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**Resilient Pastors:  
Strengthening & Establishing Longevity in an Age of Burnout**

**By  
Rev. Leland Jackson Howell**

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2026

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Graduation Date: May 15, 2026

Dr. Jeremy Ruckstaetter  
Faculty Advisor

---

Dr. Mark Ryan  
Second Reader

---

Dr. Joel Hathaway  
Director of DMin Program

---

Mr. Steve Jamieson  
Library Director

---

## **Abstract**

Pastoral ministry is increasingly marked by burnout, conflict, and vocational attrition, resulting in comparatively short pastoral tenures despite evidence that longer pastorates yield greater congregational stability, leadership effectiveness, and spiritual fruitfulness. This study addresses the problem of pastoral impermanence by examining how senior pastors sustain healthy, long-term ministries. The issue is significant because diminished pastoral longevity weakens both congregational life and ministerial resilience, whereas sustained pastorates foster deeper trust, discipleship, and missional continuity.

This study engages interdisciplinary literature in pastoral theology, spiritual formation, emotional intelligence, self-care, and Bowen Family Systems Theory to assess the factors contributing to pastoral health and endurance. While existing research consistently emphasizes the importance of personal piety, emotional maturity, and sustainable leadership practices, it often frames pastoral longevity in terms of individual discipline and technique. This study builds upon and critically reframes that emphasis by attending to the integration of theological, relational, and formational dynamics in pastoral life.

Employing a qualitative research design, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with experienced senior pastors serving long-term pastorates within the Presbyterian Church in America. Data were collected through in-depth interviews focused on pastoral practices, challenges, sustaining rhythms, and perceived outcomes of long-term ministry. The data were coded and analyzed thematically to identify recurring

patterns and to develop a constructive interpretation of pastoral longevity grounded in lived ministerial experience.

The findings indicate that pastoral longevity is not sustained primarily through individual effort, self-discipline, or the adoption of isolated best practices. Rather, enduring pastoral ministry emerges from a theologically grounded integration of spiritual formation, relational maturity, and adaptive leadership, in which pastors cultivate rhythms of dependence upon divine grace, practices of embodied rest and prayer, and patterns of relational accountability within their congregational systems. Long-tenured pastors demonstrate an ability to navigate conflict, fatigue, and role strain not merely through resilience techniques, but through a reorientation of pastoral identity and practice shaped by ongoing spiritual renewal and systemic awareness.

This study argues that pastoral health and longevity are best understood not as the product of personal optimization, but as the fruit of sustained participation in practices that locate the pastor within a network of divine sustenance, communal relationships, and adaptive leadership demands. These findings contribute to pastoral theology by offering a more integrative and theologically robust account of ministerial endurance. Further research is recommended to explore these dynamics across denominational contexts and to examine institutional practices that may better support long-term pastoral health and stability.

“God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message.”

*Robert Murray M'Cheyne*

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## Acknowledgments

To the saints of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Norfolk, Virginia: thank you for your endurance and perseverance in the gospel. Over the last twenty-eight years, we have grown up together. Your willingness to let me develop as a minister and mature as a Christian has meant enduring years of unpolished sermons, misplaced leadership enthusiasm, and the errors of a pastor learning to counsel in real-time. For your grace, kindness, friendship, and rich love, I am deeply grateful to serve as one of your pastors.

I am indebted to the Session of Trinity Presbyterian for directing me toward this DMin program and for the generous study leave and travel support that made this project possible. Your prayers, maturity, and encouragement are a significant reason I remain in ministry at this church today. Thank you for your friendship in the gospel. To my fellow pastors, Ben Lyon and Clay Warden: thank you for picking up the slack and bearing the cost of my preoccupation and busyness during this process. Your friendship and generosity have been a sustaining force.

To the staff at Trinity, thank you for your patience and kindness. I recognize the cost this project exacted on all of you and from our common mission; I look forward to celebrating our completion together. I owe particular thanks to Patricia Darden and Jennifer Wernly. Patty, as my administrator for twenty-two years, your relentless work—from Zotero notation to logistical coordination—has been vital to my own longevity and effectiveness. Jenny, your professional editorial eye organized and polished this paper far beyond its original state. While any remaining errors are mine alone, its clarity is a credit to you. Thank you both.

I wish to thank my parents, Bill and Cessie Howell, for a lifetime of faithful Christian service, and an abiding love for family and the local church. You shaped me into someone who desires to serve the local church and community with modesty and longevity. I also thank Adam and Kelley Anderson; your very generous gift funded this doctoral program, and without your support, this endeavor would not have been possible.

A special thanks to President Tom Gibbs of Covenant Theological Seminary who allowed me to enter this program off cycle, and whose idea formed the nucleus of this dissertation. Thank you, Dr. Gibbs and Dr. George Schenk, for the leadership, patience, and wisdom that you gave throughout the coursework for this program. Additionally, a heartfelt thanks to the incredible band of brothers comprising my academic cohort. You truly made this doctoral process so much more fun, rich, and edifying. You are gifts to me.

Two ministers merit special mention. The Reverend Paige Young, my childhood pastor and first employer in ministry, set the template for faithful pastoring over decades. He taught me to prioritize family, maintain a sense of humor, and love a congregation through heartbreak. The Reverend Lowell Sykes has been my ministerial north star and closest friend. Lowell, your prayers and belief in my ability to finish this program often exceeded my own. Thank you for modeling pastoral integrity and longevity for me.

To my children and their spouses: thank you for your patience during vacations and holidays when I was physically present but mentally occupied with research. You are a gift and a delight to me as adults and friends. Thank you for your support and love. Finally, the blessing of my wife, Rebecca, cannot be overstated. Your unwavering support and willingness to endure "dissertation widowhood" without complaint are the reasons I reached the finish line. Your wisdom has guided me, your humor lightened me, and your

love has sustained me. I am profoundly grateful for our thirty-three years of marriage and twenty-eight years of ministry together. You are a treasure; thank you.

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## **Abbreviations**

PCA                      Presbyterian Church in America

BFST                     Bowen Family Systems Theory

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Pastoral Ministry has never been easy. Without hyperbole, the Apostle Paul recounts the cost of his ministry. He shares,

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one- I am talking like a madman- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.<sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.<sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?<sup>30</sup> If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul uses a rhetorical list of these extensive personal sufferings and hardships to demonstrate his devotion despite the great personal cost. While pastors in the United States or the West do not face the same risks or costs that Paul endured, they do share the heavy emotional, spiritual, and psychological burden of the calling. And that burden, carried year after year, exacts a significant toll upon pastoral health and subsequent longevity. Which is why, like the Apostle Paul, we cry out, “Who is sufficient for these things?”<sup>17</sup> For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 11:23-30 (ESV)

word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Who is sufficient, indeed.

The Office of the Stated Clerk of the PCA provided data that indicates the average tenure of a first pastorate is 5.1 years, and only 1.5% of pastors in the denomination have served the same church for more than twenty years. Lifeway recently surveyed more than 1,500 pastors serving in evangelical or Black Protestant churches. They reported that the median pastoral tenure at one church is eight years. Only 15% of pastors they surveyed indicated that their ministry at their current church stretches back at least 25 years. Among those churches that existed and had a pastor 10 years ago, only 4 in 10 (44%) still had the same pastor. Those ministers that left the pastorate before retirement revealed a current annual attrition rate of 1.2% among evangelical and Black Protestant pastors. This means that every year since 2015, slightly more than 1 in 100 pastors walked away from the pulpit. When the current pastors were asked why the former pastor left the ministry, the most common reasons were a change in calling (37%), conflict in a church (23%) and burnout (22%). Of the 1.2% of pastors who leave the ministry each year, 7% are forced out due to moral or ethical issues.<sup>3</sup> Almost one half of all pastors leave their church due to conflict or burnout (45%).

The reality remains: Pastoral longevity today stands starkly at a median pastoral tenure of 8 years; it is only 5 years in the PCA. 4 in 10 pastors remain in the same church 10 years; only 15% endure at the same church for 25 years, with

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 2:16b-17

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Earls, “Pastors Remain Committed to the Pulpit,” *Lifeway Research*, May 29, 2025.

that number plummeting to 1.5% in the PCA. Should one find encouragement or concern from those numbers? Cause for hope or alarm depends upon how one interprets that survey. Bill Mills, pastor, author of more than twenty books, and founder of Leadership Resources International, a global ministry seeking to train and encourage pastors throughout the developing world, and Craig Parro, pastor, author, global teacher and trainer, and president of Leadership, Resources International, in their book, *Finishing Well*, affirm the challenges attendant to the office of pastor. They note sympathetically, “There is no more demanding job nor a more pressure-filled ministry than pastoring a local church. To bring a fresh message from the Scriptures each week, to meet counseling needs, to lead with vision, and to meet the expectations of the people is more than anyone can handle.”<sup>4</sup> One learns about the consequences of such pressure by looking at some of the recent data concerning pastoral health and longevity. In his book, *The Resilient Pastor*, counselor, trainer of pastors, and author Dan Kohn surveys the landscape of American pastors and notes the dismaying realities. He writes,

1500 pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches. 80% of pastors feel unqualified and discouraged in their role as pastors. 50% are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but they have no other way of making a living. 85% said their greatest problem is they are sick and tired of dealing with problem people.<sup>5</sup>

Kohn paints an empirically dismal picture of the state of clergy in America. More clergy leave the ministry due to moral failure annually than the

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Mills and Craig Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry* (Leadership Resources International, 1997), 203.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Kohn, *The Resilient Pastor* (WW Press, 2003), 10.

entire population of Williamsburg, VA. With barely half of clergy surveyed eager or committed to remaining in ministry, the church is left in a weakened, precarious position. Noted pastor of pastors, Anglican Bishop and author Peter Brain, provides a perspective from down-under by surveying his clergy in Perth, Australia. What he discovered resonates with what's reported in the States. In his book, *Going the Distance*, he notes, "27% of all pastors had 'burnout,' suffered a break down or serious illness whilst in full-time ministry."<sup>6</sup> Worse, the figure went up to almost half (44%) for those who had been ordained for more than 15 years.<sup>7</sup> College and seminary professor, pastor, and author of more than fifteen books, Richard Olson and his colleagues wrote *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*. They note that studies by the Alban Institute and Fuller Seminary reveal, "50%, fully one out of every two pastors drop out of ministry within the first five years, and many never go back to the church again."<sup>8</sup> Author, and pastor for more than 45 years in a multitude of contexts, Chuck Miller summarizes the situation in which we find ourselves as a church. In his book, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, Miller acknowledges, "Our leaders are wrung-out, struggling with moral failure, living lives that are out of balance, and feeling bitter toward, or disappointed in, the church and God."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Robert Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Matthias Media, 2004), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today's Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Chuck Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders: Integrating Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development* (Xulon, 2007), 6.

Given the scope and variety of pastors and traditions in the United States, collecting meta-data on all pastors in America is neither feasible nor desirable. Nonetheless, some statistics continue to appear and to alert. For instance, professor, author, and vice president of the North American Mission Board, Trevin Wax, writing for *The Gospel Coalition*, notes by way of contrast where the length of pastoral tenures stand. Interested in disabusing the notion of quickly changing pastors, and affirming the Lifeway survey quoted above, Wax notes instead that the average tenure is not 2-3 years, but research indicates consistently 5-7 years.<sup>10</sup> While 5-7 years is more healthy than 2-3 years for both churches and pastors, his analysis provides cold comfort for churches needing longevity and pastors searching for stability.

