

report 3

Clergy Burnout



the center for
**Transforming
Engagement**

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Burnout	4
Listening for Themes	8
Exponential Overwhelm	10
Financial Stress	12
Emotional Exhaustion	14
Pandemic & Other Contextual Pressures	16
Why Do Clergy Stay?	18
Recommendations to Reduce Clergy Burnout	20
Further Reading	24
Endnotes	26
Gratitude	28
Contributors	29

Executive Summary

Church leadership has never been more difficult.

Clergy burnout has been a problem for years, and has only been amplified by the social upheavals of the first years of this decade. The stress of ongoing pandemic pivots in the context of deepening political polarization and social fragmentation has left many pastors isolated, exhausted, and disillusioned.

As a school that works at the intersection of theology and psychology, we are attuned to the mental wellbeing of Christian leaders. We want to share with you—whether you are a church staff member, a congregant, or someone who supervises or trains pastors—some of the common causes of burnout and recommendations for how to move toward greater health.

We do that by sharing interviews with pastors and other church staff.¹ These interviews illuminated four common driving forces in clergy burnout, so we've arranged the clergy's stories under those four themes. These stories and many of the statistics that put them in context, were collected by Anne Helen Peterson in her Culture Study newsletter.² We end by sharing the encouraging ways that clergy find meaning in spite of these challenges and by making recommendations for ways that congregations, seminaries, and supervisors can equip clergy toward health instead of burnout.

For pastors and church staff, we hope this report helps you understand the systemic nature of the challenges you face and helps you to feel less alone in them. When we're bold in our prayers, we hope these pages might serve as the starting point for conversations with your congregations and church leadership that lead to change.

For congregants, we want you to hear the things your pastor would be hesitant to tell you directly, because they don't want to seem unprofessional or come across like they're complaining. It doesn't have to be this way, and you have a big role to play in improving clergy wellbeing.

To supervisors and trainers: we know you are doing the best you can. We are providing these church workers' words as additional learning and deeper listening to inform the work you are already doing to re-vision your support of ministry leaders.

Sincerely,



Kate Rae Davis



Andrea Sielaff



Burnout

/burn out/ (noun):

The reduction of a fuel or substance to nothing through use or combustion.

Though the above definition is scientific, it says a lot about what burnout feels like: the reduction of your energy—or even of your self—to nothing.

Internally, burnout feels like disconnection from others, from your own sense of self, and from goals or work that once mattered so deeply — now they feel purposeless or out of reach.

Burnout consists of:

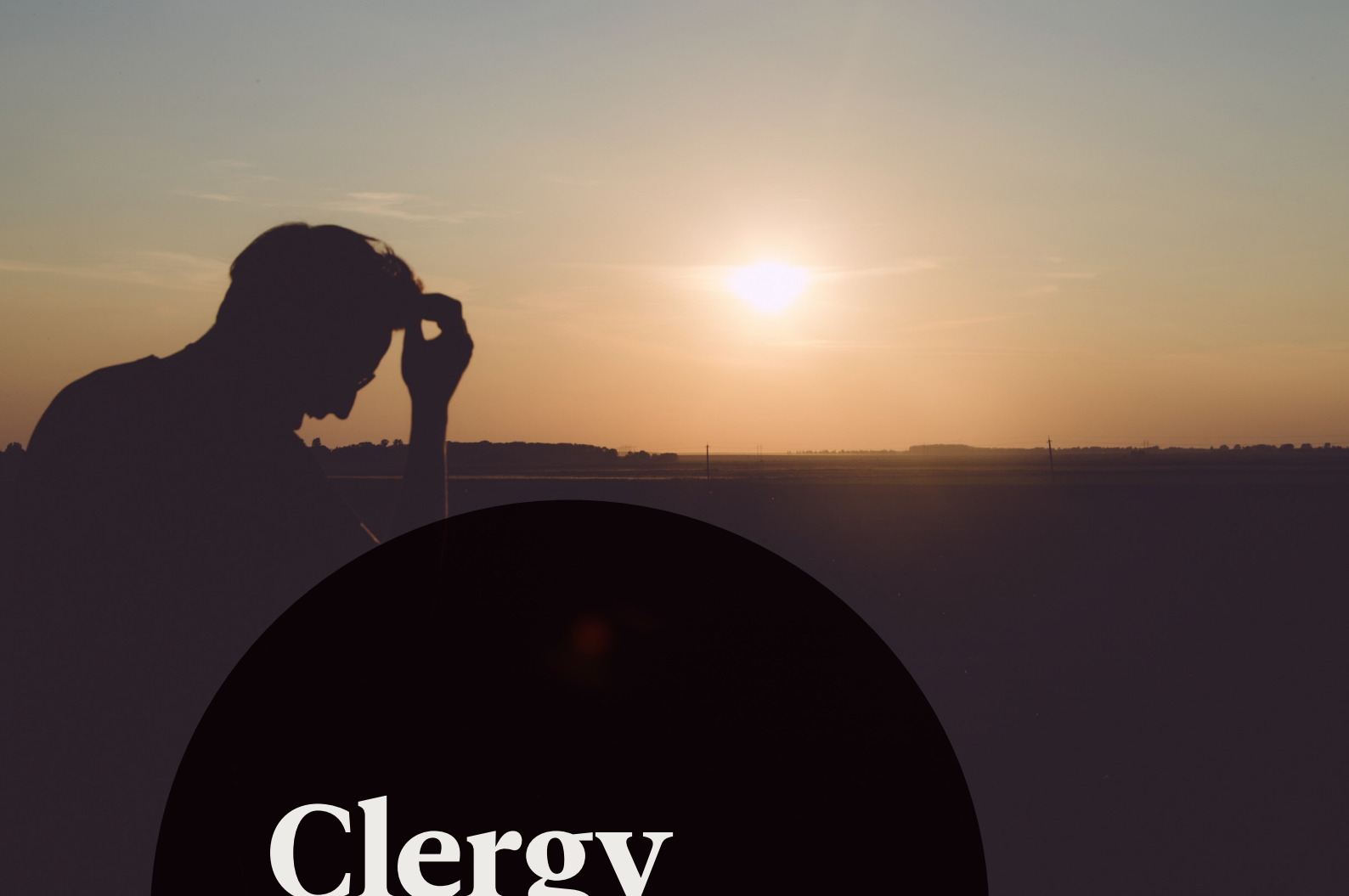
- Exhaustion, including feelings of mental, physical, and especially emotional fatigue.
- Relational distance, characterized by cynicism or indifference.
- Decreasing effectiveness, which is especially noticeable³ in the workplace and other areas of life.

