The Experience of Clergy Stress: An Adlerian Perspective

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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By:

Charlene C. Brouwer

September 2011
Abstract

Clergy and their families face a variety of unique stressors related to the profession of ministry. Chronic work-related stress can lead to burnout and other debilitating consequences. As public leaders in society, clergy have the potential to positively or negatively impact the lives of many people. Therefore, the state of their emotional health is critically important. Through a review of literature, this paper examines sources of stress faced by clergy, as well as means of coping with stress. These factors are examined through the framework of the Adlerian life tasks of work, community, intimacy, self and spirituality. Recommendations for future research are suggested to further understand clergy stress, and as a result of this study suggestions are made to congregations and denominational leaders to help them reduce or alleviate clergy stress.

*Keywords:* clergy, work, church, stress, burnout, Adlerian, life tasks
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Clergy have served society in a unique and important capacity throughout history. They are frequently called upon during times of crisis. They share in the best and the worst of times in the lives of their parishioners. Their work impacts their community and the world. Given the significant number of clergy in the United States and the extensive influence they have in society, it is important to give thoughtful consideration to the wellbeing of this population.

Although the pastoral role has seen changes over time, many challenges inherent in the position continue. Due to a variety of factors related to the nature of their work, clergy face considerable stress. The spouse and children of clergy are also affected by the context of the profession. The stress of ministry can negatively impact the minister, as well as his or her spouse, children, church members and the community at large. If clergy are unable to cope with the stress they experience in their work, the consequences can be significant and far reaching.

This paper will review the primary sources of stress experienced by clergy as identified in current research. Strategies for coping with these ministry stressors will also be explored. Both the sources of stress and suggested means of coping will be examined through the framework of the Adlerian life tasks of work, community, intimacy, self and spirituality. Suggestions for clergy, congregations and denominational leaders will be provided. Recommendations will also be given for future research.
The Import of Understanding Clergy Stress

Society

Clergy are given a unique window into the lives of others, and are frequently consulted in times of distress. Kudlac (1991) notes that historically, the roles of clergy and mental health professionals were combined (as cited in Openshaw & Harr, 2009, p. 301). Although these are now two distinct professions, Weaver (1995) observes that individuals still often look to clergy first for help with a variety of mental health issues (as cited in Openshaw & Harr, 2009, p. 301). Hohmann and Larson (1993) found that mental health practitioners and clergy were equally apt to be consulted for help, and Privette, Quackenbos & Bundrick (1994) found that for matters related to marriage and family, church attendees are seven times more likely to go to their pastor for help rather than to a secular counselor (as cited in Darling, Hill & McWey, 2004).

Despite the publicized downfall of certain religious leaders over the years, Gallup and Lindsay (1999) found that “Clergy are among the most trusted professionals in society” (as cited in Openshaw & Harr, 2009, p. 302. In addition to the pastoral counseling that clergy provide, their leadership of the congregation under their care significantly impacts members of the community. More than a place of worship, churches in the United States are known to provide a variety of socially enriching services and opportunities for people to connect with each other. In any given community, churches may be involved in assisting the poor, strengthening families, visiting those who are hospitalized or confined to their homes, and generally providing care to those who are in need (Trihub, McMinn, Buhrow & Johnson, 2010).

While precise statistics regarding numbers of U.S. clergy and congregations are nearly impossible to obtain (Carroll, n.d.), the Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates that there are currently approximately 335,000 religious congregations in the U.S. According to the
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Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, there are approximately 600,000 clergy in the United States (as cited by the Hartford Institute, n.d.). And, according to Jacquet (1991), these clergy and their churches serve approximately 142 million parishioners (as cited in Morris & Blanton, 1994). Considering the likelihood that parishioners are in relationship with others who do not attend church, one can surmise that clergy influence has the potential to affect untold numbers.

Ironically, although clergy make considerable contributions to society and experience high levels of stress in the process, there has been relatively little research done related to their health and ability to cope (Meek et al., 2003). Baker and Scott (1992) noted that most clergy and their families “function in a relatively healthy manner despite the demands and pressures they face” (as cited in McMinn, Kerrick, Duma, Campbell & Jung, 2008, p. 446). Perhaps this explains the societal tendency to view clergy as one of the professionals least likely to experience stress related to their work (Lewis, Turton & Francis, 2007).

Stress

Stressful circumstances are a common part of daily life for all people. Stress is a natural part of the human experience and a normal physiological response. When one feels threatened, the body instinctively reacts to either fight, to flee to safety, or to enter a state of extreme fear. It is noteworthy that whether the stressors are real or imagined, the body will respond the same way (Hart, 1995). If a person perceives that they lack the necessary resources to respond appropriately to a given situation, they will experience stress. It is the meaning of the event or stressor, as assigned by the individual, which determines if the event is experienced as positive, negative or neutral (Shinhwan, 2006).
The helping professions are often characterized by high levels of stress. Clergy are counted among the many professionals who provide help to individuals, couples, families and communities. As noted by Darling, et al., (2004) “Clergy in U.S. culture stand at the forefront of helping people during troubled times” (p. 261). However, while they may be helping others, clergy face their own set of challenges which can produce stress. The higher the physiological and psychological stress experienced by clergy, the lower their quality of life (Darling, et al., 2004).

Although a small amount of stress can be helpful to provide the motivation necessary to take action, too much stress, or living in a constant state of stress can be detrimental. As Hart (1995) states, “Stress is only good if it is short lived” (p. 10). The concern regarding clergy is that often their experience of stress is not short lived, but rather incessant, leading to a plethora of concerns, including burnout.

**Burnout**

It is not always easy to distinguish stress from burnout. Shinhwan (2006) succinctly describes one identifiable feature, “Stress does not slow the person down but burnout does” (p. 245). It is generally understood that burnout is the result of prolonged work-related stress. In a state of burnout, the individual is exhausted and discouraged from trying to live up to certain standards or expectations. The chronically stressed worker becomes fatigued, irritable, and ultimately apathetic and cynical (Shinhwan, 2006). Although burnout can bear some resemblance to depression, burnout is specifically related to one’s work, while depression is more multi-faceted. Typically, when an individual suffering from burnout leaves their job, their symptoms are alleviated (Doolittle, 2010).
According to Francis, Hills & Kaldor (2009), “The term ‘burnout’ was first used in a psychological context by Freudenberger (1974) to describe the progressive decline in energy, motivation and commitment of young, volunteer helpers in a community care centre for young drug addicts” (p. 243). For their definition, Cordes and Dougherty (1993) refer to the three-component concept of burnout used by Maslach and colleagues (Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Pines & Maslach, 1980), which includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Burnout is commonly experienced by individuals in the helping professions, in which they are primarily focused on working with people (Doolittle, 2007; Francis, Hills et al., 2009). Certainly this is true for clergy. Sanford (1982) noted elements that may contribute to clergy burnout, including the pressure to maintain a public persona, and work that is repetitious and never-ending, with no guarantee of results (as cited in Francis et al., 2009). Other contributing factors can include relatively low pay for the required level of education, a decline in societal respect for the position, long work hours, personal sacrifice, and unrealistic demands and expectations (Doolittle, 2007; Trihub et al., 2010; Francis, Hills et al., 2009).

Emotional Exhaustion

Certainly not all clergy suffer from chronic stress or burnout, but indications are that many are very weary. Based on their research, Francis, Wulff and Robbins (2008) describe clergy as “a happy but exhausted profession” (p. 168). They also go on to note that two-fifths of clergy feel drained by their roles, one-third experience daily fatigue and irritation, and one in ten have cynical or negative feelings toward the people with whom they work (p. 179). Among Catholic priests, Francis, Louden & Rutledge (2004) found that over a third “feel used up at the
end of the day” and nearly a third “feel parishioners blame them for some of their problems” (pp. 11-12).

Other sources indicate that many clergy are both emotionally exhausted and unhappy. The Alban Institute, a non-profit organization which provides resources and services to clergy and congregations, noted the results of a survey conducted by Fuller Institute of Church Growth in 1991. Among 1,000 pastors surveyed, 70% reported a lower self image than when they started their ministry, and 50% had contemplated leaving the profession (as cited in Beebe, 2007, p. 257). Focus on the Family, a Christian ministry devoted to encouraging families and clergy, estimates that “1,500 pastors leave their assignments each month, due to moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within their local congregations” (as cited in Stone, 2010, p. 43).

Clergy in the United States are not the only ones who are experiencing stress and burnout. Among Australian clergy, for example, female clergy are as likely to experience emotional exhaustion as male clergy, while younger clergy are more likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion than older clergy. For those Australian clergy who had a high level of emotional exhaustion, the negative impact was extensive, including a wide variety of effects such as marriage and family difficulties, few close friends, self-doubt, conflict with members of their congregation, and thoughts of leaving the profession (Francis, Kaldor, Shevlin, & Lewis (2004).

Impact

If clergy are suffering from chronic stress which can lead to burnout, this raises concern for them as individuals, as well as for their family, members of their congregation and the broader community. Given their position of leadership and influence, their emotional health and wellbeing or the lack thereof can impact many. Churches are very dependent upon their pastors
for leadership of the ministry organization (McKenna, Boyd & Yost, 2007). Little, Simmons and Nelson (2007) articulate the potential effects of leader health on organizations:

When a leader is absent, makes faulty decisions, or leaves the organization, the costs can be far-reaching. Poor health of a key decision maker can greatly reduce the effectiveness of the organization as well as create anxiety in his/her followers. Conversely, if a leader is healthy and is able to perform his/her job and provide a positive example for his/her followers, the organization should benefit. Thus, it is of crucial importance to understand what factors lead to deleterious effects on health as well as positive effects on health for leaders of organizations. (p. 243)

The factors presented thus far in this paper point to the reality of clergy stress and the importance of understanding it. Most of the research available on this topic addresses the historically traditional model of Christian church ministry, primarily Protestant, with male clergy and their female spouse. While more females are entering the clergy profession in some denominations, they continue to represent a minority of the population. In their book, Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling, authors Zikmund, Lummis and Chang (1998) report that among the denominations represented in their 1994 research, only 10 percent of clergy were female. Therefore, this paper will address the more traditional roles of male Christian clergy and their female spouses as described above.

Adlerian Principles

The intent of this paper is to examine the experience of clergy stress through the lens of Adlerian psychology. The following section will describe key Adlerian concepts related to this paper, including Social Interest, Life Tasks, Striving for Perfection and Lifestyle.
Social Interest

From an Adlerian perspective, the clergy profession is one that demonstrates a tremendous amount of social interest. The concept of social interest is one of the key principles of Individual Psychology, as developed by Alfred Adler. Adler (1964/1979) described social interest as the ultimate expression of human connection and community. It is the opposite of being antisocial. It is about being sincerely interested in the wellbeing of others. Adler found the best English translation of his concept of “Gemeinschaftsgefühl” to be, “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another” (p. 42). This speaks of respectfully relating to others with interest, empathy and compassion.