Much has been written about the benefits of longer-tenured pastorates, which involve enduring beyond the five-year mark. The late pastor and author, Tim Keller, notes how inextricable the relationship is between pastoral longevity and the size and growth of a church. He writes,

The larger the church, the more important it is for ministers, especially the senior minister, to stay put for a long time. As noted above, smaller churches change less rapidly and have less turnover. With this innate stability, a smaller church can absorb a change of minister every few years if necessary. But the larger the church, the more the staff in general and the senior pastor in particular are the main sources of continuity and stability. Rapid turnover of staff is highly detrimental to a large church.<sup>11</sup>

Frequent turnover and pastoral transience materially affect the health of a congregation. Keller attributes strong correlation between pastoral longevity and the

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<sup>10</sup> Trevin Wax, “The Myth of the Church-Hopping Pastor,” *The Gospel Coalition*, April 12, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy J. Keller, “Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes With Growth,” *Redeemer City to City*, April 1, 2024.

continuing growth of a congregation due to the continuity and stability that the senior minister provides. Southern Seminary's Professor John Crotts notes that pastors who endure longer than five years accumulate additional benefits to their congregations and for themselves.<sup>12</sup> Publisher and consultant, Thom Rainer, agrees. He notes that longevity in ministry correlates to church health, extends beyond the strategically important fifth year, deepens relationships within the church and the community, and withstands conflict.<sup>13</sup> Pastor, counselor, and author Richard Brown, in his book, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, notes, "There is overwhelmingly persuasive evidence that the most productive years of a pastorate seldom begin before the fourth to sixth year of a minister's tenure. By changing pastors frequently, a congregation has an excellent chance of missing out on some very productive years of ministry."<sup>14</sup> The Alban Institute, formerly of Washington, D.C., currently at Duke Divinity School, notes similarly the benefits and the challenges of a long-term pastorate. They reported on a, "discovery of powerful evidence favoring long pastorates" and concluded that, "in many ways, maintaining a healthy long pastorate is more difficult than changing pastorates every five years."<sup>15</sup> Writing for the Alban Institute, long-term pastor, author, and Lutheran bishop Glenn Ludwig provides a broad perspective. Affirming Rainer's benefits above, he notes the advantages of a healthy, long-term pastorate including,

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<sup>12</sup> John Crotts, "The Selfish Reason to Stay at a Church for a Long Time," *Southern Equip*, January 16, 2018, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/selfish-reason-stay-church-long-time/>.

<sup>13</sup> Thom Rainer, "Six Reasons Why Longer Tenured Pastorates Are Better," *Church Answers*, December 16, 2015, <https://churchjobfinder.com/articles/six-reasons-why-longer-tenured-pastorates-are-better>.

<sup>14</sup> Richard W. Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability: The Keys to Pastoral Longevity* (Christian Publications, 1993), 47.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, 14.

in-depth knowledge of and relationships with congregants and the congregation as a whole; contributes to greater growth together over time; stability makes possible events not possible during a short tenure; possibilities for greater spiritual growth for congregants and pastor; and deeper knowledge of and participation in the local community.<sup>16</sup>

Sharing his own perspective as a pastor as well as that of a bishop, Ludwig notes the breadth of advantages that redound to a congregation through a healthy, longitudinal pastoral tenure. Brown corroborates Ludwig's assertion and Keller's premise of the relationship between growth and long-term pastorates. He notes, "There is very persuasive evidence that suggests that it is rare to find a growing congregation that has sustained its growth over a long period of time that has not had the benefits of both long pastorates and an adequate program staff."<sup>17</sup>

The tension noted above is the axis on which this paper turns. What features keep the majority of pastors from enduring in their pastorate through these more fruitful years? Why are long pastorates far more the exception than the norm? Churches and pastors both benefit from healthy, lengthier pastorates, but long-term pastorates—twenty years or more—appear statistically unusual. The benefits both to the minister and to the congregation of a long-term, healthy pastorate remain outsized and vital. But, in a time of significant and frequent pastoral turn-over, burnout, and clergy moral failures, how can a pastor persevere? What are the features relating pastoral longevity to the minister's and congregation's health? Specifically, what contributes to longer, more effective tenures pastorally?

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<sup>16</sup> Glenn E. Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul: Building Effective Long-Term Pastorates* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, 79.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

1. How do senior pastors define pastoral health?
2. What personal and spiritual practices contribute to longitudinal pastoral health?
3. What challenges do senior pastors overcome to continue in longitudinally healthy ministry?
4. What benefits derive from a healthy, longitudinal pastorate to the pastor and to the congregation?

## **Significance of the Study**

The researcher hopes to learn both what contributes to longer-term pastorates, and what benefits flow from a healthy, lengthy tenure. One may discover that the same things that enable greater effectiveness as a pastor flow from the same temperament and skills that favor longer pastorates. Such findings would be quite useful then, not just for aiding longer pastoral tenures, but for encouraging greater fruitfulness in one's ministry. For those ministers serving in the vital first five years, what are the habits, patterns, and pathways that will enable them to persevere in ministry, setting the trajectory for a longer, healthier pastoral experience? For those ministers experiencing some form of burnout and disillusionment, how might insights into themselves and God's Word provide helpful correctives to their current state? For church leaders seeking longer,

healthier tenures from their pastors, how might the findings of this research buttress their support for and awareness of the challenges their pastor faces daily? The research appears to indicate that ordinarily longer pastorates yield more fruit for the pastor personally and for the congregation generally. The research from this study may serve as handmaid toward those worthy goals.

### **Definition of Terms**

The Reformed Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, is known as and will be referred to as the PCA. Per the polity of the PCA, the research will be limited to ordained, male pastors. For the purposes of this study, longitudinal pastorates should extend beyond the averages of 5-7 years. But particular attention will be paid to pastors who have served in the same church for at least 20 years. Remaining in one parish a long time is important, as is remaining healthy there. By health, the research focuses upon institutionally productive conflict management, on-going leadership development, power sharing and collaboration, and some fruits of Kingdom growth. Personally, the research focuses upon spiritual formation and personal piety, self-care and emotional health, and insights gleaned from BFST. BFST refers to the school of psychological thought, developed eponymously through the research and writing of Dr. Murray Bowen and popularized by Dr. Edwin Friedman, known as Bowen Family Systems Theory.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). To gain a broader understanding of some of the relevant issues, four areas of literature were reviewed:

1. Personal Piety & Spiritual Formation
2. Self-Care & Spiritual Health
3. Emotional Intelligence & Bowen Family Systems Theory
4. 2 Corinthians and Paul's Pastoral Theology

Professors and authors Bob Burns et al., Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie followed and studied a significant number of pastors and their spouses for seven years to determine what contributed to pastoral longevity and health. The culmination of their findings and insights became *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*.<sup>18</sup> They note five dominant themes that help shape pastoral health, fulfillment, and effectiveness. These include: Spiritual Formation, Self-Care, Emotional and Cultural Intelligence, Marriage and Family, and Leadership and Management. Their categories marry nicely with the interest areas of the research as well as dominant themes and areas of writing and thinking in the literature. The research seeks to discern if the major themes from *Resilient Ministry* arise as primary for and indispensable to pastoral health and longevity.

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<sup>18</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving* (IVP Books, 2013).

## Personal Piety & Spiritual Formation

### Challenges to Longitudinal Health

An ocean of ink has been spilled describing and lamenting ministerial burnout. The term itself can be oleaginous, demanding definition. Olson et al. supply a helpful definition. They write,

Here is the definition from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: ‘exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.’ Pioneering researcher Herbert Freudenberger defined burnout as a ‘state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward.’<sup>19</sup>

Webster captures well the feelings that militate against pastoral health and longevity. But Freudenberger summarizes archly the collision for pastors of their devotion to a cause and way of life with the often less than expected or desired results and rewards. It is at that intersection of disappointment, sadness, and frustration that burnout takes root, malignantly expanding and often metastasizing into cynicism, despair, and angry resignation. Researchers consistently return to spiritual formation practices, rhythms, and the spiritual disciplines as the primary means of combatting spiritual burnout. Lutheran pastor, author of more than 16 books, and noted church consultant Roy Oswald, in his book, *Clergy Self Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry*, highlights the need for the pastor’s personal practices and piety in helping shape pastoral health and avoiding pastoral burnout. He notes the vital and unique pressures pastors face in maintaining their spiritual vigor and vitality. He warns, “Pastors face unique problems,

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<sup>19</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 34.

I believe, in keeping fresh spirituality. For one thing, the spiritual disciplines we learned as children and young adults are now the tools of our trade. For me, scripture, prayer, and worship became overfamiliar and lost much of their mystery.”<sup>20</sup> Burns et al. agree about the temptation for pastors to lose vital connection with the very means of spiritual health they need. They underscore the critical import of these practices for the health of the minister’s soul. They write, “Pastors need to take steps to elevate the priority of their own relationship with God...For pastors and ministry leaders to grow in resilience for a lifetime of fruitful ministry, they must pursue a vibrant relationship with God.”<sup>21</sup> Such a healthy, dynamic relationship while offering greater health and vitality rests upon the foundations of personal, intentional spiritual practices and habits.

Olson et al. similarly underscore the indispensable role that a minister’s own faith and spiritual vitality play in aiding pastoral longevity. They note, “[Pastors must] rediscover your first love in ministry. It is a time to ask, ‘Where are your current passions? What is your first love? Are you living out of your deepest vocational and spiritual gifts?’”<sup>22</sup> They point to the Apostle Paul as one sympathetic to and familiar with burnout. They point further to what sustained Paul amidst that pressure. They note, “Paul...also describes how he was theologically sustained. He writes, ‘But we have this treasure in clay jars’...so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”<sup>23</sup> They point to the need for an on-going spiritual

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<sup>20</sup> Roy Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care* (Rowman, 1991), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 43.

dependence amidst and in the realities of personal brokenness and weakness. Mills places Jesus in solidarity with ministers struggling under the pressures and weight of ministry. He writes, “Apart from God’s sovereign protection, plan, and timing, Christ may have died before the cross if God had not sustained Him. Jesus knows about burnout. He knows that it is to be on the verge of losing heart.”<sup>24</sup> If Jesus knew about the possibility of burnout and most pastors battle and struggle against it, the need to remain close to the source of renewal and fount of power becomes quite significant to the minister.

The key to combatting spiritual burnout is to focus upon God’s glory alone, contends Mills. He writes, “Here is God’s great priority. He calls His people to this agenda and to no other the glory of God filling the earth. Herein is a key to battling burnout. His agenda alone is worthy of our calling and certain of fulfillment.”<sup>25</sup> Referring to how the prophet Ezekiel remained faithful amidst adversity Mills focuses attention upon three items. He suggests, “There are three things that God provided for Ezekiel that enabled this man to endure: a vision of his glory, a call to faithfulness, and a commissioning to the ministry of His Word. Those are the only three things that will sustain you and me as well.”<sup>26</sup> Mills lifts the eyes of faith of the tired, exasperated, ready-to-quit pastor to God’s glory and calling. Brain similarly reframes the recognition of burnout as an opportunity for the minister. He writes, “Burnout symptoms, when seen as warning light, can be a real friend. They become an opportunity to step back, to take remedial action and then either to implement or redouble one’s efforts in establishing

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<sup>24</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 227.

<sup>25</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 95.

<sup>26</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 176.

patterns of self-care.”<sup>27</sup> There is little doubt that burnout is real and prevalent across most occupations, the pastorate notwithstanding. If the reasons for burnout remain typical and even predictable for ministers, the consequences for pastoral longevity are clear and distressing.

### **Necessity for Longitudinal Health**

Burns et al. underscore the need for a rich spiritual life to undergird one’s ministry. They write, “Pastors need to pursue growth in their understanding and feelings concerning God’s acceptance. They also need to focus on their daily personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The sad fact is that, for most of us in ministry, our work for Christ comes before our relationship with Christ.”<sup>28</sup> Burns et al. highlights the tendency to confuse ministry activity with spiritual depth, to conflate pastoral busyness with pastoral health. The tension between activity *for* God and devotion *to* God remains a vital challenge with which to wrestle. Best-selling author and pastor Peter Scazzero warns, “But work for God that is not nourished by a deep interior life with God will eventually be contaminated by other things.”<sup>29</sup> He notes similarly, “Our experiential sense of worth and validation gradually shifts from God’s unconditional love for us in Christ to our works and performance.”<sup>30</sup> Here is a unique challenge for ministers. Every Christian struggles to maintain spiritual practices and disciplines amidst the frenetic, distracting

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<sup>27</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 31.

culture today. Pastors, by virtue of their calling, employ these same practices for professional purposes and risk losing the vital intimacy that these produce due, ironically, to too much ministry, too much activity on the Lord's behalf.

