

Hard to be Holy

Paul & Libby Whetham

The untold stories of church leaders



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Our deep appreciation goes to the many people who have shared this journey with us. We're aware that our two beautiful daughters were far too young to understand this whole process but often had to share mum and dad with their passion. And we give thanks for the Spirit of God who challenges, stretches and sustains us.

This book is dedicated to Una and Glen Gabb who taught us how to live faithful lives in the midst of adversity.

Foreword by Rev Tim Costello, President of the Baptist Union of Australia

I first met Paul and Libby Whetham when they were members of the congregation of St Kilda Baptist Church. As a minister I greatly appreciated their involvement, especially as Paul worked during that time at Machesah House, established as a haven for homeless young people. Since then both of them have enriched their understanding of the way we find God in the midst of our relationships. I cannot think of two people better placed to talk to us ministers about how 'hard' it is to be 'holy' without the sustenance of open and reciprocal friendships with the people of our congregations.

For that is what they very cogently argue in this excellent book. The candour with which the ministers respond to Paul as interviewer is a tribute to his art in fostering open and vulnerable relationships, and many of my colleagues will recognize their own high and low moments reflected in the responses quoted here.

I found their analysis of the stages of this struggle particularly good. I can highly recommend their description of the loosening/tightening cycle which can deepen our view of God. It is inspired and cleverly worked from the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts, and it is one of those mysterious serendipities that my own congregation has chosen the very same text for this Sunday's services as I write this foreword.

I had to laugh, reading about leaders as coming in three sorts: caretakers, undertakers and risk takers. It's a relief to me that Paul and Libby are strong advocates of the last sort. As a veteran risk taker, I can vouch for their view. True, we risk takers make some colossal mistakes, but somehow God just seems to dust us down after a contrite apology, and on we go to face another day.

The authors wisely advise that there be time for feedback on new experiments in participation. I love their sense that the new ways of being church can be an adventure, revealing unexpected talents and surprising genius in members. Church numbers are down but Paul and Libby are spot on when they point to people outside 'longing to explore their spirituality and deepen their relationships'. There are plenty of Corneliuses out there, and we need to bring them into God's house. We need to listen to them and hear their stories. That's what Jesus did.

Recently I was asked a question similar to the one Paul and Libby pose in the book: How can we become more open at church so that everyone feels part of the whole? Like them, I didn't find the question so difficult to answer once I'd climbed 'out of the box', as they say. I suggested that a congregation might encourage some of the members to tell their stories for an article in the local newspaper, that members might like to celebrate public transport by going for a picnic on a tram, that a church gathering might escape gender stereotyping by agreeing that men cook the casseroles and women chair and officiate at a meeting, or that each member of the congregation might undertake to commit some 'senseless act of kindness' during the week and talk about its implications at the following service.

In recommending a humble commitment to becoming much more interactive, to doing what is right for the right reasons, and to an awareness of the whole body of the church, Paul and Libby bring a healthy integration to their vision of a minister's vocation. My own experience at Collins Street is that our hospitality to the street people has brought us a fullness in our experience of God, and that we are greatly in their debt for this privilege. The authors often quote effectively from the free translation of the New Testament called The Message, and I can do no better than quote it here again: *"Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?"*

Introduction

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." - Matthew 22:37

The institutional church is in crisis. Trends such as church closures, aging congregations, the increase of civil marriage celebrants and the rise of alternative religions all reflect this. While the institutional church may have been appropriate in the past, its relevance today is seriously being questioned. What is not so widely known, however, is that people who work in this environment are also struggling. This is indicated by the increasing incidence of burnout, extramarital affairs and sexual abuse among church leaders. In addition, issues regarding women's ordination, homosexuality and celibacy are hotly debated.

It is interesting to note that many of these issues involve the relationships of church leaders. Surprisingly, however, there has been little actual research to examine and help make sense of their relationships in a meaningful and constructive way. Consequently, we set about the difficult task of trying to unravel the roles and relationships of church leaders. We bring two very different backgrounds to the task.

Lib grew up in the church, attended university and Bible College and served in the Middle East as a missionary. After returning to Australia, she married Paul and retrained as a Gestalt therapist, and mother! In her paid working life she has gained experience as a teacher, group facilitator and counsellor in private practice. As part of her therapist training she researched the various types of church leadership styles in terms of leaders' relationships to the congregation.

Paul became a Christian in his early twenties and has a background in welfare and clinical psychology. He has worked in church accommodation homes for people with mental illness and other community mental health settings. As part of his PhD research¹ he explored the relationships of church leaders. Sixty male clergy from different denominational backgrounds (Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Pentecostal and Baptist) across New South Wales were interviewed individually on two separate occasions. The interviews focused on their lives at the moment, particularly their relationships with both people and God. These in-depth interviews provided a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data that gave the greatest insight into the loneliness faced by many church leaders and their often impoverished world of relationships with both God and others.

Further, our research findings overwhelmingly supported the clergy research conducted by the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) Leader Survey. This research surveyed 4,500 church leaders across all denominations and is the most comprehensive clergy research ever to be undertaken in Australia. The results were published in a book titled *Burnout in Church Leaders*² and it was launched with the first edition of *Hard to be Holy*³ as a national leadership kit for Australian churches in 2001.

The first three chapters of this book outline the diversity and complexity of the problems facing church leaders. Like us, you may at first feel overwhelmed, but we encourage you to keep going. In order to have a solution, you must first have a problem. And this one is far from easy. The fourth chapter is devoted to making sense of these issues in an integrated way. In the final three chapters of the book we suggest a range of constructive alternatives to give us a way forward.

It is believed that these alternatives will not only enhance the relationships of church leaders but also lead to a different way of being church that can both greatly benefit those of us within the church body as well as make church a far more relevant place for those outside.

It is our hope that this book may shed some light on church leadership for those outside and inside the church. We also hope that it will be a valuable resource for denominational bodies, theological colleges, church leaders and those of us in the congregation who want to be more supportive of our leaders and who may also be searching for new interactive ways forward.

PART I: FACING THE ISSUES

Chapter 1: Life in the Hothouse

"Churches expect their ministers to do the impossible. His primary calling is spiritual, says the layman, but the minister is judged on organisational rather than spiritual criteria. The minister is a social being but tends not to have meaningful relationships with church members... The ministry presents us with a case of structure punishment" – Lauer¹

It is hard to be holy when you are a church leader. This may sound somewhat strange given that they specialise in God, Bible and church. Indeed, most of their daily conversations, sermon preparations and services are dedicated to imparting the mysteries of God. So how can it be that our spiritual leaders are stressed and struggling in their position?

The short answer is that people in church and the wider community tend to expect leaders who deal with God or God things to be Godlike. Consequently the constant demands and expectations made of them are often stressful and exhausting, to the point where they have little time to foster relationships with God, family or friends. As a result their unique and busy role and lack of support make church leaders prone to burnout, poor relationships and potential sexual misconduct.

In this first chapter we will explore the demands of the clergy role. In the following two chapters we will look more closely at the relationships of clergy and how they may at times use their role to fulfil personal needs in inappropriate ways.

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

Church leaders have a very diffuse and multifaceted role. In an attempt to understand the diverse and demanding nature of this role, Australian researcher Norman Blaikie² identified a range of facets of a church leader's role that have been often used in subsequent research:

- *educator* - training, instructing and leading study groups
- *evangelist* - converting others to faith
- *organiser* - organising and supervising the work of the parish and the congregation
- *pastor* - visiting and counselling
- *preacher* - delivering sermons, expounding the Word of God
- *priest* - conducting worship and administering the sacraments
- *scholar* - reading, studying and writing
- *social reformer* - involved directly in attacking social injustices



Figure 101: Church leader's tough juggling act

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) conducted the largest clergy research to date in Australia, interviewing 4,500 church leaders across all denominations in its Leader Survey (The results were published in a book titled *Burnout in Church Leaders*³ and it was launched with the first edition of *Hard to be Holy* as a leadership kit for Australian churches in 2001). The NCLS Leadership Survey included a variant of Blaikie's list in their surveys asking both leaders and attenders their views on the main roles being carried out by leaders. It is evident from the results that leaders carry out a wide range of roles. Further, it is clear that leaders have different perceptions of what their roles should be, compared to what they actually are. They found that 43% of senior ministers/pastors/priests feel they waste time on tasks not central to their role. They also found that where congregations and leaders disagree about the leadership role, or where there is conflict between leaders' actual or desired role, higher levels of burnout are found. The question of role is clearly a vexed one.

Not only do clergy have to cope with this varied and often ill-defined role, but they also struggle with blurred boundaries between their work and private lives. Both the church and wider community usually have access to their personal telephone numbers and home addresses. Their homes are often located on, or near, the church premises. Their client group - the people in their congregation - are also largely their social group as well. This all results in frequent casual and emergency interruptions where they often find themselves playing their leadership role even in their free time. The NCLS Leadership Survey found that more than 60% of senior clergy see the lack of separation between work and personal life as a significant or highly significant pressure point.

Given the unique, diffuse and constant nature of this religious role, time management is difficult. One church leader described this well in his interview.

"I guess, in the recent past, one of the greatest pressures to come to bear on my life, has been people's expectations. I'm expected to meet people from the first stages of their life in baptisms, right up to the last days of life at funerals. Expected to be able to share in all types of emotions, everything from funerals to weddings. Frequently these emotions have to change very quickly. There's been instances where I've been called to hospitals to share in the grief of parents who've suffered a cot death or a still birth, to an hour later going to share and preside at a wedding. One has to share in the emotions of both occasions. So that's one of the big demands, having to emotionally share in people's lives. Frequently it's not unusual to be called to hospital to minister to people who you don't know, who have nothing to do with your parish. These days, it's very easy to come close to job overload. People really don't know much about the life of a priest, except that they expect them to be always available and to attend immediately. Living in a presbytery is like living in an office - people come and go all the time. One has to be careful - I mean time management in this job is extremely difficult."

(Bill, 52) Note: The names used in this book are fictitious. The age is factual.



Figure 102: Strap yourself in for an emotional ride

IN A SEA OF UNCERTAINTY

To make matters worse, church leaders have to work within a church structure that often lacks clarity. The nature of the church organisation is different to that of most other organisations, since attendance is voluntary and the people who participate expect no material reward. Unlike professional organisations, there are typically no clear accountability mechanisms such as job descriptions, explicit time commitments, productivity expectations, distinct chains of command or grievance procedures.

The following quotes illustrate some of the dilemmas:

"Part of the problem is that being a minister is, I think, a fairly undefined role. You don't knock off at 5 o'clock and go home, you know; it's a thing that carries with you night and day. We all have our answering machines and other ways of trying to guard time and control and organise our lives, but still there are expectations and hidden pressures which are quite unreasonable at times." (Jim, 36)

"There are expectations of church and us personally that are just impossible to satisfy because the expectations are a bit unreal. So, again it is a kind of a draining expectation without any ready answer." (Francis, 54)

"Our parish at the moment is either sort of struggling to maintain the status quo or is in decline and people are anxious about that. The one person who is blamed for that, is always the minister. If the minister would only visit more people, the minister would only preach better sermons, the minister would only do this." (Eddie, 35)

Further, while church members' contributions are different to those typically found in a business, so too is the form of leadership. Unlike any other organisation, churches adopt a seemingly paradoxical servant-leader model. This type of leadership is based on Christ's teachings, that those who seek to be the greatest should be the least. In theory this means that leaders are to become servants and follow the example of Jesus. Although this is difficult to operationalise in an hierarchical organisation, it nevertheless is widely accepted at least as a principle of church leadership.

WHAT HAVE I GOT MYSELF IN FOR?

At the heart of this is church leaders' own expectations. Many start with good intentions to deepen their understanding of God and the Bible, and impart that knowledge to others. The complexity of their role in the context of organised religion is usually not realised until they actually start work. The NCLS Leader Survey³ found that nearly half of all senior leaders agreed that the realities of church life had been very different to their expectations.



Figure 103: The gap between leader expectations and reality can be trouble

It may be that people considering a calling to church leadership have limited information available to them. They may, for instance, like to talk about their faith and study the Bible, and admire other leaders who conduct services and ceremonies, and counsel others. Based on this information they may enter the ministry expecting to live out their faith in these ways. However, it is virtually impossible to be fully informed of the other hidden aspects of their role.

As a result, these new leaders start out expecting to do great things for God and the church. Soon afterwards they are faced with the harsh reality of church factions, powerholds and a taxing role, and realise that they either have to adapt to the circumstances and change their expectations or leave. Consequently, it is particularly difficult to survive in the first years of ministry after the initial honeymoon is over.

From pew to pedestal

Literature world-wide^{4,5,6,7} has highlighted numerous problems associated with the first few years of full-time ministry. These include:

- difficulty applying abstract knowledge to a range of real life situations
- the loss of the supportive college environment
- lack of role models
- entry into established group dynamics of the congregation
- personal self-doubts
- disillusionment with personal spiritual life
- increased need for supportive relationships

The lack of relationships in this transitional period is possibly due to a variety of reasons. In addition to the difficulty of replicating college relationships, church leaders often find themselves travelling to new and sometimes remote areas. Consequently, they are required to leave their existing support network of family and friends.

So, equipped with often half digested abstract religious knowledge and uprooted from familiar relationships they enter their first parish. Typically, they are greeted with a multi-faceted role that they feel ill-equipped to deal with. Also, in many cases there is no regular supervision to help them through.

To add to this, they may find it difficult to turn to those around them because of the ingrained stereotype about church leaders being God-like and capable of doing anything. This is what is commonly called the 'pedestal effect'; that is, the leader is treated as spiritually above others in the congregation. Being the holders of new and unique religious knowledge, leaders are expected to accurately dispense this information, but not necessarily explore it, with members of the congregation.



Figure 104: The pedestal effect is a big problem

During our research, one leader shared that after mentioning feelings of depression from the pulpit, a number of parishioners came up to him afterwards quite shocked and recommended psychiatric help since they did not think it was appropriate for a minister to experience depression. Sadly, he never felt free to talk about his personal problems again.

This is a potentially damaging experience for any church leader but particularly for those new to ministry who may already be feeling isolated.

ON THE MOVE

First placement stresses do not necessarily end once clergy move on to subsequent parishes. In some ways the stereotypical role of the church leader is a little like the role of the traditional cowboy-western hero. In the typical movie sequence, a community is in disarray and calls on the help of the hero. The hero enters the community and eradicates its major problems. Having done his job and validated his role, the hero then moves on to the next community. Interestingly, the hero rarely stays in the community. The departure of cowboys riding off into the sunset is a deeply ingrained and familiar image in Western genre movies.

The reason for this last lonely scene is simple. If the hero stays in the one community, he could become a part of the group and therefore be in jeopardy of losing his hero status. To keep the role alive and validate his very existence means that the hero must keep moving, seeking out new communities to fix up.

Church leaders resemble western heroes in that they move from one community to the next with great frequency. In Australia church leaders have the second highest mobility rates of all professions next to, fittingly, the defence forces⁷. Also, like western heroes, they are expected to bring hope to the community and, in some ways, fix its problems - however longstanding. Further, influences such as the pedestal effect, ensure that church leaders too often feel they have to work alone in their efforts to restore the community.



Figure 105: Church leaders are similar to heroes in cowboy westerns

High leader mobility is a fact of life, particularly in some denominational traditions. However, unlike our successful cowboy heroes, mobility is often highest among those church leaders bitterly frustrated since they have not yet had the opportunity to prove themselves or who have been burnt badly in their previous settlement. The following examples illustrate this:

"As much as I like this parish I think it is becoming clear to me that I probably shouldn't stay here too long. I think one bad thing about this place, is that I don't think that I will be able to realise my potential here. So I think regrettably I seek to move on. That will be a point of grief when it comes." (Sean, 36)

"There's a struggle sometimes with self-worth and whether anything that I'm doing is significant while I'm here." (Peter, 41)

"Life as a minister revolves a fair bit around work, probably more than anything else. I feel that I am being pushed into a mould that I am not really happy with. So I guess the whole question of self-esteem is coming out and that question is totally revolved around my work. I guess there has been a lot of anxiety, a lot of stress just working through that and whether it is best to stay or go or if there is hope and I guess for me that has been difficult." (Colin, 30)

A STRESSFUL CALLING

Put together a unique and diffuse role, the difficulties of transition into the first parish, congregational expectations and high mobility - how do church leaders cope? The short answer is, with difficulty, since it involves change. And any change can be stressful. Many church leaders become disillusioned and frustrated as a result. Although written many years ago, Moberg's words find an echo in the experiences of many ministers today:

"Frustrations in the ministry make many a clergyman an isolated, lonely, tired individual who is cut off from the fulfilment of the basic functions in society that offer him personal satisfaction in fulfilling his call to service. Prevented by social pressures from living as they believe men ought to live, frustrated by an unfulfillable self-image of the minister as one ordained to a holy calling, filled with vocational guilt for spending major portions of his time in pointless parish piddling, disillusioned by the politics of professional advancement, embittered by the bureaucracy that makes them office managers, committee maneuvers, and publicity directors instead of scholars and preachers of God's Word... many ministers resolve their inner struggles by entering other vocations"

- Moberg⁸

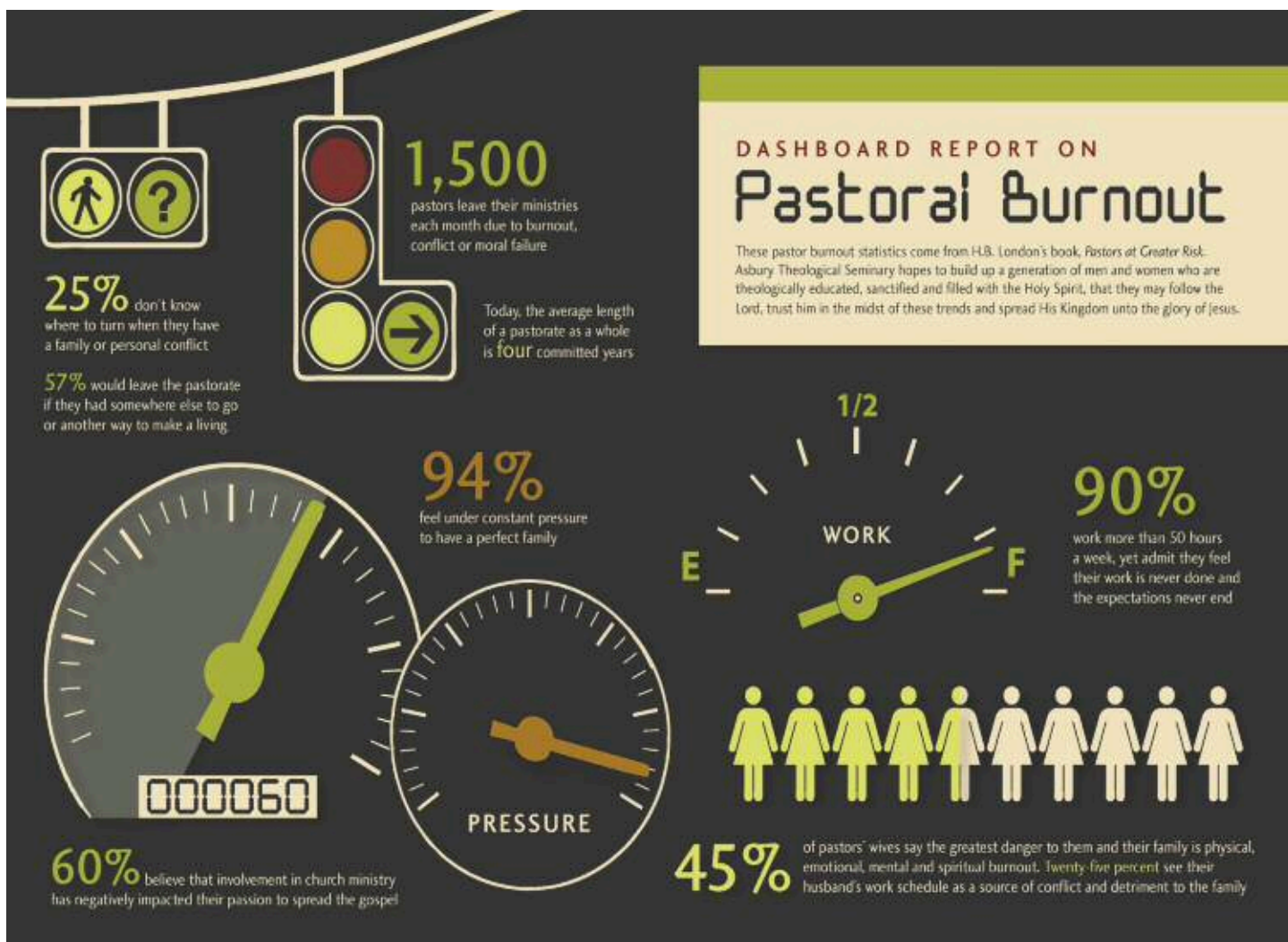


Figure 106: Dashboard warning signs

Research on stress among clergy suggests that it is a significant problem. In a recent church leaders' stress survey conducted by the Uniting Church's Synod Stress Committee Queensland⁹ found all sub-groups of the 376 participants (church leaders/lay leaders; male/female; and all age groups) were found to perceive their role as 'very stressful'.