Perhaps this also describes the intention with which many clergy set out on the career path of ministry. Their profession is very much about serving others. Religious congregations provide a place for social interaction, community, and opportunities to respond to the needs of others (Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). As Doolittle (2007) notes, the mission of clergy is “uniquely idealistic: to foster the spiritual growth of individuals and communities” (p. 35).

Grosch and Olsen (2000) also speak to the point of social interest, with the reminder that clergy “entered the field not to make money, but to help as many individuals as possible” (p. 619).

It is sobering to consider the effects of stress on these professionals: That those who begin their career with an eager and sincere passion to serve others can become so severely discouraged, cynical and exhausted, to the point of burnout. Doolittle (2007) observes that more is currently known about the prevalence of burnout than how to prevent it through the use of effective coping strategies. It would be beneficial for the emotional health of clergy to learn and practice ways of coping with the stress they experience. Increasing their ability to cope with stress should protect and foster their innate social interest.
Life Tasks

The unique goal of this paper is not only to review the sources and impact of clergy stress and identify potential coping strategies, but also to consider these factors from an Adlerian perspective and through the framework of the life tasks in particular. According to Mansager and Gold (2000), the life tasks proposed by Adler represent his “organizing concept for understanding human behavior” (p. 166). Adlerian psychiatrist and educator, Rudolf Dreikurs (1935) held that all suffering experienced by humans stemmed from the challenges related to these tasks.

Adler understood there to be three overarching social problems or life tasks that every human being must confront and solve. These include the tasks of friendship, work, and love. (Adler, 1964/1979). Adler did not prioritize these tasks, and in fact proposed that these tasks occur simultaneously and that solving an issue related to one task also helped to solve the others. In his words, “they all cast shadows across one another” (Adler, 1931/1992, p. 200). For Adler, the unifying theme of these three tasks is that all are required for survival.

Mansager and Gold (2000) offer the following perspective regarding these three tasks, “It is as if people are being asked, ‘What will you do, Human, about your condition here on earth? What will you do as earth-born, community-oriented, dual-sexed beings?’” (p. 157). Regarding the work task, humans find themselves faced with the need to sustain their life on the earth and provide for basic needs. In the process of work they realize the presence of others around them and their dependence upon one another, which is the social or friendship task. Finally, the love task involves responding to our gender and forming the most intimate of relationships. For Adler, the successful solution to these tasks would be accomplished with the utmost of social interest (Adler 1931/1992).
Since the early 1900’s when Adler posited the three tasks of life, society has seen many changes. Whether in response to these changes or for theoretical reasons, Rudolf Dreikurs and Harold Mosak suggested the possibility of two additional life tasks. These tasks include relating to oneself (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1967) and an existential or spiritual task (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967). Since the proposal of these two tasks, there have been differences of opinion among Adlerians as to whether to embrace these additions to the three originally proposed by Adler (Manaster, 1990).

Furthermore, Pew and Pew (1972) suggested using seven categories or life tasks for use in therapeutic counseling with couples, adding parenting as well as leisure and recreation to the five tasks previously mentioned (as cited in Mansager & Gold, 2000). Hawes and Blanchard (1993) also adopted the seven concepts in their practice, but differentiated between Adler’s three “major” life tasks and the four additional “minor” or “supportive” tasks (Mansager & Gold, 2000, p. 158). Hawes and Blanchard (1993) propose that the use of the additional tasks can provide a more holistic perspective.

Although there may be ongoing debate about which tasks to endorse, one can only speculate as to what Adler’s view would be on the addition of other tasks. However, it is widely known that Adler “was often heard to say, ‘Alles kann auch ganz ander sein’ (Everything can also be differently understood)” (Mansager & Gold, 2000, p. 168). Perhaps this speaks to Adler’s openness to new ideas. Manaster (1990) advises that new understandings that are gained over time may require new approaches to living in our ever-changing world. Regardless, one would hope that the theories of Adlerian psychology will be accessible to future generations and that they could benefit from applying them to their unique context and time in history.
For the purposes of this paper, the five life tasks as proposed by Adler, Dreikurs and Mosak will be addressed. In the literature, these tasks are often referred to by different names, which are used interchangeably. For example: work or occupation; friendship, community or associations; and love or intimacy, etc. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, this paper will utilize the following terms when referring to the life tasks: work, community, intimacy, self and spirituality.

In the following section, the five life tasks will be defined from an Adlerian perspective. Once defined, the various stressors experienced by clergy will be examined through the five task framework, followed by suggested coping strategies.

**Work.** This task appears to receive minimal attention in Adlerian literature. Conceivably this may be due to the rather straightforward nature of work. It is commonly understood that in order to live in society, one must work. Although the nature of a person’s work can vary tremendously, on a basic level it serves the same purpose: that of providing a means of meeting basic needs for survival. For many individuals, work goes beyond survival, and provides an opportunity to utilize their talents and abilities in a meaningful and rewarding way.

A key component of succeeding in the task of work is the quality of one’s relationships with others. If a person can empathize with others and see things from others’ point of view, they are more likely to do well in their work (Adler, 1927/1998). Always mindful of social interest, Adler (1931/1992) valued respect and cooperation, and believed that “a useful occupation implies an interest in other people and a contribution to their welfare” (p. 185).
Community. It was the belief of Adler (1931/1992) that “The oldest of human strivings is to be at one with our fellow human beings” (p. 209). Humans are social beings who need one another. Humanity has survived and developed throughout history not through individual isolation, but rather by working together to strive for the ultimate community (Adler 1964/1979). The life task of community involves having friends as well as being a friend to others. It means being interested in others and concerned for their wellbeing. It includes having a desire to be part of the community; to be a reliable and cooperative friend to all (Hartshorne 1991).

Intimacy. Perhaps it is in the life task of intimacy where the passage of time and the evolution of society are most notable. Many changes have occurred in the area of human sexuality since the time of Adler, and also since the writings of Dreikurs and Mosak. Although this task is timeless in that humans are still born into the world as either female or male, there are now many more ways in which human beings approach this task.

Based on the work of Adler, Dreikurs (1935) defined the fulfillment of the task of intimacy as a “close union of mind and body and the utmost possible cooperation with a partner of the other sex” (p. 128). Adler was addressing intimacy within his historical context, which typically involved marriage between a man and a woman. Given our society today, this task may be more broadly understood and interpreted as applying to “any committed ongoing relationship that involves exclusivity” (Hawes & Blanchard, 1993, p. 309).

The task of intimacy was not exempt from Adler’s emphasis on social interest. Adler believed that if a person was truly interested in and concerned about others, this priority would show up in everything they did. Therefore, one would also approach marriage or their most intimate relationship “as if the welfare of others were involved” (Adler, 1931/1992, p. 220). For many clergy couples, this is in fact the approach they have taken in their marriage. It is not
uncommon for clergy couples to experience a mutual sense of calling, believing that they can better serve others together than apart.

**Self.** At the most basic level, the self task involves getting along with ourselves. Human beings experience a dualism, in which we are capable of observing ourselves. At times we experience inner conflict as we observe the “good” and the “bad” within us. Humans critique themselves, and make assumptions and decisions based on their judgment of self. Out of this can develop feelings of inferiority and fear of failure. Only by accepting the self in its human totality can one experience peace (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1967).

To be human means we will make mistakes. It is not the particular mistakes that are made that are most significant, but rather what we choose to do about them. Often it is easier to forgive others for their mistakes than to forgive ourselves. Coming to accept our imperfection allows us to live with more acceptance of ourselves and others (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1967).

In her article, “Three Life Tasks or Five?”, Mastain (2011) highlights the interconnection of the tasks. She notes that a healthy relationship with oneself is necessary in order to have healthy relationships with others. This includes all relationships: at work, in the community and with a significant other. As an individual comes to understand their inherent value and worth as a human being, they are increasingly able to set aside self interest and demonstrate sincere interest in others.

**Spirituality.** It was the perspective of Mosak and Dreikurs (1967) that “Adler alluded many times to the fifth life task, but he never specifically identified it” (p. 16). Adler (1964/1979) held that each person has a unique understanding of God, and that God is the ultimate expression of perfection. Although Adler (1963) did not convey any particular personal religious beliefs in his writings, he was respectful of religion. Adler observed the connection
between religion and social interest. He stated that “In all the great movements of the world men have been striving to increase social interest, and religion is one of the greatest strivings in this way” (as cited in Baruth & Manning, 1987, p. 431).

The task of spirituality addresses the search for meaning in life and the relation of humanity to the universe. Just as Adler’s three original tasks were considered essential for survival, this is also true for many of the spiritual task as well. As Mastain (2011) observes, “Meaning or spirituality is for many people the reason they get up in the morning, and the underlying motivation behind their continual efforts to survive” (p. 8). Succeeding in the spiritual task of life involves coming to terms with the great mysteries of life in such a way as to contribute to the wellbeing of self and others.

**Striving for Perfection**

As individuals work toward solving their problems within the tasks of life, they encounter two factors that are foundational to Individual Psychology. First, these tasks are never completely resolved. There are always new situations that arise, new problems that require a response. As a result, each individual must continuously use their creative resources to adapt. Secondly, the tasks of life are approached with a sense of striving for perfection. An innate sense of inferiority continuously compels individuals to work from perceived inadequacy to a state of superiority (Adler 1931/1992).

At the core of Adler’s psychology is the observation that human beings are always striving. Just as it is natural for a plant to grow, and a vine to climb, it is inherent in human nature to creatively overcome challenges and obstacles. Within each human being is the power of life which moves them to face the tasks of life and strive for achievement. This movement causes them to apply their resources toward achieving their goals, including compensating for
defeats in one area by pursuing another. This purposive striving of each individual is completely unique from any other person, and is manifest in what Adler referred to as the “style of life” or the “lifestyle” (Adler, 1969).

**Lifestyle**

Mansager and Gold (2000) explain that “A person’s characteristic responses to circumstances define the lifestyle that makes the individual unique” (p. 156). The unique lifestyle of each individual simply flows out of them, often out of their awareness. It is a unified expression, characterizing everything they do. Their desires, thoughts and actions consistently comply with their unique pattern of living, similar to a recurring refrain of music. The lifestyle, which is set in early childhood, is persistent and very resistant to change (Dreikurs, 1935).