Former Jesuit, author, professor, Episcopal priest, and counseling clinician, Donald Hands wrote *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy* with pastor, professor, and academic Wayne Fehr. With their broad backgrounds Hands and Fehr note the particular dangers to ministers spiritually. They write, "The alienation from God is concealed by the cleric's immersion in 'the things of God'—teaching, preaching visiting the sick, praying with others, presiding at liturgy. While sincere, this kind of activity can coexist with an almost complete absence of private, personal presence to God."<sup>31</sup> Hands and Fehr underscore the ways in which ministry *work* can camouflage personal ministry *depth*. The pressures to perform and to present remain almost entirely external for ministers. Such external markers mask what may or may not be alive and flourishing internally, spiritually. The performative nature of the calling, joined to the expectation for and receipt of praise in the pursuit of these responsibilities, can confuse and mislead the minister. Miller points to the slippery temptations of church busyness that crowd out our interior relationship with the Lord. He writes, "It is all too easy for us leaders to run through life—from meeting to meeting, from sermon to sermon, from crisis to crisis, from event to event—without tending to our constant need for the cup of our lives to be filled and refilled by the Pitcher."<sup>32</sup> What are the changes demanded by both the spiritual entropy common to

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<sup>31</sup> Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: A New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self, and Others* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC), 54.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 104–5.

every Christian and the unique temptations to replace spiritual practices and concomitant intimacy with ministerial busyness?

Burns et al. discovered four key practices from their longitudinal study of a variety of pastors that aided their spiritual formation. They note these as, “Building rituals, maintaining accountability, growing through hardships, and practicing spiritual disciplines.”<sup>33</sup> These practices, matrix-like, weave in and out of each other, building and dependent upon one another, and growing more effective in combination with the others. Practitioners and writers in the field of ministry corroborate that these forces develop and undergird spiritual formation and demand attention and intentionality. Miller notes the effort required to attend to one’s spiritual formation and development, even for ministers. He writes, “When spiritual formation is an intentional part of the leadership agenda, there is the God-given potential for repentance, confession, reconnection, new perspective, creative ideas and restored and restorative community.”<sup>34</sup> The value of and indispensability for ministry motivate the pastor for the sacrifices needed to prioritize such personal, spiritual practices. He writes of their salutary benefits, “The pattern of daily dependence will always deliver to us the comfort and strength that we require.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly underscoring the necessity of pursuing a vital spiritual life as a minister, Ludwig notes archly, “Do not neglect your own personal spiritual life....Be rigorously honest with oneself before God.”<sup>36</sup> Building upon the necessity of healthy, personal

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<sup>33</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 99–100.

<sup>35</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 90.

spiritual practices, Oswald notes the relationship between spiritual depth and the reality of suffering. He comments, “Spiritual depth also seems to be an antidote to burnout. Many of the spiritual giants of the past acknowledge that pain and adversity were their greatest teachers.”<sup>37</sup> Suffering either deepens pastoral resilience or accelerates pastoral burnout and turnover. And spiritual formation, practiced intimately and consistently, provides a reservoir from which to draw during these inevitable times of challenge and difficulty.

Suffering comes without respect for desire or timing. But how can one develop more of the spiritual depth in preparation for the trials of ministry about which Oswald speaks? He suggests for the pastor to lead in his own spiritual devotion and energy. He writes, “The way to keep a congregation vital is to be a vital, growing person in their midst. Clergy don’t need more knowledge or skills as much as they need a spiritual life.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Oswald maintains that a pastor often grows most through suffering, but more that clergy spiritual health directly relates to congregational spiritual health. And spiritual health must remain a vital component of any pastor’s life. Oswald underscores the necessity of a pastor’s personal piety developing through the ordinary means of grace. He describes them as, “Spiritual disciplines can be for us the regular pathways by which we open ourselves to the grace of God. Spiritual disciplines can help restore us to a sense of being whole, forgiven, and at peace.”<sup>39</sup> That sense of wholeness,

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<sup>37</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 95.

<sup>39</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 96.

forgiveness, and peace sustains a pastor through the vicissitudes of ministry and of life and serve as buffers against the inevitable tendency toward burnout.

Mills and Parro affirm the priority of spiritual disciplines in the lives of clergy as a prophylactic against the corrosion of burnout. They write, “It is God’s presence that keeps us even when we are exhausted in situations that would seem to overwhelm us. There is a physicalness about His presence that transforms us and sets us free.”<sup>40</sup> The intimacy enjoyed with the Lord that flows from these practices and habits buttresses the minister against the expected travails of life. They enjoin, “When we learn to serve our people out of the overflow of our intimacy with God, our hearts will remain full, and they will be transformed in His presence.”<sup>41</sup> Australian Bishop Brain underscores a similar sentiment—easy to miss or to neglect—for the healthy, longer-serving minister. He notes, “Healthy, and balanced, pastors, who are able to handle both a low and high expectations of lay people, will be those who have had time to reflect upon the great truths of justification by faith and the priesthood and ministry of all believers.”<sup>42</sup> Channeling Martin Luther, Brain underscores that the Gospel must undergird our resilience and strengthen our resolve. The ballast for the pastoral ministry comes from the weight of Jesus’ finished work, appropriated by faith through the ordinary means of grace available to all Christians. Emphasizing the need for alignment of God-given gifts with godly character, Miller underscores the minister’s calling to focus upon spiritual health. He writes, “Before God calls us to mission, He calls us to a personal and ongoing

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<sup>40</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 13.

relationship with Himself. This call to relationship is the starting point of the process by which God forms leaders for His church.”<sup>43</sup> Miller goes further, putting a finer point on the relationship between ministry effectiveness and intimacy with God. He states, “The secret of godly and effective leadership is indeed God Himself...[though] it seems more exciting—and less threatening—to do ministry than to come be with Jesus.”<sup>44</sup> The dangers of this diminishment of spiritual practices and formation, masked by busyness and preoccupation in ministry, remain legion. The consequences of this spiritual impoverishment will be both seen and felt by the pastor and in his ministry.

Presbyterian pastor, author, and professor Robert H. Ramey, in his book *Thriving in Ministry*, describes the outcome of a neglected interiority sympathetically, writing, “Our driven lifestyle takes its toll on us. We experience the toll in the form of heartburn, a pounding headache, the pouring of a fifth cup of coffee, or yet another sleepless night. We can never fool our bodies, for they keep crying out to us to ‘come away to a deserted place and rest a while.’”<sup>45</sup> Scazzero notes not what these dangers bring, but from where they spring. Scazzero writes, “Work for God that is not nourished by a deep interior life with God will eventually be contaminated by other things such as ego, power, needing approval of and from others, and buying into the wrong ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we can’t fail.”<sup>46</sup> These authors together speak to the human soul’s desire for

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<sup>43</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 64–65.

<sup>45</sup> Robert H. Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry* (Chalice Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>46</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 32.

meaning, value, and importance and how pastoral ministry can seductively offer counterfeits to our truest identity found in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

A fruit of this counterfeit identity is hypocrisy. Speaking of the danger of the gap that opens between what one teaches and what one functionally believes, Hands and Fehr explore the roots of this gap in application. Writing of ministers they warn, “They are well educated in theology, and are often eloquent in speaking of the truths of Christian faith. But they have either never felt deeply and personally the truth they proclaim, or they have gradually drifted away from a personal relationship to them.”<sup>47</sup> Ludwig concurs with the reality that pastors who have never experienced or have drifted away from the truth they proclaim remain in danger of burnout. He roots the source of ministerial burnout in the diminishment of one’s affections for the Lord through the loss of these practices and habits. He notes, “If burnout is a loss of meaning, then remembering what it is we are called to be and do will always serve us well. Scripture reading, meditation, prayer, reflection, and retreats can all help to remind us of what we are to be doing and of God’s promises to us.”<sup>48</sup> Ludwig continues by addressing the need to balance competing pressures and important needs for one’s life in ministry. He writes, “There are three poles that every parish pastor must strive to keep in balance: ministry, family/community, and spiritual formation.”<sup>49</sup> Note the Lutheran Bishop lists spiritual formation as important as ministry itself. Like the adage that a cobbler himself often has the worst shoes, ministers can fail to prioritize and nourish the very thing from which

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<sup>47</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 59.

they make their living and preach to others. And the consequences remain obvious to practitioners and are evident in the data about burnout and longevity.

### **Practices for Longitudinal Health**

Ramey notes a common denominator about effective ministers in healthy, long-term pastorates. Referring to a survey of pastors, he details, “Despite the difficulty of maintaining their regular spiritual disciplines, they affirmed ‘that a strong private spiritual and devotional life is critically foundational to effective ministry.’”<sup>50</sup> Author and seminary professor, Robert Creech, in his book, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, notes that spiritual practices allow the minister to navigate difficulties in ministry, particularly interpersonally. He writes, “The proper practice of classical spiritual disciplines ought to contribute to our ability to make our way through life with less anxiety...the pursuit of formation that includes spiritual practices may also contribute to our emotional maturity.”<sup>51</sup> For Olson, et al. there are no shortcuts to ministerial health apart from the time-tested, historic spiritual disciplines. They suggest, “[W]e each develop our unique ‘Rule of Life’. This is an intentional plan of spiritual disciplines, practices that gives structure and direction for one’s spiritual growth.”<sup>52</sup> Ludwig goes further, delineating what a pastor’s Rule might include in the pursuit of spiritual health and vitality. He lists: meditation, journaling, the use of a spiritual director, fasting, pilgrimages, and kinesthetic

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<sup>50</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2019), 99.

<sup>52</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 84.

spirituality.<sup>53</sup> Other writers and thinkers would applaud the tenor and direction of these recommendations but focus first upon the minister's self-understanding. There is a vital connection between the way a pastor defines oneself and these spiritual practices themselves.

### **Spiritual Formation and Self-Identity**

The practices noted for spiritual formation do more than feed the minister's soul; they also liberate the pastor from discouragement and self-deception, acknowledged sources of burnout. Brain communicates this linkage, writing, "The practiced pattern of daily dependence will always deliver to us the comfort and strength that we require."<sup>54</sup> He notes appreciatively the role of faith for the minister. He writes, "Faith in Christ, itself a gift from God, is a great incentive to faithful work for God. We work as pastors not to earn or prove our worth to God, ourselves or anyone else, but because we have been graciously received by the heavenly father at the expense of his beloved Son."<sup>55</sup> Mills and Parro similarly point to the importance of faith for the challenge of a minister's identity formation and strength. They write, "Paul gives us another expression of God's mercy and that is the ability to see our lives and our ministries from His perspective, to look at our circumstances with eyes fixed on the eternal."<sup>56</sup> Such unconditional, vast love from the Father through Jesus Christ motivates both the practices necessary and the

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<sup>53</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 61–62.

<sup>54</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 251.

<sup>56</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 257.

perspective required to endure as a pastor. Mills and Parro note further the direct connections of resting in the love of the Father and the work of Christ to burnout prevention. They write, “The pressures to create a ‘successful’ ministry can be enormous and lead to burnout. Jesus refused to define success by the number of his followers or by the weight of His reputation. Instead, He defined success as faithfully doing his Father’s work when and where His Father directed.”<sup>57</sup> Remaining close to and spiritually connected with the Father prove to be not just guardrails against over-functioning and over-working, but brakes upon our impulses to make ministry about ourselves and our achievements.

Brain connects the minister’s ability to limit over-work with the disciplines of spiritual formation. He notes, “In order to say ‘no,’ I need to be sure and comfortable that my status before God is settled not by the amount of work I do or the size of the church I’m ministering in, but my acceptance by God, the Father.”<sup>58</sup> Oswald concurs, noting the freedom the minister receives from living by faith in what God has done. He underscores, “When I burn myself out in this ministry, it’s usually because I subconsciously believe that salvation is up to me, that, somehow, salvation needs to be redone by me. What freedom comes when we realize that the task of salvation has been accomplished.”<sup>59</sup> The authors agree that many of the roots of burnout flow from mistaken expectations for ministry joined to mistaken understandings of oneself. The antidote for pastor and parishioner alike remains single-minded focus upon the life and work of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>57</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 146.

<sup>58</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 48.

<sup>59</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 16.

The authors note how susceptible ministers are to the emotional snares of identity confusion through work and performance. Offering the promises of God as antidotes to relieve and to combat the misconceptions of over-worked and over-stressed ministers, Mills and Parro write further, “God is not desirous for anyone to accomplish great things for Him that will gain the attention of those around them. Our Father is seeking those who will be vessels for His eternal works so that...He will receive all the glory.”<sup>60</sup> Speaking similarly to our longing for acceptance from sources other than God, Brain writes, “Whilst our work and accomplishments do not form the basis of our acceptance with God, they can provide us with a strong sense of confidence and well-being. When this is reduced, it inevitably leads to frustration, as we work harder to overcome a sense of guilt.”<sup>61</sup> Hands and Fehr agree, underscoring the need to rest in God’s finished work as a minister. They affirm the precedence that God’s grace must take in the life and heart of the minister. They contend, “The discovery that one is loved by God must eventually take priority over all other ways of relating to God. The unqualified love of God for the human creature, redeemed in Christ, is prior to the human admission of guilt and seeking of forgiveness.”<sup>62</sup> Continuing to live in the reality and power of one’s standing in Christ remains a great challenge for every minister. Part of what distracts from that reality is the temptation to externalize our identity and beauty through human metrics and measures.