Another survey commissioned by the Anglican Church¹⁰ found that most of the 142 church leaders sampled were close to burnout. Five percent were so affected that immediate remedial attention was thought necessary to restore their physical and mental health. A further 20 percent said burnout was a factor in their lives, and 45 percent said they were 'bordering on burnout'. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and tiredness were also reported to be very common. In the most comprehensive study of clergy burnout in Australia to date the NCLS Leader Survey¹¹ found that a staggering 75% of clergy either had 'major' or 'borderline' burnout on a validated psychological test.

Many factors contribute to these high levels of stress and burnout. *Burnout in Church Leaders* gives invaluable insight into the multiplicity of factors involved. Among them are: Australian church leaders compared to all other occupations work the longest hours and are among the lowest paid; approximately half have difficulty finding time for recreation and do not take holidays when they should; and about one in three have major concerns about their financial situation.

The degree of distress experienced by many clergy is movingly illustrated in the following account of one clergyman's encounter with a church consultant:

"I was alight on the outside but on the inside there wasn't much I could do but struggle through the day. The thing that really struck me in the entire interview was he asked me a question and it was right at the core. One of the things he said was, "People who complain a lot aren't happy", and that was a shaking sort of question because he pointed out that I was desperately unhappy. And the second thing he said was, "What do you do for fun?" I just burst into tears at the time and I realised there was nothing I was doing that was fun. I don't know whether people have an idea of just how untogether most of us are." (Andrew, 34)

At this point it is important to differentiate between stress and burnout. Stress is either a negative or positive experience and can be associated with creative energy and motivation to change. Burnout, however, is mainly a negative experience where the person typically is left in a state of fatigue and stagnation. Rather than adapt to their unique life circumstances, people with burnout tend to be emotionally exhausted and appear stuck in their role. They usually think that others, and not themselves, should change in order to alleviate their negative state.

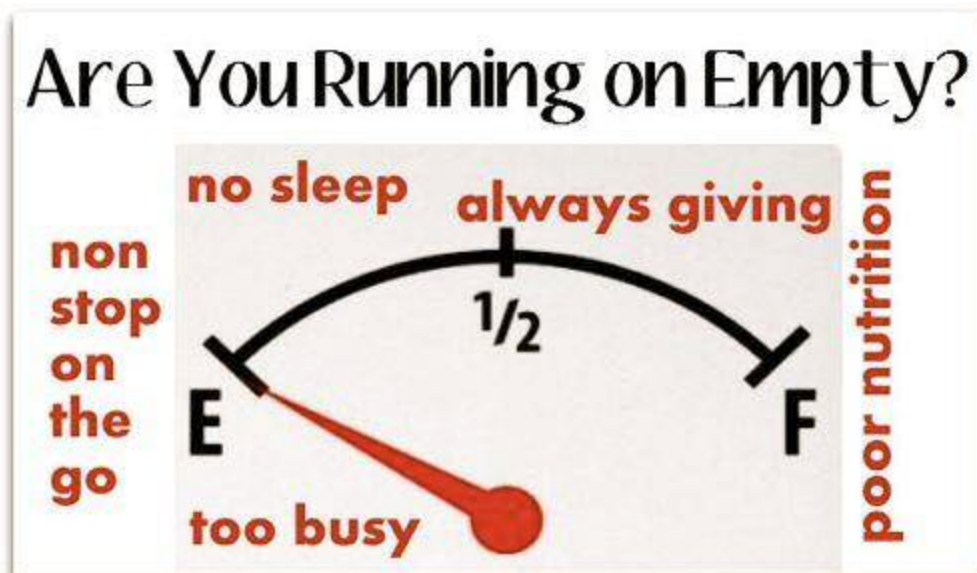


Figure 107: Running on empty?

Writers in this field¹² agree that burnout is generally brought about by a commitment to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward. Therefore it is possible that burnout is more likely to occur in church leaders who hold on to their initial expectations about what the job 'should' be, rather than adapt their expectations to what the job 'actually' entails.

Research overseas suggests that church leaders who have spent less time in ministry are more prone to stress and burnout. This is not surprising given some of the stresses that leaders typically experience in their first parish. Two American studies¹³ found that most church leaders leave the ministry after a relatively short period of time. One study¹³ of ex-church leaders found that of those who left the ministry, 62% did so before 12 years of ministry. The second study¹⁴ found that 50% of the leavers sampled did so before two years of service. Further, 42% of leaders experiencing stress have less than five years of full-time ministry experience¹⁵.

In Australia, a study by Australian counsellors of church leaders found that the first four to five years in the parish is the main stress period in a church leader's career path¹⁶. By contrast, NCLS Leadership Survey¹⁷ found that burnout was highest among those who had been ordained between 6 and 20 years. NCLS suggests that people new to ministry may still be enthusiastic and committed enough to be able to survive what are potentially highly stressful placements.

I WANT OUT

Unfortunately many leaders simply do not continue in ministry. The high levels of ministers/pastors/priests leaving the ministry is of major concern. Based on other Australian research figures^{18,19}, approximately one in two leave the ministry before retirement, constituting possibly one of the highest departure rates among all professions. In addition, a study of ex-pastors²⁰ found that 40% are either not worshipping anywhere or not using their ministry gifts in any way with a congregation.

The NCLS Leader Survey²¹ adds further weight to these findings. Current leaders were asked how often they thought of leaving the ministry. Up to a quarter of senior ministers/pastors/priests sometimes or often think of leaving the ministry.



Figure 108: Tough gig – many clergy consider exit strategies

* * *

These matters are too serious to ignore. It is important that they are dealt with and dealt with well. The levels of stress and burnout that exist among leaders across the Australian church suggest that dealing with these matters will require looking below the surface. At the heart of these issues are a range of role and expectation dilemmas. And below these a malaise centred around meaningful relationships ... or lack of them.

Chapter 2: Deeper Concerns and Consequences

"Often pastors speak of relating to people endlessly yet still feeling lonely. Pastors give but do not receive much in terms of intimacy. Therefore there is a kind of quiet, deficit feeling in which pastors wonder when it is their turn to get their needs met, who cares about their feelings, or what's wrong with them for feeling this way" – Rediger¹

In the previous chapter we painted a picture of the diffuse and challenging role of church leaders, the often unrealised expectations of what the job entails and high levels of stress and burnout. Not *all* church leaders suffer to this degree but the statistics are extraordinarily high enough to be of major concern. They beg an explanation – and a way forward.

Perhaps the single most critical factor in coping with such a stressful role is meaningful relationships. By meaningful relationships we mean a depth and quality of relationship that enables people to intimately and reciprocally share their innermost thoughts, feelings, values and core beliefs that uniquely make them who they are. The kind of relationship where I can make sense of, or find meaning in, my constantly changing world and my place in it.

It is a relationship that involves risk and testing out what is most central to my being. These quality relationships are particularly crucial when we are going through times of change, uncertainty and challenge.

Research confirms how important these relationships are. Supportive and intimate relationships are a major factor in aiding adaptation to the unique and complex church environment and reducing stress levels^{1b}.

Overseas studies² have found that church leaders who function well in their jobs emphasise family resources during times of stress. In Australia the NCLS Leader Survey³ found that leaders who are satisfied with their marriages and children experience lower levels of burnout than those who are experiencing difficulties. Married leaders also experienced lower levels of burnout than those who were unmarried.

Another Australian study⁴ examined the quality of relational resources and the impact of these resources on the stress experienced by theological students. Those students who had good immediate and extended family resources were found to have lower levels of stress.

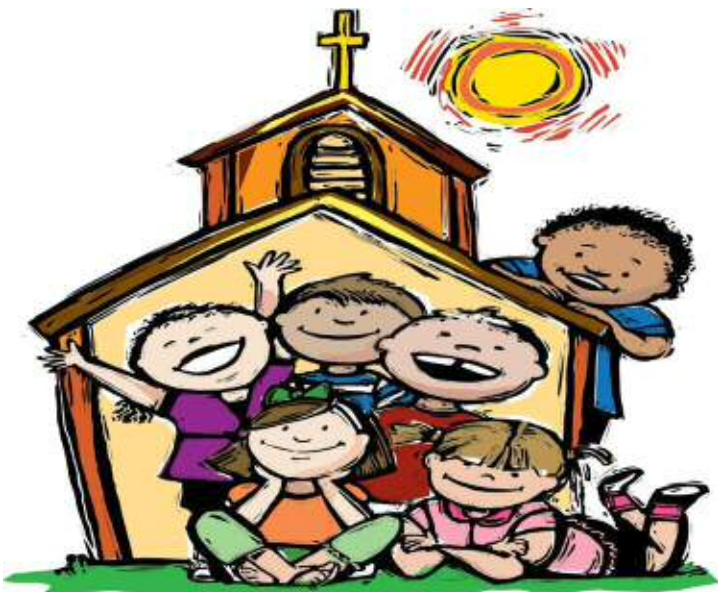


Figure 201: Supportive relationships help to decrease stress and burnout

POOR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE

It is not difficult to categorically show the importance of meaningful relationships. Church leaders themselves put relationships high on their priority list. However, putting them into practice comes much harder. There are a range of factors that combine to create this situation.

Time

While meaningful relationships may clearly be a key, the problem is that many church leaders are too busy to have them. When asked in the NCLS Leader Survey⁵ about how busy they felt their lives to be, 80% of leaders placed themselves in the top half of the scale. Levels of stress and burnout were significantly higher among those towards the 'too busy to cope' end of the spectrum than those scoring more in the middle of the scale. It may be a case of there being no space in a busy life for nurturing relationships, as important as they are.

This was reflected in the results of our research. When asked about their life at the moment, only 21 percent of church leaders used the term 'friend' and only 19 percent expressed having 'close', 'deep', 'intimate' or 'loving' interactions with people. In other words, four out of five church leaders did not mention meaningful relationships. This is consistent with international literature about clergy relationships.

The following story is a good example of how busy some clergy feel to the point of not having time for kids, wife or God:

"I've got a 7 year old and it's very interesting to see him play offices and say things like, "Don't bother me, I'm busy", and things like that. Often family seems to take second place due to the nature of the work. You can become fairly obsessive about what you're doing and sometimes you don't weigh up the costs and the responsibilities. I always preach that, you know, God comes first, family second, community, world, the church. I preach that but I lie sometimes; it's not even God first. Sometimes it's the church first and then trying to match up the responsibilities that I feel I should do, then somewhere down the line God comes in. You're trying hard to live the life that you believe but you're failing miserably. I'm fortunate in a sense that my wife's a very contented person. If I had married another lady, things mightn't be so easy, but she bears quite a huge cost in terms of ministry and I think that if there's any resentment, it's that people don't have a clue what you're going through." (Eddie, 35)

Who pastors the pastor?

Being very busy often means that clergy have little time to meet their own needs. And even when they do, the question remains, who is there for church leaders when they are in need? Or put another way, who pastors the pastor?



Figure 202: We're all in need of healing

Always giving in relationships but never receiving, results in one-way interactions. This form of relating on its own, is unnatural and unhealthy. The following story from a clergyman whose father had just died illustrates the point very poignantly:

"While people in the church are very generous with their affection and care, there is still an expectation that you are a bubbly person and can give out a lot. I suppose a thing I realise in ministry is that you're always in a situation where you're giving all the time because of your people contact with the role you're in. And so I suppose, in one sense, at one level, in the last week or so, I felt like withdrawing, and felt like hey I'm drowning, it's my turn now, I'm not going to give any more." (John, 39)

Another clergyman talked about similar struggles:

"It's a bit tough, because you're trying to find resources that you don't feel that you have. In the parish it means an increased pastoral load of helping people who are hurting, but there's very little in the way of help for you when you are hurting." (Andrew, 34)

Never out of role

Maintaining these one-way interactions over time means that church leaders operate exclusively from their role, even in social situations.

Playing their role in social settings is a common occurrence. For instance, at the majority of social functions that church leaders are invited to attend, they usually say grace or a word of thanks to start the proceedings. It is a subtle reminder to others, and themselves, that they are on-duty, even though theoretically they are off-duty. One lonely church leader describes this struggle:

"I love at times to just be lost in the crowd, as if I've nothing to do with ministry, to just while away an hour or two. I do enjoy that, but at times that can really be a waste of time, because ministry's not just to socialise. I don't know if God really likes things like that or not. I feel that I could have done a bit better at these times." (Brian, 50)



Figure 203: One way relating can take its toll over time

Nearest and dearest

The international literature suggests that the spouse is the primary support person church leaders look to for their intimacy needs to be met and to alleviate symptoms of loneliness. The NCLS Leader Survey⁵ found the spouse to be a major source of support for Australian clergy. Eighty percent of leaders cited their spouse as the most useful person to talk to in order to cope.

Ironically, however, for church leaders this important relationship is often impoverished.

Church leaders appear to have more than their share of marital problems. They were ranked third highest of all professions in America to seek divorces⁶.

In another American study⁷, the quality of life of clergy and their spouses compared to male and female church laity were examined. Clergy and their spouses were found to experience more loneliness, burnout and diminished marital adjustment than church laity. The authors concluded that individuals functioning in a clerical role experience a 'diminished quality of life' and a 'deficit' of interpersonal involvement in the non-vocational sphere.

In Australia also the marriages of church leaders are under severe strain. In our research extremely low levels of intimacy in church leaders' closest relationships were found. This was found to be true regardless of denominational background, or whether participants were married or single.

This is consistent with a survey of counsellors who counsel clergy in Australia⁸. It revealed the main types of stress church leaders were treated for in order of importance were:

- marital problems
- overwork and inability to resist demands
- and faith crisis



Figure 204: Many clergy marriages end in divorce

Reasons cited for marital problems include long irregular hours, infrequent leisure time which often does not coincide with most of society, low stipends, enmeshment of work and family systems, and expectations from the congregations and the couples themselves^{9,10}.

In-house conflict

Australian studies^{11,12,13} have also found that major forms of conflict exist between church leaders and church laity. In a study¹³ examining 243 ex-church leaders the most significant reason for half the sample leaving was conflict with laity and other denominational leaders. A further half of the sample also felt there was a lack of support from the parish.

The NCLS Leader Survey¹⁴ found that a quarter of leaders found it hard to deal with difficult attenders. This factor was also strongly related to high levels of burnout.

Clergy problems are also usually heightened by the fact that they lack the necessary group work skills to effectively deal with the church congregation. Factors such as ingrained group dynamics, powerful members in the congregation, poor communication channels and unchallenged church expectations can plague leaders.



Figure 205: Church leaders' main source of conflict is dealing with powerful church members

The following accounts highlight this:

"This other person who is part of the committee didn't like something I suggested, which was pretty radical in the life of the parish. Since then she has been rather cold to me. It seems that anything I suggest she seems to say it's not a good idea. She's one of those so called 'power brokers' around the place. I can understand what they tell you now, 'Make all the mistakes in the first 3 years, and then get the hell out of there' (Roger, 31)

"I'd reached a stage where I didn't feel I could do any more there - they've had a long history of short-term pastorates and, towards the beginning of my third year, I believed that the elders of the church got ready for me to leave at the end of the year, even though I had no intention of leaving." (Eddie, 35)

"The sad part is that we have been the target of attack with a few people in the parish who have been doing it for the last 16-18 years. It has been very hard. From the time we came we didn't have a honeymoon time here. We just sort of got into problems that we had to work with and then it snowballed because of the loyalty here. People don't mind hurting the minister to save their relationships so truth doesn't prevail; it is just loyalty. " (Ivan, 49)

Relationships with congregations can be further complicated by church leaders wanting to be a 'good' role model and not wanting to bite the hand that feeds them. Since leaders are ultimately dependent on the offerings from the congregation they have to be careful how they present to, and confront others. All of these factors tends to compound the leaders' isolation and at times frustrate their relationships with those around them.

This was further supported in our research. Out of all the resources available to church leaders in times of trouble, they were found to turn to members of the congregation the least. Rather than working with them, congregations are frequently seen as a blockage to growth. Some examples of this include:

"I guess it is frustrating when there are things that are not happening. One of the frustrations I guess I am feeling is that there are some sections of the parish who don't want that to happen or in my perception perhaps, are blocking out or slowing that process down, whereas I feel I really want to move ahead and restructure the parish. It would be a really great way to move ahead." (Mark, 35)

"This week I will have topped about 74 hours and that's not counting lunch times and things like that. So you put the time in and yet there's still things that aren't done and people will tell you about the things that aren't done, and there's this enormous tendency to feel guilty about what's not done. Being responsible for change and being an initiator for change, means you cop a considerable amount of flak. The stress comes in the fact that sometimes you could cheerfully strangle a few people, and yet you still feel care and concern and love for them. You also want to see change happen, especially when you believe that the change is due to a call of God. That's hard."
(Eddie, 35)

The fact that church leaders often find it difficult to relate to other members of their congregations is of particular concern. This is because potential supports for church leaders are not being utilised.

Socially adrift

The PhD research used a number of quantitative and qualitative measures to help understand church leaders' relationships with other people. Their scores on most measures were lower than average. In the area of general social relating their scores were lower than all other sub-groupings sampled including psychiatric populations. Overseas literature confirms their impoverished social abilities. It shows that church leaders have few, if any, close friends inside or outside the church^{15,16}.



Figure 206: Many clergy are adrift and need a hand with relationships

One clergyman talked about his lack of friendships in these terms:

"I haven't managed to establish any close relationships outside the church at all. So I've got no friendships, and largely that's because of the nature of the job. By the time you finish you are so tired, the last thing you want to do is see another person, and yet you need some people to replenish you at times." (Andrew, 34)

Inside the church, 22% of church leaders and 48% of their wives said that they lacked in-depth sharing with other church couples and consider that a disadvantage to their marriage¹⁷. Further, in a survey of clergy's wives, 56% reported saying they had no close friends in the church¹⁸.

The NCLS Leader Survey¹⁹ suggests that nearly a third of leaders find that moving makes it difficult to keep close friends and nearly a fifth have strong feelings of isolation.

This is consistent with another major study²¹ which found similarities in psychological profiles in a review of 38 different studies of theological students and ministers:

"This pattern suggests that religious tend to be more perfectionistic, worrisome, introversive, socially inept and, in more extreme cases, more isolated and withdrawn" – Dunn²¹

Importantly, however, the author observed that these patterns changed once church leaders left the religious environment:

"Once they have left this environment, the personality test results of both religious men and women resemble more closely the results obtained from normals in the general population" – Dunn²¹

These findings suggest that problems in relating are exacerbated by operating predominantly from a role in the religious environment which, in some ways, is like living in a glass house.



Figure 208: Fragile glasshouse

THE CONSEQUENCE: LONELINESS

Those who lack meaningful relationships experience stress, have problems adapting to the unique and complex religious environment and are prone to burnout. Literature worldwide^{22,23,24,25,26,27} states that loneliness and not being able to talk about feelings are key factors associated with burnout.

This has also been shown in research with clergy. In an overseas study²⁸ higher levels of loneliness were found in church leaders compared to church laity. Another overseas study²⁹ found that half of the church leader participants were dissatisfied with their attempts to manage negative feelings, and resolve conflicts effectively.

An Australian study³⁰ also found that church leaders had elevated levels of loneliness and exercised greater control over angry feelings. However, loneliness played a bigger factor in burnout than did repressed anger.

For many church leaders, loneliness is part of the job, not only because their role is a unique one, but also because they often work alone and are isolated from their peers.

It is important to note here that solitude, often seen as part of a spiritual life, is very different from loneliness. Solitude is a positive experience which strengthens a person's relationship with self, God and others. One theologian expresses the difference between isolation and solitude well:

"The purpose of solitude is not to isolate from others, but ultimately it is to help individuals become more deeply related to one another... The relationships people have with others, God and self are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent" – Davies³¹

In contrast, a person who experiences loneliness feels a lack in the quality of their relationships, regardless of whether they have people around them or not. Also, the lonely person feels sad and distressed as a result of this lack in relationships.



Figure 209: Loneliness is often part of the clergy job

For people who experience loneliness, there is a sense that there is no-one with whom to share the deepest, most vulnerable aspects of their lives. This is consistent for many of the church leaders interviewed in our research. They often wondered if anyone really understands what they go through. The following interviews highlight this:

"There is a certain sense of loneliness being in a role. The more I continue in the role of a minister the more I understand that no one who hasn't done it really knows what it is like, and that straight away puts you in a fairly lonely place. Another bad thing is I don't think that I can say that I've got any really close friends in the parish that I can unburden myself to." (Sean, 36)

"In the midst of work, the challenge of the work, I'm always going to ask the question about what effect does this have on my wife and the children. For my wife and myself we both find here a lonely place to be; it's hard to make friends among your peers and we're all the time measuring up the loneliness of being here with the work that God's called us to do." (Harry, 48)

POOR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

For church leaders operating within organised structures, there is often a high level of impoverishment and uncertainty in their relationships with others. Our research showed that this same impoverishment is often experienced in church leaders' relationships with God.