Burnout in millennials, a demographic that has been the focus of Anne Helen Petersen's writing, is characterized by:

- massive student debt
- the stress of social media
- the feeling of a “calling” that leads to an unlivable wage,
- the expectation to be working all the time at one job while also making time for a second for financial sustainability.

In response to her reporting on millennial burnout, pastors of many generations contacted her to say ***these burnout symptoms are common in clergy.***





Clergy Burnout

In pastors, burnout often occurs as a result of the acute stress of pastoring people in crisis coupled with the chronic stress of managing intrusive and unrealistic congregational demands. These stresses erode the emotional, spiritual, and physical resources. Because burnout happens gradually, pastors often don't realize it is happening to them until they are seriously impaired.⁴ In the words of the clergy we interviewed, burnout feels like this:

“Mostly, I feel low-key dread.”

“I wake up with a pit of dread in my stomach.”

“Despair is setting in.”

“I was drained dry.”

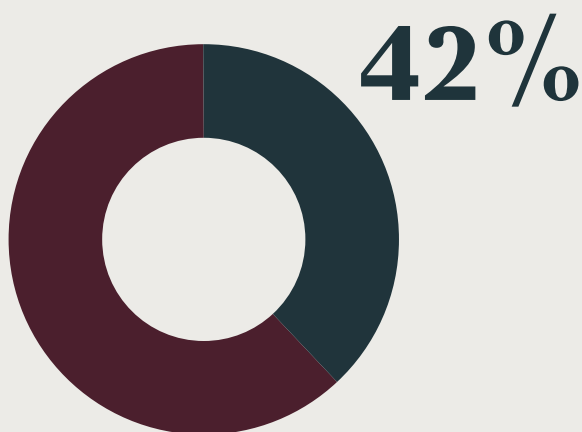
“It's like having an existential crisis every day.”

“Emotional triage.”

“The floor falls out and I am left trying to put one foot in front of the other without anything to support me.”

Clergy burnout can lead to cynicism, exhaustion, an inability to feel compassion, and loss of purpose. It often sneaks up through daily overwork and nights of interrupted sleep, until they just can't do it any more. Exhaustion turns into resignation — sometimes a resignation to continue through the motions while feeling hollowed-out, in other instances a literal resignation from the role.

In a 2022 survey, 42% of Protestant pastors said they had given “real, serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry within the last year.”⁵



For those of us who work in or with churches, burnout is common, though too-often unnamed and overlooked. We talk about other leaders' burnout with compassion and concern, while rarely owning our own experiences of stress, overwhelm, and done-ness. Perhaps we feel that we're supposed to be above that; we've supposed to have sipped from the living water of Christ and shouldn't feel thirst, and so don't discuss it. But that doesn't mean the thirst isn't there.

If you're a congregant or supervisor of clergy: Statistically, there's a good chance your pastor is burnt out. They may not tell you — or even answer if asked — for a slew of reasons. They don't want to seem unprofessional or unboundaried. They don't want to come across like they're complaining, or worse, seem incompetent. And the reality is, they don't want to risk their livelihood if their burnout is misread as incompetence.

Given the personal nature and complexity of this topic, we wanted to let congregational leaders speak for themselves about their experiences. We asked about what they're feeling now, what they've felt for years, the pain of following a “calling,” the sheer number of jobs a contemporary pastor is performing, how their larger community could alleviate burnout — and, of course, what they're praying for most ardently in this moment.

