some insights about how to deal with these problems by observing the manner in which He dealt with them. (p. 10)

To deal with role conflict and ambiguity, why not implement these simple, practical next steps for vocational health and wellness in the parish? The need for pastors to understand their collective calling to ministry, as well as their unique *personal* calling to *pastoral* ministry needs to be repeatedly emphasized in their professional training. When the biblical prototype of a pastor, the apostle Paul, reviewed his own calling, he demonstrated healthy differentiation between himself and others sharing the calling:

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. *But by the grace of God I am what I am*, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Cor. 15:9–10, NIV, emphasis added)

“By the grace of God, I am what I am.” With healthy self-differentiation, Paul in effect declares, “Though I am not numbered with the ‘super-apostles’

(2 Cor. 11:5), I too share their calling to ministry ‘by the grace of God that was with me.’” His candor and humility (which hardly deny his obvious giftedness) grant today’s pastors and leaders permission to declare: “I am what I am by divine design. I do not have to possess the gifts of my colleagues, nor do I have to live up to their own callings. God has gifted me, though ‘I am the least’ of the pastors, with divinely provided skills to accomplish the unique ministry He specifically called me to.”

Years ago, I read of a certain Rabbi Ben Ezra, who testified: “When I get to heaven, God is not going to ask me why I wasn’t more like Moses—He will ask me why I wasn’t more like Ben Ezra.” You were born for a divine destiny that only you can fulfill—so be yourself.

Life and ministry are not about replicating some successful predecessor’s career or gifts. Like snowflakes, the Creator makes no two pastors alike. Our unique calling is calibrated only by the grace of God, and we can all live and minister with humble confidence, celebrating the gifts and successes of our colleagues, all the while affirming with healthy self-differentiation our unique personal calling to love and serve Christ Jesus. For is it not true that “the One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it” (1 Thess. 5:24, NIV)?

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