The interviews began by asking an open question about their 'life at the moment'. To our surprise, eighty percent of church leaders did not mention their relationship with God. This unanticipated omission prompted us to return a second time and ask specifically about this relationship. The responses of many leaders highlighted that their relationship with God was under strain. In particular, only 28 percent expressed having a 'close', 'deep', 'intimate', or 'loving' relationship with God. Further, only 8 percent referred to God as 'father' and 3 percent as a 'friend'.

The NCLS Leader Survey³² suggests that a poor relationship with God is also related to high levels of burnout. That is, those leaders who prayed and read their Bibles less regularly, who did not feel particularly close to God in life or worship, and who did not have a supernatural experience of God experienced high levels of burnout.

In our research, church leaders who expressed more loneliness were of particular concern. Not only were their relationships with people impoverished, but they also frequently had a poor relationship with God. The NCLS Leader Survey³² also found a similar link between leaders' relationships with God and people. Those who felt a stronger sense of isolation in their role were more likely to experience burnout and were less likely to feel they had grown in their faith.

This is consistent with the loneliness literature. One study³³ found that religious university students who were lonely also experienced a less personal religious faith compared to less lonely students. By contrast, those who experienced less loneliness and had a 'greater sense of belonging' with others around them were found to have a more personal and intimate relationship with God. In other words, a religious person's relationship with God is reflected in their relationships with others, and vice versa. This being the case, the impoverished relationships of clergy with others may indicate a similarly impoverished relationship with God.



Figure 210: Relationships with God and neighbor go hand-in-hand

In our research lonely leaders allocated little time to developing more personal and intimate relationships with either people or God. Indeed, many of the lonely church leaders viewed their relationship with God primarily in the context of work. At times this work arrangement with God was tenuous because they were paid to, or 'have to', pursue it:

*"(What) I find difficult is my own spiritual life and gaining the conviction to see that it's worthwhile spending the time in that kind of a spiritual life, giving time to it."
(Robert, 27)*

"I guess one's relationship with God, my own that is, is very much tied up with my work. I guess it's good in some ways because I get to prepare sermons and so forth. But there are some bad things in that I guess, when I really don't feel like wanting to know about God and so forth, I still have to, because maybe we have our sermon to do, or study to do or something." (Colin, 30)

"Like most relationships, my one with God often gets pushed down by workloads and responsibilities I feel I've got, so spending time, intentionally, alone with God, doesn't happen very often." (Sean, 36)

"The difficulty that I just continue to struggle with is slackness - that I can go through times of really being slack in terms of spending time with God I tend to still do it, but sometimes it can be fairly rushed and fairly flippant. I'm not very involved and my prayers, they're a reflection of the way that I pray, they've become very short, brief. Then my slackness in those areas of discipline flows over into slackness in work, and slackness in Godliness, slackness in relationships with people." (Simon, 27)

Faith in question

Some of the lonely church leaders also experienced uncertainty in their relationship with God. This may partly be because leaders often feel responsible to laity, God and their denominational officials. However, they are not sure how these various authorities relate to each other.

Consequently, church leaders may even wonder if they are hearing God correctly. One lonely participant articulated this uncertainty well:

"'Nay, God is with you', but not being able to feel Him very closely. And that's where I'm at, at the moment. It's a bit of a struggle, just in terms of a remembered call, rather than a direct feeling of call. At the moment I'm pretty shaken.

You also want to see change happen, especially when you believe that the change is due to a call of God. That's hard. The other stressful thing at the moment is that when you feel convinced that something is God's will and yet other people aren't quite as sure or they're not quite sure that they even believe that God speaks in that way, that becomes stressful. Then just dealing with, I suppose, your own mental state in terms of times of stress which also brings about questions in yourself about, now have I got it right? Am I sure? insecurities, and that's very hard to deal with.

I suppose, sometimes you can feel a bit angry with God in the sense that you feel God calls you to do things, and then you head down that track and they don't turn out in a way that you feel that God is even pleased with, and you just wonder why on earth things happen this way, and just try and sort the mess out. That's a problem.

And then, to top it off, in the times that you feel that you want clearness of direction from God, that it would be most helpful, and in the times that you hope that your faith would sustain you, it's those times that you find out just how distant some of it is. And that's a bit of a shock." (Eddie, 35)



Figure 211: It's difficult for many clergy to practice what they preach

In sum, a great many church leaders have problems in relating. In many cases, being set apart from people both outside and inside the church leaves church leaders prone to loneliness. To add to this dilemma, even their closest relationships with family and friends are impoverished. This leaves many disillusioned, to the point where they may question their own relationship with God.

A matter of choice

Although life in the hothouse is difficult for many, it is still desirable. There may be many reasons for this – a sense of fulfilled calling; being able to spend time following religious pursuits; being there for others. However, at the end of the day, the fervour with which many leaders go about their tasks can result in impoverished relationships and an uncertain faith. Clearly the role of leader cannot be a substitute for authentic relationships.

Relationships cannot be earned; they have to be risked in reciprocal ways. We need to continually put ourselves on the line with another. This takes time and commitment. It is a choice; a choice to risk or avoid intimate relationships. Thus many leaders end up lonely, not because of the demanding environment per se, but because they choose to put their time and energy into other pursuits and operate predominantly from their role.

Having said all that, it is nevertheless difficult to risk authentic dialogue and interaction in an environment that typically upholds monologue and separation. We will return to this question later in the book.



Figure 212: Dialogue in church is rare

Being starved of intimacy with both people and God, places many lonely church leaders in a vulnerable position. Many either leave, or get their needs met in some other way.

In the next chapter we will look at the often sensationalised and complex area of clergy sexual abuse. This is one way of getting needs met that is totally unacceptable and yet sadly it is all too common in the church today.

Chapter 3: Abusing Power to Fulfil Personal Needs

"Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God"
 – 1 Peter 2:16

So far we have focussed on the difficulty of clergy living out their calling in a religious environment that is often characterised by limited relationships.

The church today debates many relationship issues. However, one that is sorely missing is an open discussion among the whole church community concerning the impoverished nature of clergy relationships and how they go about meeting their personal needs.



Figure 301: How do we make sense of clergy sexual abuse?

At the extreme end of the spectrum is sexual misconduct. Some may question whether it is necessary to devote an entire chapter to an area of clergy conduct that only applies to a minority. We do so for several reasons. First, as we shall see, the incidence is higher than many people realise. Second, it is of very serious concern not only for the perpetrators and their victims but for the church community as a whole. Third, we will attempt to show that beyond the current emphasis on codes of ethics, important though that is, there are far wider ethical implications that leaders and denominational bodies need to consider.

SEXUAL ABUSE

While there are arguably many abuses of power by clergy, sexual abuse is among the most blatant. Here leaders use their position of power to sexually abuse others in order to fulfil their own unmet needs. It has many damaging and long lasting emotional and psychological consequences for the victims involved. There are many tragic stories of survivors of clergy sexual abuse in Australia¹. They highlight the inadequate mechanisms for victims to deal with their trauma and bring clergy perpetrators to justice. Sadly victims tend to feel misunderstood and often blame themselves, while many perpetrators continue their abuse largely unchecked.

Further, precisely because our clergy are highly visible symbols of the Christian gospel, such abuse can also do great spiritual harm both to the individuals involved as well as the Christian community at large.

"The church community invests its trust in ministers that they will use the power that they have to act in a responsible manner. When ministers abuse their position for a sexual end they not only severely affect the spiritual and personal development of the women involved, they also undermine the antecedent trust in the ministry itself" – Ormerod & Ormerod'

Interestingly, the sexual misconduct literature^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8} reflects the burnout literature in that it identifies loneliness and a fear of intimacy as primary factors in sexual abuse. When describing his experience working with clergy sex offenders one writer indicates that:

"Many of these men experience a keen sense of isolation and loneliness... in their hearts they tell of a sharp feeling of isolation" – Loftus⁸

In short, despite a lonely and often stifling work environment clergy sexual misconduct is still a blatant abuse of power which is totally inexcusable.

How bad is the problem?

While it is impossible to get exact figures on the incidence of clergy sexual abuse there is disturbing evidence that a major problem does exist. Most statistical data has been gathered in America. For example, a survey⁹ of 300 American church leaders across denominations reported that 23 percent admitted having done something with someone other than their spouse that they felt was sexually inappropriate. A further 12 percent admitted to having sexual intercourse with someone other than their spouse.

In another American study¹⁰ of 300 clergy, 33 percent of those surveyed confessed to sexually inappropriate behaviour with someone other than their spouse. A further 13 percent said they had had sexual intercourse with a parishioner.

A document by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA states that:

"Statistical evidence suggests between 10 and 23 per cent of clergy nationwide have engaged in sexualized behaviour or sexual contact with parishioners, clients, employees etc, within a professional relationship. The toll of suffering such behaviour exacts is staggering"
- Policies and Procedures on Sexual Misconduct

Unfortunately comparable Australian statistics are not yet available. However the increasing number of cases made known to counselling services, advocacy groups and more recently complaint committees within denominational bodies strongly support the evidence gathered in the States.

The public perception that clergy are more ethical than their secular counterparts could seriously be challenged. Similar research¹² among secular psychotherapists and counselors in the US indicate that 6-7 percent admit sexual intercourse with clients. This figure is almost half that of clergy. It is such comparisons that led Arch Hart (one-time Dean of Fuller Seminary) to assert it would be safer to refer one of his daughters to a non-Christian psychologist than to a minister for counselling.



Figure 302: Home visits are potentially dangerous

Some readers may simply argue that church leaders are more honest, thus explaining clergy's inflated admissions. However, an alternative explanation is that clergy of all helping professions are perhaps especially vulnerable to sexual involvement with their client^{13,14}.

"The loneliness of clergy, the close relationships they enter, the fact that they have intimate access to people's homes and bedrooms, the privacy and isolation of their own office settings - all these factors can be conducive to sexual desire and can contribute to the temptation to act on that desire"
– Lebacqz & Barton¹⁴

Further, clergy are clearly lacking in the area of skills and accountability in comparison to other helping professions. For instance they receive only limited, if any, counselling training and supervision, until recently they have had no well developed ethical codes and guidelines and they have fewer mechanisms for accountability. As already mentioned the quality of clergy social skills is also deeply concerning.

Tell no-one

There is also evidence to strongly suggest that church leaders who engage in sexual misconduct do not typically disclose to those around them. One study¹⁵ found that 96 percent of the church leaders questioned in a survey concerning their inappropriate sexual behaviours, told no one. The author of another paper¹⁶ was a counsellor of church leaders who had been involved in sexual affairs. Of the 65 church leaders that he counselled, all stated that they could have ended the affair at any time, yet none did so until confronted.

The first step in dealing with acts of sexual misconduct effectively is, of course, to acknowledge a problem. However, the literature suggests that an admission from abusive church leaders, although desirable, is unlikely.



Figure 303: Abusive clergy are most likely to keep their lips shut and not confess their abuse

Many in the field of sexual misconduct^{16,17,18,19,20} believe their lack of disclosure is associated with loneliness and a fear of intimacy with others around them. Those church leaders who mistrust others have also been shown to be more likely to entertain sexual temptation. Further, it is believed that a mistrustful church leader tends to:

"isolate himself from others, especially from those closest to him, whom he is likely to perceive expecting the most from him... (and) may go looking for someone to have a relationship with whom he perceives is less threatening or demanding" – Thoburn & Balswick²⁰

A cautionary note is needed here. Although disclosure is part of the solution, it can also be part of the problem if inappropriate. Clergy who engage in sexual misconduct often set up 'special' clients or relationships where they can disclose inappropriately to their victims. That is, they may talk more about their own personal issues rather than focus

on the other person's. Consequently, these inappropriate relationships serve to meet the needs of clergy more than the person to whom they are supposedly ministering.

ETHICAL CODES WILL STOP THE ROT - WON'T THEY?

If Jesus' commands have little effect on unfulfilled and abusive church leaders' behaviour, it begs the question will ethical codes make a significant difference? The short answer is not necessarily.

Ethical codes are designed to safeguard the public and the profession and direct practice so that the best possible service is provided. Unlike legal laws which outline the minimum standards society will tolerate, ethical codes typically represent the maximum or ideal standards set by the profession.

In short ethical codes are static guidelines that are designed to ensure greater accountability among members of a profession. They are an important and necessary step towards reducing the incidence of sexual misconduct among clergy. However prominent psychologists²¹ in the counselling field have outlined numerous shortcomings of ethical codes in general. They include:

- some codes are vague, lacking clarity and precision, making enforcement difficult
- simply learning ethical codes will not prepare professionals for ethical practice
- some issues cannot be dealt with solely by relying on ethical codes
- clients are often ill-informed to determine whether a professional is practising ethically
- conflicts sometimes emerge within ethical codes as well as among various organisations' codes
- ethical codes tend to be reactive rather than proactive
- a professional's personal values may conflict within a specific standard within an ethics code
- because of the diverse viewpoints within any professional organisation, not all members will agree with all proposed standards

Despite their limitations, probably the most important feature of the newly developed denominational ethical codes in Australia is the specific protocols pertaining to complaints of clergy sexual abuse. The details of 'independent' investigative committees and details of how such complaints are dealt with are a particularly important step forward. These grievance procedures are long overdue and are a very welcome addition, especially for victims of abuse.



Figure 304: Grievance procedures for victims are long overdue

However, setting standards and dealing with complaints is quite different to living out a life with virtue and integrity.

MORE TO ETHICS THAN CODES

People often think that good ethics is just a matter of enforcing adequate rules. But it is far more than that. Think about parenting. It is one thing to discipline our children and tell them what to do when we are around, but quite another to help them develop internal controls that guide their behaviour when no-one is around. It is similar for clergy. It is very

important to develop this kind of intrinsic virtuous character rather than just enforce more external constraints. This is especially the case given that clergy frequently work intimately with people behind closed doors.

Being trained in theology unfortunately does not exempt church leaders from immoral acts. A counsellor of clergy involved in sexual affairs concluded:

"The knowledge of the 'law' has no intrinsic power either to keep the law or to redeem. The church leaders with whom I worked knew the commandment pertaining to adultery. Most of them did not know themselves, and likewise, did not allow others to know them very well" – Steinke²²



Figure 305: The pedestal effect is associated with a host of problems for the leader and congregation

The terms "ethics" and "morals" are often used interchangeably and are derived from ancient Greek and Latin, *ethos* and *mores*, which both mean "character"²³. So to roughly determine whether an action is ethical or not, we can ask ourselves "Is this something a person with a good character would do?"

The whole question of being of good character has recently become a prominent feature in the area of counselling ethics. Writers in the field are now clearly distinguishing principle ethics from virtue ethics. The former focuses on ethical obligations and the actual dilemma itself, whereas the latter focuses on the character of the counsellor and the ideals that are important to them. Put another way principle ethics asks "Is this situation unethical?" whereas virtue ethics asks "Am I doing what is best for my client or parishioner?"

The attraction of virtue ethics is that it compels us to be mindful of ethical practice even when we are not being faced with an ethical dilemma. However, it is not a matter of choosing one or the other. Rather, we need to integrate the two so that better ethical decision-making may result.

Virtuous practitioners display five main characteristics which are believed to be at the core of virtue ethics²⁴:

- motivated to do what is right for the right reasons, not because they feel obligated or fear the consequences
- possess vision and discernment, knowing which principles to apply to a situation and how to apply them
- possess compassion that involves a regard and sensitivity for the welfare of others
- possess self-awareness, the capacity to see how their own belief system affects their interactions with others
- understand and are connected with the ideals and expectations of their community, as well as uphold moral decision-making in their community

Hence, the virtuous person not only knows ethical principles but is naturally motivated to live them out in a self-aware, integrated and compassionate way.

Christian maturity

One further characteristic of the virtuous practitioner or person with good character is that they are able to clearly discern good and evil. The writer to the Hebrews also describes mature Christians as people "who have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). It may be that those clergy who abuse their power to fulfil unmet needs have in part lost this ability to discern what is truly good and what is evil.

So how can church leaders, or all of us for that matter, be encouraged to develop such good, mature characters that can distinguish good from evil? Without this personal and moral development there is always potential for clergy to abuse their power to meet their own needs - no matter how many codes are in place! There are many ways to grow in Christian maturity. In the chapter that follows we will propose a model of meaning-making that helps show how we develop our understanding of God through relationships.

In relation to church leaders, a second key way to grow in maturity is by recognising the value and giftedness of all church members and that all have an important part to play in church life. This not only helps all members to grow in maturity and love, but it also empowers others to take more responsibility and share leaders' busy workload. Importantly, as we encourage greater mutuality and reciprocity in clergy-lay relationships it also reduces the potential abuse of power among leadership.

At present a key factor leading to sexual abuse is the power imbalance that exists between leaders and members. In many interactions between clergy and laity, lay members share deeply and intimately with the pastor but the pastor does not share personal matters with laity. Hence dependency can easily be fostered and also abused.

"Mutuality is missing in the pastor-parishioner relationship. The pastor has power, and the parishioner is vulnerable. The very freedom of access to parishioners' lives means that pastors are dealing with people who are often extremely vulnerable. The core of professional ethics lies in the recognition of this power imbalance between the pastor and parishioner" - Lebacqz & Barton²⁵



Figure 306: An imbalance of power creates the potential for abuse

We believe that maturity and accountability can only fully develop as leaders become more integrated into the congregations they serve and acknowledge that they are but one part of the whole. This will also effectively reduce the power of their role. Paul writes:

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works or service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" - Ephesians 4:11-13, 16

Leader Apart

Unfortunately being joined together is a difficult task in a church system that traditionally upholds separation between clergy and laity. This is reflected in the 310,000 church attenders sampled by NCLS across Australia²⁶. Many church attenders feel that church leaders are simply 'out of touch'. The survey found that 22 percent agreed or strongly agreed that church leaders were 'out of touch' with the concerns of ordinary church attenders and another 23 percent were uncertain.

At the core of this separation issue is the degree of power invested in the role of a church leader in the institutionalized church. One commentator²⁷ asserts that 'humility does not institutionalise well' and that this has ramifications for those who pursue faith via an office.

"The problem is that structures and leaders tend to become invested with an importance and a spiritual status well beyond their true function in the community of believers. Instead of being viewed merely functionally necessary to ensure some kind of order and continuity, the nominated or ordained leaders become paradigmatic for all Christian ministry, and those Christians who are not ordained become viewed as 'lesser' Christians, followers of human leaders rather than followers of Christ. Clerical status then seems to place a barrier between Christ, the suffering servant who summons ALL to follow him, and those people whose way of following is not to seek office in the Church" – Campbell²⁷ (original emphasis).

This dilemma seems to have been further exacerbated by the Western church's embracing of professionalism. On the positive side, such a move is desirable in theory since it ultimately attempts to make church leaders more accountable. However, on the negative side, such a move can potentially isolate estranged church leaders even further from the people around them.

Ironically, the move toward professionalism fosters greater dependency on church leaders from church members and creates a more demanding social role for leaders. All of these factors heighten the potential for church leaders to experience loneliness, burnout, poor relationships, impairment and sexual misconduct.