Brain amplifies the need for the pastor to remain secure in Christ and His work and free of the ever-elusive need for other’s approval. Noting how we tend to affix our

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<sup>60</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 169.

<sup>61</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 55.

value to external accomplishments, he writes, “My success does not depend upon everyone agreeing with me, liking me or encouraging me. My status is determined by my response to Christ. I am primarily God’s servant, not the church’s. I serve the church best by serving God.”<sup>63</sup> Faith and perspective into God’s sovereign works also manage expectations—that great accelerant for over-work and busyness. Mills and Parro note, “Effective ministry in the eyes of God is never measured by the response of the people.”<sup>64</sup> Ramey underscores the need to remain close to the good news of Jesus Christ and His work in us and in His Church. He writes, “All clergy need such a shrine where Christ dwells in our hearts. When my ministry begins to go awry, it is because I have forgotten this core principle of the gospel...As a minister, you are first and foremost, today and always, a person of Christ.”<sup>65</sup> The authors repeat and underscore the basic, sublime truths of the gospel as medicine for the minister’s needy, over-worked, often over-stressed heart.

As with so much of the Christian life, the most basic truths—the ones first learned—become the most critical to our health and effectiveness as pastors. Miller locates the minister’s ability to resist burnout and to find power day to day in resting in these truths devotionally and relationally. He writes, “Where do I find the motivation and propellant for continuing my journey of faith when I’m tired or discouraged? In God’s presence. What prompts you and me to keep going through the hard times of life? God’s

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<sup>63</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 97.

<sup>64</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 188.

<sup>65</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 142.

presence.”<sup>66</sup> Brain relies on the gospel to confront the motivation for the minister to please others and gain their acceptance through their ministerial activity. He challenges, “Every person has a desire to be accepted and needed. It is at this point of need that the gospel is such good news. Through our acceptance of Christ, we find that God accepts us.”<sup>67</sup> Learning and re-learning those truths often come through the benefit of stopping and resting. These truths, powerful and indispensable as they are, require time to consider and to marinate in them. Intentional rest or Sabbath-taking is a key component to spiritual formation.

## **Sabbath**

Rooted in the Fourth Commandment and built into the warp and woof of the universe, Sabbath observance remains an indispensable gift to ministers and lay Christians alike. Consistent Sabbath observance promotes spiritual health in ministers and protects against pastoral burnout. Oswald affirms, “I strongly recommend a spiritual discipline of Sabbath time.... we talk about keeping the Sabbath in spirit through worship, while forgetting the logic and wisdom behind the need for regular weekly rest for both physical and spiritual renewal.”<sup>68</sup> Scazzero speaks of Sabbath not just restoratively, but as reorienting for the minister. He notes, “At the heart of the Sabbath is stopping to surrender to God in trust...I give up control and trust God to run his world

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<sup>66</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 73.

<sup>67</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 246.

<sup>68</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 123.

without me.”<sup>69</sup> Lawyer and author Justin Earley, in his book, *The Common Rule*, highlights the spiritual convictions one must embrace to practice Sabbath. Concurring with Scazzero, he writes of the variety of salutary benefits of keeping the Sabbath. He stresses, “Now I Sabbath as a way to understand my salvation; my soul depends on it. When I stop working, I have to admit that the world doesn’t depend on me...Sabbath helps me see how small I am.”<sup>70</sup> In these ways Sabbath observance doesn’t just restore, it promotes perspective and offers freedom to the minister.

Brain writes with similar urgency about the strategic importance of Sabbath observance for ministers, “God clearly cared enough to establish the pattern for us in the Ten Commandments. Physically rested people are better able to remember God, reflect upon his goodness and purposes, and then serve others through their work.”<sup>71</sup> Echoing Scazzero and Earley and applying Sabbath benefits directly to temptations that ministers face, Brain notes further, “It is a weekly reminder to us of God’s graciousness and our need to be saved from workaholism where we allow work to master us.”<sup>72</sup> Earley speaks similarly to Brain regarding the minister’s fears and insecurities and the consequent role of Sabbath. He notes, “The rest beneath the rest is the knowledge that in Jesus all work is finished...When that’s true, we can finally take a day off. We can finally take a nap or stare at a cloud or have a long dinner with friends. ‘It is finished’ is the lullaby of all

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<sup>69</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 157.

<sup>70</sup> Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 153.

<sup>71</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 161.

<sup>72</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 176.

things, our restless hearts included.”<sup>73</sup> Each of these authors note the deeper, more personal work that Sabbath observance produces and the subsequent fruit beneficial to ministry and longevity. Ludwig prescribes Sabbath observance to counter over-functioning. Expanding beyond the concept of simply one day out of seven for rest, he writes, “Role ambiguity can lead us to over-extending ourselves. Times of rest are very important. The concept of Sabbath time is a commandment to rest from daily labors. It is important to find those times of refreshment by taking regular days off and using our vacations.”<sup>74</sup> The authors agree about the value and benefits of Sabbath observance. Of what specifically should the Sabbath practice consist and what other facets of spiritual disciplines should the life of the minister include? The practice of Sabbath rest bleeds into and overlaps with the equally important practices of prayer and silence.

## **Prayer & Silence**

Brain warns about the indispensability of prayer to pastors. He warns, “Prayerlessness may not be noticed by others, but it robs the pastor, since God has clearly told us that he delights to strengthen, guide, and comfort his servant.”<sup>75</sup> He notes further its value when he writes, “Attention to these two activities of prayer and preparation for preaching are fundamental to my self-care. This should not surprise me, since they are fundamental to every Christian’s relationship with God.”<sup>76</sup> Merging the practices of

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<sup>73</sup> Earley, *The Common Rule*, 148.

<sup>74</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 18.

silence and prayer, Oswald points to the salutary value of silent prayer. He writes, “The early Christian mystics called meditation ‘contemplative prayer’ and practiced it often.”<sup>77</sup> Hands and Fehr agree, emphasizing the value of this type of prayer. They write, “For clergy especially, the daily practice of contemplative prayer is bound up with healthy and much-needed attitude of legitimate self-care.”<sup>78</sup> Kohn notes pithily that we must pray as our Lord did. He writes, “Follow Jesus’ model. He took time for Himself; private prayer time.”<sup>79</sup> Few Christians or pastors would disagree with the need for prayer. How to engage in this type of slow, introspective form of prayer described above requires more attention and points to the concomitant need for silence to accompany prayer.

Miller says the quiet part out loud when he describes resistance to silence as a practice. He writes, “Silence and solitude can be very threatening. We must remember, however, that Jesus Himself went off early in the morning to be alone with His Father. Following Christ therefore requires our diligence and ongoing intentionality to sit alone, to abide in His presence and in the Scriptures.”<sup>80</sup> Earley goes a step further, noting more of the reasons for resistance to silence in the lives of Christians. He writes, “To sit peacefully in silence requires knowing your soul, knowing who you really are, and being fundamentally okay with that and at peace with that. That is exactly why we avoid it; we

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<sup>77</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 98.

<sup>78</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 63.

<sup>79</sup> Kohn, *The Resilient Pastor*, 168.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 85.

don't know who we really are. Or if we do, we're terrified of ourselves."<sup>81</sup> Little wonder, then, that ministers and Christians alike avoid this vital Christian discipline.

Despite this resistance, Hands and Fehr underscore the critical need for pastors to practice silence. They state, "What seems to be crucial for spiritual deepening and growth is a discipline of silence. One needs to become outwardly and inwardly quiet, without agenda, in reverent openness to the blessed mystery."<sup>82</sup> Ramey agrees with the need, recognizes the resistance, and entices the too-busy, burned out pastor invitingly. He woos, "All clergy need a shrine where Christ dwells in our hearts. Again and again I have discovered that when my ministry begins to go awry, it is because I have forgotten this core principle of the gospel...I have to return to Christ as the center of my life."<sup>83</sup> Scazzero notes the benefits not just to the minister, but to the congregation of this solitary practice, writing, "When I have sufficient 'slowing-down time' alone, I find that my activity is marked by a deep, loving communion with God. Then Christ's life, more often than not, flows through me to others."<sup>84</sup> Brain similarly urges time apart and alone, writing, "Along with all Christian people, pastors do well to make time to be alone with God, having no other agenda, than to meditate upon God's word and to respond in prayer."<sup>85</sup> While counter-intuitive, silence joined to and infused with prayer proves nourishing, convicting, and builds resilience in the soul of the minister.

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<sup>81</sup> Earley, *The Common Rule*, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 61.

<sup>83</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 51.

<sup>85</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 177.

Scazzero amplifies the need for silence and solitude, noting, “The classic Christian disciplines of silence and solitude...are so foundational to emotionally healthy spirituality.”<sup>86</sup> Brain further notes the indispensable need for pastors to take time off for silence. He encourages, “There is real need for pastors, especially those who work alone, to take ‘time out’ for studying and reflection. This needs to be intentional, since a dozen good things will inevitably crowd it out.”<sup>87</sup> Silence and prayer, while often resisted, provide much needed perspective, healing, and strength for the difficulties of pastoral ministry. Time alone and apart for its own sake is an inadequate barrier against the vicissitudes of pastoral life. The spaces that Sabbath creates and that prayer and silence inhabit must be filled with practices that further fuel the soul and nourish one’s life with God.

### **Christian Community**

While one practices many of the spiritual disciplines for the Christian life in solitary, private settings, an equally large part of the Christian life is lived together, publicly, communally. Christianity is not a solitary exercise, but one meant to be embodied together in community. Community enhances and deepens many of the practices vital for spiritual formation. Brain lays down a marker for pastoral health and longevity with his emphasis upon Christian friendships. He emphasizes, “Whether single or married, we need good friendships. They may be found within the congregation, from previous churches, pastor’s spouse’s groups, or from pastors or Christian friends from our

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<sup>86</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 86.

<sup>87</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 165.

formative years. But we need them.”<sup>88</sup> Brown highlights the importance of community in offsetting or mitigating pastoral burnout. He writes, “One of the most effective deterrents to ministerial deterioration is the development of a pastoral support system...including the pastor’s friends and family.”<sup>89</sup> Mills and Parro refer to the Apostle Paul’s own needs for fellowship and community to commend these as vital for the life of the minister. They write, “The comfort of a brother and the love of a church were used of God to sustain Paul in these days. He was not only able to endure through this time but also to experience joy in those difficult days.”<sup>90</sup> The need for Christian companions in the long, arduous journey is not only vital for pastoral health and balance, but indispensable for pastoral growth.

So vital is community in the life of the Christian and ministry, that there appears a ceiling to Christian growth and maturity without intentional, embodied community. Scazzero highlights that emotional health or spiritual maturity ordinarily cannot move ahead without intentional Christian community. Discussing the role that other Christians play in our own growth, he notes, “I don’t know many people who shed many layers of their false self in order that the true self might emerge unless they have a few trusted mature companions to help them along the way.”<sup>91</sup> Bishop Brain similarly underscores and amplifies the necessity of Christian community in the form of friendships for the minister. He challenges, “It is almost impossible to exercise a New Testament ministry

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<sup>88</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 158.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, 154.

<sup>90</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 253.

<sup>91</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 86.

without friendship emerging. The gospel will...bring people into God's family as we become sons and daughters who are no longer enemies, but friends of God."<sup>92</sup> Pastors need friendship and community not just for their own health and growth, but to combat their inherent self-deception and spiritual blindness.

Ramey underscores the role that friendships play in accountability for the minister. This facet of Christian community is vital as a defense against burnout and the dangers of spiritual ignorance of oneself. He writes, "Be accountable. Arrange a regular consultation with either a peer group, a professional counseling consultant, a committee from your church board, or all three...tell them generally what's going on in your counseling, and, better still, in your life."<sup>93</sup> Kohn too aligns the need for community with the need for accountability for the pastor. He writes, "Realistically and intentionally, each pastor needs to pursue the regular involvement of at least one accountability partner with whom he can be completely honest. Such an accountability partner needs to be given permission to ask the challenging questions."<sup>94</sup> The call for friendships that engage in a form of accountability points to the blind spots every pastor possesses that require external perspective and aid.