It is interesting to consider the lifestyle in relation to stress. First, the unique lifestyle, or way of responding to life, is most visible in a person during times of stress (Adler, 1969). Second, just as the lifestyle of each person is unique, so too is their experience of stress. What is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another. This is due to the meaning an individual assigns to the event or situation. Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) clearly convey Adler’s viewpoint on this matter:

> No experience is a cause of success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences - the so-called trauma - but we make out of them just what suits our purposes. We are self-determined by the meaning we give to our experiences, and there is probably always something of a mistake involved when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life. Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations. (p. 208)
As previously mentioned regarding the task of self, feelings of inferiority are part of the human experience. Adler (1931/1992) held that everyone experiences feelings of inferiority, because all have circumstances they would like to improve. In fact, he believed that inferior feelings have been the driving force behind all human improvements. Feelings of inferiority can provide the motivation required for an individual to move in a new direction in order solve their problems. Adler noted that, “No human being can bear a feeling of inferiority for long; he will be thrown into a state of stress that demands some kind of action” (p. 53).

The typical response to feelings of inferiority is for an individual to find a way to strive for superiority. This too is part of the unique expression of their lifestyle. However, this attempt to be superior does not actually solve the problem at hand. Rather than being useful and contributing to a positive solution, this striving for superiority is behavior that Adler (1931/1992) would describe as often going “towards the useless side of life” (p. 54).

It has been noted that each individual assigns their own subjective meaning to given situations. In the same manner, feelings of inferiority are also subjective. When comparing the self to others, fictive values are created and assigned to all. These values are created in the imagination of the individual, and are not related to the true value of any individual. Most often individuals will perceive others to be greater, to be more capable, to have more, etc. than themselves. Herein lays the root of inferiority (Dreikurs, 1935).

Mosak (1977) observed that inferior feelings decrease social interest. As one becomes consumed with gaining superiority over others, the capacity for caring for the needs and wellbeing of others diminishes. This brings to mind the task of self, and the importance of learning to stop fighting with ourselves, and instead to encourage and accept ourselves. As
Mosak points out, “If one does not realize that he has a place by the very reason of his existence, no success, power, education or wealth can provide a sense of security” (p. 100).

Although a sense of inferiority is certainly not the only reason for stress in an individual’s life, it can be a significant factor. It was Adler’s (1931/1992) perspective that feelings of inferiority “can express themselves in a thousand ways,” (p. 53) and that these feelings “always produce stress” (p. 54). All this has special bearing on the unique life experiences of clergy. From the vantage point of these five tasks, this paper will now explore the various sources of stress experienced by clergy.

Sources of Clergy Stress

Work

Given the fact that work is a life-long endeavor, a certain sense of satisfaction and fulfillment with one’s occupation is very important (Mueller & McDuff, 2004). It is clear that work-related stress impacts job satisfaction. Every type of occupation carries with it its own unique stressors. The pastoral role is no exception. It is a profession quite unlike any other. Yet, similar to other kinds of work, it has “both its personal benefits as well as its liabilities” (Lee, 1999, p. 477). In their article, “Beyond Social Interest: Striving toward Optimum Health and Wellness,” authors Sweeney and Witmer (1991) note that work is an essential task of life which “provides an opportunity for great satisfaction and contribution to wellness or a source of equally great discouragement and a contributor to potential illness” (p. 535).

Comparatively little research has been done regarding clergy employment factors. Therefore, less is known about conditions affecting clergy job satisfaction than for other occupations. Clergy are generally perceived as being satisfied in their role, particularly since it
is understood that they pursued their career path based on a sense of calling (Mueller & McDuff, 2004).

Among male Anglican clergy in the Church of England, job satisfaction is lowest for those in their forties and fifties and highest for those in their sixties and beyond (Turton & Francis, 2002). Mueller and McDuff (2004) report that female clergy are generally more satisfied in their occupation than male clergy. Additionally, research indicates that clergy who work in larger congregations experience greater satisfaction. Those working in parishes with significant financial challenges report diminished feelings of accomplishment (Hills, Francis & Rutledge, 2004).

The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches states that there are currently 607,944 ministers and 338,713 churches, or nearly two ministers for every congregation (as cited in Warner, 2010, p. 14). This is in contrast to the 1950’s, when the number of clergy was approximately the same as the number of churches in the U.S. Additionally, Stone (2010) observes a decline in overall church attendance in recent years. Consequently, this clergy surplus creates a tighter job market, making pastoral positions more difficult to obtain than in the past.

Darling et al., (2004) found that clergy work an average of 54.5 hours per week (p. 266). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), clergy are compensated for their work with a mean annual salary of $48,290, or a mean hourly wage of $23.22. For many years, clergy maintained status within the middle class, which is no longer guaranteed. While many denominations require clergy to obtain graduate degrees, some ordain individuals who simply feel called to the work. In recent decades, as other professionals with graduate degrees have seen increased salaries, clergy salaries have remained flat. Specifically, “in the past decade, those
with graduate-level degrees earned an average mean household income of $105,530 - almost double that of male married clergy” (Price, 2001, p. 18). There is little doubt that the financial challenges confronting clergy are a source of stress for them.

Hang-yue et al., (2005) and Kuhne and Donaldson (1995) note that in many respects, the responsibilities and characteristics of the work done by clergy are comparable to that performed by business leaders. Both are required to interact on a daily basis with many people. However, clergy tend to have more varied interactions, which can range from mundane to heartbreaking, frequently within the same day (as cited in McKenna et al., 2007).

Similar to corporate professionals, clergy are required to juggle a variety of complex tasks, including “Planning, organizing, controlling, budgeting, staffing, motivating and even disciplining in order to adequately deliver caring services to their constituents” (Little et al., 2007, p. 248). However, although clergy bear the responsibilities and stress common to corporate executives, they do not receive similar compensation and benefits (Price, 2001), and they do not receive comparable training in management practices (Blizzard, 1985, as cited in Kemery, 2006). It is likely that these factors contribute to their sense of inferiority and stress as they strive to carry out the business of the congregation.

Most clergy do not enter the ministry so that they can manage an organization. Initially, they are often responding to a sense of spiritual calling to invest directly in the lives of people. However, as their congregation grows, they find that more and more of their time is required for managing staff and administrative details. As a result, they may find themselves immersed in tasks that they do not feel prepared for or particularly enjoy (Knapp, Pruett & Hicks, 2009). Job-person fit theory, as discussed by Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter (2001) suggests that individuals
who perceive that their job is not a good fit for them will experience increased stress and be more susceptible to burnout.

Blanton (1992) observed five key areas of stress related to the work of clergy, including “mobility, financial compensation, expectations and time demands, intrusions of family boundaries and social support” (as cited in Morris & Blanton, 1994, p. 189). Literature written by Blackmon, 1984; Ellison & Matila, 1983; Evers & Tomic, 2003; Gleason, 1977; Hall, 1997; Morris & Blanton, 1994a; Ostrander, Henry, & Fournier, 1994 has produced the following extensive list of work-related stressors for clergy (as cited in McMinn, Lish, Trice, Root, Gilbert & Yap, 2005):

Stressors facing clergy include 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, the senior pastor, one’s congregation, and of one’s denomination. (p. 564)

In today’s society, clergy do the work of ministry in an increasingly secularized atmosphere. Secularization decreases the authority and legitimacy of the clergy occupation. In this social context, church attendees are more likely to approach the church with the mindset of a consumer rather than committed member. These factors also contribute to increased clergy stress and propensity for burnout (Miner, Dowson & Sterland, 2010).

Miner (2007) notes that the greatest source of stress for clergy is the relational component of their work (as cited in McKenna, Boyd et al., 2007). Ministry is relationally intensive work in a unique context. Providing leadership to a group of voluntary members is no easy task. Each
individual has his/her own ideas of what the pastor should do or not do, and how things should be done in the congregation. If they disagree with the pastor, they are free to leave the organization at any time, and some do. This is also another difference between clergy and business leaders. While employees may be unhappy with their boss or the corporation, they may also be dependent on the income they receive for their work, and therefore stay with the company.

The fact that churches are always at risk of losing members is a constant source of stress for clergy. They feel this pressure and may be at risk of losing their job if their membership and financial numbers are not continuously increasing. When continuously confronted with the high, disparate expectations of their church members, clergy sometimes resort to attempting the impossible task of trying to please everybody all of the time (Meek et al., 2003). Deluca (1980) referred to the clergy profession as a “holy crossfire,” as clergy and their families struggle to deal with the conflicting expectations of “self, family, congregation, denomination, and God” (as cited in Morris & Blanton, 1994, p. 189).

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) have proposed an explanation as to why church members have unrealistic expectations of clergy. Historically, clergy have functioned “as intermediaries between members of the congregation and God,” and “share in the psychic rewards offered to the gods, for example: deference, honor, and adoration” (as cited in Krause, Ellison & Wulff, 1998, pp. 727-728). If church members understand God to represent perfection, as Adler did, it is logical that they also expect perfection from the person who is representing God to them. Lenski (1961) found that as the leaders of the church, clergy are expected to embody the standards of the religious organization more than the members (as cited in Krause et al., 1998). When clergy fail to live up to the idealized expectations of parishioners, and particularly when their human nature
is revealed through what is perceived as a moral failure, it can be a disappointing and even devastating experience for parishioners.

The standard of perfection is not only expected of clergy by parishioners, but is also often self-imposed. Clergy are aware of how their performance compares to their desired ideal (Ellison & Mattila, 1983). What complicates matters further is that not only are the expectations and standards placed upon clergy extremely high, they are also ambiguous. Katz and Kahn (1978) define role conflict as “the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult” (as cited in Kemery, 2006, p. 562).

Clergy generally do well when their role allows them the freedom and flexibility to create their own schedule and to respond to the unexpected needs that inevitably arise. Ambiguity in this sense is helpful. It is the experience of the conflicting expectations of church members that is stressful (Kemery, 2006). For example, some parishioners may expect the pastor to be a scholar; others want him to primarily serve as a counselor, providing individual pastoral care; still others believe he should excel as a teacher and public speaker. Also, in that people of faith are likely to take matters related to their faith seriously, their expectations are strongly held. According to Lee (2007), “For pastors, the greater the frequency of presumptive expectations, the lower their reported wellbeing” (p. 767).

Given the relational dynamics just discussed, it is not surprising that clergy experience conflict with parishioners. Jinkins (2002) found that in addition to role overload, interpersonal conflicts were among the most challenging experiences of clergy (as cited in Beebe, 2007, p. 258). Krause et al., (1998) report that compared to the typical church member, clergy experience both more support from others as well as more conflict. Three specific areas over which conflict
often arises within the church include (1) General issues, such as gossiping, (2) Leadership issues, role performance, and the lifestyle of the clergy, (3) Church policies and doctrines (Krause et al., 1998, p. 738).