Figure 307: Many people are dependent on clergy

Beyond knowledge

A key factor contributing to leaders being set apart from their congregations, is the emphasis placed on leaders being the holders of knowledge. The Bible certainly teaches the importance of knowing God and Jesus Christ, and the dangers of following false teaching. However, all too often this emphasis is equated with an academic knowledge of theology, rather than the importance of testing, and living out this knowledge in an integrated way with the rest of the church community. Some of these dilemmas are illustrated in the following quotes:

"I'm more and more finding myself in positions of doubting what I've always held, essential doctrines or beliefs, and not finding it easy to work out how to relate these doctrines to situations I find myself in, or relationships." (Joe, 27)

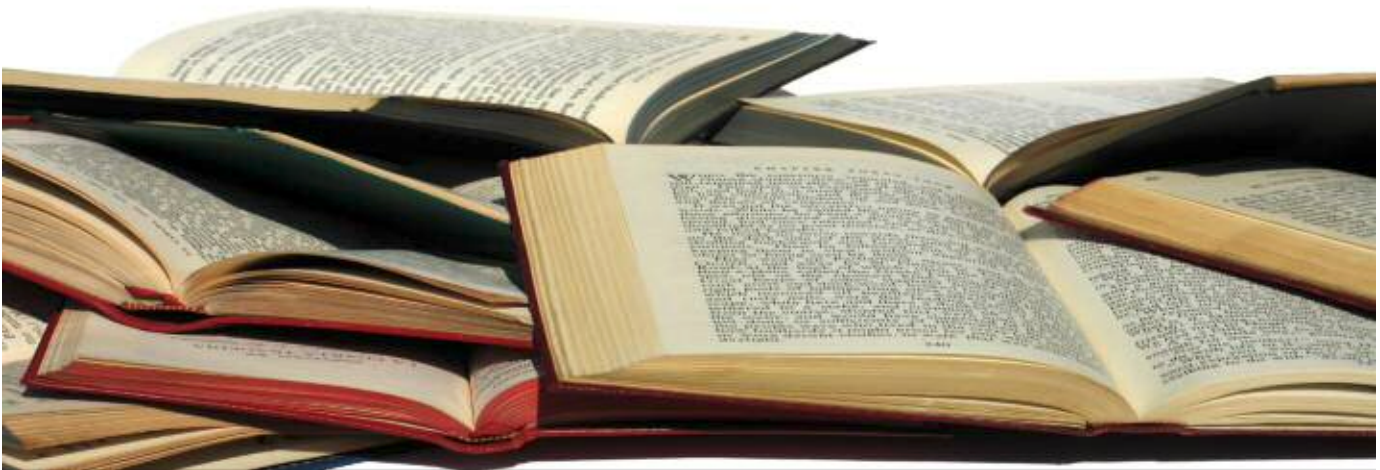


Figure 308: Knowledge is one thing, relationships another

"I'm still working through a lot of the things that happened in college for me, and the way that they really challenged my understanding of God. I often feel that I'm just sort of skimming the surface, and it sometimes comes through in my preaching at times, or speaking with other people. I just think there's something, that this needs to go deeper. But exactly what direction that is, I don't know. It would be easy for me to, out of my background, just to sort of start with the spiritual laws or something, but I think it's not that simple. It's not that black and white, and there's a real struggle there." (Roger, 31)

"I think my relationship with God, at the moment, is a little more impersonal than I'd like it to be. After 18 years in the ministry and a fair bit of academic work, one of the sad things is that I drag God into the academia of what I've done. It would be nice to simplify all of that, and at times whenever I get a much simpler approach towards God, I enjoy it. The God I used to believe in as a child and an adolescent has somehow faded, disappeared, and I remember that God as being a very personal God. I know that sort of a God, that personal God does exist, I've experienced it before, and I'd very much like to find that again." (Samuel, 44)

The problem is that knowledge can be devoid of relationships altogether. If we interact with others solely on the basis of this knowledge, we ultimately operate from our role, which is one-way relating. Again, leaders in particular are in danger of seeing themselves as different, and even better than their congregations. The following quote is an example:

"There are frustrations as an assistant minister, I guess, because you always believe that you know everything. College is not that far away and so you have all your theology rolling around in your head. You feel sharp theologically and so you believe that you're the best equipped person to put phenomenal structures and changes in place. And your boss is generally a bit slower and a bit wiser than you are, so that can be frustrating. You're always thinking you know how to do things better than your boss." (Andrew, 34)

Unfortunately congregations can reinforce this tendency by always looking to their leaders for the 'right' answer, rather than adopting an attitude of growing and learning together. However, Campbell again warns against the dangers of barriers that potentially separate church leaders and laity:

"If we use professional specialised knowledge as an ideal for all we fall into the ancient error - that only those who KNOW can love God and neighbour... The simplicity of faith is overcome by the complexity of esoteric knowledge" – Campbell²⁷ (original emphasis).

Thus the current emphasis on professionalism and esoteric knowledge has made it harder for many church leaders to be integrated into the church community and grow in maturity. These factors are believed to exacerbate problems of clergy loneliness and hinder their personal development which may in turn lead to further abuses of power.

The ethical responsibility of denominations

It is perhaps necessary to reiterate again, that despite a difficult environment, just as loneliness is a choice, so too is the abuse of power. Instead of risking reciprocal relationships to meet personal needs leaders choose to inappropriately use their role. This has devastating consequences for the church community as a whole.

So what part can denominations play? The situation is urgent. The ever increasing clergy attrition rate and incidence of sexual abuse suggest that something must be done to effectively deal with these issues.

"The church is responsible for the professional conduct of its clergy and must act to prevent misconduct from causing harm to its members or the community at large" – Fortune²⁸



Figure 309: Denominational leaders have an important part to play in stemming abuse

Developing ethical codes or waiting for clergy to admit their abuses is simply not enough. Instead a more proactive approach is required to help church leaders develop their range of relationships and become more integrated into the church community.

Setting up more accountable relationships with those around them is not only believed to stem the abuse and burnout but it will also send a very clear message to church members and the wider community that we can have confidence in the ethical practice of our clergy and church hierarchy.

We will return to the question of how leaders, congregations and denominations may go about promoting a more relational environment for clergy in part III of this book.

First however we will outline a model of spiritual meaning-making. This will help to explain just what it is about intimate relationships that is so crucial to our psychological and spiritual maturity and how the lack of them can lead to such a range of problems.

PART II: MEANING-FULL RELATIONSHIPS

Chapter 4: Tested and Growing

"No-one can develop freely in this world and find a full life without feeling understood by at least one person. Misunderstood, he loses his self-confidence, he loses his faith in life or even God. He is blocked and regresses. Here is an even greater mystery: no-one comes to know himself through introspection, or in the solitude of his personal diary. Rather, it is in dialogue, in his meeting with other persons" – Tournier¹

If we are to better understand the complex web of issues facing church leaders, we need to go still deeper. Why do relationships matter so much when it comes to questions of faith and meaning?

Although researchers to date have highlighted many of the issues facing clergy, they have tended to explain them in a fragmented, piecemeal way. This is not surprising given that in the field of psychology very few theories have the capacity to deal with issues of faith, meaning and relationships. However, personal construct psychology is perhaps the model that comes closest.

Personal construct psychology² explores how we anticipate and create meaning in the world. More importantly it also shows the importance of reciprocal and intimate relationships to develop these meanings that are at the very core of our being.

The primary aims of our research were firstly, to extend these principles to spiritual meaning-making and secondly, to propose and test out a model for understanding the relationships of clergy. The model is simply a way of bringing together a multitude of facts in a consistent, logical and integrated way.

The model was overwhelmingly supported by the research findings. The results showed that relationships are not only important for church leaders' psychological well-being but also for their spirituality. Thus in order to make sense of the struggling relationships and impoverished faith of many clergy, this chapter attempts to outline the main principles of spiritual meaning making in lay terms.

THE ART OF MEANING MAKING

To understand the process of meaning making we first need to remind ourselves just how unique each of us are. No two individuals are exactly alike; no two upbringings exactly the same. Even identical twins grow up into unique and different individuals. The factors that shape us are endless - temperament, thought processes, family upbringing, life experiences, geographical location, culture to name just a few.



Figure 401: Identical twins grow up to be uniquely different

We are equally as diverse when it comes to our perceptions. Think back to the last time you went to the pictures with a good friend, one with whom you share a lot of interests. You may have given it the same star rating or chances are you may also have categorically disagreed. "How come you laughed so much? It wasn't *that* funny." "What was wrong with the acting? I thought it was one of her best roles" and so on.

Same movie. Same screen. Yet despite being exposed to the very same thing we each interpret, and respond to it, differently. And these differences occur when we see and hear all the information together, at the same time!

Most of the time, however, we do not see the whole picture. Life is not a movie. It is not scripted and practised, and shown over and over again. No, our lives are far less predictable and contrived. Strangely, we do not know the specifics of the beginning or end of our lives. Further, in terms of life on this earth we are here for seemingly a fading moment. Not knowing in detail what preceded us and what will follow us, we each have to live out our lives with this uncertainty. In dealing with this unknown we are inextricably faced with issues of purpose or meaning. Is there a bigger picture, and if so, what does it look like, and how do we fit in?

Using the limited information available to us, over the course of our life we have come to develop a unique framework of personal meanings by which we interpret the world and our place within it. Like having a personalised road map, our meanings help us to find our place in the world and get us to where we want to go. However, like wanting to go to a house in a new housing estate, if our map is out of date it is no longer helpful. Therefore, given our constantly changing world, the more our meanings are tested and updated the more useful they are. They help us to interpret events around us and deal with change in more effective ways.

Meaning-full lives

For many of us a key element in our framework of personal meanings is our understanding of spirituality. People make sense of life in many ways. Some find a strong sense of 'the other' through a connection with nature, others through a sense of belonging to a group, still others through a spiritual life force or a personal God.

For Christians, meaning is very much about a deep intimate relationship with a personal God. Rather than an unchanging state this relationship with God is a dynamic and interactive journey involving every part of our being: mind, body and soul. It also requires us to be actively involved in deeply loving relationships with other people.

Jesus stressed the importance of relationship when he gave us the 'new commandment' which is repeated sixteen times in the New Testament:

"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way that I loved you, you love one another" – John 13:26-14:2

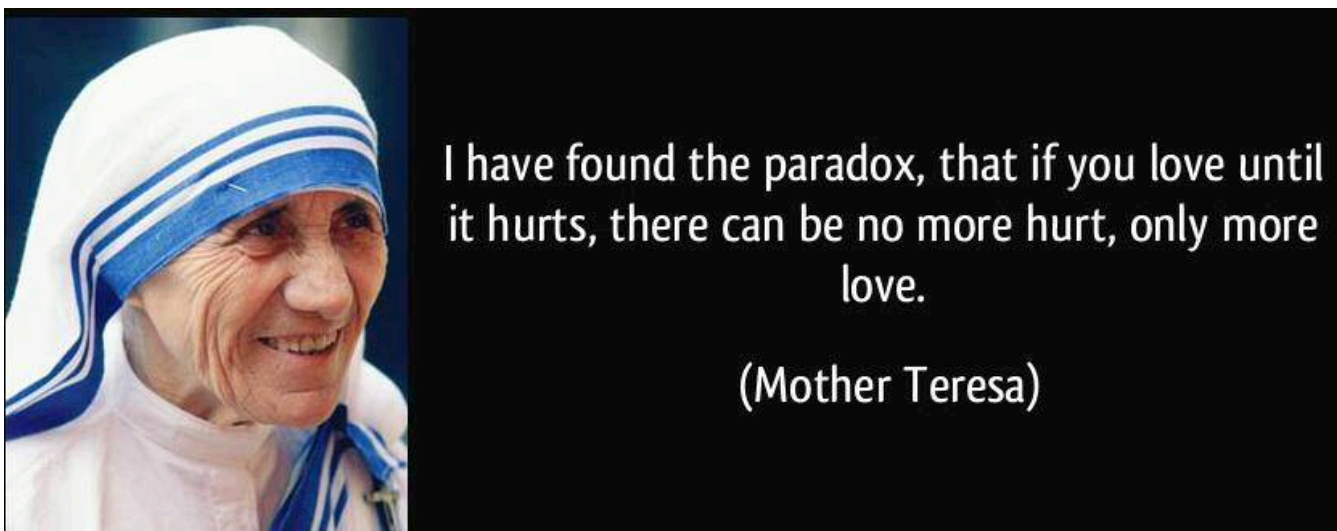


Figure 402: Love is the law: Mother Teresa

The fact that the Christian faith is both interactive and relational is both theologically and psychologically sound. Yet it is also complex and risky. Far from a straight forward process the way by which we deepen our spiritual understanding of life is a highly unique and creative one. This is partly because we are uniquely different in our make-up and perceptions and partly because the information we have about the spiritual realm is largely abstract and incomplete.

It is important to remember that we do not come to magically see things clearly and completely after attending a single church service or making a decision to turn to Christ. It requires a far more active commitment than that. Faith is grown, not simply given.

We need to continually engage in honest and reciprocal relationships if we are to develop our personal meanings. Relying on stereotypes or just talking about the weather will simply not do. Rather, an attitude of genuine interest and transparency in our relationships with God and others is essential. So too is a regular reading of the Scriptures and an openness to the Spirit. By actively testing out our meanings in these ongoing ways we not only deepen our relationships but we also develop our spiritual meanings at the same time.



Figure 403: The Bible points to a loving relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

PETER AND CORNELIUS

The experiences of Peter the disciple with Cornelius and the early church illustrate well the ongoing nature of our faith journey and the need to continually test out new thoughts and experiences in light of the Gospel.

According to Peter's spiritual road map, the good news of Jesus was for Jews only, and there were certain Gentile foods that he was forbidden to eat. However, one day he fell into a trance and saw a sheet being lowered full of these forbidden foods and heard a voice telling him to eat (Acts 10 and 11).

With this new information, he had a choice. He could have ignored it and stuck with his existing meanings or understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, or he could try reflecting on this experience and testing out his beliefs.

He chose the latter and a second incident occurred. He was invited to eat with Gentiles. Again the choice, to test or not. Peter believed that the Spirit was telling him to go and he did, still uncertain as to what all this meant. It was as he talked with Cornelius and learnt how God had also been working in his life that everything fell into place and Peter was able to include Gentile Christians in his life map.

And that is not all. Peter then took the corporate dimension seriously by presenting the issue to church leaders in Jerusalem. Although initially criticised for his actions, the believers there were also challenged to grow in their understanding as they discussed the latest events. Fellow Jewish Christians who had accompanied him were also forced to develop their meanings as they saw the Spirit of God fall on these Gentile believers.

Going deeper

Peter's experiences describe several important steps in the whole process of personal meaning-making. As Christians we start with certain "givens", Scriptural principles that form the basis of our belief system. We then encounter a whole range of experiences that often challenge these beliefs and force us to reinterpret Scripture or look at it in new ways. Certainly Jesus repeatedly encouraged his listeners to do the same.

In psychological terms, this reinterpretation is known as the "loosening" phase, where we question or come to see in new ways our traditionally held beliefs or how we make sense of something.

The second phase occurs when we take action on the basis of our new understanding. We have before us a range of possibilities but we choose one and act on it. In Peter's case, he not only ate with Cornelius, but also took others with him, and finally shared the whole experience with the leaders in Jerusalem to check it out further. This is called "tightening" or committing ourselves to a particular meaning which we then act on. This is typically a real step of faith where we have to put ourselves on the line.

We do not hear much more about Peter, but it is probably fair to assume that he went on from that day eating with and accepting other Gentile believers. Certainly the church did. This is the "elaborating" part of the process of meaning-making. Our spiritual road map is now more detailed and better able to direct us in future events.

The usefulness of new meanings for our lives can only be discovered as we act on them and test them out. It is through this testing out or action phase that we are able to tighten our meanings. This cycle of loosening and tightening helps us to elaborate our view of God, the world and our place in it through creative and meaningful ways. Our faith grows and we reach towards maturity.

Being creative

We go through this creative process most days of our lives. At a very basic physical level it occurs when we try new food. For example, imagine I am a hamburger fan and arrive in a small town with no take away shop, just one Vietnamese restaurant. Since I have never tasted Vietnamese food before, I start to entertain the various possibilities on the menu. This is the loosening phase. Lacking specific information, I imagine what each dish may taste like. To gain more information I may look around and see what other people are eating, or ask the waiter for a quick run down of menu items. Based on this limited information, I then make a prediction as to which food might be appetising, and make an investment by placing my order.



Figure 404: Vietnamese food is a different experience

My meanings are now well on the way to being tightened one way or the other! Once the meal arrives I then test out my selection. Using all the information available to me, such as my sense of smell, touch, sight and taste I determine if my prediction is confirmed or not. The proof is literally in the eating. If it is good I may order the same meal again another time or be open to visiting other Vietnamese restaurants. If the meal is not to my satisfaction, I will probably choose a different meal next time or just stick to takeaway shops.

However, while deciding to eat only at the takeaway shop may be more predictable, it does not help me elaborate my understanding of food or enable me to creatively adapt to circumstances where there are no takeaway shops.

Dealing with a different cuisine is one thing; dealing with people is quite another. Rarely do we know exactly what another person's motivations and hidden thought processes are. Instead, we usually have to guess what these covert influences are, based on what they do and say.

To add to this uncertainty, we humans are known to change our opinions and behaviour, sometimes regularly. We could for example be enjoying a good conversation with someone when, all of a sudden, they react unexpectedly with much emotion to something that we have said. At this particular moment we may feel shocked and wonder what led to such an outburst. Certainly this is an unpredictable experience, but it happens frequently. Consequently we have come to expect the unknown with others and even ourselves. Relating with other humans is a challenge as well as an art.



Figure 405: Relationships are a challenge as well as an art

Transcending the obvious

Meaning-making in the physical and social realms is relatively easy compared to the spiritual realm. Here we enter a whole new world of experience where we are forced to transcend the obvious. A relationship with God or a spiritual being whom we cannot physically see, hear, touch, taste or smell is more challenging. Humans may be complex and unique but at least there is some form of sensory experience.

A relationship with God is much more abstract. The nature of the God of the Bible is unchanging and therefore predictable, and the basic principles of our relationship with Him and others are laid down in Scripture. However as we have seen from the example of Cornelius the ongoing nature of our relationship with God and how we understand the Scriptures is not so predictable.

God was revealed to us par excellence through Jesus Christ, and all of our spiritual insights must ultimately be tested by His life and teaching. But apart from this major self-revealing act two thousand years ago, God is revealed to us today through the Bible, prayer, dreams, premonitions, people, situations, nature and darkness, to name just a few. In other words, almost anything!

So relating to this God whom we cannot clearly see or hear is a whole different ball game. Nothing like what most of us are used to, and it involves all of our being, including our intellect. Far from a simple passive process, deepening our understanding of God is a complex and active one.

The Apostle Paul talks about this:

"I want to talk about the various ways God's spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. Remember how you were when you didn't know God, led from one phoney god to another, never knowing what you were doing, just doing it because everybody else did it? It is different in this life. God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can" – 1 Cor. 12:1-2, The Message

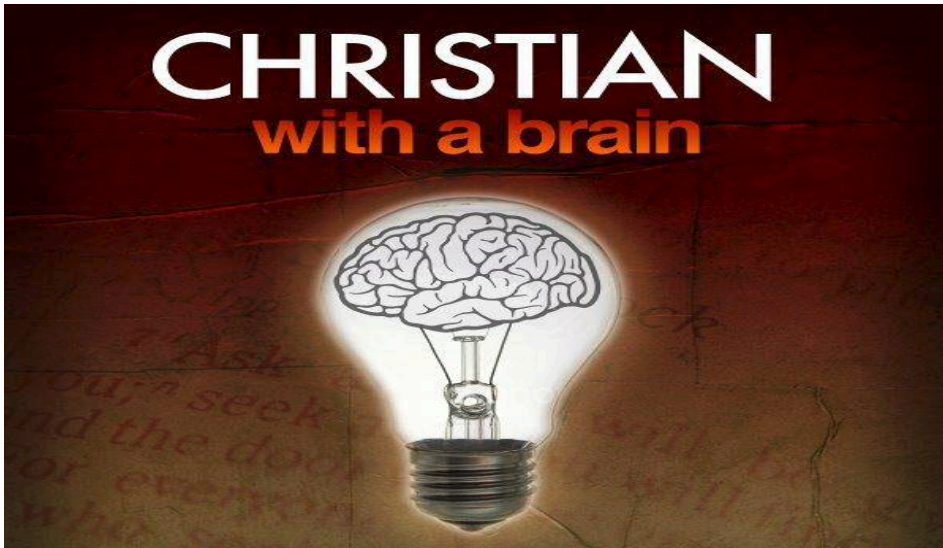


Figure 406: It's important to use our brain and not park it at the door when entering church

To use our intelligence to discern what the Spirit is saying and seek to understand or make sense of things as well as we can, is possibly one of the most creative and difficult processes in life. Yet this rigour is exactly what is required if we are to experience meaning-full spirituality.

It is for this very reason that our relationships with God and others are of vital importance in making sense of and growing in our faith. It is no coincidence that the law can be summarised in relationships with God and neighbour. It is at the core of our Christian experience. In this light it is also of major concern that our church leaders frequently experience impoverished relationships with both God and others.

Testing out and elaborating our spiritual meanings will not always have the same collective ramifications as the example of Peter, but the process will be much the same. We are all faced at times with persistent urgings, changed circumstances, prayers answered in ways we did not predict, dreams and visions, or people encounters, that force us to revise the way we make sense of our spiritual journey. Part of that process will be reflection and part will be action.

Most importantly however we typically test things out through relationship. So like Peter we need to be part of a faith community where we can collectively test out what we believe the Spirit of God is saying to us with the Scriptures as our reference point.

WAYS OF GETTING STUCK

When counselling people who want to deepen their relationship with God and elaborate their spiritual meanings, we have noticed that there are two common ways people get stuck. One way is to be too loose or vague in our meaning making processes, getting caught up entertaining endless possibilities without ever committing ourselves to action. The other common way is to be too tight or rigid in our meaning making processes, that is, being very set about the way we relate to God.

Being Too Loose

It is sometimes easier to discuss being more spiritual than actually making a commitment to test out a new alternative and move forward with it. We can just stay at the stage of entertaining spiritual possibilities, reading about them, thinking about them, talking about ideally what should be happening. However, these possibilities are never actualised.

Making a commitment to something we believe God is telling us, as Peter did, then testing out and looking for confirmation for these abstract meanings in a variety of ways, is sometimes daunting. For this reason, it is no wonder that many of us simply continue to entertain possibilities, rather than risk a more real and direct experience with a personal God. It is only when faith is coupled with action that our spiritual meanings can be elaborated and actualised. As the Bible says "Faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26, NIV). It is as simple and as difficult as that.

When not experiencing faith in action and in our relationship with others we can become general and vague. This sounds safe enough. However it has associated problems, the main one being that we can experience a general difficulty in relating. Endlessly entertaining possibilities typically confuses ourselves. Should I or shouldn't I? Would this be good for me or not? It is also fair to assume that it confuses others also. So not only do we have difficulty testing out our central meanings but others around us can feel awkward because they find it difficult to understand us.