Olson shifts the discussion regarding the need for Christian community from one of accountability to that of transparency. He urges, "Engage in constructive self-disclosure. One can turn to a trusted individual—friend, family, or professional—to tell some of the feelings inside, those we can't seem to ignore, and begin to think and talk

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<sup>92</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 146.

<sup>93</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 58.

<sup>94</sup> Kohn, *The Resilient Pastor*, 257.

about a different way.”<sup>95</sup> Discussing our need for and the value of holy friendships he adds further, “But what sets them apart is that they have a larger purpose beyond the friendship itself; they help point us toward God. Holy friendships are about truth telling, encouragement, and accountability.”<sup>96</sup> The need for these types of Christian relationships remains vital, but it is often overlooked and undervalued.

Meaningful, transparent friendships and Christian community often remain elusive for pastors, contributing directly to pastoral burnout. Lifeway research finds that 69% of all pastors report that they need to devote more time and attention to friendship and fellowship with others.<sup>97</sup> Meeting this need remains challenging amidst the crush of ministry and life itself. Barna fellow, writer and researcher, Glenn Packiam, in his book, *The Resilient Pastor*, notes this challenge and difficulty of pursuing meaningful relationships as a pastor. He writes, “These relationships do not flourish by accident. They require attention and intentionality. ... Life is too full of the demands of ministry...to just hope that meaningful connection will just happen. ... The chase for deep friendships and intimate relationships is a lifelong quest.”<sup>98</sup> The cost of not prioritizing one’s friendships and community is high. Packiam asserts bluntly, “If we really want to last in ministry, if we want to emerge from this as truly and fully human beings, then we must take seriously the human vocation of loving well.”<sup>99</sup> Christian

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<sup>95</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 67.

<sup>96</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 94.

<sup>97</sup> Aaron Earls, “Most Pastors Report Feeling Lonely,” *Lifeway Research*, April 30, 2024.

<sup>98</sup> Glenn Packiam, *The Resilient Pastor: Leading Your Church in a Rapidly Changing World* (Baker Books, 2022), 101.

<sup>99</sup> Packiam, *The Resilient Pastor*, 102.

community generally, and intimate, open friendships specifically, are found at the intersection of difficult but indispensable. Christian community, similar to the historical practices of spiritual formation, either erodes pastoral resilience in its absence or fortifies pastoral longevity with its presence.

Spiritual formation speaks to the minister's need to attend to and develop practices that promote pastoral longevity. Reassuring to the modern ear, none of the spiritual practices described break new ground from thousands of years of Christian tradition. Nonetheless, these trusted habits and disciplines often prove difficult to remain devoted to, eliciting a high cost to the pastor's health, longevity, and enjoyment in ministry. There is significant overlap between these disciplines and the practice of self-care. While both flow from similar sources of concern for the holistic health of the pastor, self-care and spiritual formation remain distinct and must be considered separately.

## **Self-Care & Spiritual Health**

### **Necessity of Self-Care**

Self-care is a concept that has become so widely known it may have lost some of its meaning and instead of arresting attention, it now sounds anodyne. How is a minister to think about self-care given the calling to a cross-shaped life and the call to 'come and die' by their Lord? More research indicates how important it is for pastoral longevity. Peter Brain describes the salutary relationship between self-care and pastoral health while providing some Christian meaning and definition to the often elastic term. He defines self-care as, "The wisdom to ensure, as far as humanly possible, a wise and orderly work

that conserves and lengthens a pastor's ministry."<sup>100</sup> He humanizes the pursuit of self-care and puts it in its appropriate priority for pastors by noting, "Self-care is there, a way of recognizing our ministry is a good, God-given gift. According to Dr. Hart 'most ministers don't burn out because they forget they're ministers, they burn out because they forget they're people'."<sup>101</sup> Contrary to popular perceptions or even conventional wisdom about self-care, Brain provides a different definition and understanding. He writes, "Self-care knows nothing about slackness or laziness, but will prove to be a means by which we can rest long enough to be able to reflect upon the purposes of God revealed to us in the Bible and...will enable pastors to remain fresh for the work of ministry."<sup>102</sup> Ramey warns of the consequences of the absence of self-care for pastors. He writes, "Unfortunately, many of us seem to be content to run on the fumes from an almost-empty spiritual tank. In the short run, it's so much easier to keep chugging along than to stop, take an in-depth look at ourselves, and initiate some drastic changes in our lives."<sup>103</sup> Brain also seeks to put starch in the britches of the minister regarding self-care. He warns, "All self-care has a cost. There is a price to pay. A stand needs to be taken. For some pastors, it is emotionally far easier, though never satisfying, not to make any moves at all."<sup>104</sup> Self-care for the minister is needed, vital, and often over-looked and ignored. The advantages of self-care help motivate the minister to seek to prioritize it.

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<sup>100</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 24.

<sup>101</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 241.

<sup>103</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 147.

<sup>104</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 43.

## Benefits of Self-Care

Oswald notes the strategic value of self-care for longitudinal ministry. He writes, “I have come to call this ‘self-care for the sake of the kingdom.’ I take care of myself, not only for my sake, or in gratitude for the life given me by God, but also for the sake of others. If I don’t take care of myself, I not only hurt myself, but I let others down as well.”<sup>105</sup> Oswald turns the conventional thinking about self-care as self-absorption on its head, arguing instead that its benefits redound congregationally beyond the individual. Brain goes further to describe the motivation for self-care. He writes, “Self-care means understanding the meaning of positive health and working toward it.”<sup>106</sup> Olson broadens the understanding of self-care from attending to one’s dignity to care for one’s health. He writes, “Research shows that self-compassion is strongly linked to reductions in anxiety, stress, depression, rumination, perfectionism, and shame and...[T]hose with self-compassion are more forgiving and caring of others and experience less burnout and compassion fatigue.”<sup>107</sup> Oswald makes the linkage between the absence of self-care and burnout more explicit. He writes, “The research on burnout generally agrees that chronic fatigue and apathy develop from being overly committed and involved in our work.”<sup>108</sup> Pastors recognize the dangers of over-work and its relationship to burnout. Self-care provides an alternative perspective and way of life. And one that offers succor to the tired

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<sup>105</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 23.

<sup>107</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 130.

<sup>108</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 121.

and resources for the weary. One can acknowledge the temptation to abuse self-care while also recognizing it is indispensable to pastoral longevity and health.

## **Practices of Self-Care**

If self-care for the minister is not selfish but offers strategic value for ministry health and pastoral longevity, one must pursue these practices or habits in a Christian manner. Researchers and authors identify several practices of self-care needful for every Christian, pastors included. These include appropriate rest, adequate exercise, and meaningful relationships.

### **Rest**

Brain underscores the need for ministers to live fully as humans in order to care for themselves. He warns, “As pastors, we feel sometimes that since we are involved in God’s work, we can ignore this creation ordinance of rest, and the physical aspects of life, like sleep, exercise, and balanced diet.”<sup>109</sup> Ramey notes what an important role that sleep and rest play in the lives of healthy, successful ministers. He notes, “Balanced clergy get enough rest... except for occasional emergency calls or a new baby in the house, there’s usually no good reason for ministers not to get enough sleep....it’s crucial to receive as much as your body needs.”<sup>110</sup> Olson et al. warn against cutting corners with sleep. They note, “Recognizing that sleep deficiency affects so negatively my capacity for joy and vitality in ministry, I consider it a spiritual discipline to put aside work and

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<sup>109</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 150.

take time for sufficient sleep.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly Brain commends the importance of rest specifically to the work of ministry writing, “Physically rested people are better able to remember God, reflect upon his goodness and purpose, and then serve others through their work.”<sup>112</sup> Olson et al. write further of the indispensability of rest for pastoral effectiveness. They underscore, “Without rest, our hearing is impaired, and we will probably get things wrong. Only at rest can we hear what we have not heard before, and be led to what is most deeply beautiful, necessary, and true.”<sup>113</sup> Speaking of the relentless demands of the pastorate which combat the calling to rest, Oswald notes counter-intuitively, “When we are under excessive stress we need more rest and sleep than usual...[clergy need] permission to rest more while they make their move into a new job and role.”<sup>114</sup> Rest is a form of self-care that decelerates from the rush and crush and busyness of ministry and seeks healing and perspective while away from ministry. There is another form of self-care that accelerates life and even intentionally physically exhausts the minister. Rest is one side of the coin of the minister’s common humanity; the other side is to exercise and to remain active physically.

## **Exercise**

Olson et al. merge these areas of practical self-care into one prescription for pastoral health. They summarize that the minister must work to, “Attend to our physical

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<sup>111</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 117.

<sup>112</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 161.

<sup>113</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 82.

<sup>114</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 45.

health, including nutrition, exercise, and rest.”<sup>115</sup> Referring to the need for the minister to take responsibility for self-care and one’s own health, Olson et al. write about the on-going benefits for ministry through exercise. They encourage, “In midlife, whether forty, fifty, or later, one becomes aware of one’s own mortality. It is important to take specific steps in physical health care to claim the abundant life we offer to others.”<sup>116</sup> Ramey highlights the need for clergy to exercise to enjoy a longitudinal ministry. He writes, “Balanced clergy exercise regularly. Experts extol the merits of doing aerobic exercise three or four times a week.”<sup>117</sup> Hands and Fehr similarly summarize often unheeded but vital wisdom writing, “Care of self includes care of body. This includes some regular exercise, physical exams, and the elimination of harmful habits such as smoking and eating fats.”<sup>118</sup> Linking burnout to depression, Ludwig reminds of the vital importance that exercise plays. He writes, “There is no better antidote to depression than exercise. We need to get those endorphins working for us in positive ways.”<sup>119</sup> The famed 17<sup>th</sup> century pastor and author, Jonathan Edwards, noted similarly in his diary about the value of good diet. He writes, “I think I find myself much more sprightly and healthy, both in body and mind, for my self-denial in eating, drinking, and sleeping.”<sup>120</sup> What Edwards noted three hundred and fifty years ago was the indissoluble connection between physical

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<sup>115</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 70.

<sup>116</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 150.

<sup>118</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 76.

<sup>119</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 43.

<sup>120</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Banner of Truth, 1997), 25.

stewardship of our bodies and spiritual effectiveness as ministers. Self-care involves the solitary activities of rest and exercise, but also convivial life with others.

## **Friendship**

Christian community is commanded by Scriptures in Hebrews 10:25. Christians should not neglect, “to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as they see the Day drawing near.”<sup>121</sup> The Christian and the pastor alike find and are shaped by community through gathered worship, small groups, and Christian relationships. Christian friendship is not commanded by Scripture but remains vital to the health and longevity of the pastor. Brain exhorts about the significant need for a minister to have and to enjoy friends. He writes, “As pastors, we need to take some special responsibility in seeking friendships, and making time in our diaries for them to grow. Friends will help us keep our spiritual passion alive.”<sup>122</sup> Beyond prayer, time in God’s Word, and the other spiritual disciplines, friendships maintain spiritual fervor. Olson et al. point to the value of close, intimate colleagues and friends with whom a minister can share the joys and struggles of pastoral life. They write about ‘constructive self-disclosure’ where, “One can turn to a trusted individual--friends, family or professional--to tell some of the feelings inside, those we can’t seem to ignore, and begin to think and talk about a different way.”<sup>123</sup> Building intentionally honest and safe friendships serves

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<sup>121</sup> Heb. 10:25.

<sup>122</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 153.

<sup>123</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 67.

as an antidote both to the emotional isolation often common to the pastorate and to self-deception endemic to the Christian life.

Ludwig agrees with the need for self-disclosure, noting the minister needs not just friends and companions. He goes further, urging disclosure with fellow ministers to share and process life. He enjoins, “Finding other pastors who are willing to share in the struggles and joys of ministry is very supportive. It is important that these pastors be people that can be trusted so that sharing can be open and honest.”<sup>124</sup> Locating the need for companions and friends squarely within the search for self-care, Olson and colleagues note further, “It also points to a vitally important self-care practice—finding, initiating, and sustaining those relationship that conquer the loneliness and empower us for the many tasks and challenges in our ministry.”<sup>125</sup> Implicit in the encouragement is the reality that loneliness and isolation contribute directly to pastoral deterioration and burnout.