Rediger (1997) points to an increase in “incivility, fighting, and abuse in congregations,” resulting from differences in belief (as cited in Mueller & McDuff, 2004, p. 263). It is of interest to note that clergy who have more liberal theological beliefs than their congregation experience more conflict than those who have more conservative beliefs than their congregations (Mueller & McDuff, 2004). Also, McKown (2001) found that clergy who have a management style of avoiding conflict actually experience increased interpersonal conflicts as well as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (as cited in Beebe, 2007).

Some may find it ironic to learn of conflict within churches. Perhaps conflict is not expected from organizations known for espousing values such as faith, hope and love. Rook (1990) comments on the fact that negative interactions or conflict can be particularly harmful when it is rare and unexpected (as cited in Krause et al., 1998). This certainly may be the case in religious congregations. Since clergy function as the primary leader of the church, they ultimately bear responsibility for what is occurring within the organization, and are often the target of criticism. According to a Gallup survey conducted in 2004, the primary reason people leave a church is disappointment with the pastor (as cited in Stone, 2010).

Another reported stressor related to the work of clergy is boundary ambiguity. Ministry provides a unique context in which the boundaries between the professional and personal lives of clergy are often unclear. For example, although a pastor is employed by the church, his family also typically attends services and often participates in various church activities. In some
situations, clergy and their families live in a parsonage, which is owned by the church, and often located adjacent to the church facility.

When the lines between private and professional life are blurred, it can result in stressful circumstances, and make it challenging for the pastor to differentiate himself from his role. Some examples of boundary ambiguity and presumptive expectations include the following behaviors of church members: Dropping by the home of the pastor without invitation or warning; assuming that the pastor will unlock the church building for a meeting since he lives next to the church; assuming that the pastor’s spouse or family will serve at or participate in church related events; calling a pastor on his day off or during meal time, etc. (Lee, 1999).

In his book, Clergy Burnout, Pastor Fred Lehr (2006) describes the dangers of the lack of self differentiation in the context of ministry:

Living as the resident martyr and victim, one soon becomes enmeshed in the pathology of the system. Boundaries get blurred. Personal identity evaporates. Clergy have told me that outside of their ministries they have no idea who they are. Without their role, they are nobody. Somewhere in the first five years of their ministry they lost track of themselves and learned that this was the price to survive in a classic codependent system (p. 36).

This review of work-related stressors for clergy provides a limited overview of the challenges they face in their occupational experience. Low salary, high responsibility, job fit concerns, unrealistic expectations, relational conflict and unclear boundaries are some of their significant sources of stress. Based on this information, it is not surprising that Hoge and Wenger (2005) found in their study of pastors who had left ministry that 58% of them cited
feeling “drained by the demands on me” as a critical factor in their decision (as cited in Lee, 2007, p. 761).

Lee (1999) observed that the effects of stress experienced on the job spill over beyond the work environment into other areas of life. As one’s general sense of wellbeing suffers from work-related stress, all of one’s life may be impacted. Earlier in this paper it was pointed out that Adler believed that the different tasks of life are interrelated. As this paper now proceeds to examine the sources of stress related to the other tasks of life for clergy, this truth will become apparent.

Community

The life task of community can be more complex for clergy than for those involved in other professions. An individual in the general population may work at their job, greet their neighbor across the street, entertain friends, and attend church on Sunday. For this person, these interactions are often with distinct groups of people. Exceptions might include situations such as attending the same church as their neighbor, or a co-worker who becomes a close personal friend, etc. Referring back to the earlier comparison to the corporate world, when a CEO leaves her office for the day, to her neighbors across the street she is simply a neighbor, not a CEO.

For clergy, the issues of boundary ambiguity are evident in this life task. Perhaps comparable to the role of a politician, clergy have a sense of always being “on” and “on call.” Clergy are ever conscious of the role they represent as they are out in the community. Their church may be the place where they worship, but it is also their place of employment. People in the church may be their friends, but these same individuals may also be in a church leadership role that requires them to determine the pastor’s salary. Neighbors are not simply neighbors, but someone to whom the pastor represents the church and, as discussed earlier, even God.
Lee (1999) notes that, “clergy family life cannot be understood apart from the quality of the family’s relationship to the congregation” (p. 479). Perhaps a considerable amount of stress is experienced by clergy due to the fact that it is challenging for them to differentiate themselves as an individual from their professional role as clergy. They are always wearing the pastor hat. Wildhagen, Mueller and Wang (2005) state that, “Clergy, more than other professionals, often are expected to become involved in their communities” (p. 386). Even within this expectation the interconnection between self, job and community is clear. When the pastor is involved in the community, he is seen first as a pastor, rather than an individual.

This background may help to explain the profound loneliness experienced by clergy. Headington (1997) stated that 70% of pastors “report not having a close friend” (as cited in Meek et al., 2003, p. 342). The following quotes convey the theme of isolation within the profession, which persists beyond lines of gender and culture. Retreat leader Sr. Mary Luke Jones said of her work with female clergy:

I was surprised by their loneliness. They come with a deep thirst for community. The pastor is supposed to be everything to everybody, but she can’t develop deep relationships with the congregation because she has to be objective and stand apart. That was new to me (Frykhom, 2011, p. 10).

Shinhwan (2006) says the following regarding Korean clergy, “They do not have close friends. They are less likely to have a social support than any other person in their communities. Their needs for reverence and holiness separate themselves from their neighbors” (p. 242).

The irony here is that although the profession is highly relational, and clergy are involved in many relationships, they feel utterly alone. They may be in the community, but in a sense are
not equal members of it. From an Adlerian perspective, it appears that clergy demonstrate a very high level of social interest, but are not the recipients of its benefits.

This pervasive sense of loneliness can contribute to clergy stress as well as other serious maladies. In their book, *Primal Leadership*, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) explain the health protection provided by friendship. Whereas the death rate is tripled for socially isolated middle-aged males who experience three or more intensely stressful events in one year, no impact is noted for these events for males with many close friends.

Although clergy may desire close friendship with others, this is difficult for them to attain. The expectations of clergy previously discussed tend to lead to isolation. McMinn et al., (2005) provide the insightful example that whereas when a surgeon has a bad day, he might go out for a drink with his colleagues; if a pastor has a bad day, he is expected to pray about it. Proffitt, Cann, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2007) point out the high level of social constraint with which clergy live because of their occupation. They fear revealing their private struggles publicly.

Clergy may be hesitant to form close friendships with individuals within their congregation, so as not to show favoritism. Also, the time spent on required church-related social activities prevents them from having time to develop friendships outside of the church (Doolittle, 2007). As a result, the friendships they do form may be lacking in depth and authenticity. Related to this, Doolittle (2007) provides the following response from a pastor, “Emotionally, I don’t feel as if I can completely trust persons in the church with real feelings - and I include my clergy colleagues - who often try to give the impression that everything is perfect” (p. 37).
Among Catholic priests, Bricker and Fleischer (1993) report a connection between lack of social support and lower self esteem and job satisfaction (as cited in Doolittle, 2007). Sarason and Sarason (1982) found that individuals who feel that they have little social support are less likely to be tolerant of others, less hopeful about the possibility of change, and have a more negative view of relationships. These factors bring to mind the symptom of depersonalization related to clergy burnout previously mentioned in this paper.

**Intimacy**

Research on the experience of spouses of clergy is even more limited than that regarding clergy. However, all indications are that feelings of loneliness and isolation are common to both clergy and their spouses, and the marriage relationship is impacted. Valeriano (1981) cites one survey in which “56% of clergy wives reported having no close friends, and one-fifth of the women believed that people shy away from them because they are married to a pastor” (as cited in McMinn et al., 2005, p. 567). Warner and Carter (1984) state that compared to non-clergy couples, pastors and their wives “experienced significantly more loneliness and diminished marital adjustment” (as cited in Darling et al., 2004, p. 262).

In their loneliness, some wives of pastors reach out for support through online groups and organizations designed specifically for them. Lisa Takeuchi Cullen (2007), reports in her Time magazine article, “Pastors’ Wives Come Together,” that loneliness is the leading topic on the hotline for pastors’ wives provided by Focus on the Family. Sherryl Stone, who has been in the role of “pastor’s wife” for over thirty years, offers the following description of her experience:

In our new church I experienced something I’d never felt before. People were nice to me, but they didn’t want me to be a part of their lives. I kept wondering why I couldn’t “click” with these people. I continued to invite families over for dinner and have play
dates with other moms and their kids. But an incredible loneliness began to envelop me. We were hundreds of miles from our families. And because I’m an outgoing person, I wondered why I couldn’t find the friendships I needed for emotional support (Stone, 2010, p. 181).

The reasons for clergy loneliness discussed earlier in this paper very likely apply to the wives of clergy as well. They too face high expectations because of their role as the pastor’s wife. They may also hold back from sharing their concerns with others for fear of jeopardizing their husband’s career. In addition, Wildhagen et al., (2005) note the fact that clergy typically do not stay in one congregation for their entire career, but may move frequently. These geographical moves can also take a toll on the friendships of clergy and their spouses.

Papnek (1973) referred to the clergy profession as a “two-person career,” implying that although the congregation may be paying a salary to the pastor, there are definite expectations placed upon the spouse, who is unpaid (as cited in Morris & Blanton, 1994, p. 193). Morris and Blanton (1994) go on to point out the complexity of the clergy spouse role. Based upon the expectations of the congregation, the spouse may find herself in three full-time jobs (personal career, family and church) and paid for only one.

The following quote by Ruthe White (n.d.) articulates the uniqueness of the role, “The pastor’s wife is the only woman I know who is asked to work full time without pay on her husband’s job, in a role no one has yet defined” (www.pastorswife.net/). Finch (1980) conveys the perspective and struggle of one unnamed clergy spouse on this topic: “Well, she shouldn’t be an unpaid curate, but she is. You can’t help it. You shouldn’t be, but you just fall into it. Sometimes when I’m really tired, I say ‘I’m just not going to do it any more’. It’s silly. Then I just do it” (p. 856).
Based on empirical data, Finch (1980) gleaned three “rules of thumb” that clergy spouses tend to operate within, even when they intend to carry out a less traditional role in the church. These include:

1. Good relationships and an atmosphere of cordiality must be maintained at all times.

2. Sufficient social distance should be maintained so that, whatever the degree of intimacy of a relationship, the clergy wife remains a person who appears trustworthy and never divulges confidences.

3. A clergy wife should be seen to be supporting her husband in his work, preferably by some visible and active means. (pp. 862-863).

Although some stereotypes regarding the clergy spouse role continue to persist, there have also been significant changes in the way spouses choose to approach the role. Baker and Scott (1992) found that newer trends indicate that spouses of clergy often find fulfillment through employment outside of the home and church. They tend to be highly educated. Compared to non-clergy female peers, the spouses of clergy report greater satisfaction with life and less depression (as cited in McMinn et al., 2005). Informal surveys have found that many clergy spouses find joy in their role. Perhaps these conflicting experiences point to the paradox observed by Zoba (1997), that “the role of clergy wife is both a place of privilege and a place of emotional challenge” (as cited in McMinn et al., 2005).