“Burnout is like the downpour of rain on the roaring fire of a passion for ministry”

— Matt Bloom, 2017

Listening & Themes

In response to Petersen's reporting on millennial burnout, pastors of many generations contacted her to say these burnout symptoms are common in clergy. To learn more about the challenges facing clergy, she interviewed seven pastors from a variety of Christian traditions:⁶

- **Lydia, Minister in a Liberal Denomination in a Small City in the West, Age 34**
- **Seth, Pastor at a Lutheran Church in Montana, Age 35**
- **Marcella, Priest in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, Age 36**
- **Eric, Lead Pastor at a Disciples of Christ Church in Alabama, Age 34**
- **Alexis, Former Youth Minister in Florida for a Baptist and a Non-Denominational Church, Age 27**
- **Grace, Incumbent at Parish in the Anglican Diocese of Montreal, Age 41**
- **Ann, Hospital Chaplain, Chicago, Age 45**



She asked them:

- How did you get to where you are now?
- Describe your current responsibilities as a religious leader. What's the most gratifying part? The least/most exhausting?
- What do you feel like when you wake up in the morning and face your day?
- How do you think the responsibilities of the religious leader have shifted with time? Did your path, your education, etc prepare you for your current position and its responsibilities?
- What are you most worried about in your congregation / following right now?

- What are you most worried about as an individual who has to pay bills? Do you have health insurance? Are you working a second job? Are you worried the church will have to let you go, or are you secure?
- Do you have student debt, and how do you feel about it?
- If you have a family, how do your responsibilities — and your exhaustion — spread onto them?
- How does the idea of religious leadership as a “calling,” one to be followed at any cost, fit into all of this?
- What’s one thing that your congregation or community could do, or be mindful of, that could help reduce your burnout?
- If applicable, what could your denomination / larger religious organization do to reduce burnout?
- What are you praying for most ardently in this moment?

These interviews revealed common themes about contributing forces in the experience of clergy burnout:

- **Exponential Overwhelm**
- **Financial Stress**
- **Emotional Exhaustion**
- **Pandemic and Contextual Pressures**

You can read the interviews in their entirety in the report supplement. Below, we include an explanation of each theme, information on it, and exemplary quotations from the interviews.



EXPONENTIAL OVERWHELM

An alternate name for this theme was the Hydra problem:

“The Hydra is a nine-headed Greek monster that grew two new heads every time one was chopped off. Jobs that have too many parts, or too many people to report to, are often unmanageable and can lead to overwhelm.”⁷

The Hydra is nearly undefeatable because it creates two problems for every one solved — the challenge becomes exponentially harder the more “progress” you seem to make. Pastors experience the Hydra problem due the unrealistic number of roles in their work. Other roles that church leaders also fulfill, that they named in their interviews, include:

- Event planner
- Counselor
- Graphic designer
- Supervisor
- Marketer
- Service trip planner/
leader
- Outreach
- Preschool chaplain
- Social justice work
- Intergenerational
ministry
- Fundraiser
- Social Worker
- Babysitter
- Budget specialist
- Curriculum designer
- Nonprofit
administrator
- Communications
manager
- Trauma specialist
- Musician
- Officiant for funerals
and weddings
- Chaplain
- Choir leader
- Property maintenance,
including lawn care
and shoveling snow

Congregations often expect that pastors would be good at every part of a job that can include up to 64 different task clusters and 13 working roles.⁸

“The breadth of tasks performed by local church clergy coupled with the rapid switching between task clusters and roles that appears prevalent in this position is unique. I have never encountered such a fast-paced job with such varied and impactful responsibilities.”⁹

“Small church pastors are all generalists. We’re preachers and teachers, but we’re also caregivers and counselors, administrators and bureaucrats, ad hoc social workers, and sometimes even custodians and groundskeepers. That’s the most exhausting part for me: the tasks that I am neither naturally gifted for or educated to best perform. I didn’t go to seminary to become a landlord, but it’s extremely common for congregations to rent out space to preschools, outside groups, you name it. Those relationships are meaningful and vital for many reasons, but they can also become sticky wickets very, very easily.”

— Eric

“I think that some of my congregants believe that all I do is preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. But it’s way, way more multifaceted than that. Sure, I do worship and adult education and pastoral care. I also manage the church staff, meet with lots of teams and committees who are doing the work of the church, engage with administrative stuff (constantly), represent the church in public settings, and work with community partners and coalitions to advocate for social change.”

— Lydia

“I feel like I am expected to do everything that pastors did forty or fifty years ago while at the same time coming up with all sorts of new, creative ministry initiatives to engage a changed world.”

— Seth



FINANCIAL STRESS

In addition to college, many denominations require a Masters of Divinity to become clergy, programs that are usually 3 years of full-time study. Financial stress impacts clergy via low wages, part-time positions or bivocational work, and lack of retirement or healthcare benefits. Even then, when health care costs increase, they can become too expensive for a congregation to bear.