This resultant lack of relationships with people around us can further compound our uncertainty and give us fewer forums to test out our central meanings. Consequently, an experience of confusion, loneliness and meaninglessness can typically follow.

Even though this appears undesirable it is in fact a very safe place from which to operate, simply because we do not have to risk disappointment or anxiety, if our vague and abstract meanings are not confirmed. In the case of Peter, for example, he could have simply kept on thinking up possible explanations for his trance without acting. This would have been a safe response but his faith would have stagnated in the process. Again, given the diversity and uncertainty of life, it requires faith and a commitment to test things out and seek confirmation for our meanings.



Figure 407: Signs, like people, can be confusing

Being Too Tight

While some religious people can be too loose or vague in the way that they make sense of God and spirituality in order to reduce their anxiety levels, others can be too tight or constricted. They can reduce God and spirituality to narrow and restrictive understandings, so that the whole process is safer and more predictable. This is the second common way religious people get stuck, seeing spirituality in too narrow an institutional or doctrinal framework.

This is a trap into which Peter would have fallen if he had continued maintaining the letter of the law, that is, if he had refused to enter a Gentile home and continued to advocate that Christianity was for the Jews only.

These overly tight ways of operating have similar problems to the overly loose processes, in that they impinge on our relationships with others and hinder our adaptive processes. If we only experience God in one particular way, it is a little like continually choosing one item from the menu. And although we actually get to test it out each time, we do it the same way time and time again, to the point that any deviation throws us into a state of anxiety. So to reduce anxiety levels, we have to maintain the ritual and keep the existing status quo, rather than try out other possibilities.

The end result of being too rigid in our meaning-making processes is that we tend to end up relating with others who see things like ourselves. Similarly we avoid relationships with those people who seemingly want to experience spirituality in different ways. This inevitably leads to an "us" and "them" approach to faith. This not only limits our relationships, but makes adaptation impossible, since any experience outside our own may be considered unbearable.



Figure 408: Doing things the same way all the time can be limiting

HOLDING THE BALANCE

Whether we are too loose or too tight in our meaning making processes the end result is restricted relationships. Consequently, we may typically have to rely on stereotypes, prejudices and preconceived notions for the information that we desperately lack in our limited understanding of others.

By not taking an interest in others, we are ill-informed or unaware as to what is happening for them. This is particularly the case when we do not know the person and meet them for the first time. By not taking an active interest in them we are left with first impressions. For example, we may make initial judgements of their character by the colour of their skin, their dress, status or speech. Often, however, these judgements are more of a reflection of who we are, rather than who they are. In order to do the person justice and keep our prejudices in check, we need to talk with them.

It is by risking dialogue with this person and being open to having our existing meanings challenged, that we can test out our sketchy predictions and elaborate our meanings and prejudices. It is not by chance that Jesus asks us to relate to those different from ourselves.

The same process can be said for our relationship with God. That is, if we avoid a direct relationship with God we also typically rely on stereotypes and unelaborated notions. By not testing out our meanings in a range of on-going relationships with both people and God we are most likely going to get stuck and experience a less meaning-full form of spirituality.

Of course we do not have deep relationships with everyone and even when we do have them they are most likely not deep and meaningful all the time. However, the ability to enter and sustain these meaningful relationships is essential. They are also very risky since it means continually revising our most personal meanings.

Typically it is through taking risks that we are able to grow, adapt and become spiritually mature. Withdrawal and avoidance only seem to frustrate and delay this process for us.

A Christian psychologist put this well in his seemingly controversial article called 'The power of positive sinning'. He highlights that risking involvement in the world is the usual path to maturity, not being removed from the world:

"Perhaps maturity can be achieved through simple innocence and unworldliness. But, it is more likely that those who seek ethical purity by withdrawal from the world and from exposure to temptation can attain that goal largely at the cost of developing a full human maturity. Involvement in the rough and tumble of the world, in which one can take risks, can be hurt, and can make mistakes, is for most people the means by which maturity is gained" – Clines³

In order to elaborate our personal and spiritual meanings we need to play an active and intimate part in our relationships with both people and God. This is primarily a creative process, inviting us to be in the world but not of it, continually taking risks and having the openness to see things differently and test out new possibilities. Ideally, if we are active in doing this, it is a fair indication that our framework, or road map, is constantly undergoing revision.

Further, the extent to which we reflect and learn from these encounters will help us to build a robust framework that is capable of interpreting the world around us in more effective and meaningful ways, therefore helping us grow in spiritual maturity.

In sum, testing out our meanings via relationships is essential for psychological and spiritual maturity. The dilemma for clergy is how to achieve this in a church system that is characterised by one-way relating.

So where *do* church leaders go from here? Or rather where *do we* go from here?

WHO'S GOT THE PROBLEM?

It would be easy to say that church leaders have the problem. However, as we have seen, there is something about the church environment that makes it tough for anyone going into the system. The problem is bigger than many of these struggling individuals. This is not to deny the personal choices they make, whether to risk or avoid relationships, whether to fulfil needs appropriately or abuse. However, to focus on leaders alone would be to use them as scape-goats, leaving more problematic systemic issues unchallenged.

In other words, to view church leaders as simply lacking in holiness or by offering them relationship counselling, important though that is, is too simplistic. To suggest that the leader is the sole problem in a church is a little like saying one person is responsible for all of a family's problems. We are in error when we focus on one part of the system and forget the rest, since all parts of the system are involved.

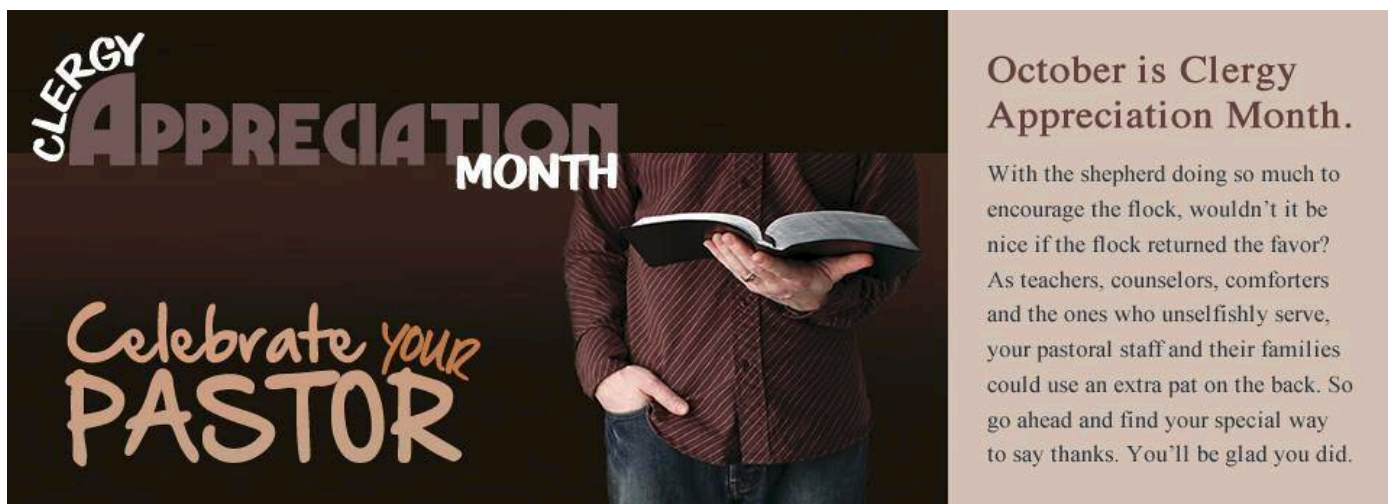


Figure 409: Appreciating leaders for their important part

We frequently see examples of this in our practice when a child is referred by his family for therapy. Typically, there are difficulties at home and the 'problem' child has been identified by the parents as the causal factor and nominated for therapy. Often there is little insight that other family members may have contributed to the problem. This is usually evidenced by the parents' surprise when they are requested to attend an initial family assessment with all immediate members present.

The fact is that a problem arising in any social system needs to consider all the players involved. Therefore we will need to consider the response of leaders, congregations and denominational bodies.

Prevention rather than cure

In the first part of this book we have seen that the range of problems facing clergy is very diverse. A similarly wide range of strategies at all levels is needed to address these.

Strategies will include individual counselling for leaders experiencing high levels of stress and burnout, consultation for churches and leaders in conflict and the provision of ethical codes and grievance procedures to help address the incidence of sexual misconduct. Thankfully most denominational bodies and a number of paradenominational groups now provide valuable forms of support and accountability in these areas.

Essential though they are, many of these initiatives are nevertheless reactive or band-aid in nature. Given the overall impoverished nature of clergy relationships, clearly something has to change at a systemic level. Addressing these problems requires a far more proactive stance which squarely addresses clergy's roles and primary relationships, particularly their integration into the church community. This is a critical step in fostering personal development and effectively stemming the abuse of power by church leaders.

In the final part of this book we want to focus on ways that we can all work together towards better relationships and redefined roles. We will begin by learning from the collective wisdom and experience of those church leaders in our research who were thriving. They gave us great hope in the midst of much sorrow and anguish, and personally challenged us by their faith and commitment to deepening relationships with God and others.

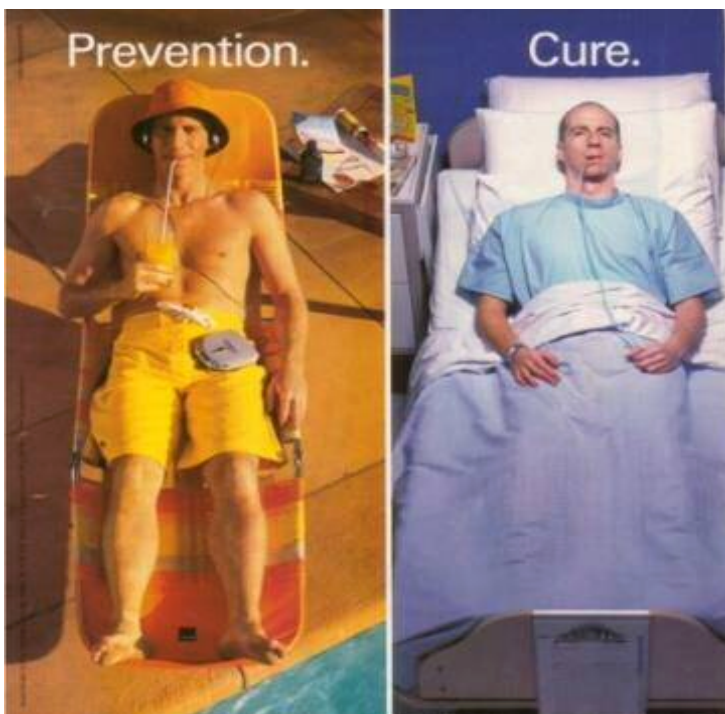


Figure 410: Prevention is better than cure

PART III: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

Chapter 5: Dare to be Human

"Loneliness is solitary. It is something we do by ourselves; no one can do it for us. Nor is it something we can share, for when we begin to share it, it disappears. The prescription for life and the antidote for loneliness is human interaction." – Woodward¹

One of the most encouraging outcomes of our research was discovering that amid a predominantly struggling group of clergy, was a small group of leaders who had survived the isolating church environment well. These leaders experienced high levels of satisfaction in their lives.

In their extensive study of leadership, the NCLS Leader Survey² also found satisfaction with life to be one of the main factors associated with low levels of burnout. So what does being satisfied with life really mean?

In psychological terms, feeling good, satisfied or content about one's life is referred to as positive affect. Moreover it is one of the key indicators that reflect whether our meanings are being confirmed by others.



Figure 501: Life is good

Conversely, those who find it difficult to relate openly to others fail to find confirmation for their most personal meanings and consequently feel negative about life, leaving them prone to loneliness and burnout.

Not surprisingly then, those leaders who were less lonely and more satisfied with life in general were characterised above all else by a willingness to risk developing intimate, two-way relationships with both God and others. In this chapter we will take a closer look at how these interactive leaders did it by drawing largely on their own stories.

We acknowledge that there are a range of other coping strategies² that individual leaders may find helpful and we have included some of these in the Appendix at the back of this book. However here we focus on the outcomes from our research.

IT TAKES TIME

Relationships simply take time. And for many clergy time is a rare commodity, so time management becomes crucial. The following accounts show how the least lonely, interactive group of leaders were skilled at managing their time so that they achieved a balance between, and an integration of, their work and personal lifestyles.

"In this job there are always more things to do than there is time to do them. So you have to make priorities and that means you leave some things out and you do other things." (Bill, 52)

"Time management in this job is extremely difficult. Holidays are a necessity, so are days off, but I suppose there's a great fulfilment in being needed. It's just a question of not allowing yourself to be brought to a point where you have no reserves left for yourself." (George, 39)

Many of these leaders also talked about the importance of supportive relationships with spouse, family and friends.

"I came out of working as an architect and a town planner, and I had lots of little things to do, but they were grouped under big headings, major projects, and I was experienced at running projects that fell into a predictable pattern. But working in church ministry, I've discovered there's lots of little things that don't fall into neat boxes and, I guess, there's a stressfulness that has come about because of that.

The wife and I are very close. We see ourselves as in ministry together and I don't know how I'd go if my wife wasn't supportive, I couldn't, if she didn't have that disposition and attitude about ministry. I think I'd find it very very difficult. Life's good, life's good. We're at a good season." (Phil, 37)



Figure 502: Our nearest and dearest relationship often reflects all other relationships

"As an overall picture, I find myself very content and very blessed. I have a wonderful wife, I have two lovely kids and a wonderful church. So I consider myself very thankful for all that I've got. I live in a nice place, nice area, I've got a lot of friends and I'm excited more than anything else about my future, both in my personal life in my marriage and seeing the kids getting older and maturing and seeing the church growing and steps ahead with that. So I'm very excited about all those issues." (David, 47)

"I feel I am headed in the right direction - I don't feel confused or dismayed or like there are any problems, so where I am headed and where I am willing to go is the same thing as basically my whole life and ministry, marriage, all seems to be going really well. It is something that I assess continually and it is all on the right track." (Geoff, 26)

"I am very happily married, I have a wife and three sons and they are a constant delight to me - I find family life very enjoyable and satisfying and a lot of my ministry as a full time pastor in a church is centred around developing family life and encouraging people to enjoy that side of who they are. I guess working in a community where families struggle - that tends to flavour much of who I am and what I do. Generally as a person I would look on the healthier side and expect that people would move in that same area and I am always looking for good things that come out of that." (Stephen, 40)

These examples of interactive church leaders highlight their ability to elaborate and adapt to their unique and demanding social role. From these extracts it is interesting to note that this process is an active one, with clergymen putting time into relationships with those around them. From a meaning-making perspective, engaging in more personal discussions helps leaders to test, elaborate and receive confirmation for their personal meanings. They end up less lonely, are better able to adapt to their role and also enjoy more enjoyable and satisfying relationships with others.

TEAM EFFORT

Good relationships with colleagues also helped reduce loneliness. By being involved in a team ministry leaders were able to engage in more group processes, and were also able to share the work-load of the parish, which ultimately lessened the intensity of their role and allowed them to have more time out for other things. Many commented on the benefits of being able to share the journey with their peers and support one another:

"Life is fine at the moment. Good things, bad things. Well, this morning, we've had a staff meeting together and I'm always pleased that there's good relationships with our staff. There are six of us and we all get on very well, we laugh and we have morning tea together so it's a very good thing to have." (Bill, 52)

"We have a good relationship, a good relationship as friends. We laugh together much more than we argue and, when we argue, we always argue in a productive way. There's never any spite or malice or there's never any grudge afterwards, and that's really good. In terms of the whole staff team here, we get along really well and so that's a positive about my life." (Andrew, 34)



Figure 503: Supportive teams are important

"Now at this particular time things are going very well - and I think it all stems back to the last several months - the last half year or so. We have come into contact with some really good people up north on the Gold Coast who we have affiliated ourselves with. It's just exciting to see the potential that we have that has been increased in the faith of our people in the church here." (Terry, 46)

"Being a Christian and a minister of a church I have found that the Bible has taught me a lot of good stuff - life principles, not just religious jargon and rules and regulations but just principles in how to live a very good and healthy and happy life. It's a great church; it is fun to be here. I don't come to church for an endurance test; I come here to enjoy it and we have a lot of fun. It is very good." (Mike, 36)

In sum, it seems that the relationships of interactive clergy were highly valued. Engaging in, and maintaining these quality relationships with others not only reduced loneliness and helped them cope with their role, but also seemed to reflect the basis of their work and, indeed, their life.

LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOUR

As with their relationships with people, interactive church leaders also expressed their relationship with God as a high priority. Despite the demanding nature of their role, many of these leaders spoke about the importance of allocating time to develop this relationship in the form of prayer.

"I guess I think that traditionally and originally, being a clergyman was supposed to be a contemplative prayerful life. In today's things you're always struggling with time to pray, time to meditate on the Bible, and all those sorts of things. And when you have a busy church, and a busy family, there is a constant struggle to do what you want to do, and therefore you often feel guilty that you don't do enough, and have to organise yourself in a rigorous discipline to do it. You're just fighting for the time to do it. And Luther's words often come to my mind: "Now I'm very busy today, I must spend another couple of hours in prayer." (Ted, 48)



Figure 504: Time for prayer is essential

"It's very easy to allow circumstances to dictate your relationship with God, but I try not to do that. I try to commune with God in good times and bad times. Sometimes it's an effort, and you've got to discipline yourself to actually do it." (Mike, 36)

"I think the greatest thing at the moment which my life requires is a discipline with respect to prayer - every morning when I wake up, after a shave, the first half hour is committed to prayer and that is probably the most important foundation to my life at the moment, and if that ever wavers I'll be on shaky ground." (George, 39)

"My relationship with God has probably become something that's more important to me the longer that I've been a priest. I think, as we start out on our ministry, we tend to be enthusiastic, and we throw ourselves into work, and perhaps that's at the expense of internalising what we are doing. So I think as I got older and more experienced, I realised that unless the aloneness of the relationship with God is worked on, we don't become very productive in our work." (Pedro, 35)



Figure 505: Good news for all of us

These statements highlight how interactive clergy exercised discipline to develop their relationship with God. Developing any relationship, be it with people or God, requires making it a priority, allocating time to, and making oneself available for such a relationship. Further, because interactive clergy made time to develop their relationship with God, they also seemed to experience contentment and satisfaction in this relationship. Again, strong parallels could be seen between relationships with people and God. Here are some examples:

"I guess it's all a bit like a marriage, once you get on the track for a long time. You either feel uncomfortable in it, or you feel comfortable in it, and I feel comfortable after 40 years or more walking with God. I feel blessed by Him, wonderfully blessed by Him." (Frank, 59)

"I am able to relate better and expand more the vision that He has given me to the people. And it's just that tremendous awareness of God's presence that's forever increasing. And within that vision unfolding, it's just beginning to touch more and more people. Just to see the lives change, because it basically stems from a relationship that's increasing with myself first, and just going on and overflowing into the people's lives." (Terry, 46)

"Generally, at this stage, I feel close with God, and that's been good, and I'm surprised at how much it always reflects me spending time with God. I'm actually stopping and taking time out to pray and read the Word. But when I don't do that, my relationship starts to be affected dramatically. And so like all relationships, you have to keep working at it. And so it's no good me feeling I've been a Christian for 20 years, and say it all comes naturally to me. God does want me to put my heart out to Him, He does want to know how I'm going, and He does want me to, sort of, put all my cares and concern on Him so that He can work things out. And the more I learn that, and the more I actually do that, the stronger the relationship becomes." (John, 39)

GOING FIRST

Two further characteristics of interactive leaders are worth sharing here. First, these leaders frequently take the initiative in these relationships; that is, they take an active interest in others and consciously initiate opportunities to elaborate their understanding of things. Second, they are willing to disclose their own weaknesses. The latter is a precious gift that is essential for two-way relating to take place.

Self-disclosure is very much a concrete quality. It prevents those religious people characterised by idealism and abstract or loose thinking from closing in on themselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer³, believed self-disclosure was at the core of Christianity. He believed that the problem we face in knowing another human is parallel to that of knowing God: each must reveal him/herself. It is through this self-revealing act that we come to know more of ourselves, others and God and are able to test out the meanings that are most important to us. In this way we are able to make the unknown, known.

Interestingly, our research findings revealed that those who initiated conversations with people, also initiated conversations with God. While this finding supports the notion that leaders who are testing out their meanings with people are also doing the same with God, it further suggests that such leaders are prepared to be known in more complete and concrete ways.

The process of elaborating meanings is risky and potentially devastating since it means putting ourselves on the line continually.