Baker and Scott (1992) also note that many clergy wives tend to choose employment in some type of service career similar to their husbands (as cited in Morris & Blanton, 1994). In their study, Darling et al., (2004) found that 71.5 percent of the clergy spouses were employed, “averaging 28.1 hours a week in their professional careers, and 45.1 hours with their families” (p. 266). In her article, “The New Preachers’ Spouses,” author Joy Bennett Kinnon (2001)
highlights Judge Denise Page Hood, a federal court judge who is also a clergy spouse. Hood states, “If your husband or wife is in the ministry, then your household is in the ministry” (p. 52).

Hood’s comment seems to be validated by the available literature. The occupation of clergy impacts the entire family, including the spouse and children. However, Lee (2007) notes that although a pastor and his wife may both be involved in the same church community, they will each have their own unique experience and perception of the social environment. For example, Darling et al., (2004) report that the spouses of clergy experience more stress than their clergy husbands. This is due in part to the frequent interruptions related to ministry that take the pastor away from home and family. As a result, the spouse may often be left to handle family issues on his/her own.

It appears that clergy couples generally practice the type of social interest championed by Adler. Their marriage relationship does take into consideration the welfare of others. The question is how to do this in such a way as to protect the health of the marriage. Hills et al., (2004) found that the only demographic factor to predict exhaustion among clergy was marital status. Presumably this is due to the tensions clergy experience as they are pulled between the conflicting responsibilities of work and family. Price (2001) refers to the results of one study in which one half of the male clergy spent ten hours or less per week with their families. Both clergy and their spouses report their greatest area of stress is “intra-family strains” (Darling et al., 2004, p. 272).

Hall (1997) identified six stressors that are particularly challenging for every clergy couple: “financial stress, lack of family privacy, frequent moves, spouse being on call, spouse is busy serving others, and lack of ministry to clergy family” (as cited in Trihub et al., 2010, p. 102). Clergy families report that their experience can be like living in a “fishbowl,” as their lives
are closely watched and sometimes judged by church members. It is not uncommon for children of clergy couples to self identify as a “P.K.” or “preacher’s kid.” This speaks to the unique experience and impact of the ministry profession even on the children in the pastor’s family.

It is also understood that boundary ambiguity and intrusions upon family boundaries will produce stress within the family system (Boss, 1980). While every family must navigate boundary changes within the family system over the lifespan, clergy families also have the unique challenge of distinguishing the boundaries between family and church. This can be difficult, as clergy and their spouses are “often called to assist persons in crisis at all times of the day or night,” and are “often expected to show high levels of compassion and empathy for persons who are suffering” (Darling et al., 2004, p. 271).

For example, a pastor may be challenged to preserve the personal boundary of a day off with his family when a member of the congregation calls in crisis. If he chooses not to respond to the crisis, the member could perceive him as uncaring and perhaps leave the church. If he does respond to the crisis, he disappoints his family, and may implicitly communicate to them that the needs of church members are more important than theirs.

Clearly there are significant issues contributing to the stress of clergy related to the task of intimacy. Jud et al., (1970) found in his study of clergy who had left the occupation that over one-third cited “wife or family unhappy” as being a key factor in their decision to leave (as cited in Lee, 2007, p. 762). Ministry is not a profession that is abandoned lightly, considering the sense of spiritual calling that is typically involved upon entering it. Unfortunately, when faced with their own marital and family concerns, clergy are often hesitant to seek outside help and support. They see themselves as the helper, not the one to receive help. Most often, clergy couples are facing problems in the task of intimacy all alone (Darling, et al., 2004).
Self

Moving now to the fourth task, this paper will address stressors affecting clergy in relation to the task of self. Questions for consideration here include, “how do clergy get along with themselves in ministry?” and “how do individual personality and character traits impact their experience of ministry?”

One basic aspect of the self that plays a role in the stress experienced by clergy is simply age. In terms of demographic variables, age has the highest association with burnout. Younger employees, particularly those under 30 or 40, are more likely to experience burnout than older employees (Maslach et al., 2001). Therefore, clergy are more susceptible to stress and burnout earlier in their career. High ambition and lack of experience can be contributing factors at this career stage.

Hatcher and Underwood (1990) suggest that when clergy have a low opinion of themselves, they are more likely to experience stress as they try to prove their worth through their work. In this striving they may push themselves to meet unrealistic standards (as cited in McMinn et al., 2005). This brings to mind the Adlerian perspectives referenced earlier; of the striving of each individual toward perfection, and their movement from feelings of inferiority to perceived superiority.

Rayburn et al., (1986) observed that in order to be socially pleasing, clergy are less likely to “admit to role overload, role insufficiency, and role strain” (as cited in Darling et al., 2004, p. 262). Wanting to prove that they are worthy and capable, and also perceiving the expectations of perfection, clergy are hesitant to acknowledge personal limits and ask for help. Living with the chronic fear of letting people down can produce feelings of stress and guilt.
Still other factors related to the self that can contribute to clergy stress and burnout include “self-blame, disengagement, venting, distraction, and denial” (Doolittle, 2007, p. 36), and idealism, perfectionism and compulsive tendencies (Grosch & Olsen, 2000). Of these, the factor most often discussed in the literature reviewed for this paper is narcissism. According to Bursten (1982) and Westen (1990), narcissism is “broadly defined as a strong psychological interest in oneself” (as cited in Zondag, 2004, p. 423).

Hessel J. Zondag of the Netherlands has focused much of his research on narcissism, and particularly on how the work of pastors is affected by it. In his article, “Just Like other People: Narcissism among Pastors,” Zondag provides a helpful perspective on this topic. He points out that to varying degrees, everyone is narcissistic. It is only considered dysfunctional or pathological when it is extreme to the point of contributing to antisocial behavior. It is not something to be judged as morally right or wrong. Kohut (1966) and Stolorow (1975) explain that some amount of narcissism is necessary in order for an individual to have a healthy view of self (as cited in Zondag, 2004).

Zondag (2004) cites the work of Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) and Rhodewalt & Morf (1995) as he conveys the challenge of narcissism:

In dealing with others, narcissistic people are constantly on the lookout for recognition and reassurance. They need other people’s admiration to confirm their imagined greatness. A lack of admiration from others results in feelings of emptiness, depletion, apathy, and a sense of not really living. It is precisely these feelings which constitute the core of narcissistic vulnerability. At the same time, however, it is difficult for narcissistic individuals to be dependent on others, since this clashes with their imaginary grandeur. Narcissism therefore creates a mental double bind: the individual needs others for
recognition and especially admiration, but simultaneously hates to be subject to the judgment of those very same others (pp. 424-425).

According to Patrick (1998), pathological narcissism is not a common characteristic among clergy (as cited in Zondag, 2004, p. 428). Yet it is likely that many clergy struggle with narcissistic tendencies in varying degrees. In fact, Meloy (1986) reports that the clergy profession is ideal for someone with strong narcissistic tendencies. Some factors that point to this conclusion include the fact that clergy often feel called by God to do their work, and they communicate from a position of spiritual authority to an audience who looks to them for guidance and answers. In this environment lies the potential for the pastor to receive admiration and praise. The unique work of clergy, including the fact that they are literally put on a public pedestal every Sunday, can by its very nature provide reinforcement for narcissism.

More broadly, Lasch (1978) and Sennett (1974) found narcissism to be common among middle-class professionals who perform highly relational work. In order to succeed in a relational occupation, one must be able to make a favorable impression on others. This is one of the abilities of a person with narcissistic traits (as cited in Zondag, 2004, p. 428). Here we see an example of the interplay between the life tasks of self, community and work.

The interest of this paper is how narcissism may contribute to the stress experienced by clergy. As discussed earlier, clergy live with high performance expectations, imposed by self and others. Their level of stress may fluctuate according to how well they are managing these expectations. For many clergy, this may result in an exhausting “roller coaster” experience. As Zondag (2004) explains, “self-esteem is high [in the narcissist] when the individual succeeds in convincing others of his/her achievements, and low if the badly desired admiration fails to
materialize” (p. 426). Clearly, narcissistic tendencies can be a contributing factor to the experience of clergy stress.

Another factor that receives attention in the literature related to the self task of clergy is that of personality type. Carl Gustav Jung, a contemporary of Adler, was the originator of psychological type theory. This theory was put into practice through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI “claims to identify and assess four dichotomous indices of psychological type: extraversion (E) and introversion (I), sensing (S) and intuition (N), thinking (T) and feeling (F), and judging (J) and perceiving (P)” (Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley & Slater, 2007, p. 269).

These four indices are used to create 16 different psychological types. Psychological type theory suggests that generally individuals tend to fall into one of 16 categories in terms of their personality. The type preferences include “two orientations, two perceiving preferences, two judging preferences, and two attitudes toward the outer world” (Francis, Robbins, Kaldor & Castle, 2009, pp. 202-203).

It is common knowledge that Adler and Jung held differing views on several aspects of psychological theory. Adler believed in the absolute uniqueness of the individual and the consistent expression of the individual’s lifestyle. He did not put people into categories or boxes of any sort. For Adler, an individual’s life is their own unique creation, created out of the meanings they make of their life experiences. No two could possibly be identical. However, it appears that some valuable insight can be gained by considering general patterns of personality expression. Each individual is certainly unique, even though they may share some common lifestyle expressions with others of similar personality type.
Based on the research, there are definite patterns of personality type among clergy. Several studies indicate that individuals in the clergy profession tend to be more introverted than extroverted, prefer feeling over thinking, and tend more toward judging than perceiving. The studies show less consensus regarding the preferences of sensing versus intuition among clergy (Francis, Craig et al., 2007, p. 278). This personality profile has also been found to be consistent among clergy in the United States (Francis, Wulff et al., 2008).

Of the 16 personality types presented by the MBTI, the most common clergy type is ISFJ (Francis, Robbins et al., 2009). Following is a description of this type according to Myers (1998):

- Quiet, friendly, responsible and conscientious. Work devotedly to meet their obligations.
- Lend stability to any project or group. Thorough, painstaking, accurate. Their interests are usually not technical. Can be patient with necessary details. Loyal, considerate, perceptive, concerned with how other people feel (as cited in Francis, Robbins et al., 2009, p. 209).

If this generally describes a common clergy personality profile, it is understandable how they could experience their role as stressful. This paper has already described the high and ambiguous expectations placed upon clergy. If their personality style compels them to be painstakingly conscientious in their work, and to always consider of the feelings of others, they face a perplexing predicament. Like chasing after a mirage in the desert, they are working valiantly toward achieving something that is actually impossible: pleasing everyone all of the time.