A 2015 survey by the National Association for Evangelicals found that 57% of pastors are not provided health insurance by their church, and 62% of churches do not contribute to a retirement plan or pension for their pastor.¹⁰

In 2018, the average total student loan debt for a seminary graduate was \$54,600. Education debt is usually seen as an investment that will pay off in higher income, but for clergy larger salaries are not necessarily forthcoming. In order to justify such debt, a borrower would need a starting salary of more than \$65,000 to meet monthly payoff guidelines—a figure that is well above the average salary for all clergy.¹¹

A Masters of Divinity costs around \$50,000 in tuition (not including cost of living expenses). For a pastor fortunate enough to find a full-time position, the median salary for clergy is \$52,000.¹²

“The idea of a “calling” sometimes makes my congregants (not all, but enough of them) feel like I should be willing to be underpaid for my level of education, experience, and expertise. Money is not everything, and I’m not in this to get rich. But the idea that people with very financially comfortable lives get to tell me that I already make plenty of money just makes me feel like they don’t really care (which feeds the burnout). I had about 50k in student debt from seminary when I graduated, and now I’m down to just over 30k. Every time I think about it, I wish that my congregants actually valued my expertise, education, and credentialing.”

— Lydia

“The entirety of the time I’ve worked in youth ministry, I worked two jobs to pay the bills. I was averaging 60 hours of work a week. For a long time, my second job was Chick-fil-a, so I didn’t have health insurance, which was really scary.”

— Alexis

“Surveys have shown the vast majority of clergy, around 9 of 10 Protestant pastors in the US, experience financial stress.”¹³

“A few years ago, my denomination simply ended its denomination-wide health insurance program for clergy and basically expects individual congregations to pick up the cost of their pastors’ health insurance. But a lot of congregations can’t afford to do that! My wife and I are on COBRA insurance right now — which costs us over \$1,100/month — until her new job’s benefits kick in later this year, at which point I’ll move onto her insurance.”

— Eric

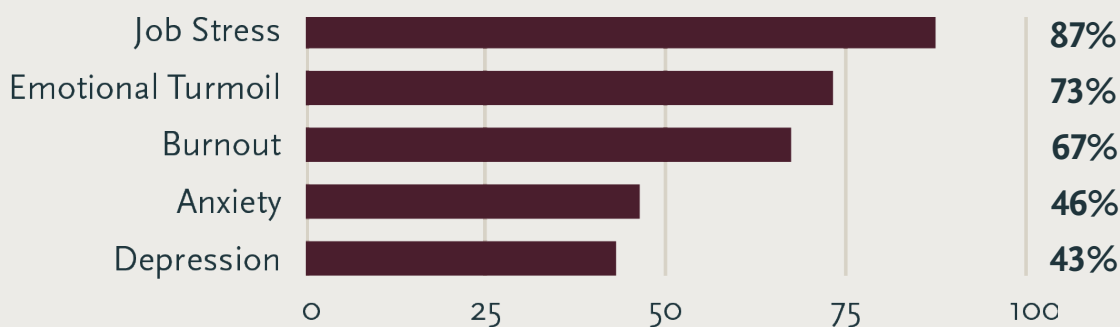
“I was strangely relieved to be declared an ‘essential worker’: it meant that I would have to go to a dangerous job, but I’d keep getting paid, and I don’t worry about being let go. I do have health insurance through the hospital (which, when I was a pastor of a church, I didn’t have). But my chaplaincy position still doesn’t pay enough, and I adjunct at a state school and at a seminary. And I do ethics consultation for a tech company. No doubt, this is part of my being tired. I get the most meaning out of the chaplaincy and the seminary teaching. For what it’s worth, all of the chaplains in my department are working second jobs and most of us have significantly more education than the position requires. [...] I think the idea of calling has played into chaplains being deemed essential workers. It also helps to suppress wages. I make more as a chaplain than I ever have, but it is still not livable. If I were single, I could not make it. If you complain, they say it is “the nature of the work.” In my particular context, I will sometimes run into a physician who talks about his (usually his) job as a calling. Of course, he makes, at minimum, six times what I do — so the language of call itself functions in very different ways within the same institution. ”

— Ann

EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Pastoring well requires a substantial amount of emotional work. For many people, clergy are often the first contact in crisis; for better or worse, “the clergy person is, and always will be, the therapist on call.”¹⁴ Congregants seek help from clergy for grief, terminal illness, addiction, marriage and family conflicts, and physical and sexual abuse.¹⁵ Though clergy often find meaning in this work, they also suffer vicarious trauma or mental illness (depression, anxiety, and sleeping problems) because of it.¹⁶

- **Mental health issues that clergy indicated being moderately or more affected by include:¹⁷**



- **A number of research studies show that carrying a heavy emotional load, as many pastors do, increases psychological distress. Doing consistent emotional labor creates emotional exhaustion, lessens a person’s ability to regulate their own feelings, and decreases job satisfaction.¹⁸**
- **In one survey of Presbyterian clergy, 44% could not affirm that they had enthusiasm for their work, and 39% felt drained by their ministry roles.¹⁹**

“Some days are okay, and I think, ‘I can do this.’ Yet, it is not an inspired, ‘We are going the distance! We are going to do great things in God’s name!’ kind of feeling. Rather, it is, ‘All right, I can survive this today.’ Other days, it is kind of like the floor falls out and I am left trying to put one foot in front of the other without anything to support me. ...It is like having an existential crisis everyday, and being expected to not only keep the faith but lead the faith of others everyday. It can be very exhausting.”