"You are so terrified when you realise the cost of really loving someone, that you step back and become a bit frightened, not prepared, feeling strongly the call to serve others, and to love them in Christ's name, but then really frightened to become too vulnerable to open to other people." (Larry, 62)



Figure 506: Being vulnerable with fellow clergy colleagues is risky

Interactive church leaders talked about the importance of continually revealing their humanness and relying on God. It was this self-revealing quality that seemed to help them deepen their spiritual meanings:

"I guess I would assess my relationship with God presently as probably being much closer than I've ever had before, for the simple reason that there are a number of both personal and ministry things happening, at the present time, that require of me some fairly solid thinking through, and so a lot of that is being done prayerfully and I find that is casting me back on God. So I guess, as an overall assessment, I'm very much aware of my own frailty, I'm very much aware of my ministry lacking and so therefore, dependency on God is heightened in that sense." (Stephen, 40)

"I value that time where I can pray and be alone in His presence. I value the time that I can just be quiet and allow Him to speak to me. I believe that in the Scripture, and also in experience that they, the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God and that the Master tells the servant what to do, and I like to come as a servant before God. I love His spiritual guidance and I like the times of asking God to forgive, as He does show us these faults that we have and where we've done wrong or said wrong. I love the joy of being able to confess that to Him and the freedom that we get through confession." (Bruce, 63)

Many of these interactive leaders revealed their own frailty to God. Being in such open dialogue with God, these clergy wanted to confront and confess their vulnerabilities and work toward an acceptance of who they were. Moreover, they sought meaning in their lives and desired to clearly hear God's voice or leading.

"Being loved by God, having a task that I believe is fundamentally connected with God, having a meaning for each day that's there." (Arthur, 63)

"Often I'll spend time, just walk along the beach, just praying, talking to God, trying to hear what He's saying to me, presenting a request to Him, petitioning Him for things. I'm looking for a meaning." (Mike, 36)

"I have a good relationship with the Lord, I've been experiencing some wonderful times in prayer lately, and a real ease at praying, and a very strong sense of His presence as I pray. And I find Him speaking to me - only yesterday, speaking to me in a very strong, clear way, such as I haven't had for some time. I hear it from the Lord every day, just the little things, in little ways." (Phil, 37)



Figure 507: Spiritual signs are everywhere

"My relationship with God at the moment, I feel is very close and warm and I appreciate it from my point of view, and I feel acceptable - I feel I find favour in His sight in our relationship together, as we're walking, and working and interceding; I tell Him where I'm at. Him trying to guide me as to which way to take etc. I didn't wish that I had extra gifts or extra abilities to do things in a much more superb way, I haven't those and therefore I have to come back to accept who I am, what makes me me, and go with that and accept that rather than trying to be someone I'm not, and do things that I can't." (David, 47)

These statements illustrate how their relationship with God was central to the lives of these clergy in terms of meaning, and acceptance of who they were. Possibly this open relating and acceptance of themselves helped them to relate to God, and others, on a more intimate and earthly level, thereby elaborating the notion of their role as clergy as well as allowing them to acknowledge their own personal needs.

Being able to acknowledge and meet needs is very important. However as we saw earlier many leaders feel that they are not understood and find it difficult to get their own needs met. Therefore one of the most striking findings in our research was that clergy who turned to their congregations for support in times of trouble particularly benefited.

CONGREGATIONAL SUPPORT

We asked participants to list ten people they turned to for help. Congregational members were nominated the least. However despite being an underutilised resource, those clergy who did turn to them were among the least lonely. Interestingly, out of all the subgroupings that leaders nominated as support, this was the only one that significantly reduced the level of clergy loneliness.



Figure 508: Church members have an important part to play in supporting clergy

The NCLS Leader Survey⁴ also found that those leaders who had grown in their faith over the last year had lower levels of stress and burnout than other clergy. More importantly, however, those who had experienced major growth in their faith *through involvement in their congregation* had even lower levels of stress and burnout than those who had grown through other means. Further, levels of leader burnout were also less in those congregations where attenders knew a great deal about their leaders' personal spiritual journey.

These findings suggest that there is something quite unique about being intimately known and supported by those among whom you live and work. The following stories illustrate how valuable these relationships can be:

"I'm in my 11th year here, and I suppose I can see the benefit of being in a place for some time because you get to know people and over a period of time opportunities arise in their lives where particularly disastrous things happen and you're there to help and get alongside of them, and so, you know, friendships are really deepened and you have opportunities of really helping them through those difficult patches and for their faith to be deepened and for you to grow as well." (Alex, 47)

"We've got some good friends that support us, a particular couple in the church that I can basically tell them anything, how I feel, and know that they'll keep it in confidence and appreciate me as a person and not as a pastor. They're mature Christians and I count them as close friends and they're a great support. I call Steve at work and if he's not busy I can just talk. I can tell him what's going through my head and my doubts, fears and the lot." (Phil, 37)



Figure 509: Support is all around us – if we make ourselves vulnerable!

"My Scripture co-ordinator is a leader who I have trained up. I guess that he would be a mentor for me in a way. It is not something that has deliberately happened or something that has become a format or a function in my life but it is just something that just naturally happened. I admire this man and his life and his whole attitude." (Geoff, 26)

"I got to know this (congregational) person in a way that was I suppose more intimate than others, he and his wife and he in particular... I guess what I have come to understand him as being, is more than just a friend. He has become a mentor in a lot of ways, somebody I admire, somebody whom I often think on, if I am making important decisions, somebody whom I find myself mirroring in terms of taking decisions, or directions or waiting and thinking twice before I act." (Neil, 50)

"One friendship I had in my last pastorate which was very significant for me, probably because it was through my most difficult time of life when I went through my divorce and was raising the kids on my own. We developed a good bond and friendship to be able to communicate, to talk, to cry, to discuss things. I was accepted and loved by someone for who I was, also the freedom to be challenged, and we had that kind of relationship where that person could say anything to me about what I was doing and what I had said, and challenged me about where I was going, and that wasn't threatening because I knew I was accepted and loved by this person." (David, 47)

"The relationship that has been very prominent with me of late is the relationship with my prayer partner. He is a man who is very intense in all sorts of ways and God speaks to him prophetically and I listen to him. I feel that we are able to relate very well because we understand the same sort of things; we move on the same wave length. I find him very stimulating, very encouraging and very demanding and very frightening. We relate well so that I can be completely open to him and he to me, we can share together and pray together." (Doug, 66)

There are some important things to note about the relationships in these stories. One is that these leaders are able to not only give to members of their congregation, but also receive from them. In many cases their own faith is elaborated through this process.

The second thing to note is the freedom to talk to someone about anything and everything without fear of criticism. All too often our encounters are marred by a judgemental attitude that sees everything in terms of right or wrong. Perhaps it is because we expect so much of our leaders that they can come in for unusually big doses of criticism. However, few things shut down disclosure more quickly.

It is important to point out that leaders are not expected to indiscriminately self-disclose and ask for help from all members of the congregation. Rather they are able to wisely discern and seek out an individual or group of people whom they feel they can trust.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, it is vital that leaders know that they are loved and accepted by those to whom they turn for help. They will not be thought of as being any less for being human and having needs.



Figure 510: Clergy are human too

"People in authority should always stay close to those for whom they are responsible, and encourage true and simple meetings. If they stay aloof, they cannot know their people or their people's needs... They can very quickly shut themselves up in their role because they are afraid or believe themselves to be a little god; then they will lose touch with reality. They need people who refuse to take them too seriously, who see them as they really are and bring them back to earth. Of course, they must have confidence in these people and know that they are loved by them" – Vanier⁵

Some pastors may question whether laity are willing to accept such friendships between clergy and congregational members. Many church leaders feel that laity 'box' them in and are 'possessive' about their ministers. One leader expressed this dilemma well:

"I think the expectations that people have of you as a minister are sometimes quite, quite difficult to deal with. They sneak up and surprise you sometimes. In the older congregation here there's a tendency for them to look at you as their minister, but not as their friend, and it's very difficult for them to cross those boundaries sometimes. It's kind of sad in a way because I just personally feel that you can't minister to somebody unless you have some sort of relationship with them that goes beyond what you do on Sunday." (Andrew, 34)

Hopefully it may partly be just a matter of time and changing attitudes. One American⁶ study believed that church laity would discourage clergy from pursuing close friendships within the church. Their rationale was that lay members would view such relationships as 'exclusive' or 'special'. However, contrary to expectations, the congregations in this study were found to encourage rather than discourage church leaders in developing close friendships. So leaders take heart.

The importance of clergy turning to the congregation for help is a very important finding in the life of the church. First, because they are able to utilise resources immediately available to them. Rather than rely on outside sources of support which may involve extra time and effort, they can access help in their own backyard. This in turn reduces their feelings of isolation and separation.

Second, these leaders are less lonely and less prone to burnout and sexual misconduct. As satisfying and meaning-full relationships are developed with those around, the temptation to meet intimacy needs in inappropriate ways is diminished.

Third, by acknowledging their own needs and weaknesses, it challenges the prevailing stereotype that leaders have it all together and need help from no-one. Once congregations become more aware of clergy humanness they in turn are forced to elaborate their understanding of what it means to be a church leader. This is an essential step if congregations are to modify their expectations, reduce their degree of dependency on leaders and share the workload.



Figure 511: Contrary to public opinion, clergy are not super men or women

We have looked at a number of positive ways that leaders can effectively deal with the stresses and strains of an often difficult work environment. It is important to address the problems at an individual level and certainly leaders themselves need to have a look at the choices they make and how they can do things differently.

However, what about the environment itself? Are there ways that we can do church differently so that both leaders and members can grow together in faith and relationships in a more integrated way? The next chapter addresses these questions.

Chapter 6: Journeying Together

"A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together... As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of" – 1 Cor 12, The Message

In the first part of this book, we noted the high levels of stress and burnout experienced by church leaders, growing attrition rates, high levels of loneliness and lack of intimacy with those closest to them, a frequently impoverished relationship with God, and at times an abusive relationship with those they have been called to serve.

We have also seen that in order for all of us, leaders included, to grow and mature in our faith we need a place where we can test out and elaborate our spiritual meanings and find out what the Spirit of God is saying through the give and take of two-way relationships.

Thankfully there is a small minority of leaders who have discovered ways of effectively nurturing two-way relationships with God, family and members of the congregation in ways that enable them to thrive and grow.

However, as we commented earlier, it is too simple to say that it is entirely up to leaders to get their act together without looking at the system of which they are a part. But unfortunately we are often hampered in the church by a professional model of ministry which reinforces the separation of its leaders.

Separation seems to be endemic. This became very obvious to us as we attended or visited a range of denominations on a Sunday morning. It simply did not seem to matter if we were attending a Catholic, Baptist, Uniting, Pentecostal or any other variety of service! It was still typically a matter of a small group of leaders, and predominantly the senior church leader, addressing a largely passive audience.



Figure 601: It's easy to be a passive spectator in church

Knowing as we did all the problems faced by leaders, we began to explore an alternative, an alternative that would help leaders and congregations journey and grow in their relationships with God and each other together. As counsellors we are keen to help those who are struggling but we would much rather work towards preventing problems in the first place.

In its essence we are proposing a way of being church where leaders are no longer set apart but are more integrated as interdependent parts of the congregation under the Headship of Christ. This will mean a paradigm shift in the way we think church for all of us.

We believe that if the church can recapture a more holistic view of the Body of Christ in all its activities starting with worship the potential benefits are great:

1. An interactive environment is created where leaders and members can explore and develop their spiritual meanings together as the group seeks to hear what the Spirit of God is saying through and to the whole body
2. Loneliness will be reduced as leaders are encouraged to share more reciprocally and meaningfully with the congregation
3. There will be less opportunity for abuses of power as leaders become more integrated; in allowing others to know them there will be a more natural accountability
4. Clergy workload will be lessened as other members are encouraged to exercise their gifts and share more responsibility within the body
5. The church will provide a powerful role model for effectively living with difference and dealing with conflict

There are a number of other ways that congregations can be better informed about the relational problems of their leaders and help improve the quality of those relationships. Some of these are included in the Appendix. However in this chapter we will simply take a closer look at what a more interactive church might look like.

PARTS OF THE WHOLE

Let us start with some key Scriptural principles. We often forget that the Pauline epistles were addressed predominantly to churches rather than individuals. In them, Paul describes the church as the Body of Christ. He emphasises that Christians are all one in Christ (Gal.3:28); that no one part of the body is more important than any other, but each needs the other (1 Cor.12); that each and every member has been given gifts for building or growing the whole (1 Cor.12); and that the church is the temple of God where His Spirit lives (1 Cor.3:16).

Importantly, leadership in a more holistic setting means not running to our own strict and preconceived agenda, but allowing the Spirit of God to speak through the whole group. In valuing and facilitating the unique contribution of each and every member, the leader is willing to share the direction and life of the group with its members. Letting go of absolute control, or dying to oneself, is essential.

Ultimately, this requires a major mind-shift in the way that we view church and our part within it. Rather than seeing church as a mere collection of separate individuals with the leaders set apart, we must begin to see ourselves as a special gathering of interdependent individuals with a unique part to play in the life of the body of Christ.

As we do this, the body is no longer so dependent on one part to do most of the work. Rather the gifts and resources of the whole group are released.

To be committed to such a view when leading groups is both risky and liberating. Risky in the sense that we all know where we would like to go, but the shared journey, or process, is very much unknown and may take us to unexpected places. Liberating in that leaders become more aware that they are only responsible for the special part that they have to play, but not for the whole life of the group and the unique contributions of all the other parts. With individuals now firmly out of the spotlight, God is able to speak through the greater body.



Figure 602: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts

A shift in power – a voice for the poor

Opening up the group is also risky because it requires a fundamental shift in power. The more that leaders relinquish the direction, life and ministry of the group to its constituent members the less personal power they effectively have. This not only helps operationalise the servant-leader model but is also very important in light of the previous discussion about sexual abuse and the power of the clergy role.

It will also mean sharing power with the poor and marginalised, people who often have little or no voice in our traditional church structures. Interestingly, the church body is in theory to give special honour to the less honourable parts.

"As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way - the 'lower' the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary.... You give it dignity and honour just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher" – 1 Cor. 12: 26-7, The Message

Jesus especially emphasised relationships with the marginalised and oppressed. Jesus' lifestyle was a simple one, spending it predominantly outside the religious institution with under-privileged people. Whilst prayer and worship were central to Jesus, he also was committed to issues of justice, mercy, righteousness and love of the marginalised people in society. Indeed, he not only focuses on the 'poor' but says that he is found amongst them.

"Whenever you did one of these things (good deeds) to someone overlooked and ignored, that was me - you did it to me" – Matthew 25:40, The Message

In intimately identifying with the oppressed Jesus seeks to change their situation. In bringing this good news to the people who need it most, Jesus effectively turned society's values on its head. That is, people who had traditionally been dishonoured, dependent and oppressed in society were now honoured, interdependent and liberated in this new scheme of things.

The Bible is full of examples of God choosing, and speaking through, the unlearned, the poor, the marginalised.

"This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written, 'I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots...' Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?" – 1 Cor.1:18b-19;26-27, The Message



Figure 603: Blessed are the poor

This is indeed a challenge for all of us. By creating opportunities and inviting all members to actively share in the life of the church, we perhaps come closer to honouring the weaker parts. We give them a place that is often denied them in the wider society.

In sum, as we strive to honour Christ as our one Head and move towards a more interactive and integrated way of being church where we are all empowered to be the body of Christ, perhaps we come closer to what Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians:

"By means of his one spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain, his spirit, where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves - labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free - are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive" - 1Cor. 12:14, The Message

The view of ourselves as an interdependent whole with Christ at the head needs to be recaptured in every aspect of church life - committee meetings, home groups, social activities, outreach initiatives at home and overseas and last but not least when we gather together for worship.

For us worship services have become possibly the most important place where these principles need to be lived out. First, because they can serve as a model for all other church activities. Second, because it is in the Sunday service that the stereotypical notion of clergy having it all together and needing no-one can most effectively be challenged. Third, it is often people's first contact with church and first impressions can have a lasting impact on whether they remain long enough to become a part themselves.

Last but certainly not least we have rarely experienced anything more exciting or moving than to see the Spirit of God released through his people gathered together where each and every person is valued and invited to take an active part in something far greater than any one of us – the body of Christ.



Figure 604: Creative worship

INTERACTIVE WORSHIP

Our journey to discover an alternative began several years ago when we started visiting a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre down the road. As we shared some of our lives together over a game of cards a number of the residents became interested in finding out a bit more about this God of ours. When they read the Bible they were often struck by the liberating good news of a loving and accepting God. So a few came to church with us. The problem was no-one spoke to them. Rather than experiencing relationship they came away feeling even more isolated. We began to question just what we were bringing people into.

We were also in the middle of our research into the relationships of church leaders. We experienced a flood of changing emotions in response to the complexity of problems we discovered - anger, disbelief, grief, helplessness. So on the basis of these two experiences we started praying and talking with leaders and members of the church we attended. At about the same time there was a unique opportunity to be part of a new sister church that was being formed in a neighbouring suburb and we along with six other founding members were given permission to explore alternative ways of being church. We were privileged to be part of that process with all of its ups and downs (and there were plenty of both!) for the next four years. Subsequently we moved interstate and began worshipping at an established church that had two morning services. But again we were privileged to be given a lot of latitude in leading worship once a month at the second service.

Being encouraged to use our gifts and working with clergy who were willing to explore alternatives were two things we are very thankful for in both churches, but there the similarities end. The two churches differed with regard to denomination, number of attenders, average age, level of education, socio-economic background and length of service. One was new although still partly influenced by its sister church and the other was well-established.

Two very different churches. And yet both responded very positively as we introduced the principles of what we now call interactive worship. We would like to share these with you as one possible way forward for the church today.

We acknowledge that some of these elements may already be in practice to a greater or lesser degree. However we are also aware that they are not easy to operationalise in largely hierarchical church structures where leaders have traditionally assumed or been given much of the power.



Figure 605: Doing church differently

First principles

When we gather together for interactive worship we begin by inviting the Holy Spirit to speak to us as a body and remind people that we have come together to deepen our relationships with God and with one another. The two are very much interrelated to the extent that growth in one area is often reflected in growth in the other. Conversely as we have seen an impoverished relationship with God frequently goes hand in hand with poor relationships with people. One small but very important step to help the process is rearranging the seating into a circle or U-shape where we can see and respond to one another. To have relationships with others in the congregation it helps to see them!

We also like to remind people that God has gathered this particular group of people together to worship and build one another up at this particular time and that he has given each and every believer a gift to be valued and contributed. We are very much on a faith journey together seeking what the Spirit of God wants to say to us individually and as a group in the midst of our constantly changing and challenging world.

In the service that follows we will typically include all the familiar elements of songs, prayers, Bible readings, teaching/preaching, notices, sharing times and offering but we try and maximise opportunities for all to be involved.

"HI-RISK" services!

Let's face it, opening services up to God and people *is* risky. But when you start to see the Spirit of God move and people of all ages and life experiences being released to take an active part it can be a beautiful and exciting thing. To help keep us on track we evaluate what we are going to do following the acronym Hi-Risk. It summarises the following key principles.

Holy Spirit led

It might sound clichéd but it is vital that our team meeting before the service and the service itself is bathed in prayer that we will be able to hear and do what the Spirit of God is saying to us individually and as a group.

In recognising that the Spirit may speak through any one of us and in a variety of ways we typically retain a teaching segment but we restrict the time so that there is also opportunity to respond to what is being taught either in the large or smaller groups. In this way we can test out and elaborate our understanding together through dialogue and action. Our aim is to make sense of this Word and see how it can be lived out in the diversity of our life experiences both as individuals and as the body of Christ in our particular community.

By encouraging all of us to develop more open and intimate sharing with one another, leaders are encouraged to play but one part in the whole body, and are enabled to receive support and nurture as well as to give it, to test out their spiritual meanings rather than just dispense them.

Interactive

Traditionally our services focus on ways we can interact individually with God. But as we have seen our relationships with God and others are often intimately connected and so we encourage ways during the service that people can talk with one another. This might be through forming pairs or small groups or may occur in the larger group. It may be giving them the opportunity to discuss the implications of the sermon or simply praying together.

Some of our most consistently positive feedback has been people appreciating the chance just to be heard. We know from our own experience that we can at times attend church with a heavy heart or something we passionately want to share but simply do not have the opportunity to do so.



Figure 606: Small discussion groups maximize participation

Real

People are typically yearning for real and authentic experience in our highly concocted televised world. Maybe the Bible reading is a good place to start. We call it "Bible alive" and have variously used rap, drama, modern versions like "The Message" - anything to bring it into the reality of the twenty-first century. We also might take the theme of the passage and get people to call out the first word that comes into their mind when they hear the word "peace", "slave", "journey", whatever! Anything that helps us relate it to the reality of our own lives.

Small group discussions after the preaching of the Word are also a good way to encourage the freedom to share authentically as we talk about its relevance in our lives. In this way we can help bridge the gap between the largely artificial environment of church to our lives outside.

Inclusive

We constantly look for ways that everyone present can actively participate if they want to. This is potentially good for the person and for the rest of us. For example, we may encourage open prayers where people are invited to just say a sentence so that those who usually say a lot give opportunity for others to also share.

Or we may invite people to respond in just one or two words, for example, something they are thankful for, or how they are feeling this particular day, something for which they want prayer, what one word they are left with after the preaching of the Word. The possibilities are endless, but it is one very simple way of getting a sense of what God is laying on the hearts of the whole group.