The data indicates that the personality types of ISFP and INTJ experience the lowest satisfaction and highest emotional exhaustion in ministry. In contrast, those who are most
satisfied and least emotionally exhausted in the pastoral role are those with the personality types of ENFJ and ESFJ (Francis, Wulff et al., 2008). The differences in orientation of extraversion versus introversion are particularly noteworthy.

In psychological type theory, the orientations of introversion and extraversion reflect two different sources of energy. Individuals who are more introverted tend to be energized by going within themselves, through solitude and times of quiet reflection. On the other hand, those who are more extraverted in nature receive energy by going out and being with other people. Given the fact that ministry is a relationally intensive occupation, pastors who are more introverted may feel emotionally drained by spending too much time out of their preferred orientation (Francis, Wulff et al., 2008).

Certain aspects of clergy work may appeal more to one orientation or the other. An individual with tendencies of either introversion or extraversion brings unique strengths to the role. For example, introverted clergy may thrive on quiet study, prayer, and providing individual counseling to church members. However, as introverts, they may find themselves emotionally drained by performing other necessary tasks that extraverts would find energizing, such as public speaking and attending large group social events (Francis, Robbins et al., 2009).

Francis, Robbins et al., (2009) found that 62% of clergy preferred introversion, whereas 38% were more extroverted (p. 208). This statistic could provide some explanation to the observation mentioned earlier in this paper that clergy tend to be “a happy but exhausted profession” (Francis, Wulff, et al., 2008, p. 168). If two-thirds of clergy are introverted, isolated individuals striving for perfection in a highly relational and ambiguous context, it is no wonder they are exhausted.
Another possible source of stress related to personality type is the potential difference in clergy type preferences compared to that of the general population. For example, in their study of Anglican clergy in the United Kingdom, Francis, Craig et al., (2007) found that clergy scored higher in feeling than thinking, compared to the general population of males. This difference could cause the general population to view clergy as too sentimental, and may offer a partial explanation to the fact that typically more women attend church than men. In addition, Francis, Craig et al., (2007) found that “male Anglican clergy also prefer judging significantly more frequently than the male United Kingdom population norms” (p. 280). In this case, the general population represented in the congregation may see the pastor as too rigid. Indications are that personality type preferences are a factor to be considered related to clergy stress.

**Spirituality**

It may seem odd to think that pastors might experience stress in the spiritual task of life. Given the fact that spiritual matters are their area of expertise, one may expect no problems for them here. Historically, some in the field of psychology have held that spiritual belief is detrimental to mental health. However, there is increasing research that points to the psychological and physiological benefits of spirituality. Part of the challenge of studying the effects of religious belief and practice is in how to measure them (McMinn, 2008).

Doolittle (2007) found a correlation between high spirituality and high personal accomplishment in his study of 222 United Methodist Clergy. However, those high in spirituality were also high in both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Doolittle suggests that the correlation with emotional exhaustion may point to the pastor’s need to utilize every possible coping strategy in order to deal with the exhaustion, including spiritual resources. The reason for the correlation between high spirituality and depersonalization is unclear. This
correlation raises questions regarding whether a close relationship with a deity or “Higher Power” may cause a person to be less attached to people (Doolittle, 2007).

As noted earlier in this paper, clergy are frequently called upon to help others in times of distress. As parishioners face crises and painful tragedies, such as the death of a loved one or a runaway teenager, clergy are often present with them. Darling et al., (2004) note a connection between increased compassion fatigue, or the experience of apathy related to the demands of providing care for others, and a lower sense of spiritual resources among clergy. A potential source of stress for clergy in the spiritual task is how to represent God to people when there are no easy answers, and God seems absent. Certainly clergy experience stress when they find themselves wrestling with their own spiritual questions and doubts. After all, their congregation is looking to them for answers.

In his book, Faith & Doubt, Pastor John Ortberg (2008) writes about three categories of personal doubts that have troubled him at times. First is the lack of evidence of the existence of God. Second is the uncaring and even cruel behavior of some religious believers throughout history. Third is the existence of suffering in the world.

Where can clergy go with their own spiritual questions, doubts and disappointments? If the spiritual leader has unresolved spiritual doubts, can he continue to instill faith in others without feeling like a fraud? If she exposes her doubt to the congregation, will they leave the church? If he shares it with a denominational leader, will he lose his job? Here again is another example of why clergy are often socially isolated.

In the upcoming section, this paper will review suggested methods of coping and managing stress. Coping is generally understood in a positive sense. However, not all ways of coping are equally effective. In fact, some can be detrimental. Regarding stress related to the
spiritual task of life, a connection has been found between the use of negative forms of religious coping and increased distress, anxiety and depression. Some examples of negative forms of religious coping include viewing life circumstances as punishment from God, viewing negative events as an act of the Devil, and expressing anger and confusion about one’s relationship with God (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000).

Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) suggest that the reason for these harmful effects may be that negative religious coping behaviors add an additional burden to an already stressful situation. In making this proposal, they are referring to the work of Pargament et al., (1994), which showed that individuals who engaged in negative religious coping experienced increased global distress at three weeks follow-up, as well as the longitudinal study conducted by Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco and Nicholas (1999), which linked negative religious coping with poorer psychological adjustment concurrently and four months following (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

**Coping Strategies to Alleviate Clergy Stress**

This paper will now move from exploring the sources of clergy stress to possible means of coping with the experience of stress. Just as this paper reviewed sources of clergy stress in the five life task areas, so too methods of coping with stress will be examined in each of these five areas. Although it has been mentioned that coping can be positive or negative, this paper will focus only on positive coping strategies for effectively reducing clergy work-related stress.

**General Coping**

This limited review reveals that clergy and their families experience considerable stress related to their occupation while they exert significant leadership and influence in society. Therefore, it is important to explore the options that are available to them to decrease their stress and increase their sense of emotional wellbeing.
The goal is not to eliminate stress. Potentially stressful circumstances will inevitably arise as human beings live in the world and interact with one another. Rather, the goal is for clergy to be aware of effective coping strategies and means of support they can utilize to manage the stress that they experience. According to Trihub et al., (2010), “supported pastors tend to produce healthier churches” (p. 102). This idea is rich with Adler’s concept of social interest. The potential of a positive ripple effect is great, as supported pastors invest in the health of their church members, who in turn care for and impact their community and the world.

Although the potential stressors are numerous, many clergy and their families have found a way to manage quite well (McMinn et al., 2005). Francis, Hills et al., (2009) note that anyone in a given profession is likely to experience work-related stress from time to time. However, clergy tend to believe that they should be better able to cope with their stress than others who are not employed in ministry. Here again we see an indication of clergy holding themselves to an unrealistic standard of perfection, perhaps mistakenly believing that, “Other people get stressed and burned out by their work, but I should not.”

One general recommendation for coping with ministry stress in a healthy way is to follow the wisdom of the adage, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” Emotionally and spiritually healthy clergy spouses make it a practice to use a variety of coping techniques, rather than relying on just one (McMinn, 2008). Doolittle (2010) found a pattern to emerge from the behaviors that protect against burnout, which was a pattern of “balance and variety” (p. 93). In order to realize these healthy practices, clergy must develop the ability to establish personal boundaries and to manage their time (Doolittle, 2010).

The following specific behaviors have been found to protect against burnout among clergy: Meeting with a mentor, reading scholarly material and attending a retreat twice per year
all are associated with lower emotional exhaustion scores. Also, by exercising three times per week, clergy are one-fourth as likely not to have high emotional exhaustion. Engaging consistently in Bible study and biannual retreats are associated with lower depersonalization scores. Mentoring someone else and maintaining the practice of taking time for oneself protect against a low sense of personal accomplishment (Doolittle, 2010).

Clergy may be tempted to avoid incorporating these behaviors into their life, as they take clergy away from the direct work of ministry. Carving out time from a busy work schedule in order to go for a jog or meet with a mentor may feel selfish in the moment. However, it is these types of self-care practices that allow clergy to manage their stress and remain healthy in the long term. As Doolittle (2010) states, “these outside behaviors do not detract from a clergy’s call, but rather supports the call to ministry” (p. 94). This paper will now proceed to focus on specific recommendations for positive coping in each of the five Adlerian life task areas.

Work

**Differentiation.** A key factor in successfully coping with the stress of work for clergy is to be able to differentiate themselves as an individual from their role as a pastor. The more clergy are able to differentiate self from their work role, the less defensive and reactive they are in the midst of conflict. When their sense of worth and value does not come solely from how they or others evaluate their work role, they are more likely to collaborate with others rather than to avoid conflict. Decreased conflict contributes to decreased levels of stress and burnout (Beebe, 2007).

As a pastor grows in self differentiation, he is better able to discern between the unrealistic expectations of congregation members and the fulfillment of his own sense of personal mission. Without this perspective, clergy remain at risk for role overload, which
contributes to increased stress and conflict (Beebe, 2007). According to Gill (1980), in order to prevent burnout, pastors must avoid over-identifying with members of their congregation, and develop the ability to communicate strong feelings (as cited in Beebe, 2007, p. 259).

Differentiation requires a conscious, personal choice. Some examples for clergy include developing relationships and hobbies that are unrelated to the church; affirming one’s self-worth and value even when things are going poorly in the church; and developing a plan for alternative employment if one were to choose to leave ministry.

**Support.** Clergy need supportive relationships where they can simply be themselves and set aside the work role of pastor. While these relationships may be challenging to find and cultivate, they are critically important for the emotional wellbeing of pastors and their spouses. Trihub et al., (2010) found that clergy appreciate and utilize the mental health services that are made available to them, such as personal time off, prayer support groups, retreats specifically designed for clergy, and sabbaticals.

It is important that clergy be aware of what type of support groups are truly beneficial to them. While pastors generally welcome opportunities to relate with other clergy, feelings of competition can come up in this context. If denominational leaders are also present in the group, clergy may feel the pressure to perform and meet expectations. Although there may be some level of support provided in these settings, their benefit may have more to do with continuing education and networking than support, as they do not allow clergy to disengage from his/her work role (McMinn et al., 2005).

Meeting with a professional counselor can be a very helpful coping strategy for clergy. First and foremost, this setting provides the benefit of complete confidentiality, which is important to clergy in their public role. With the help of a mental health professional or a trained
life coach, clergy can process their work-related stressors in a supportive environment. Here clergy can openly and honestly share their frustrations and challenges, and be heard and understood rather than judged. As clergy can share on this level, they can experience comfort, validation and empowerment. Out of this experience they can make informed decisions regarding work-life balance. (Meek et al., 2003)

Beyond supportive counseling, sometimes more in-depth therapy may be appropriate. Patti Cappa (2005), Executive Director of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado relates her observations from their therapeutic work with clergy:

They simply need a safe place to share their fears, disappointments, traumas, and failures, as well as their joys. We often hear stories from clergy who have never told their traumatic stories to any living soul, even to their spouses after decades of marriage. The pressure to be somehow more than human is so great that their negative feelings seem like a betrayal of God and their ministry (p. 263).