— Seth

“The most exhausting is that it’s SUCH intense emotional labor: managing boundaries, navigating power dynamics, dealing with all the complicated behavior people bring into community space. When I am well rested and balanced, which is rare, I wake up excited to get to do all the fun stuff that is a part of my job. When I’m tired or overfunctioning, I wake up with a pit of dread in my stomach. ...My wife and I have to be really careful about boundaries and what kind of work energy we bring into our relationship, even though we both work in church. We would love to have children but neither of us feel confident about balancing a life in ministry with having kids: we just don’t know if we’d ever have enough leftover emotional energy for little ones (it’s hard enough reserving it for each other).”

— Marcella

“Occasionally, when I’m working on an exciting new project or program, I feel invigorated. Mostly, I feel low-key dread. The exhaustion spreads and makes me feel impatient and frustrated at home. I hate getting home from a day of dealing with adults acting like children and then feeling like I don’t have the energy and patience to deal with our toddler (who is amazing, but also a toddler). And so I feel resentful of my congregants because I would much rather feel like I could give the best of myself to my family instead of them sucking it all dry by 6 pm.”

— Lydia

“I can speak to an experience of burnout in a prior congregation where, although most of the people were lovely and well-intentioned on their own, somehow it never added up to the sum of the parts. As an organism, the parish was exhausted and anxious and it was almost impossible to get anyone to serve in leadership or devote additional energy to new projects. It was hard to articulate while I was in the middle of it, but once I got out I was able to realize that for four years I had been pouring my energy and love into a system that was incapable of giving any of it back; I was literally drained dry.”

— Grace

“Most exhausting part of my work is pager duty. For many hours of my work week, I am in charge of an on-call pager. That often means going to the trauma center and seeing patients with horrible injuries and trying to get their families medical updates. This is fast paced and very tiring. It feels like emotional triage. Lately I’ve been waking up in the middle of the night and have had a hard time going back to sleep. ...In terms of the emotional and relational work required for the position, none of my formal education prepared me for that.”

— Ann



PANDEMIC & CONTEXTUAL STRESSORS

The current context of ministry, including pandemic pivots and political and social tensions, have exacerbated the risk of pastoral burnout. Pastors are working more hours, carrying additional burdens, and reporting lower levels of well-being.²⁰

“On average a full-time pastor works 50-59 hours per week, though during the pandemic the majority have worked 6 to 10 extra hours per week.”²¹

“Back in 2016, 2 out of 3 pastors said they felt more confident at that time in their ministry than they did when they first started out. But today, only 1 in 3 pastors feel that level of energy, enthusiasm and sense of confidence in what God’s calling them to do.”²²

The impact on congregations is ongoing, bringing seismic challenges, as seen in this August 2021 survey:²³

- **Pre-covid, 40% of congregational participants volunteered; now, only 15% do.**
- **67% of clergy said that 2020 was their hardest ministry year.**
- **76% of churches had conflict around covid safety measures — nearly a third of those churches said conflict was moderate to severe.**

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Since March, I have been forced to do much of my pastoral work over the phone and on the computer which is incredibly time consuming and exhausting for me. I spend about 10 to 15 hours putting together a Youtube video service each week to make sure older and immunocompromised members can worship from home. These amateur efforts on my part have been appreciated, but are very tiring for me personally and professionally. It is like, almost overnight, I was compelled to do a job that I was never trained or called to do. Serving a church in a small town in Montana — where many of the members don't even have cell phones, email addresses or internet access — seemed like a call in which digital ministry would be only a small part of my work. Since March, it has become the main thing that I do every week and it is wearing me down. [...] I feel like I am expected to do everything that pastors did forty or fifty years ago while at the same time coming up with all sorts of new, creative ministry initiatives to engage a changed world. Our congregation was longing for new direction and ways to reach into the 21st century in new ways, a job that often falls on the pastor as the only full-time church employee. I was trained to serve churches of a different era: when people prioritized religious participation and church attendance on their own and it was the pastor's job to come alongside and nurture the religious commitments that they brought with them. Now, I feel like I have to be a leader in the constant fight for institutional relevance while I still help people nurture a faith they do not realize they have and a spirituality that they do not know they need.

— Seth

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"I'm most worried about our capacity to actually be the church in the world. Guiding and birthing change in religious communities is like turning a cruise ship — you need patience, persistence, and long-term vision. Leading a congregation now is like trying to do a K-turn with a cruise ship in a narrow canal. And, like, the boat is on fire... Especially now, with COVID and the election, people are showing up deeply, deeply anxious, and that anxiety comes out in very strange and unexpected ways. But instead of getting to tell them that they are being ridiculous and need to get a grip, I'm supposed to empathize with them and help them find a way out of it. I want to be able to do the latter, but it's awfully exhausting. [...] Prior to COVID, I would have said that leading worship and community organizing things were the most gratifying part of the job. But the reality is that, at least for me, online church doesn't involve any of the emotional feedback that I used to get in-person. And, serving a congregation with mostly older folks, I get a lot of complaints about tech issues and almost no help with them. My education and credentialing did not prepare me for this rapid shift to digital ministry. I have no desire to learn how to edit audio or video. Like, literally none. But I guess I have to now?"