While a form of friendship, spiritual direction also contributes to greater pastoral health and longevity as another way ministers can stay connected to and aware of their own hearts, feelings, and needs. Oswald highlights, “If I were to choose one discipline to undergird all the others, it would be meeting regularly with a spiritual director.”<sup>126</sup> Ludwig too points to the need for pastors to employ and benefit from spiritual directors. He writes similarly, “Use a spiritual director. Find someone who can be a pastor to you

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<sup>124</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 45.

<sup>125</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 92.

<sup>126</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 102.

and hold you accountable for your spiritual journey.”<sup>127</sup> These authors suggest that pastors need a pastor to care for them, walk with them, and serve as a companion to them. Kohn concurs, noting the need for pastors to have others intimately involved in their lives. Referring back to the formerly normative practice of pastors confessing to other pastors, he writes, “Pastors need pastors...It is a great tragedy that those who...go about absolving sins of penitent sinners are not themselves penitents...Every pastor needed a confessor to whom he went regularly to pour out his heart and to confess his sins.”<sup>128</sup> Similar to spiritual direction, counseling speaks to a relational need to which pastors must avail themselves for their own health and durability. Oswald notes the importance and priority of counseling for the pastor to grow both in self-awareness and in ministerial skills. He writes, “We are bound to make better pastoral counselors if at some point we ourselves have been recipients of therapy. How is it that we feel free to assist others in exploring the internal chaos of their lives when we ourselves have never faced our own.”<sup>129</sup>

Whether finding a confessor, a spiritual director, a counselor or simply other pastors, all ministers demand the involvement of others in their lives. Rich, thick relationships salve the minister’s hurts, embolden the pastor for the work ahead, and preserve a measure of honesty and self-reflection necessary for pastoral integrity and longevity. Oswald summarizes some of the most hopeful forms of self-care that lead the minister to enjoy a longitudinally healthy ministry. In addition to the expected categories

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<sup>127</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 61.

<sup>128</sup> Kohn, *The Resilient Pastor*, 69.

<sup>129</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 160.

of a good diet, consistent exercise and rest, forms of robust relationship overwhelm the list of priorities. He lists,

Being aware and growing in the spiritual practices and disciplines that will strengthen and enrich our lives and ministry. Finding supportive relationship—friends, pals, support groups, family, coaches, mentors, counselors, and spiritual directors...attending to our physical health, including nutrition, exercise, and rest.<sup>130</sup>

Oswald's list, as this area of research highlights, contains activities which we do and habits we pursue. What's missing from these behaviors, profitable as they are, is an awareness of the parts of the minister that resist such behaviors. The pastor needs visibility to what contributes to the on-going conflict in his relationships or his self-sabotage, despite his doing all the prescribed behaviors of spiritual formation and self-care. Self-awareness must also remain a top priority for the pastor to move ahead and remain healthy in ministry.

## **Emotional Intelligence & Bowen Family Systems Theory**

### **Indispensability of Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) was first described and conceptualized by Salovey and Mayer as an ability-based construct analogous to general intelligence. They argued that individuals with a high level of EI had certain skills related to the evaluation and regulation of emotions and that consequently they were able to regulate emotions in themselves and in others in order to achieve a variety of adaptive outcomes.<sup>131</sup> This

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<sup>130</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 70.

<sup>131</sup> Peter Salovey & John D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence. Imagination, Cognition and Personality," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 9, no. 3 (1990): 185–211, <https://doi.org/10.2190>.

construct has received increasing attention from both the scientific community and the general public due to its theoretical and practical implications for daily life. The same authors defined EI as “the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought.”<sup>132</sup>

Scazzero underscores the necessity of emotional maturity and self-awareness for the minister when he writes, “To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well.”<sup>133</sup> Kohn speaks to the need for emotional health and strength for the healthy pastor. He writes, “When we are emotionally resilient, we can confront our problems with a sense of hope and power. When our psychic reserves are depleted, overloads sap our strength, paralyze our resolve, and maximize our vulnerability.”<sup>134</sup> The absence of emotional intelligence or awareness results in the minister responding too often or too deeply to the needs of others, even at great cost to self. Mills and Parro note, “When we become need-motivated and keep saying ‘yes’ to the requests of others, we often develop attitudes of anger, resentment and bitterness as the expectations overwhelm our resources. At this point we are very vulnerable to burning out.”<sup>135</sup> The pastor often does not understand the deeper drives urging over-functioning or people-pleasing. Pointing to the internal, psychological needs often driving pastoral busyness, Gombis highlights the need to understand one’s motivational drives. Speaking directly to pastoral longevity and the challenge of self care,

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<sup>132</sup> Salovey, *Emotional Intelligence. Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 511.

<sup>133</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 26.

<sup>134</sup> Kohn, *The Resilient Pastor*, 126.

<sup>135</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 234.

Gombis notes, “The sources of burnout for many ministers are our ministry ambitions and our fears....to see our churches grow, we forego rest and refreshment and involve ourselves in far more than we should...fear that if we’re not doing enough, the church will fail.”<sup>136</sup> Bishop Brain warns similarly of the connection between susceptibility to burnout and low self-awareness. He warns, “In burnout, we often feel unappreciated and underachieving, which means we are prone to say yes to everything that comes our way. Why? Because it gives us a boost. Someone appreciates us.”<sup>137</sup> Again, the destination of burnout arrives from the highways of over-functioning and people pleasing, often unseen and misunderstood by the harried minister.

Ramey speaks directly to the need for self-awareness and understanding and the protection that these can bring. He challenges, “Know yourself. There’s no substitute for self-understanding. Become aware of your needs, your drives, your fantasies, your feelings, and your particular temptations. Where are you most vulnerable?”<sup>138</sup> Hands and Fehr discuss the need for the minister to remain distinct from the ministry itself, recognizing the desires that lead to over-commitment and the fear of disappointing anyone. They ask, “the crucial point for the clergyperson to consider is this: Do I have a personal life and unique relationship to God? Or am I totally defined by the ministry that I carry out to others?”<sup>139</sup> Scazzero moves the discussion from the dangers we avoid to the benefits we enjoy with greater emotional health. He notes, “Emotional health

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<sup>136</sup> Timothy G. Gombis, *Power in Weakness: Paul’s Transformed Vision for Ministry* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 128.

<sup>137</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 35.

<sup>138</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 53.

<sup>139</sup> Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 61.

powerfully anchors me in the love of God by affirming that I am worthy of feeling, worthy of being alive, and loveable even when I'm brutally honest about the good, the bad, and the ugly deep beneath the surface of my iceberg."<sup>140</sup> The battleground, then, for pastoral longevity amidst the persistent threats of burnout is found in the heart of the minister. The pastor's needs, drives, even longings prescribe how he will respond to the ocean of needs always present, always unmeetable, and always vying for his time and attention.

### **Self-Awareness and the Growth of Emotional Intelligence**

Mills and Parro speak to the need that pastors have to know themselves, to be aware of their inner drives and motivations. They note the gulf between *what* a minister does and *why* he does it. They observe, "Those of us in ministry are tempted to find our life's meaning in our ministry because ministry has such obvious eternal aspects to it. The significance of our ministry makes it easy for us to draw our sense of personal identity and self-worth from what we do."<sup>141</sup> Oswald connects this lack of self-awareness to ministerial burnout. He reflects, "The roots of our burnout are almost always hidden from us. There are some internal messages or self-perceptions that...lead to our own destruction. Uncovering these hidden desires, these distorted self-images, usually requires the aid of an objective outsider."<sup>142</sup> Brain links self-awareness to character and ministerial fruit. He writes, "To be able to identify and think carefully about the reason

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<sup>140</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 54.

<sup>141</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 158.

<sup>142</sup> Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 159.

for anger is essential. When this is in place, I can attend to my feelings and to the problem itself.”<sup>143</sup> Uncovering the ‘why’ in ministry is rarely clearcut, remains hard, complex work, and is invariably opaque. Brown underscores the relationship between self-awareness and pastoral longevity. He writes, “Self-Understanding. The better a pastor knows his strengths, his weaknesses, his style, his tendencies in conflict, and his approach to adversity, the more prepared he will be to deal with the obstacles and challenges to staying longer.”<sup>144</sup> Scazzero broadens the aperture from pastoral health to Christian maturity. He invites the minister and the Christian into the world of emotional health and awareness through the call to follow Christ. He writes, “The call of discipleship includes experiencing our feelings, reflecting on our feelings, and then thoughtfully responding to our feelings under the lordship of Christ.”<sup>145</sup> This section began by discussing the need for the minister to understand his feelings and emotions. The cited authors then highlight the indispensable role that deeper understanding of oneself plays in understanding drives and motivations that contribute not just to negative emotions, but to pastoral burnout. If self-understanding and emotional intelligence play such a strategic role in ministerial contentment and longevity, how does one grow in this awareness?

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<sup>143</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 90.

<sup>144</sup> Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, 178.

<sup>145</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 71.

## Humility and Emotional Intelligence

Humility may prove to be the indispensable element of emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Ramey notes the need for humility for the minister to flow from greater self-awareness and understanding. He writes, “Being a faithful pastor never insulates you against criticism and rejection. Members can erupt over almost any issue, sometimes a minor one indeed. Yet that’s the risk pastors invariably face. It’s built into our calling to ministry.”<sup>146</sup> Humility can provide the necessary ingredient to absorb and to manage the inevitable and often painful conflict pastors endure. Mills and Parro point to the critical need for humility in the lives of healthy pastors. They write, “True humility is not seeing ourselves for less than what we are; rather, it is a confident affirmation of who God has made us to be in Christ and the ministry He has set before us. We get into trouble when we see ourselves out of proportion.”<sup>147</sup> They note that humility does not just keep the minister human-sized, but modest and honest about gifts and weaknesses. Brain concurs, underscoring the connection between humility and self-understanding. He writes, “We pastors need all the help we can get in being reminded that we are people. This will keep us from pride, from isolation, from a Messianic ‘I can do it all’ complex and from burnout through overwork and anxiety.”<sup>148</sup> Olson et al. tie together healthy ministry with healthy spirituality and note humility as a key indicator of those. They write, “How do we develop an authentic and renewing spirituality? First, we are wise to practice humility

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<sup>146</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 104.

<sup>147</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 267.

<sup>148</sup> Brain, *Going the Distance*, 257.

and transparency.”<sup>149</sup> Remembering we are people leads to a kindness toward oneself that flows from an accurate view of oneself. Where self-awareness, authenticity, and humility begin and end remains challenging to determine. But the reality remains that there is power for the minister in being honest about and caring toward oneself and one’s needs. Humility not only helps the pastor’s self-understanding, but also breeds greater strength and resilience for ministry.

### **Resilience and Emotional Intelligence**

Ramey speaks of the benefits which redound to the self-aware minister, particularly in times of conflict. Writing about how to discover perspective amidst times of conflict he notes, “Criticism, especially if unfair or unwarranted, hurts. Nevertheless, realizing that you are being attacked because the church system as a whole is attempting to keep itself in balance eases the pain somewhat.”<sup>150</sup> Recognizing the patterns or larger forces infecting conflict is helpful but inadequate if not joined to emotional maturity in conflict. Olson et al. point to the need for greater self-awareness when facing and enduring conflict. They suggest, “We are thus better able to keep ourselves calm in stressful situations because we are attentive early to what we are experiencing in the present moment and we have some skills to direct our attention elsewhere in a way that helps us relax.”<sup>151</sup> They go further in connecting how self-understanding enables us to process negative situations more positively and effectively. They write, “When we start

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<sup>149</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 73.

<sup>150</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 44.

<sup>151</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 128.

to experience the physiological effects of a stress response...we need to take note, embrace it, and tell ourselves that something meaningful to us is at stake.”<sup>152</sup> Self-understanding lays bare more of the pastor’s drives and needs that often fuel discontent, bitterness and conflict—all key ingredients for burnout. It also supplies the minister with tools of empathy, deescalation, and humility critical for understanding and moving through conflict. Self-understanding is often not discovered alone which highlights the need for external perspective and help.

## **Bowen Family Systems Theory**

### **Importance of Bowen Family Systems Theory**

Dr. Murray Bowen, MD, was Clinical Professor in Psychiatry and Director of The Family Center, Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, DC. His research and thinking concerning families and systems of humans interacting together became known as Bowen Family Systems Theory. He taught that, “The theory is an attempt to view the family as a unit rather than as a collection of individuals. It deals with the network of emotional interrelationships in the family.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, Bowen contended, “Functioning in one part of the system affects all parts of the system.”<sup>154</sup> He moved the discussion from individual pathologies to relational processes among one another. As he explored families and groups as a system he noted, “The emotional system includes the

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<sup>152</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 55.