Adlerian therapy could be a beneficial resource for clergy. In this particular therapeutic environment, clergy can gain awareness of their subconscious beliefs about self, others, and the world, and come to understand how these beliefs may be contributing to unnecessary stress. New personal insight can equip and empower clergy to take intentional steps toward growth and positive change, thereby reducing stress. Since clergy life and work is embedded within the community, means of coping in this life task area will now be examined.

Community

Friendships. Proffitt et al., (2007) are clear in their recommendation that in order for clergy to recover from the difficulties they face in life, they must overcome the barrier of social constraint with which they typically live. In order to be emotionally healthy, clergy must have
trusted friends with whom they can openly share their thoughts and feelings. The intentional
development of safe friendships is an important coping strategy for clergy.

Current research affirms Adler’s view of social interest as an indicator of mental health.
Lee (2007) reports that for clergy and their spouses, “the higher the number of supportive family
and denominational relationships, as well as the total number of such relationships overall, the
greater the reported wellbeing” (p. 767). To better cope with the stress of ministry, clergy and
their spouses will do well to develop a rich network of satisfying relationships with a variety of
other people

Ideally, these friendships will come from an array of sources; not only from family
members and within the church, but also friendships with others outside of these groups. For
clergy, cultivating friendships with members of their congregation can be exceedingly complex,
and fraught with risk. Role ambiguity often makes these relationships unsafe, and church
conflicts can easily disrupt the “friendship” facet of the relationship.

Learning to discern which relationships are “safe” or “unsafe” is important for clergy and
clergy spouses. Friendship requires a certain degree of mutual self-disclosure. Whether inside
or outside of the church, it is important for clergy to identify people who can be trusted to
notes that a safe person admits their own mistakes and imperfections, is non-judgmental, a good
listener, supportive, and truly enjoyable to be around. Clergy and their spouses deserve to have
rich and renewing friendships, and would benefit from being intentional about developing them.

**Boundaries.** On the one hand, in order to cope with stress and increase emotional health,
clergy need to let more people into their lives, as mentioned above. On the other hand, clergy
will also benefit from establishing firm boundaries in their relationships with others, especially members of their church. Boss (2002) states that learning to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries “is one of the most critical developmental tasks required of families during the life cycle” (as cited in Darling et al., 2004, p. 272). For clergy families in particular, it is critical that they learn to establish clear boundaries with members of their congregation. This practice is essential for their personal wellbeing, and also models healthy behavior for their church members (Darling, 2004).

Specific boundaries may vary from one pastor to another, depending on their circumstances and needs. However, at the very minimum clergy should establish and protect a consistent schedule of time off from work each week. This time off can be used in a variety of renewing experiences, including developing meaningful friendships that provide encouragement and support. For clergy who are in the habit of taking little or no time off, it will require establishing a new routine. This may be uncomfortable for a time, as clergy, their family members and congregation adjusts to the new boundaries. Working with a life coach or being part of a pastor coaching group can provide encouragement and support for clergy as they seek to improve their life-work balance.

**Intimacy**

Many clergy couples have thriving marriages despite the stressors they face in ministry. These healthy marriages can provide hope for all clergy that in spite of the stress of the ministry role, healthy intimacy is attainable. Following are several factors that have been shown to contribute to this.

**Shared Responsibility.** One factor found to reduce stress and increase satisfaction in the task of intimacy is the mutual sharing of household and family responsibilities. The wellbeing of
clergy wives is positively impacted when clergy are present and tangibly involved in the care of their children and the upkeep of their home (McMinn et al., 2008). This is an important benefit of setting clear work boundaries, which allow clergy to be more fully present to the needs of their family and joys of full engagement in the family system.

**Diverse Support.** The marriage relationship between clergy and their spouse is often a primary source of mutual support. Given the challenges clergy couples face in developing other trusted friendships, it is natural for them to turn to each other first to share concerns as well as joys. It is important to protect this most intimate of all relationships. However, the healthy clergy couple will not expect their spouse to be their sole source of support. Continuing the theme of the importance of relationships, clergy couples cope better with stress when they have other trusted friends in addition to their marriage relationship (McMinn et al., 2005).

**Courage to be Imperfect.** Many of the clergy stressors reviewed in this paper have to do with unrealistic expectations of perfection. As a result, an important coping strategy for the clergy family is to accept the idea that, “we need the courage to be imperfect, to make and accept our mistakes graciously” (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1967, p. 54). As clergy stop expecting perfection from themselves and their families, could it be that their congregation will follow suit? As clergy acknowledge their imperfections to others, could it be that members of their congregation would also become more accepting of their own imperfections? Can these things be different?

Hall (1997) includes this idea of embracing imperfection in his list of healthy behaviors for clergy couples. He found that:

“Clergy with healthy marriages tend to handle the pressure of time and implement effective boundaries, prioritize time with their families, not move frequently, and avoid
the ‘fishbowl experience’ by refusing to accept expectations of a perfect family” (as cited in Meek et al., 2003, p. 342).

**Self**

**Solitude.** McMinn et al., (2005) found that clergy primarily cope with stress and care for themselves through “intrapersonal” resources. Intrapersonal coping occurs within the pastor, or on his own, as opposed to relational coping, which involves another person. According to McMinn et al., (2005), “In many situations, clergy may need to get alone in order to recover from the intense personal demands of daily work” (p. 577). This is particularly true given the data referenced earlier in this paper, which indicates that a majority of pastors score high in introversion as opposed to extraversion.

In his book, *Finding Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) notes that the average person in today’s society spends about one third of their waking hours alone (p. 89). He posits that spending significantly more or significantly less than that amount can be problematic. He suggests problems range from the tendency to follow the crowd and not think independently when one is always with one’s peer group; to irrational thoughts, depression, and even suicide when one is too often isolated from others.

While some amount of solitude can be a healthy way for introverted clergy to cope with stress and regain their energy, caution must be exercised here. Too often the tendency is for clergy to isolate from others, which is not a helpful strategy. The finding of McMinn et al., (2005) that “clergy do most of their care alone” (p. 576) is concerning. Granted, time alone to exercise, pray and enjoy individual hobbies could certainly be beneficial ways of coping with stress through solitude. However, clergy need to be aware of when solitude crosses the line into isolation. From an Adlerian perspective, the path of health is most often found somewhere in the
middle, rather than in the approach of “all or nothing”. This applies here as clergy are encouraged to find their own optimal balance between solitude and social engagement.

**Confidant.** According to McMinn et al., (2005), clergy tend to rely more heavily on intrapersonal methods of coping than their spouses. Clergy spouses, although reporting experiences of loneliness, do seem to rely on more relationships for coping than their clergy husbands. Particularly in the area of coping with feelings of sexual attraction to someone other than their spouse, research shows that clergy are much more inclined to cope on their own rather than through relational coping. This is concerning, as McMinn et al., (2005) notes that in matters of sexual attraction, clergy “are more likely to use forms of coping deemed questionable by expert judges than to engage in healthy forms of coping that require them to disclose attraction to others” (p. 576). For example, while non-clergy may cope with unwanted feelings of attraction by talking with a trusted friend or counselor, clergy are generally hesitant to reveal feelings of this nature, and usually attempt to cope with their feelings alone.

Once again, the need for trusted relationships with others is evident. Although pastors may be hesitant to talk about their feelings of sexual attraction and other personal matters, sharing these feelings with a confidant is a healthier path than going it alone. Clearly, sharing on this level requires vulnerability, courage and trust. It necessitates clergy confidentially revealing their humanity and imperfection with a trusted friend. Although choosing this path may initially produce feelings of fear and anxiety, in the long run, it is part of a healthy plan for coping with stress.

**Self knowledge.** In order to better cope with the stress of ministry, clergy must know themselves, and strive to continually grow in self awareness. When clergy are aware of their personality type, as discussed previously in this paper, they can also be aware of the strengths
and challenges inherent in the tendencies of their personality style. They can also recognize personality differences between themselves and others with whom they interact. Such self knowledge can result in fewer conflicts, and thereby decreased stress and potential for burnout.

Francis, Craig et al., (2007) point out that clergy may need to develop their ability to appreciate how others who are different from them perceive the world and operate in it. For example, clergy who generally have a MBTI preference for judging may need to “develop their ability to appreciate how individuals with a preference for perceiving tend to resist patterns, routines, and firm commitments in order to respond more effectively to the assumptions and expectations of male culture” (Francis, Craig et al., 2007, p. 280).

Additionally, the more clergy and their spouses know themselves, the more they are able to set personal limits and boundaries, leading to a more balanced life. Learning how to set realistic expectations of oneself, and setting limits in relationships with others are healthy coping behaviors for clergy couples (McMinn et al., 2008). This counsel certainly also applies to the clergy spouse, as she determines her level of involvement in the congregation. One clergy spouse chose to set and articulate her limits as follows:

This is not a two-for package. You are hiring him. My role is to be his spouse and to support him as any other spouse would support their spouse. And I will participate in the life of the church as any other member would based on my gifts and abilities. Please don’t expect anything beyond that (McMinn et al., 2008, p. 452).

**Spirituality**

Not surprisingly, research indicates that the preferred method of coping with stress for clergy is through spiritual resources. The spiritual task of life is obviously important to clergy, given their choice of profession. The level of satisfaction clergy experience in their spiritual life
is a significant indicator of their risk for burnout. Clergy who feel satisfied with the spiritual aspect of their life are 1/20th as likely to experience emotional exhaustion (Doolittle, 2010).

For clergy and their spouses, greater spiritual resources and spiritual satisfaction are related to lower levels of psychological and physiological stress as well as reduced compassion fatigue. Clergy with increased spiritual wellbeing also report experiencing a better quality of life and a sense of meaning and purpose (Darling et al., 2004).

**Diversify.** Darling et al., (2004) note that the coping method most frequently used by clergy and their spouses is “seeking spiritual resources”, whereas the least used method is “acquiring social support” (p. 272). While this again raises the concerns about clergy isolation, McMinn et al., (2005) offer another perspective. While spiritual coping may regarded as intrapersonal, in that it may involve the clergy in solitary practices such as Bible reading, prayer, and meditation, these practices for clergy are in fact perceived as relational. In these practices, clergy are relating to God, which is the relationship they value above all others.