— Eric

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"I do think that despair is setting in, though. In the uber-Protestant idea of chaplaincy in the US, we are encouraged to think of our units as our congregations. This includes the staff. In the past few months, they have less patience, are more lax in adhering to safety protocols, and less attentive to patients according to what the patients tell me. Everyone seems stretched thinly and seems to feel lonely, even when surrounded by people at work. I say "despair" because I think whatever this is feels like a new normal that won't change — and it's hard to work under these conditions without the prospect of the conditions getting better."

— Ann



Why Do Clergy Stay?

Why do clergy stay in a job that has high levels of role-related, financial, emotional, and contextual stress? Many live in a paradox of meaningful work alongside the kinds of chronic and traumatic stress that lead to burnout.

Several studies found that clergy can experience burnout and work satisfaction at the same time.²⁵

“The most gratifying part of pastoring is also the least exhausting part for me: the sharing in personal enrichment and education that leads people closer to God. ...I could be making more money in any number of other occupations, but I also know that those jobs would not make me as happy or fulfilled because of that crucial difference between occupation and vocation. I am meant to be a pastor of a congregation — have known that since I was eighteen, and truthfully I probably knew it even earlier than that.”

— **Eric**



“I’m an assistant rector for youth and family ministries, so I run youth groups, faith formation classes, service trips, intergenerational ministries, outreach projects, chaplain at our preschool - plus all the regular stuff like preaching, leading worship, pastoral care, social justice, etc. The most gratifying part is getting to be a meaningful part of people’s lives, and getting to be in community with others in a way that is so deep and powerful and life-giving.”

— **Marcella**

“I work mainly in pastoral care at the moment, and my responsibilities are to listen well and help people think through existential problems brought on by illness. Often they have religious or philosophical questions or topics they want to talk about. The most gratifying part for me is having a long in-depth conversation with a patient who wants to use their religion (often Christianity) to think about their situation. I feel like I’ve done meaningful work when I can help patients feel like they aren’t losing everything at the same time.”

— **Ann**

“My current congregation is, overall, amazing; I’ve been here for just over two years and it has (surprisingly, in some ways) been a really good fit. During the pandemic, they’ve really pulled together to support each other and me (including financially). Compared to many of my colleagues, I’m extraordinarily blessed/lucky/privileged, however you want to put it. I am also living proof that it’s possible to come back from burnout. ”

— **Grace**

Now What?

CLERGY RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE BURNOUT

Because clergy experience significant meaning in their work, they often stay through many challenges. They want to stay in ministry, and congregations, seminaries, and supervisors can help them avert burnout. Here's a summary of what our interviewees said about what would help, followed by their recommendations in their own words.

- Revise seminary education to align with the current context of church ministry and to provide more practical tools—the “nuts and bolts” of ministry as well as intellectual and relational skills.
- Pay clergy a living wage with benefits (health insurance, parental leave, retirement plans).
- Show gratitude and respect.
- Change clergy job descriptions to be clear, realistic and bounded.
- Resource clergy with training in managing the emotional burden of ministry and increasing self-awareness.
- Provide peer groups for clergy that provide safe spaces to share their experiences.



“What I would love to see is the culture around ministry to change, because what we are doing right now isn’t working. Pay your staff better. And if you can’t do that, set up better systems of support for them. Acknowledge that emotional and spiritual work is still difficult, even if it looks to you like only soft skills.”

— Alexis

“I think seminary education doesn’t teach you how to do ministry so much as it teaches you how to think like a minister, and it’s important to recognize the distinction. It’s about giving you a mindset — a lens with which to do ministry. And that’s helpful, but it also means that if you don’t get the nuts-and-bolts stuff in your field education experience, you’re probably not going to get it and will have to learn most of it on the job. My denomination should push harder for clergy compensation to keep pace with other mainline denominations. Disciples clergy are some of the lowest-paid on average compared to our peers, and compensation is the most honest form of how a worker’s value to their employer is communicated to them.”

— Eric

“In terms of the emotional and relational work required for the position, none of my formal education prepared me for that. The chaplaincy training helped with self-awareness and avoiding burnout, but it could have been better. To be honest, my own work with my therapist helps me more than any class or training that I’ve had.”

— Ann

“[My current] Lutheran parish loved me back into life for two years and restored my faith in my own gifts, calling, and work. They did this mostly by having excellent boundaries and a clear sense of what was my job and what was not, being generous, expressing gratitude, and having a sense of humor. Which is a pretty good summary of How Not to Burn Out Your Pastor, if congregations are looking for one.”

— Ann

“What would relieve burnout? If my congregations could trust me — not just as a person but as a professional. I am relatively new to full time parish ministry (3 years in), but I have years and years of experience as a lay leader in different congregations and in our denomination. I’m held in good regard by many prominent senior colleagues. When I suggest a path forward that somebody doesn’t agree with, they reference how inexperienced I am or suggest that I am somehow naive. And out of one side of their mouth they say “We love you!!!” and out of the other side, they make snide comments about my age. Also, heavens above, they could give me the parental leave that the denomination recommends!!!”