We are also heightfully aware that many people will find what we are suggesting very risky and that some people like to go to church and just sit. So we are very careful to invite people to participate but never expect more of them than they are ready to give. We learnt very early that it is important to start small and that no matter how well the group gets to know each other, there is always the need to respect the right to pass.

People may also be wondering where kids fit in. Being the parents of two children this is a very important question for us. We think it is well worth the extra effort to have kids as an integral part of interactive worship. Being valued and included sets a good example for their adult lives that they are as much a part of the church as anyone and that they too have a part to play. For instance when adults are in small groups applying or praying about the message we typically have the children doing a related task that they contribute when we reassemble as a whole group.

Spontaneous

Linked to being real is the importance of spontaneity. We acknowledge that liturgy and printed prayers or responses are very meaningful for some people and serve to deepen their experience of God, but we also are aware that they can easily be parroted or even used to avoid current real life issues. We also know from our work with a diverse range of groups that when people are encouraged to talk about and explore what's happening for them right now, there is an incredible energy to move ahead.

That's not to say that the interactive services that we are describing are *totally* spontaneous. Far from it. But it is nevertheless a key principle that needs to be fostered throughout the service. One incident comes to mind when we met for worship and it was quite obvious that one member was hurting badly. We simply gathered around him and prayed and later continued in the planned worship. If we deny opportunity for spontaneity we surely quench the Spirit.

Kreative

Being creative can be as simple as asking people to pray in single sentences to decorating the whole church in ways that illustrate the theme of the service. It may be offering coffee in the middle of worship so everyone gets the chance to be spoken to. It may be inviting children to act out the Bible reading for the day. It may be asking adults to choose from a whole range of objects something that relates to a current struggle and inviting them to share it with the wider group if they feel free.



Figure 607: Expressing different gifts at Easter

The possibilities are only limited by our imagination. Of course there will be some other factors to consider such as the number of attenders and physical space. However we have been amazed at how many underutilised gifts there are. A key to releasing creativity is encouraging a team approach to worship where people can pray, brainstorm and work together.

We sometimes wonder whether this kind of "Hi-Risk" interactive service is closer to what Paul had in mind when he wrote this to the Corinthian church.

"So here's what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight. If prayers are offered in tongues, two or three's the limit, and then only if someone is present who can interpret what you're saying. Otherwise, keep it between God and yourself. And no more than two or three speakers at a meeting, with the rest of you listening and taking it to heart. Take your turn, no one person taking over. Then each speaker gets a chance to say something special from God, and you all learn from each other. If you choose to speak, you're also responsible for how and when you speak. When we worship the right way, God doesn't stir us up into confusion; he brings us into harmony. This goes for all the churches - no exception" - 1 Cor. 14: 26 - 33, The Message

Getting started

It may be that churches simply start out by offering an alternative form of worship once a month or create a new time slot. It is also very important to encourage a team of people to explore and offer interactive worship together. There is something very powerful about meeting as a small group and wrestling with the Word and what the Spirit is saying before inviting others to share the journey.

One way of getting started is to invite a team of 6-8 people of varying ages and gifts who are keen to explore alternatives. Ideally they would also represent or have contact with different groupings within the church, including those on the fringe. Initially it may be good to work with the same team once a month for up to a year to develop and role model interactive worship.

As people become more familiar with the principles, it could be good to encourage different pre-existing groups within the church to lead worship - home groups, youth groups, musicians, Alpha groups, fellowships. Former worship leaders will also need to learn the important lesson of dying to oneself in order to release the different parts of the body.

Preparing a service can begin with reflecting on the passage individually and then coming together to share and pray about what we believe God is saying to us as a group.

The next step is to identify themes and then brainstorm ways to further explore them in worship with the wider body. The "Hi-Risk" principles serve as a checklist. The beauty of working as a team is that we can role model the same principles that we are trying to embody in the congregation as a whole.



Figure 608: Two heads are better than one, and twelve better than two

It is also very important that we constantly evaluate the services and invite feedback from as many others as possible. We typically ask people for one thing that worked and one thing that did not. We also expect criticism because we are doing something quite different and that usually creates some discomfort.

One thing we have also noticed is that it is very easy for services to quickly revert to traditional ways of doing things simply because they are so ingrained. That's not to say that some of those forms are not good, but we are trying to create an intentional alternative for all of the reasons cited in this book and to do that we find it essential to educate people about the rationale for doing things differently as well as use the "Hi-Risk" checklist for evaluation.

Yeah but ...

No doubt we can all think of some of the problems with attempting a very different alternative to the way we currently experience worship. Let us try and address a few that we have encountered.

Our church is too big

It will be challenging to implement these principles in creative ways in very large congregations of 100 plus, but it is well worth pursuing. It continues to concern us that in many of these large churches, people are simply not known. We are particularly concerned for the leaders of such congregations. How are they an integrated part of this larger body? Where are they able to share their struggles and test out their meanings in truly reciprocal ways with other members of the congregation? How are they encouraged to receive from the body, as well as to give? Unfortunately our research showed that leaders of all congregations regardless of size can experience loneliness and all its associated problems.

One alternative for larger churches may be to conduct smaller satellite services for say five weeks out of six, and come together as a whole group for the sixth week. Another alternative could be to roster different home groups to be responsible for leading services. Lastly, the church could explore ways of encouraging more interaction during services by breaking regularly into small groups for different segments of the service.

Moreover, the fact is the average congregational size in Australia is just 70. Further, a third of churches have less than 25 attenders, and more than half, have fewer than 50 attenders¹. For these churches in particular an alternative form of interactive worship is highly feasible and desirable. Often their services are still modelled on a large group format which is simply inappropriate for such small numbers. The kind of worship we have outlined also provides a much needed alternative for small churches that either have to share their leaders or who do not have a leader at all.



Figure 609: We all have big questions

Why not just do the interactive bit in home groups?

Many may still argue that the best place for greater inclusion and interaction is a Bible study or home group. But as we mentioned above the worship service can provide a very important role model for all other church activities while at the same time helping to break down the pedestal effect and the stereotype of clergy having it all together and needing no-one. It is also very important to demonstrate the importance of relationships to people coming to church for the first time. What better place to do it than in the service itself.

Unfortunately home groups themselves can all too often resemble a Sunday service with one or two dominating proceedings and few opportunities to really test out spiritual meanings together.

Opening things up is too risky

You're right. It is risky! But hopefully we have been able to show you that the potential benefits are far greater. Also training clergy and other church leadership in facilitation skills will enable them to deal better with problems that may arise.

For example suppose you have a member that consistently holds the floor and espouses questionable opinions. We have learnt in our own work with a variety of educational, therapeutic and church groups that it is important to formulate some group rules. We all like to be respected and listened to, without dominant ones talking over us or trying to run the show. Consequently we clearly state that those who usually talk, will have to work at listening, and those who listen, are encouraged to talk more.

To achieve this requires good 'gate-keeping' skills. However, when the ground rules are set and participants realise that they are all encouraged to play equal parts in the group, the dynamics typically change in positive ways. When they realise it is safe to risk disclosure without getting shot down, members become more active in a number of ways: raising awareness, finding out what part they each have to play, contributing to the group, taking an interest in others, giving support and encouragement to one another, sharing responsibility for the group and being accountable to one another. It typically provides members with a unique and empowering experience of being part of something bigger.

Surprisingly we have rarely encountered major points of conflict during interactive worship. On the contrary, we have typically experienced an increased unity amongst the diversity. Ultimately relationships are deepened and our faith is sharpened as together we strive to hear what God is saying not just to one or two individuals but the whole group. And if there were overt conflict it would be important to address it together thus providing a powerful role model for the whole church community.

Not everyone wants to be involved

True. And that is why we stress the importance of inviting but not pushing participation. It may be that for many older people in particular this form of worship is just too far removed from the church and societal culture in which they were brought up. However some of our most positive feedback has also come from those well into their 60's and 70's who felt for the first time that they were really a part of the body and that they had something valuable to contribute.

Young people have also repeatedly told us that they want to hear old people's stories and learn from their wisdom. They want to know the struggles they face and how their faith has got them. Older people are a precious gift that we long to see released as much as any other.



Figure 610: Engaging youth is important

It's too much effort

Ironically the more you explore this kind of worship the easier it becomes. This seems to be largely because a safe place is created where people feel free to test out their spiritual meanings and contribute their unique gift. As people grow in trust and confidence you keep discovering more and more gifts that you just did not know people had, or they become willing to use them in a broader context.

Another key is to journey together as a team. Not only are the number of resources automatically greater but it is also very true that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This goes for the church body as a whole gathered for worship as well as team ministry.

Wanted - team players

Interactive worship simply will not happen if leaders and/or members are unwilling to play their part. It has been encouraging to see greater participation by laity in some churches but we believe there is still a long way to go, particularly if the voices of the poor are to be heard. And if members are increasingly encouraged to use their gifts more, and the congregation seeks to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to and through the whole body, the role of the leader will also need to change.



Figure 611: Activities around food is always a big draw card

REDEFINING ROLES

We have touched on changes in role and power already but let us state quite clearly that the role of clergy continues to be vital if churches are to move ahead in this new direction.

A number of commentators in the field have called for a redefinition of the role of clergy. It's been said that church leaders come in three types:

"There are three kinds of leaders: caretakers, undertakers and risk takers. We've certainly had enough caretakers and undertakers in the church. It's now time for some risk takers"

For the church to survive it must move toward a more real, relational and relevant place. In order to achieve this leaders of the future need to not only know knowledge about God and talk at people but also know how to relate to God and talk with people. This would not only help to reduce church leader loneliness and all its associated problems but also help church to become a safe, interactive and supportive place where dialogue and the spirit of God is found.

The National Church Life Survey¹ in its conclusion on church leadership also emphasised the need for change:

"Australian church leaders need to rediscover their place in congregational life in an era of lay empowerment. As attenders take on roles that were traditionally the precinct of the ordained ministry, clergy will need to redefine their role. This is not a challenge Australian church leaders can afford to ignore" – National Church Life Survey¹

Many churches may recognise that their leaders do not possess all the gifts and that it is necessary to affirm those gifts that they do have and find ways of compensating for those they are missing. However, in practice we still tend to expect them to be master of everything. In a more integrated view of the body we would expect a more active process where all members are encouraged to discover and use their gifts for the building up of the body.

We realise this is going to be challenging for leaders who often are quite simply not good team players. Whether by choice or by nature of the role we have seen that they are often isolated and set apart from their congregations so working more intimately with others and trusting them with a greater part to play will require a major commitment and mind shift.

The place of teaching

Let us look in more detail at one particular gift, that of teaching, since this is one area that clergy have traditionally been expected to excel in. Many preaching rosters reflect this. The gift of teaching is a very important part of body life. However we also need to remember the importance of testing out what we hear through relationship and the dangers of espousing knowledge without the fruit being produced in our lives.

Moreover, we have frequently found that when God has something He strongly wants to lay upon our hearts as a group, He often does not just say it to one person but to several and not only to leaders. However, unless we have some kind of interactive forum where all are given the opportunity to contribute, we can miss out on what God is saying to us as a community.

It may be worth noting here that in the early church certain people exercised gifts of speaking out God's word and teaching on a regular basis and thus became recognised as 'prophets and teachers' (1 Cor 14:6,26-33 and 12:28). However, as one prominent theologian writes:

"These same gifts, as well as many others, were also regularly exercised in a more spontaneous way by any and all within the community... for the upbuilding of the community" – Fee²

The key seems to be valuing and facilitating the contribution of each and every part. Therefore we would see that teaching the Word is still a vital part of the clergy role but that it would be coupled with opportunities to more actively test it out and see how it is being understood and applied by others within the congregation.



Figure 612: Bible teaching and interaction is important

Leading by facilitation

A second major focus of the clergy role would be to facilitate and value the contribution of each and every member. In the NCLS Leader Survey³, nearly half of senior leaders believed their main role should include training people for mission and ministry, but only 13% actually fulfilled it.

This discrepancy may be for a myriad of reasons as we have already seen. Of particular concern is that leaders find conflict with laity a major stress factor. Therefore working in a more intimate and interactive way with the congregation may be perceived as simply adding stress.

Ironically, however, there is an overwhelming body of evidence to suggest that leaders who are actively involved with their congregations and community, experience lower levels of burnout and their congregations are more vital and effective. So on both counts, a more interactive and inclusive environment is a good thing! Consider these characteristics all of which are associated with lower levels of burnout and more vital congregations, as outlined by the National Church Life Survey³:

- leaders inspire others to action rather than taking charge
- attenders feel that leaders put a high priority on growing attenders' gifts and skills
- attenders feel that leaders highly value listening to their ideas
- the community is taken into account in direction setting
- high percentages of attenders feel that the vision and direction are regularly evaluated

Two further characteristics of leaders which are associated with lower levels of burnout and which help facilitate a more reciprocal sharing and developing of spiritual meanings are that attenders feel that they know a significant amount about their leaders' spiritual journey and leaders are seen as compassionate. Specifically with regard to worship, it is interesting to note that conducting worship has been shown to be one of the more stressful roles for clergy³. Yet one more good reason for sharing the responsibility.

Taken together these findings clearly demonstrate that effective and sustainable leadership includes the sharing of self and the active seeking out of members' gifts and insights, thus journeying together in a more inclusive and interactive way.

The role of laity

Just as we need interactive leaders open to the Spirit of God, we also need interactive congregations. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to allow the paid professional to do the work of the ministry, but we miss out on fulfilling our own calling in the process. We need to discover again the unique gifts that God has given us, and explore ways of contributing them more to the group. We also need to review our patterns of communication, the procedures we follow to conduct business, and the ways we frequently exclude people in those processes.



Figure 613: Church members participating the way they know how

Further, and perhaps most importantly, we need to ask ourselves how we can better support our leaders, and give them the freedom to be human like the rest of us, letting go of our cherished stereotypes. As we have seen, this will require change both ways, as leaders will also need to become more willing to make their needs known and receive help.

If you feel that God is calling you as leaders or members to explore a different way of being church then trust also that you have the gifts and resources to go ahead with the people that God has uniquely called together to be his body wherever you are and however many you are. There will no doubt be other resources that you will find along the way but God is very much present where two or three are gathered together. Our part is to not quench the Spirit but give Him full opportunity to move.

Let us remind you too that the two congregations we have been privileged to journey with are different in many ways and their form of interactive worship also differs. The principles are the same but how they are fleshed out will be as different as the congregations that risk applying them.

In the final chapter we will suggest ways that denominational bodies can also play their important part.

Chapter 7: The Place of Training

"This fundamental condition of the common membership of the Church, shared by clergy and laity alike, needs to find expression in the life and worship of the Church" – Gibbs & Morton ¹

Having begun to understand the struggles of clergy in the first part of this book, we then looked at ways that leaders both individually and together with their congregations can more effectively foster meaningful reciprocal relationships with God and others, particularly in the context of interactive worship.

However, at numerous points along the way we have also emphasised that many of the dilemmas facing clergy are not solely due to inherent relational problems within leaders themselves. Rather they are exacerbated by the nature of the structures and systems within which they work. It is very difficult to operationalise reciprocal relationships and dialogue in a system that traditionally separates leaders from their congregations and upholds one-way relating and monologue.

Therefore to pursue the directions that we have suggested will require the support and encouragement of denominational bodies. Given the range of problems facing clergy other strategies which foster relationships could also profitably be implemented. Some of these are included in the Appendix. Thankfully many are already in place.

However our aim here is simply to focus on the training and education of both leaders and congregations as we see this as crucial if significant change is to occur. Again, given the diversity of theological education available, some colleges will be further along the road than others. But we believe the current challenge facing the vast majority of our churches is to radically redefine the whole notion of what it means to be in leadership and to change the emphasis of training accordingly.



Figure 701: Training is important if leadership and church are to be done differently

INTERACTIVE TRAINING

Based on the research presented we believe that denominational bodies need to address relationships at three levels: home, college and church. To do this may well require an overview of the ethos and emphases of training courses as a whole, as well as examining current course content and methodology.

Emphasising relationship

This may sound rather like selling refrigerators to Eskimos. The reality is though that many leaders have impoverished relationships with God, neighbor and themselves. This would suggest that there needs to be a greater emphasis on valuing and actively encouraging leaders to pursue intimate and meaningful relationships.

Consistent with the two greatest commandments clergy need to be taught that open, honest, vulnerable, two-way relationships are the major vehicle for meaning-making. As such they are the key to our psychological and spiritual well-being and Christian maturity.

Research has clearly shown the importance of supportive relationships in reducing stress, starting with the person to whom you are closest. Good relationships start at home with the people who know us most intimately. No doubt we can possibly impress or woo people when we have to. The difficulty is sustaining quality relating in our daily interactions with loved ones.

To actively foster better relationships with those around us may first require training in self-awareness. Further leaders need to learn how to recognise their own needs and discriminate appropriate ways of meeting them. Again, without addressing personal needs loneliness and a whole host of problems including abuses of power can result.

The difficult truth is that relationships take time. As someone once said, "To love one another, we need to know one another; to know one another we need to spend time with one another." For clergy to have more time to nurture family or social relationships means that denominations may need to reduce their expectations of leaders. Leaders will need to learn to delegate and congregations will also need to share the load. In essence, clergy will need to do less and congregations need to do more.

For this to occur, congregations need to be first educated about the clergy crisis and their untold stories. Once awareness has been raised and stereotypes challenged, then meaningful experiences for congregations need to be provided to assist them to move from passive to interactive participation (Check out the Appendix for more information about pews, pedestals and doing church differently).

College training

We wrote earlier about the need for leaders to see themselves more as facilitators. To do this they will need to be given training in basic group skills. This will help them become more integrated with their congregations and also enable church attenders to take more responsibility. The NCLS Leader Survey² suggests that only 11% of leaders feel that they were well trained for equipping laity with another 41% feeling they had only received a basic outline. The remaining 48% were trained very poorly or not at all.



Figure702: Approximately one in two church leaders feel inequipped after having completed their training

This is disappointing given that training in facilitation would also help grow the sort of resilient leaders described in *Burnout in Church Leaders*². Four characteristics of leadership style were identified as significant in relation both to congregational vitality and sustainable and effective leadership:

- leadership that grows a vision that is owned by the attenders
- leadership that is capable of achieving the goals that have been set
- leadership that inspires attenders to action rather than being non-directive or overly directive
- leadership that puts a priority on growing attenders' gifts and skills

Training in group skills is also a very important step toward helping leaders deal more effectively with conflict. As we have seen conflict with laity is one of the greatest causes of stress and reasons for leaving the ministry. The difficulty

here is that each congregation has its own unique set of characteristics. Moreover there is no one set way of dealing with the diversity of issues that are likely to arise, for example, communication patterns, personalities, decision-making processes, the distribution of power, needs, resources, and so forth. Each local congregation will also have its unique set of group dynamics which are usually so ingrained that members have habituated to the conditions.

Leaders trained in facilitation can help the congregation move through conflict and provide a powerful role model in the way that they relate to others in an open and honest fashion. In doing so clergy would be able to create a safe environment that encourages open and honest interactions and where the Spirit of God may be released through His people in every possible way.

Training in group facilitation will include leaders viewing and working with their local church as a whole, dealing effectively through whole group processes with powerful individuals or small groups who have more than their just say in proceedings and giving a voice to the dishonoured and marginalised in our congregations. Not only will this assist leaders in the difficult job of running a church, but it will also deepen their relationships with the people with whom they are called to be co-members and co-workers.

Of course for something new to enter the theological curriculum, something old must exit it. Although we may see the need for church leaders to know themselves, others and God better the difficult question arises - Is there space in the theological training to develop individual and group skills? Having worked in the university sector we know it's difficult to turn around old practice and the old guard! However, if we want safer, more interactive and supportive church environments then the bottom line is that current curriculums need to be changed to reflect this.

Training church teams

Again it is not just leaders who need to reassess their role. Members too need to see themselves differently as each having a unique gift to contribute to the life and witness of the church. Perhaps it is partly because this emphasis has been lost that church numbers are dwindling rapidly in many churches. The job of mission is far too big for any one person, however dedicated or gifted.

Somehow we need to train up leaders and congregations together to recapture this image of the body and put it into practice. Our experience is that it is not going to come solely through pulpit preaching. In the context of denominational training we may need to consider ways of training up teams of leaders and members who can role model alternative ways of being church in their own local congregations. To do this we may need to take training out of the college and into local churches.

The beauty of training leaders and members together is that the integration of leaders is encouraged from the very beginning. Both can also learn from each other. Our training will need to address the interdependence of leaders and laity not only in the context of teaching and worship but also fellowship and home groups, youth programmes, social gatherings and the nitty gritty of committee meetings and decision-making processes.



Figure703: Home group training

A secondary aim will be to encourage congregations to take on greater ownership and responsibility for the life and direction of their churches under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully this will also ease the transition process when one leader moves on and another takes his/her place.

The more denominations can foster open forums where we can test out and grow together in our faith seeking to hear what the Spirit of God wants to say to all of us and the more we can creatively work through difference together, the healthier we will all become. Further, we believe that we will more effectively show signs of the Kingdom and so provide a radical alternative to our fragmented and searching world.