Just as water does not need to be told to run downstream, clergy do not need to be reminded to use spiritual resources to cope with stress. They tend to do this automatically. The challenging counsel for clergy based on this literature review is to diversify their coping strategies beyond intrapersonal spiritual coping. Related to this, McMinn et al., (2005) raise an important question, “if pastors solely rely on spiritual resources for coping, then what happens if they find themselves in a ‘dark night of the soul?’” (p. 578).

**Keep what works.** Perhaps clergy rely so heavily on spiritual means of coping with stress because they find them to be effective. In their review of 850 studies pertaining to the connection between religion and health, Koenig et al., (2001) found numerous benefits occurring from the practice of religious faith. Some of the benefits include a greater sense of wellbeing,
increased physical and mental health, increased hopefulness and optimism, and decreased depression as well as decreased use of medical services (as cited in Darling et al., 2004).

In order to cope with stress, clergy and their spouses frequently make it a practice to turn their concerns over to the care of God. Other specific spiritual activities that are found to be helpful include “retreat/solitude, reading Scripture, journaling, fasting, and prayer” (Meek et al., 2003, p. 343). Clergy couples should benefit from continuing the spiritual practices they find effective in decreasing ministry related stress.

Recommendations for Denominational Leaders and Congregations

Denominational Leaders

In the course of reviewing the literature for this paper, several specific recommendations for denominational leaders emerged. Denominational leaders are in a position of authority, and play a key role in the preparation and education of clergy. Denominational leaders are in a unique position to initiate programs and processes to reduce clergy stress, thereby increasing the health of the pastoral leaders and their congregations.

Connection. Clergy desire an ongoing connection with their denomination, and want to know that the denomination is concerned about their wellbeing. Clergy are interested in confidential, affordable mental health services made available to them through the denomination, and would like the availability of these resources clearly communicated to them. Standardized denominational guidelines pertaining to mental health services for clergy are also desirable (Trihub et al., 2010).

Clergy report experiencing a decrease in denominational support over time. Many feel that the denomination is more concerned with the size of the church than the wellbeing of the
pastor of the church. Clergy who do utilize mental health services often do so in spite of fear of disapproval from denominational leaders (Meek et al., 2003).

**Seminary training.** According to Meek et al., (2003), “prevention begins at the seminary level” (p. 345). As the training ground for clergy, seminaries bear a great responsibility to provide adequate preparation for the many and varied tasks of ministry. Seminaries will do well to create an open environment where all ministry-related topics can be discussed. Training should be provided on how to recognize and manage stress. The importance of implementing boundaries and building authentic relationships with trusted friends must be emphasized as keys to emotional health. Seminarians will also benefit from discussions regarding strategies for dealing with sexual attraction and protecting the marriage relationship (Meek et al., 2003).

The more equipped clergy are for a task, the less likely they will experience stress related to that task. As discussed earlier in this paper, clergy often find themselves doing the work of organizational management, for which they often feel ill-prepared. Seminary training related to management practices such as budgeting, conflict resolution, and managing staff would be advantageous (Kemery, 2006).

**Mentoring.** In one study, 45% of clergy reported that the most important thing denominations can do to reduce clergy stress and burnout is to provide opportunities for mentoring (Meek et al., 2003, p. 343). Clergy want to end their isolation and be known by someone who will listen and truly care about them. They express a desire for a mentor who is actively involved in helping them meet the challenges of ministry. Along these lines, McKenna, Yost and Boyd (2007) suggest that denominations could establish formal mentoring programs for clergy, pairing new pastors with those who are more experienced. According to Meek et al.,
(2003), “with their overwhelming responsibilities, clergy need to feel that they are not alone, that they are part of a bigger partnership with those who will stand by them” (p. 343).

Trihub et al., (2010) propose that establishing “pastoral support networks” could be a cost effective and valuable means of support for clergy (p. 108). These networks could be sponsored within the denomination, or across denominational lines. Darling et al., (2004) propose that inter-denominational support networks could potentially be more effective, as clergy are sometimes hesitant to share freely within their own denomination. As mentioned previously, confidentiality is a critical factor in supportive relationships for clergy and their spouses. Denominations will benefit from ongoing collaboration with mental health professionals regarding how to provide the best support for clergy (Trihub et al., 2010).

**Enrichment.** In addition to mentoring, McKenna, Yost et al., (2007) also suggest that a leadership development program of continuing education for clergy would be beneficial. Topics for these educational seminars should be practical, and geared toward addressing key issues of concern for clergy, such as managing staff, dealing with trauma, and leadership challenges. Other potential topics for clergy enrichment classes could include self-role differentiation (Beebe, 2007), conflict resolution and spiritual formation (Miner et al., 2010), psychological type workshops (Francis, Wulff et al., 2008), preretirement education (Knapp et al., 2009), and training on assertiveness, marriage, parenting, and time management (Morris & Blanton, 1994).

**Screening.** It would also be highly advantageous for denominations and seminaries to make routine psychological testing part of their protocol. This would serve as a proactive, preventative measure, whereby vulnerabilities could be detected prior to clergy being settled in a congregation. This testing could provide some level of protection for everyone involved, including clergy, the clergy family, the congregation members, and the denomination. If
potential vulnerabilities are identified, appropriate resources and interventions can be recommended (Francis, Robbins et al., 2009).

One striking example of the importance of screening and evaluation of clergy is provided by Doolittle (2010), who found that, “ministers who served a traumatic church in the past were 10.5 times (P < .0001) as likely to have high emotional exhaustion, even though they are no longer serving that congregation” (p. 93). With this knowledge, clergy who are experiencing residual trauma could receive appropriate mental health services through their denomination, and be placed in a congregational setting known for a higher level of emotional health.

**Congregations**

According to Morris and Blanton (1994), “congregations need to be educated about the realities of life in clergy families and the ways in which they can collectively enhance or diminish the satisfaction of clergy families (p. 194). When church members are unaware of the unique challenges of clergy life, they may unknowingly contribute to stressful circumstances in their congregation. Educating church members on the effects of unrealistic expectations and personal criticism may positively impact the clergy-congregation relationship (Lee, 1999).

Congregants would also benefit from understanding the financial challenges faced by clergy. They should be aware that they “should not rely on the faulty assumption that a minister with a strong sense of calling will necessarily remain at the same church” (Wildhagen et al., 2005, p. 397). Clergy are in many ways just like employees in other occupations, who consider compensation package, quality of work environment, and benefits in their decisions regarding employment (Wildhagen et al., 2005).
Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limited availability of research on clergy, their spouses and families, there is a need for more new data overall regarding this population. Research on clergy spouses and the children of clergy is particularly lacking. The clergy role is embedded in society. As society and the clergy role evolve over time, new research is necessary to understand the changes that are occurring, and the implications of these changes on clergy mental health and family life.

Darling et al., (2004) recommend future research to increase understanding of “the characteristics and qualities of clergy families who are at risk in comparison to those who are doing well” (p. 274). They also suggest future research to compare the stress of clergy couples and families to that experienced by couples and families in other occupations which are also known to be high in stress. Perhaps others who share the commonality of a highly public role, such as business and political leaders, would provide an interesting comparison to clergy.

Given the wide variety of tasks and responsibilities that are common to the clergy role, Francis, Hills et al., (2008) propose research that measures satisfaction levels among clergy in the various aspects of their work. In light of the large number different religious denominations, they also suggest studying the impact of religious tradition preference on clergy work satisfaction.

Based on the fact that experiences of personal criticism are strongly linked to clergy burnout, Lee (1999) suggests future research on the relationship between the pastor and the congregation. Studying the effects of criticism within this relationship could provide helpful information regarding clergy stress and length of tenure. Also, given the important affiliation clergy have with the denomination in which they are employed, additional research is also needed regarding this relationship (Lee, 2007).
Based on this literature review, it appears that research regarding the expectations that congregation members have of their pastor could be helpful. Denominational leaders, clergy and congregants could all benefit from discovering the answers to questions such as, “specifically, what do individual congregants expect from their pastor?” and “how diverse are the expectations within a congregation?” A similar study could be conducted related to the expectations that congregation members have of the clergy spouse. Conducting longitudinal studies related to these topics in various congregations and denominations would provide the opportunity to observe and analyze shifts in expectations over time.

Given the fact that females represent a minority of clergy, more research is needed regarding this population. It would also be beneficial to gain understanding of the unique experience of male spouses married to female clergy. Additionally, research related to the experience of couples where both partners are working as clergy would be interesting.

Another recommendation for research would be to compare the emotional well-being of clergy who regularly attend a support group or work with a life coach or counselor to clergy who choose not to utilize these sources of support. Again, it would be advantageous to study these individuals over a period of several years to observe long-term effects. It would also be of interest to research which particular methods of support prove to be most effective and beneficial for clergy.

A qualitative study designed to compare the motivating factors of seminary students entering ministry to the motivating factors of clergy leaving ministry could be quite informative. Conducting such a study within individual denominations could provide denominational leaders with important information related to clergy retention. Findings could also prove valuable to seminary professors as they prepare students to face the realities of the ministry profession.
Summary and Conclusion

The literature reviewed for this paper indicates that the clergy role is filled with a variety of unique challenges and potential sources of stress. It is understood that clergy stress is at the same time common within the profession, and yet a very personal experience. It is the individual’s perception of the potential stressor and the meaning they ascribe to the situation or event which causes it be experienced as stressful or benign. Prolonged work-related stress can lead to burnout and even cause clergy to leave the profession.

Unrealistic and ambiguous expectations of perfection from clergy pervade religious congregations, and many times clergy also expect perfection from themselves. These expectations are also frequently extended to include clergy spouses and children. Another common experience of clergy is a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. They lack authentic friendships, where they can simply be known and embraced as a fellow human being, rather than as a spiritual leader.

The Adlerian concept of the five life tasks provides a helpful framework through which stressors and strategies for coping with stress can be examined. Clergy experience stress in each of these five areas. However, clergy can be encouraged to know that things can be different. There are many possible strategies for reducing clergy stress, a few of which have been presented in this paper. Church members, denominational leaders and mental health professionals must be aware of the role they can play in fostering the mental health of clergy.

The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler has much to contribute to clergy mental health. In particular, the practice of social interest or friendship, and accepting one’s human imperfections are key antidotes to clergy stress. These are missing pieces in the life of many clergy that can be reclaimed.
Given their leadership role, clergy have a significant impact in society. With appropriate understanding and support they have the opportunity to create the kind of life that promotes their own wellbeing and allows them to contribute to the wellbeing of others. Like the congregation members they serve, clergy share in the human experience of imperfection. Could it be that a primary key for clergy to reduce stress, live a balanced life, and fulfill their unique calling to help others is found in the acceptance of this fact?
The Experience of Clergy Stress

References


THE EXPERIENCE OF CLERGY STRESS


doi:10.1007/s11089-008-0122-5


doi:10.1007/s11089-005-4821-y