— Lydia

“Many religious leaders are working 21st century jobs with 20th century skills. We’re still getting trained and formed for a version of church/life that doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve been anxious about burnout and overfunctioning since I started down this path — there is no training, no resources, no support for self care. What could my denomination do? Work to engage and promote meaningful conversation about changing/transforming models of priesthood so that clergy can be grounded and healthy. There’s a ton of lip service about self care, but what we need to be doing is radically reenvisioning what it means to be a priest in a white supremacist and toxic capitalist system. But I do want to say that I see a lot of young(er) clergy gaining some awareness around how to engage in ministry in a healthier and more holistic way, especially when we have safe spaces to really open up about our experiences. A lot of the spoken and unspoken boundaries imposed by earlier generations of clergy are being questioned, adjusted, and reimaged in ways that truly integrate self and community care, and it’s really cool to be a part of that change. There’s a lot to be hopeful about as the Church continues to transform! The savior complex is rampant in this field, and there’s almost no counter-narrative to that way of doing this work.”

— Marcella

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a significant body of research on clergy burnout and resilience that echoes much of what we heard from pastors in these interviews. (See References and Resources, below.) Based on both our learning and listening, our recommendations are targeted for what clergy, congregation members, and denominational leaders can do to prevent or relieve clergy burnout.

In looking to the future, we choose to focus on hope and the possibility of what could be beyond the challenges of the present. Our hope is not simply optimism and moving towards solutions, but a Christian hope that goes through the disorientation and grief of Holy Saturday before encountering Resurrection. We recognize that some of these recommendations would require a similar journey of disorientation or lament before celebration.

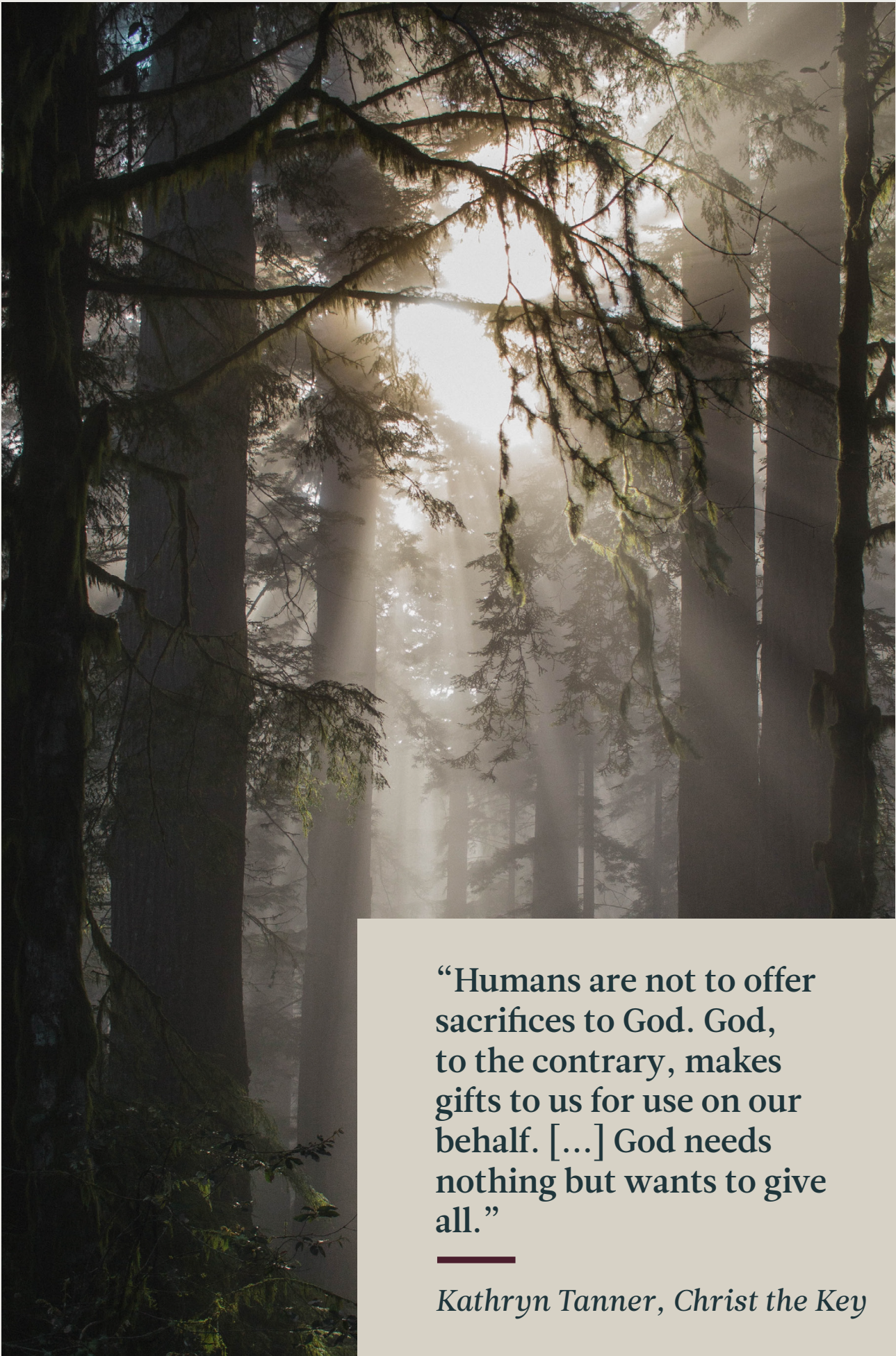
Our first hopes are for clergy. We hope they feel their belovedness in their relationship with God. We hope they create space for the sustaining practices that renew them internally, so that their ministries can be an outpouring of that abundance. We hope they exercise agency in their daily schedules and emotional reactivity through intentionally developing boundaries, and through understanding what in their soul-formation demanded boundarylessness and sacrifice, when the sacrifice has already been offered through Christ. Finally, we hope that they join (as members, not gatherers) competition-free communities of support that provide belonging and understanding.