<sup>153</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 1st ed (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 1992), 3.

<sup>154</sup> Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 4.

forces that govern emotional reactivity.”<sup>155</sup> Rather than referring vaguely to any emotions, Bowen focused specifically upon anxiety within a system and its effects. He noted, “Anxiety is the most important variable in determining how the system functions.”<sup>156</sup> Bowen pointed out that, regardless of the human grouping, anxiety is the driving energy of the system. He also posited that, “The family system extends over multiple generations. Patterns of relationship are transmitted from one generation to the next.”<sup>157</sup> Anxiety and conflict in relationships flow from families as historical systems, not just present-day situations and relationships.

The heart and soul of pastoral ministry remains relationships with parishioners. Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) focuses upon how to navigate those relationships with particular emphasis upon managing one’s own emotionality. Edwin Friedman, rabbi, therapist, professor, author and mass-popularizer of BFST, in his book, *Generation to Generation*, speaks directly to the role that BFST can play in addressing clergy burnout and longevity. He writes,

With regard to burnout, family systems theory also makes a major contribution to understanding and modifying the emotional processes in clergy-congregational relationships. Efforts to deal with burnout that are based on the individual model run the risk of adding more burden to the enervated profession because they convey the message that the problem originates or is located in his or her own psyche...A family systems view of burnout sees the enervated clergyman or woman as the symptom bearer of the relationship system of his or her congregational family.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 16.

<sup>157</sup> Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 305.

<sup>158</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Family Therapy Series (Guilford Press, 2011), 196–97.

BFST looks beyond individuals and whatever conflict they're experiencing and looks to the family from which the individual comes, as well as the family in which the person works or ministers. That family, because it's a congregation of individuals, is also made up of many families. Friedman and BFST suggest that to understand burnout or, conversely, satisfying longevity, one must understand the dynamics of these families. Namely, it is important to understand how one metabolizes anxiety relationally and how generational issues in the family of origin continue to play a role in how both the minister and the congregation navigate conflict and tension. BFST lifts the eyes of the minister above his own needs or even his problems to the issues facing the larger system and how one recognizes and combats those larger, stronger challenges relationally.

Jack Shitama, author, pastor, and consultant, underscores why BFST is important for the local pastor. In his book, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, he writes, "Family Systems Theory teaches that the most significant factor in how someone fares under hostile conditions is their own response. Self-differentiation is the key to that response."<sup>159</sup> Friedman defines differentiation as, "The capacity of a person to define his or her own life's goals and values apart from the surrounding togetherness pressures...includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being."<sup>160</sup> As these authors point out, a critical point of BFST is to evaluate how one responds to the anxiety and pressure of the relational system in which a pastor

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<sup>159</sup> Jack Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety* (Clarix Works Inc, 2018), 4.

<sup>160</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 27.

finds himself. Creech summarizes this approach by writing, “Pastors must manage their own reactivity...their energy goes into changing self rather than telling others what they should do.”<sup>161</sup> Self-management, related to emotional maturity, determines how and in which ways one reacts to crises, conflict, and pressure—the unfortunate bread and butter of pastoral work.

Describing pastors as both dreamers and overseers, internationally recognized leadership consultant, pastor, author, and therapist Peter L. Steinke notes the importance of both emotional maturity and evaluation of relational systems. In his book, *How Your 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church Family Works*, he writes, “Being a dreamer and overseer are effective roles to the degree that the leader...achieves this by defining self, regulating one’s own anxiety, staying connected to others, stimulating their resources, and staying the course.”<sup>162</sup> Creech discusses the overlap for the pastor between self-management in one’s family and in one’s church. He writes, “The whitewater of the congregation life, however, occurs in the rapids of relationships. What was true about managing myself in the anxiety and emotional process of my own family was also true about managing myself in the...congregation I served.”<sup>163</sup> Ramey notes the importance for pastors to think in systems, providing a nod to the salience and relevance of BFST. He writes, “Pastors have the responsibility today to understand systems and to be servants of

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<sup>161</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 53.

<sup>162</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 104.

<sup>163</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 5.

systems. We cannot simply minister to people one-on-one and ignore what we have discovered about the nature of systems.”<sup>164</sup>

Ramey highlights the work of Ardean L. Goertzen who cautions pastors to ignore BFST at their own peril. His research indicates that pastors who leave pastoral ministry altogether place a higher value on warm, personal relationships than on keeping an eye on the system as a whole.<sup>165</sup> The pastoral crutch of simply loving people, being likeable and agreeable, though tempting, is no match for the power of the church system. Creech affirms that such an approach—while appearing warm—masks a deeper pathology. He warns, “The dependence on others is a mark of our emotional immaturity, and it is a common one for pastors.”<sup>166</sup> He goes further, noting the reasons why ministers enter ministry and the problems endemic to that common approach. He avers, “People often enter the ministry with no higher calling than ‘to meet people’s needs.’ But pastors are not therapists.”<sup>167</sup> Creech goes farther with a surprising warning, “The pastor’s survival may depend more on the ability to understand emotional systems than on skilled exegesis or preaching.”<sup>168</sup> Referencing the importance of BFST to pastoral effectiveness, Creech exhorts in a counter-cultural direction. He points out—again affirming the indispensable need for pastoral self-awareness—that pastors often don’t know or understand their core motivations for ministry, a lack which results in conflict, discouragement, and frustration.

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<sup>164</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 20.

<sup>165</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 20.

<sup>166</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 66.

<sup>167</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 78.

<sup>168</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 9.

But then he observes that ministry effectiveness may depend far less upon the predictable, visible gifts common to all pastors. Instead, the functional utility of these very gifts depends upon the extent to which the pastor employs them in constructive, self-aware, non-anxious manners.

Olson similarly marks the importance of the pastor learning how to navigate conflict and difficulty through the help of BFST. Pointing to the work of Friedman and highlighting the role that the pastor's own emotional maturity plays in making changes and enduring conflict, he notes, "What is vital to changing any kind of family is the capacity of the family leader to define his or her own goals and values while trying to maintain a non-anxious presence within the system."<sup>169</sup> Even if a pastor intellectually agrees, nodding in agreement with Olson's point, how does he grow in or develop a non-anxious presence amidst tension and conflict?

### **Differentiation and Family Systems Theory**

One finds at the root of effective pastoral ministry not just requisite self-awareness, but a stable, secure sense of self. Guthrie et al. define this style of relating to others from a posture of confident wholeness as differentiation. They describe the concept of differentiation, originating from Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, as "The capacity to hear and empathize with parishioners' frustration while not necessarily agreeing with their analysis or taking the attacks personally."<sup>170</sup> Scazzero offers a straightforward definition of differentiation. He writes, "Differentiation involves the

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<sup>169</sup> Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 123.

<sup>170</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 74.

ability to hold on to who you are and who you are not...People with a high level of differentiation have their own beliefs, convictions, directions, goals, and values apart from the pressures around them.”<sup>171</sup> Shitama provides a working definition that orients the pastor or leader to a stronger sense of self. He writes, “Self-definition is the component of self-differentiation that is the defining of goals and values.”<sup>172</sup> Creech defines differentiation as, “The capacity for a person to balance emotion and intellect.”<sup>173</sup> Ludwig, when discussing the emotional state and maturity of a pastor, notes the importance of a well-defined sense of self. He writes, “It is important for the pastor to be perceived, in the midst of such crises, as a thoughtful, deliberate, calming presence.”<sup>174</sup> Creech warns the pastor about not pursuing growth in differentiation. He cautions, “The less well-differentiated we are, the more our relationships shape or determine our behavior. The lower our level of emotional maturity, the more behavior of others and their reactivity will affect the choices we make.”<sup>175</sup> Note that all of these definitions challenge the minister to remain both connected to others relationally and emotionally, while psychologically apart or distinct from others. Note too that they all suggest that the more pastors minister from a confident posture of differentiation, the more effective they will be emotionally and relationally with others, particularly in times of relational tension.

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<sup>171</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 58.

<sup>172</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 63.

<sup>173</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 20.

<sup>174</sup> Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 23.

<sup>175</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 108.

One observes the level of differentiation that a pastor possesses more clearly in times of stress or conflict. Steinke notes the healthy practices that a more differentiated pastor can pursue in times of anxiety. He writes, “The more mature have ample resources, take time to address the stressor, and use imagination to handle their stress. They have greater balancing capacities.”<sup>176</sup> Mills and Parro write similarly about the freedom that comes from a more differentiated understanding of one’s personhood. They affirm, “This perspective leads to great freedom in ministry; our personal meaning and worth are not dependent upon a successful ministry, and we are not encumbered with the great responsibility of fulfilling an eternal work which we are simply not capable of doing.”<sup>177</sup> Emotional freedom and perspective lead to broader imagination and deeper resources to navigate conflict. Recognizing one’s innate tendencies to use ministry to assuage one’s sense of self or to salve one’s fears and worries must precede a healthy, honest perspective on ministry challenges.

Ramey writes about people-pleasing and the internal struggles that define one’s ministry and its effectiveness. He warns, “Are we afraid we will hurt someone’s feelings? We can only turn a corner if we strengthen the self. A weak sense of self can never faithfully respond to the demands of the gospel. Nor can a weak self resist the personal requests that threaten to overwhelm every ministry.”<sup>178</sup> Guthrie et al. concur, arguing that differentiation allows the minister to navigate conflict and difference more effectively. They write, “Differentiation involves not being afraid of others, not avoiding them and

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<sup>176</sup> Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works*, 95.

<sup>177</sup> Mills and Parro, *Finishing Well: In Life and Ministry*, 153.

<sup>178</sup> Ramey, *Thriving in Ministry*, 139.

not being overly influenced by them. It means remaining connected to people with different opinions, yet not forming our beliefs or making our decisions based on the voice of our parents.”<sup>179</sup> BFST helps the pastor not just resist pressures and remain contentedly independent of the prevailing whims or demands of congregants. BFST also enables more effective leadership, better problem solving, and healthier relationships.

Creech affirms the importance of a differentiated pastor to lead a healthy congregation. He notes, “The leader who is working on differentiation will be better able to provide a steady hand to a congregation facing significant changes... discerning its future, managing intermittent conflict among its members or engaging an unexpected crisis.”<sup>180</sup> Shitama too underscores the need for a church or system to have a well-differentiated leader for it to become and to remain healthy. He writes, “In any system, if there is someone who can maintain principled, non-anxious stands, while staying connected emotionally, they are leading through self-differentiation. And one non-anxious leader can make a difference.”<sup>181</sup> Creech similarly notes that work at differentiation yields benefits to the pastor and the congregation. He writes, “Developing a greater capacity to endure the pain of others will eventually help them to function less dependently in the relationship.”<sup>182</sup> He goes further to state, “The better differentiated the pastor, the more thoughtful and principled leadership will be possible.”<sup>183</sup> According to

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<sup>179</sup> Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 124.

<sup>180</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 33.

<sup>181</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 59.

<sup>182</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 38.

<sup>183</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 46.

Creech, the more differentiated pastor remains, “Increasingly comfortable with not having answers to all questions, solutions to every problem, or knowing exactly what others should think or do in every situation.”<sup>184</sup> All the authors point to the cascading benefits of a differentiated pastor for the congregation. From courage to steadfastness and from imagination to resilience, the ability of a pastor to remain apart from the congregation while remaining relationally connected to them remains vital for both pastoral health and congregational well-being.

### **Maintaining Integrity as an Individual and BFST**

BFST predicates many of its conclusions around managing the competing individual and togetherness forces. The former, in its extreme, leads to cut-off, and the latter leads to fusion or co-dependence. BFST describes how when anxiety rises, the togetherness or herding instinct becomes predominant. Creech notes that when anxiety rises, “It leaves the pastor vulnerable to the togetherness principle...vulnerable to offering a reactive kind of care, forfeiting the more solid ground of our neutrality. We can lose necessary emotional boundaries with the other and surrender our effectiveness.”<sup>185</sup> Steinke similarly urges pastors to fight these pressures when anxiety rises and pressure increases. He writes, “I have to remain, as best as I can, an objective, non-anxious presence, focused on my goals. Otherwise, I will be pulled into the emotional glue that maintains the acute anxiety and polarization.”<sup>186</sup> Creech describes that *via media* between

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<sup>184</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 86.