CONCLUSION: HEALING FOR ALL

Church is important but it's not everything. Sometimes we forget that. The real test for any Christian is living out our faith in truth and love in the world outside. Operating predominantly from within the artificial church environment is plagued with a whole host of problems. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the deeply disturbing trends among our clergy. Church leaders are currently facing a crisis of great proportions. Stress, burnout, marital dissatisfaction, poor social abilities, sexual abuse and impoverished relationships with both people and God all reflect this. Interestingly, a common factor in all of these issues is loneliness.



Figure 704: Church is important but it's not everything

In unravelling the roles and relationships of clergy we have discovered that their unique and demanding job description in the context of an isolating hierarchical church system creates the ideal environment for loneliness and the abuse of power. Of more concern is the church's recent embrace of professionalism. Professionalism actually intensifies the pedestal effect and threatens to isolate estranged clergy even further – ironically exacerbating existing problems.

Starved of intimacy and meaningful relationships many church leaders rely on their role to fulfil their needs. This is because their godly position tends to give them legitimate entry into the wider world of relationships. However, this form of professional relating is a poor and insufficient substitute. Deeper intimate relationships with both people and God need to be grown and nurtured in more reciprocal, spontaneous and ongoing ways. Consistent with the two greatest commandments, research has clearly shown that when leaders have quality two-way relationships with God and the people around them they are less lonely, more adaptable and more satisfied.

While this may sound simple enough little has actually occurred at a systemic level to actively foster integration of leaders into the church community. Instead we largely continue to promote separation between clergy and laity, and persist with stereotypical notions that leaders are God-like and okay in their loneliness. Nothing could be further from the truth! Further, while the recent development of ethical codes is welcomed, their effectiveness to deal with leadership abuse, on their own, is seriously questioned (Note: read the Appendix to further your understanding of key church issues and explore practical alternatives: *The Rise of the 'Done With Church' Population*, *The Empty Pulpit*, *Christian Mentoring Rationale* and *Australia: Great South Land of the Self-Absorbed or Spirit-Led?*).

So what's the way forward? Ultimately, it means redefining church and church leadership. We need to move away from a separation model to a more integrated and accountable one where church structures and leaders reflect more inclusive and interactive practices. In doing so, not only will clergy relationships be enhanced but the Spirit of God will also be released to speak through the whole body. These interactive processes are essential if we are to test out and elaborate our spiritual meanings and grow in maturity (Note: Check out our free e-books *Built for Adventure: Mystery, meaning & mental health* and *The Small Group Leader* at www.lifeboatstories.com to help you be more real, resilient and relational).

This interactive dialogue could help address our currently over-represented aging population, dwindling congregations and numerous church closures. Ironically, like many inside the church, people outside are also longing to explore their spirituality and deepen relationships. Trends in our society such as the breakdown of the extended family, high mobility, advancing technology and the information explosion create fragmented and complicated lifestyles that lack interactive and meaningful relationships.

By creating an interactive environment where dialogue and the two greatest commandments are seen to be lived out, things could be very different for all of us: leaders, congregations and the wider community. By developing a climate of open questioning and a willingness to journey together, we may help to make church a more meaningful place. In deepening our relationships with God and one another in more inclusive ways, hopefully we will come closer to relevance in a society that is increasingly searching for spiritual answers and yearning for deeper relationships.



Figure 705: Want to take your faith adventure to another level?... read *Built for Adventure: Toward Mystery, Meaning & Mental Health*. Free e-book download available at www.lifeboatstories.com.

PART IV: OTHER RESOURCES

God never promised us smooth sailing - just a safe harbour!

Suggestions for leaders, congregations and denominations

Here are some suggestions for leaders, congregations and denominational bodies to move forward and enhance clergy relationships.

Suggestions for Leaders

Set boundaries around your workload

- Take regular morning, afternoon and lunch breaks away from your desk
- Perhaps structure your day into 3 blocks: morning (9am-1pm), afternoon (1pm-5pm) and night (5pm-9pm)
- Only work 2 blocks per day
- If you have a night block for church meetings, try to take the morning block off the following day
- Aim to work 10 blocks a week i.e. 5 days x 2 blocks of 4 hours per day = 40 hours – breaks

Prioritise time out with God, family and self

- set aside regular time for prayer and reflection
- set aside time for annual retreats
- block out a day a week for partner/family/friends only

Develop relationships with peers

- pursue team ministry options
- get involved in regular peer support group and/or retreats

Risk appropriate self-disclosure with people around you

- use "I" statements possibly starting with "I feel ... because ..."

Learn to discriminate sources of support within the congregation

- identify as many people as you can who will accept you just as you are and spend some time with them
- seek out a mature member whom you can respect as a potential mentor

Empower the congregation and grow small groups by accessing free resources on our website: www.lifeboatstories.com

- build your resilience and bolster your mental and spiritual health by reading **Built for Adventure: Toward mystery, meaning & mental health** (Whetham e-book, 2015)
- for practical people skills read **The Small Group Leader** (Mallison e-book, 1996)
- encourage the congregation to do the **Lifeboat Challenge** to help tell their stories in a small support group

Get out more!

- take a break from the religious environment
- start a hobby or interest
- go for regular walks or exercise
- have fun and don't feel guilty about it

Suggestions for Congregations

Become more informed about the issues facing churches and their leaders

- explore your own stereotypes about what church leaders should be and do
- accept your leaders as human and expect less of them

Be a friend

- invite them round to watch footy, eat pizza and veto all church discussion!
- respect leaders' need to develop closer friendships with one or several members of the congregation

Help safeguard time for leaders to foster relationships starting at home

- don't contact them on their day off
- be prepared to fill in on their day off
- send them off for marriage or family enrichment weekends

Be prepared to take a more active role assisting leaders

- ask leaders about their personal faith journey
- be prepared to work in an interactive worship team
- contribute your gifts in Sunday services and other aspects of church life

Access free resources on our website: www.lifeboatstories.com to develop your own mental and spiritual health

- build your resilience and bolster your mental health by reading **Built for Adventure: Toward mystery, meaning & mental health** (Whetham e-book, 2015)
- to develop your people skills read **The Small Group Leader** (Mallison e-book, 1996)
- do the **Lifeboat Challenge** to help you develop and tell your life stories with one another

Above all: Try and be a part of the solution, not the problem... It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness!

Suggestions for Denominations

Training

- inform prospective clergy candidates of the potential relational problems of ministry
- conduct pastoral care workshops for clergy to explore roles and relationships
- provide training in character ethics and sexual misconduct issues
- provide a comprehensive list of services that clergy can utilise
- conduct a workshop or subject in group facilitation for clergy-in-training and those already in the field
- provide ongoing supervision and spiritual direction for new graduates

Job descriptions

- provide specific job descriptions for clergy
- prioritise time for developing quality relationships
- clearly delineate work and personal time
- ensure optimum time in any one appointment for maximising relationship opportunities

Peer group initiatives

- promote team ministries
- promote peer group support
- provide paid opportunities for retreats

Congregational involvement

- educate congregations about clergy stresses and practical ways they can help
- train teams of laity with leaders
- provide consultation for churches and leaders in conflict
- sexual misconduct response
- assess ethical codes and grievance procedures
- inform congregations of their rights
- encourage congregations to take more responsibility for their faith journey by telling their stories and joining ongoing support groups

The Rise of the ‘Done With Church’ Population

By Tom Shultz, Dec 16 2014

John is every pastor’s dream member. He’s a life-long believer, well-studied in the Bible, gives generously and leads others passionately.

But last year he dropped out of church. He didn’t switch to the other church down the road. He dropped out completely. His departure wasn’t the result of an ugly encounter with a staff person or another member. It wasn’t triggered by any single event.

John had come to a long-considered, thoughtful decision. He said, “I’m just done. I’m done with church.”

John is one in a growing multitude of ex-members. They’re sometimes called the de-churched. They have not abandoned their faith. They have not joined the also-growing legion of those with no religious affiliation—often called the Nones. Rather, John has joined the Dones.

At Group’s recent Future of the Church conference, sociologist Josh Packard shared some of his groundbreaking research on the Dones. He explained these de-churched were among the most dedicated and active people in their congregations. To an increasing degree, the church is losing its best.

For the church, this phenomenon sets up a growing danger. The very people on whom a church relies for lay leadership, service and financial support are going away. And the problem is compounded by the fact that younger people in the next generation, the Millennials, are not lining up to refill the emptying pews.

Why are the Dones done? Packard describes several factors in his upcoming book *Church Refugees (Group)*. Among the reasons: After sitting through countless sermons and Bible studies, they feel they’ve heard it all. One of Packard’s interviewees said, “I’m tired of being lectured to. I’m just done with having some guy tell me what to do.”

The Dones are fatigued with the Sunday routine of plop, pray and pay. They want to play. They want to participate. But they feel spurned at every turn.

Will the Dones return? Not likely, according to the research. They’re done. Packard says it would be more fruitful if churches would focus on not losing these people in the first place. Preventing an exodus is far easier than attempting to convince refugees to return.

Pastors and other ministry leaders would benefit from asking and listening to these long-time members before they flee. This will require a change of habit. When it comes to listening, church leaders are too often in the habit of fawning over celebrity pastors for answers. It would be far more fruitful to take that time and spend it with real people nearby—existing members. Ask them some good questions, such as:

1. Why are you a part of this church?
2. What keeps you here?
3. Have you ever contemplated stepping away from church? Why or why not?
4. How would you describe your relationship with God right now?
5. How has your relationship with God changed over the past few years?
6. What effect, if any, has our church had on your relationship with God?
7. What would need to change here to help you grow more toward Jesus’ call to love God and love others?

It’s time to listen. Even as I’m writing this today, another high-capacity lay leader emailed me with his decision to leave his church. He’s done. Like many others I know, he’s also a nationally known Christian leader. But he’s done.

Your church, even if it’s one of the rare growing ones, is sitting on a ticking time bomb. The exodus of the Dones, the rise of the Nones and the disappearance of the Millennials do not look good for a church afraid to listen.

It’s not too late to start.

<http://www.churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/177144-thom-schultz-rise-of-the-done-with-church-population.html>

The Empty Pulpit

The Adelaide Advertiser

Church-going is down, fewer priests are being ordained. What draws the few who choose the life of the clergy and how will churches survive? MARIA MOSCARITOLO reports.

It is no surprise that the popularity of organised religion and the place of the church in people's lives is slowly dying. Yet despite this, there are still young men and women whose only ambition is to leave school and head for the pulpit.

True, they are a diminishing breed, but they hear the "call" of God as strongly as their predecessors – perhaps more so – as they pursue what is now an unglamorous career. Ordinations are down across organised religions, from the Catholic Church to the Lutheran Church. While religion's declined importance in society is mostly to blame, other more subtle factors also come into play: few attractive role models, the isolation of a priest's life, the lack of prestige.

University of South Australia clinical psychologist Dr Paul Whetham, co-author of *Hard to be Holy*, does not believe this means the future is gloomy. "It's raising up a new breed – they are more community-savvy," he says of incoming clergy. He predicts the declining popularity of churches will swing around as people increasingly buck against our "instant coffee" world to search for solace and meaning. But it will probably not be church pews they return to but church in the home, work or market place. "These are small faith communities who do life together, telling their stories and being accountable to one another through mentoring or peer mentoring relationships. It is through the give and take of real relationships that people get a deeper sense of community and spiritual connection".

The Catholic Church is suffering the most (although in developing countries it is booming). This year, no one in South Australia has come forward for ordination. One priest was ordained last year. Compare this to Adelaide in the early 1970s, when close to 80 men a year became priests. "We haven't got enough priests coming through to fill the parishes we have," says Father Dean Marin, director of vocations for the Diocese of Adelaide.

The Anglican Church still has steady numbers "exploring" the priesthood, but this translates to only one or two being ordained each year. It is not experiencing a shortage because this mirrors the fall in the number of parishes. Father Marin believes fear of long-term commitment – seen also in declining marriages, for instance – is as much responsible for the drop in clergy numbers as the sliding popularity of the church. Reverend Bob Kempe, assistant director of the pastoral program at the Lutheran seminary, ventures the few coming through have a much stronger sense of conviction, rather than simply testing whether it is what they want to do. "I don't think there's the kind of prestige in the minds, particularly of the younger ones, to be a pastor like there used to be," he says.

To ensure survival, SA churches are trying to revamp their image and attract the younger crowd. They are visiting schools and organising retreats, even tapping those with potential on the shoulder to have a go. Archdeacon Peter Stuart, head of the Anglican Church's ministry development council, says the church is looking for new leaders who can "build congregations".

The age of Uniting Church ministers is going up with the age of its congregation. But more young men and women are being attracted to the lay ministry, perhaps because it is an "easier in and easier out" than ordination. "I think it's related to the decline in standing... lower profile... of ministers in the community. People don't automatically think of the ministry as something they aspire to as a career," says Reverend Dr Andrew Dutney, principal of Parkin Wesley College. "If younger people don't see young ministers, they're not likely to think: I can do that."

Three or four years ago, most men entering the Lutheran Church were in their 30s and 40s and making the church their second career. Now it is seeing more interest from young aspirants. The average incoming age is about 25, and the church appears stumped – though pleased – by the reversal. But numbers are still waning. It ideally needs 10 to 12 new pastors a year, but is getting 7 to 10. But there are other problems besides fewer people behind pulpits.

Dr Whetham says priests have always been subjected to what he calls the "pedestal effect" – congregations treating church leaders as substitutes for God – but modern day life has made this peculiar isolation worse. "If clergy try to step down from the pedestal, congregations often try and put them back up there... clergy loneliness because of this effect is a key issue," he argues. A church leader is also an administrator, a counsellor and a social worker, but without the supportive community he could once rely on to share the load – and the result is burn-out. Priests, pastors, deacons can feel compelled to leave as they are asked to tackle more tasks with less support. "It's a bit of a vicious cycle," Dr Whetham says.

- Adapted from Maria Moscaritolo, 10 April 2004

Christian Mentoring Rationale

By Dr John Mallison

A common failing of those in ministry is to forget they are human, and need to be ministered to as well as ministering to others. Several Australian studies are revealing some alarming statistics of professional ministers in this country. As part of his PhD research, Dr Paul Whetham, Director of the Masters in Counselling Program at the University of South Australia, for example surveyed sixty clergy from a cross-section of denominations in southern New South Wales. As well as asking respondents to complete questionnaires, he also interviewed them individually on two separate occasions.

Paul and his wife Libby wrote their book *Hard to be Holy* based on the clergy research and clearly show the pressing need for support among Christian leaders. They noted that among the experiences of church leaders, there are high levels of stress and burnout, growing attrition rates, high levels of loneliness and lack of intimacy with those closest to them. Frequently there is an impoverished relationship with God and, at times, an abusive relationship with those they have been called to serve. These findings are consistent with international literature about clergy relationships.

In preparing their manuscript, the Whethams drew on the research findings of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS), which surveyed 4,500 senior clergy. The NCLS found that, for at least 19% of all congregational leaders, burnout is a major issue. A further 50% (one in two) are borderline and therefore potential candidates for burnout. Around 12% of leaders say they often think of leaving the ministry and an identical percentage diagnose themselves as having high or very high levels of stress. In one question, leaders were asked whether they had someone with whom they could be completely honest, and who encourages, supports and prays with them in their ministry role. Around 12% of clergy indicated that they have no person with whom they can be completely honest. Evidence suggests that these ministers have dramatically higher burnout scores than clergy as a whole.

The Whethams found that only 19% of clergy spoke of having "close", "deep", "intimate" or "loving" interactions with people. In other words, four out of five church leaders did not mention meaningful relationships. It is a case of "always giving in relationships but never receiving. This results in one-way interactions. This form of relating on its own is unnatural and unhealthy."

Dr Peter Kaldor of NCLS reports that in dealing with stress, there is a range of different coping strategies that leaders commonly seek to employ. These strategies include:

- Finding time for relaxation - stepping away from the pressures of work to get fresh air and, hopefully, to recharge the batteries.
- Dealing strategically with the pressures with which one is faced. Delegating tasks and responsibilities, reorganising time and priorities and seeking additional training, are all ways to seek to deal with the pressures in the workplace in the hope that the stress will be reduced as a result.
- Growing spiritually to combat pressures that are being faced. Seeking time alone in reflection or intentional times of prayer provide good examples of seeking to build up ones spiritual backbone in order to be able to better deal with the challenges that exist.
- Seeking support from others. Talking with someone about the issues one is facing is an important method of coping open to clergy.

Evidence suggests that those leaders who seek to cope by growing spiritually, or by dealing strategically with issues, recorded lower burnout scores. One of the learnings from this study is the importance of leaders having a support framework around them. *Hard to be Holy* underscores the importance of the pivotal nature of relationships with both God and others, and goes on to comment that, "Relationships simply take time ... so time management becomes crucial. Making relationships a priority, requires allocating time to, and making oneself available, for such relationships."

Increasingly, those who take their Christian discipleship and service seriously, are coming to see the value of having a mentor with whom they can share openly and to whom they can be accountable. As the wise old sage said, "Two are better than one" (Eccl. 4:9).

Australia: Great South Land of the Self-Absorbed or Spirit-Led?

“Culture is part of the air we breathe; it’s in our mother’s milk” Hans Rookmaker once said. If that’s the case, Australians are seriously in danger of being contaminated! According to demographer Bernard Salt, modern Australia is being affected by a growing sense of entitlement and self-absorption: “Quality of life in Australia has improved in line with the increased prosperity, and this process seems to have engendered a growing communal sense of entitlement. You can be forgiven for thinking that the universe always delivers: plasma televisions, mobile phones, branded clothing, cafes for breakfast, cheap overseas air travel and annual incomes that rise with age, expertise and application.

If the world delivers such abundant opportunity, then over time we become more and more comfortable; with this comes self-interest and even narcissism. Have a look at the Facebook or Twitter profiles of a random group of friends of all ages. There you’ll find long dissertations about their favourite quotes, their favourite colours, their pets’ names and, if you’re lucky, the number of countries they’ve visited”.

Australians may be materially rich but they are increasingly time, relationship and spiritually poor. This abundance has led to a growing mental and spiritual health crisis. One in five Australians will experience a mental illness within a 12-month period and almost half the population will experience a mental illness at some stage in their lives. And although just above half the Australian population identify with Christianity as their religion, less than one in seven regularly attend a church. **The 6 top reasons why Aussies don’t go to church include:** irrelevant to my life; don’t accept how it’s taught; outdated style; issues with ministers; don’t believe the Bible; and, too busy to attend (McCrindle, 2013).

There’s a crisis in the community but there’s also one in the church that few people know about. Of the one in seven Aussies who do attend church, the vast majority are usually too busy or self-absorbed to hang out or help out. Consequently, paid church workers are usually charged with the task of tending to the needs of the church and wider community, with little or no support. This typically creates problems for church attenders who do too little and paid church workers who do too much and often burn out. Read ***Hard to be Holy: The Untold Stories of Church Leaders – Chapter 1 Life in the Hothouse*** (Whetham & Whetham, 2nd Ed. 2015) – free download www.lifeboatstories.com.

This current Australian chapter of entitlement and self-absorption is consistent with the decline of great civilizations. Scottish historian Alexander Tyler examined the world’s greatest civilisations from the zenith of their power to their fall and he describes 8 critical steps involved. Sadly, it suggests that modern Australia may be nearing the end of the cycle:

1. From bondage to eminent spiritual faith
2. From spiritual faith to great courage
3. From courage to liberty
4. From liberty to abundance
5. From abundance to complacency
6. From complacency to apathy
7. From apathy to dependence
8. From dependence back to bondage

The bottom line is that abundance, entitlement and self-absorption ultimately create spiritual apathy and dependence. So even though we have growing mental and spiritual health crisis in Australia many of the faithful are either too busy or self-absorbed to hang out or help out. Indeed, *“the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few”* (Luke 10:2). It’s interesting to note that Jesus had a totally different take on abundance: *“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked”* (Luke 12:48). By loving God and our neighbor as ourselves, we are bound to break our self-absorption, revitalize our spirit-led faith and go on the adventure of our life. Read ***The Spirit Led Life: God’s Ultimate Desire*** (Stuart Gramenz, 2008) – free download www.lifeboatstories.com.

Lifeboat Stories is a psychology practice that focuses on mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. Our services include counselling, free online resources and community workshops to help build resilience and wellbeing.

Ripple Effect is a book club that connects faith with life. It creates a safe space to retreat, revive and reengage. Members meet for regular soul food in cafés to explore Christian spirituality books and personal Spirit-led stories. It also aims to create a ripple effect by resourcing mentors and building support networks (see last page for our free e-books).

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Meryem Brown, psychologist, Synergia

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Dr Barry Chant, president, Tabor College (Australia)



Dr Paul Whetham is a clinical psychologist who has over 25 years' experience in mental health.

His latest book is *Built for Adventure: Toward mystery, meaning & mental health*.

Libby Whetham is a mother, ESL teacher and group worker who has previously served overseas.

Paul and Libby now run a psychology practice in Seacliff, South Australia, called **Lifeboat Stories**.