We hope that congregants gain a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted, complex roles that pastors fulfill, and that they develop reasonable expectations for their leaders. We hope they come to see the humanity of their pastor, and then extend the grace that they would also like to receive, including warm support that can handle the tension of being both congregant/pastor and friendships. Also, we hope congregational leadership teams educate their congregations about the elements of a healthy church system — and share in ownership of hard decisions (including covid policies) — to support pastors' boundaries.

We hope supervisors of pastors and denominational leaders hear the call to create sustainable ministry environments for those entrusted to their care through compensation structures (a living wage, health care), and bringing compensation into alignment ordination demands and student-debt load. Supervisors have an opportunity to redefine what “success” looks like for pastors from more holistic standards, and to educate congregations on the breadth of pastoral job descriptions to help them set their expectations.

Ultimately, **we hope for the church**, as the body of Christ, to embody God in society, especially in its relationships with and service to others.²⁶ When churches become a source of burnout, we risk inadvertently demonstrating a harsh divinity who demands sacrifice, who is never pleased with what we offer. In an era of isolation and unchecked capitalism, people are hungry to belong to a different type of community, and to know a God who smiles on humanity with love and acceptance, a God who looks upon us and says “this is my child, with whom I am well pleased.”

To better become that church, many of us will need to re-examine our theologies, especially when it comes to language sacrifice for ministry. The sacrifice was already provided, offered, completed, and redeemed in Christ Jesus — we do not need to offer sacrifice to God, but to recognize that God is giving to us. In that recognition, may we become communities that are increasingly able to authentically express the character of the God of abundance, love, and grace.



“Humans are not to offer sacrifices to God. God, to the contrary, makes gifts to us for use on our behalf. [...] God needs nothing but wants to give all.”

Kathryn Tanner, Christ the Key

Further Reading

Resources & Offerings from the Center for Transforming Engagement

The Resilience Report: The report contains our best learnings on what resilience is, why we need it, how we go about strengthening it, and how it connects to the Christian tradition.

Flourishing in Service: In this report, we share our conversations with alumni of The Seattle School's various programs, asking the question: What is ministry today?

Resilience in Crisis Webinar Series: In an early response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we hosted a free webinar series to support, resource, and encourage leaders and practitioners.

Certificate in Resilient Service: A program designed to develop your inner resilience in community with helping professionals and faith innovators.

Resilient Congregations: A program for teams to develop their congregational identity, listen to the aspirations and needs of their communities, and design a congruent ministry in response.

Career & Call: An online course on the process of discovery and discernment that you can use over and over again in making life decisions both now and in the future.

Coaching & Consultation are available. Contact transforming@theseattleschool.edu

Resources by Anne Helen Petersen

The Contours of Clergy Burnout

Anne Helen Petersen's newsletter, [Culture Stack](#)

Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation. (2020).

Recommended Resources on Clergy Burnout & Resilience

Clergy Burnout and Resilience: A Review of the Literature. Jackson-Jordan, E. A. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*. 2013;67(1):1-5. doi:10.1177/154230501306700103

Clergy Burnout, Revised and Expanded: Surviving in Turbulent Times. Lehr, F. (2022). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis. Proeschold-Bell, R.J., & Byassee, J. (2018). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group.

Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing. Bloom, M. (2019). Landham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Literature Review of Clergy Resilience and Recommendations for Future Research. Sielaff, A. M., Davis, K. R., & McNeil, J. D. (2020). *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647120968136>

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Endnotes

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Gratitude

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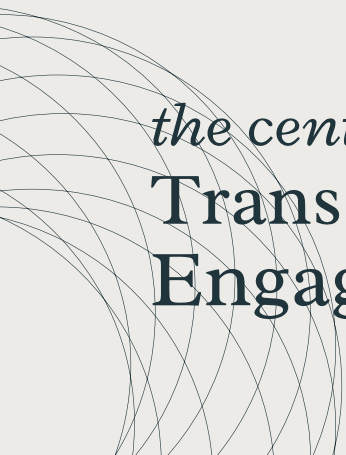
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