<sup>185</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 80.

<sup>186</sup> Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works*, 110.

cutting off and fusing with others when we experience conflict and anxiety. He notes the pastor must retain, “Capacity to remain connected to others in times of increased anxiety, while maintaining our principles and managing our own automatic responses.”<sup>187</sup>

Shitama delineates the fine line between cut-off and fusion by noting, “It is showing care and concern for the other, apart from the issue at hand. It is NOT kowtowing to the will of others. It IS respecting that the other...without letting them define you. I find it helpful to think of emotional connection in terms of pastoral care.”<sup>188</sup> Standing athwart these competing desires and pressures to walk away and wash one’s hands or to draw very near and seek to ensure happiness and peace is the differentiated pastor and a subsequently healthier congregation.

Creech ties the tendency toward pastoral burnout with the pastor’s tendency toward fusion. Pastors tending toward fusion often over-function and assume more responsibility than is legitimate or needed. Creech points to a weakly differentiated sense of self as the source of over-functioning and notes its unfortunate results. He warns, “If the pastor does not possess a clear sense of self, or responsibilities and boundaries, pastoral care can be an invasive act of over-functioning in another’s life, reinforcing their helplessness.”<sup>189</sup> Shitama similarly warns the leader or pastor how to remain distinct from the others in the conflict while not cut off from them. He writes, “The non-anxious leader is able to maintain her identity in the midst of the surrounding emotional processes...It is understanding what is going on in the system and not getting sucked into

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<sup>187</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 87.

<sup>188</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 11.

<sup>189</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 81.

the dysfunction [while] staying emotionally connected.”<sup>190</sup> Creech goes further in his diagnosis of the pathology of pastoral over-functioning. Responding to every congregational crisis like a “dog whistle”, Creech laments, “He will responsibly be with them...to do for people what they are perfectly capable of doing for themselves, the more mature pastor will refrain from anxiously over-functioning.”<sup>191</sup> Once more, the pastor appears to be doing good and helpful things. It is the pace and the volume of all the crises attendant to ministry that can lead to burnout in a congregational context. But more, it is the *why* of what’s driving the pastor to seek to meet all the needs, all of the time, while avoiding any hint of disappointment or any whisper of conflict that matters most. Discovering the why within oneself and from one’s own family system is the first step toward breaking free from pastoral over-functioning and ministerial over-work.

Steinke notes similarly the linkage between what can often appear as central pastoral tasks that can also mask low levels of emotional maturity. Worse, emotional neediness directly contributes to over-work, over-responsibility, and its attendant, burnout. He writes, “Sentimental care is one of those [attempts to relieve one’s own distress] adjustments. It is also indicative of a low threshold for tolerating pain in others.”<sup>192</sup> The pain in these instances is at best that of the disappointment of others and at worst their criticisms. Shitama urges the pastor toward remaining connected to others while not losing a strong sense of self. He writes, “Your ability to say, ‘This is what I believe, this is what I think we should do, this is where I think we should go’ while, at the

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<sup>190</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 55.

<sup>191</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 84.

<sup>192</sup> Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works*, 61.

same time, giving others the emotional space to self-define is central to leading through self-differentiation.”<sup>193</sup> Creech makes a startling, sobering linkage between a minister’s weak sense of differentiation and a failure to love. He notes, “The more we emotionally fuse in relationship to others, the less we can love them in the way of Christ. The less well-differentiated we are, the more reactive we are to the behavior of others.”<sup>194</sup> Creech is asserting that what’s driving the pastor’s tendency toward fusion is ultimately self-love and self-protection. Shitama summarizes how self-differentiation helps the minister avoid the twin pressures of fusion or cut-off. He describes its importance to the healthy church system and to effective pastoral leadership by. He writes, “The key to leadership in an anxious church is self-differentiation. It is the ability to define one’s own goals and values amidst surrounding togetherness pressures AND to stay emotionally connected.”<sup>195</sup> Like all counseling models, BFST provides perspective and tools, but it does not supply or convey spiritual power.

Where does the strength come from to apply or embrace the theories of BFST? As helpful and insightful as they are, how can a pastor find the resources to make these changes—painful as the proponents of BFST attest? For Christians, the resources must come from outside of ourselves; they must be graces from the God of all grace. Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we see a theology of grace, a dependency upon God’s strength in one’s weakness, more clearly than in the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth.

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<sup>193</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 108.

<sup>194</sup> Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 159.

<sup>195</sup> Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People*, 63.

## 2 Corinthians and Paul's Pastoral Theology

### Theology of Grace: Cruciformity and Ministry

Paul anchors self and pastoral understanding in his union with Christ. He is united to all of Christ, including to His death and resurrection. Spiritually, Paul understands that he is and will be united to Christ on the cross and in His death, as well as in the empty tomb and in His resurrection. It is to these two poles of Jesus' finished work—death and rising—that Paul looks to understand his life and ministry. From this often-autobiographical letter the pastor receives courage for the difficulties of ministry, receives succor in the stress and sadness of ministry, and receives direction for a biblically shaped ministry. And, those benefits flow through the Spirit's application of all the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection to our lives and ministries. The minister does well to pay close attention to the pattern and the power of a crucified and risen Savior.

Paul resolves to preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified and rejoices that he has been crucified with Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2 & Galatians 2:20).<sup>196</sup> Paul's vision of the Christian life is cross-shaped; it is cruciform. As one follows Jesus, he or she must expect cruciformity, a recognition that life will be, inevitably and thankfully, cross-shaped. And, that truth doesn't just shape expectations; it strengthens and enlivens pastoral ministry as it does the Christian life through its inexorable connection to the resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>196</sup> 1 Cor. 2:2, Gal. 2:20.

Nowhere in Scripture does one find these themes of death and resurrection as they apply to Christian living more clearly than in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps his most auto-biographical letter, Paul shares more of himself and more of his need for the cross and resurrection than in any other pastoral letter. It is from these insights into his dependence upon the life and work of Christ, specifically Christ's death and resurrection, that a clearer picture of pastoral life and ministry emerge. Author, New Testament scholar, and professor at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, George H. Guthrie notes,

We need to hear 2 Corinthians, know it, and take it very seriously as we reflect on how Christian ministry is to be done in the world. The words of 2 Corinthians embody a pastoral strategy, both elegant and wise, that seeks to draw a wandering congregation close, close to their apostle and his mission, and thus close to the true gospel and the true Christ.<sup>197</sup>

2 Corinthians brings more clearly into focus the paradigmatic ways in which every pastor must view themselves and their ministry. It elucidates the pastor's need for and trust in the death of Christ as well as the minister's dependence upon and gratitude for the resurrection of Christ.

### **Cruciformity and Power as a Servant**

“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.”<sup>198</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:5**

George Guthrie notes that, “This confession stands at the center of early Christian confession of Jesus' identity and position in the universe. He is the true ruler

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<sup>197</sup> George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2015), 13.

<sup>198</sup> 2 Cor. 4:5.

of the world.”<sup>199</sup> He adds, “This servant orientation of his apostleship grounds his motives and his posture toward the Corinthians in Christ’s virtues. This is the upside-down orientation of true Christian leadership...true leaders advance God’s kingdom by sacrificial service.”<sup>200</sup> The character of ministry must seek to emulate Christ’s person and work. One’s service to that King and His message stem, then, from the posture of a slave or servant.

Timothy Savage, writer, scholar, and pastor in America and Europe, holds a PhD in New Testament from Cambridge and is European director of the Gospel Coalition. Savage points to the way Paul embraces the posture of servant or slave in this verse. He writes, “Paul’s humility works out in practice: in his willingness to submit to suffering and in his service to others...divine glory works out in the ministry of the apostle Paul...in the same way in which it did in Christ—in humble suffering and sacrificial service.”<sup>201</sup> Paul remains eager to emphasize how his life and ministry reflect the cruciformity of Jesus, the pattern of servanthood, and Jesus’ promise to bring life from death in his disciples. Savage highlights the root of the Corinthian error regarding Christ as a slave. He continues, “Their error arises from a false understanding of the cross. They have ignored its offensiveness and bypassed its shame. They have shown little interest in a Jesus of humility, a gospel of suffering or a Spirit who affirms that

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<sup>199</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 243.

<sup>200</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 243.

<sup>201</sup> Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 86 (Cambridge University Press, 1996) 157.

Jesus is Lord.”<sup>202</sup> The error of the Corinthians is often the error of contemporary clergy too. Clergy, like all Christians, naturally eschew the humiliation of sacrificial service and avoid the death that the Christian life often resembles. Paul goes further than simply inviting the Christian to servanthood; he calls the follower of Jesus to recognize and to reflect cross-shaped inability and incompetence.

### **Cruciformity and Power in Weakness**

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness... <sup>7</sup>So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.<sup>203</sup> **2 Corinthians 11:30, 12:7-10**

Referring to the personal suffering that Paul endured as a result of the “thorn in the flesh,” Savage notes that even if the reader never learns the source of that trial, more important lessons emerge for Paul and subsequently for all Christians. He writes, “The power of God comes to dwell in the humble.”<sup>204</sup> He notes how the Corinthians tend to view such modesty and vulnerability in the apostle Paul. He writes, “Critics fail to appreciate his glory. They regard his humility as incompatible with his alleged glory and hence as proof of this failure

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<sup>202</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 157.

<sup>203</sup> 2 Cor. 11:30, 12:7-10.

<sup>204</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 168.

as a minister of Christ.”<sup>205</sup> Paul’s insistence on writing about his own suffering and not ministry victories perplexed the proud Corinthians and glorified his crucified Savior.

Also referencing this passage, pastor and author James C. Howell, professor of Old Testament at Duke, highlights the way Paul responds to criticisms and attacks. He writes, “When his leadership was hotly contested, he ultimately responded, not by flexing his muscle or thrashing his foes but by the most startling confession imaginable.”<sup>206</sup> Underscoring the *why* behind Paul’s boasting and the hope for all Christians who embrace movements toward vulnerability and humility, Savage notes, “In the cross of Christ he discovered not only that divine power had been manifested in human weakness, but also that it took eyes of humility, eyes of faith, to detect that power...a cross-shaped faith which focused on the unseen, not the seen.”<sup>207</sup> The contentment of Paul in his weaknesses comes from his confidence that in—and not despite or outside of—these trials and sufferings and setbacks, Christ’s power becomes more accessible to him. Paul’s insistence upon biblical self-deprecation and his resistance to boasting of success or triumphs rings dissonantly today.

Brian Rosner and Andrew Malone are both New Testament professors and academics in Australia. Trevor Burke is a New Testament scholar at Cambridge. Together they wrote *Paul as Pastor*, concerning pastoral ministry from the life

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<sup>205</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 154.

<sup>206</sup> James C. Howell, *Weak Enough to Lead* (Abingdon Press, 2017), 128.

<sup>207</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 185.

and teaching of the Apostle Paul. Rosner et al. underscore the counter-cultural manner in which Paul talks of ministry. Contrary to highlighting successes or avoiding weakness and suffering, they paint a portrait of ministry with the colors of suffering and hues of the over-arching need for a life of the cross. They write, “Paul narrates his apostolic vocation in terms of suffering and deliverance, of weakness and power. Paul identifies himself very closely with the Crucified but Resurrected One.”<sup>208</sup> Savage notes the indispensability of the cross to Paul’s effectiveness in ministry, writing, “The very existence of Christ’s power in Paul was conditioned on the apostle’s prior humility and weakness.”<sup>209</sup> Transferable to all ministers, Savage notes further the stability and security which Paul experienced through resting in the beauty and work of Christ. He writes, “For Paul the vital truth is that any achievement worth glorying in belongs to the Lord and hence any boasting must, by definition, be exclusively in him.”<sup>210</sup>

Professor of New Testament at Fuller Seminary, Timothy Gombis, points to the critical elements that lay behind Paul’s reliance upon resurrection power in his life and ministry. Paul first recognized and did not resist weakness within himself or challenges outside of himself. Hence Paul chooses consistently to highlight—even boast—about these difficulties and sufferings. He writes about the source of Paul’s hope, “Since God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him based on his faithful obedience unto a shameful death, God would flood Paul’s life and ministry with resurrection power the

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<sup>208</sup> Brian S. Rosner, Andrew S. Malone, Trevor J. Burke, eds., *Paul as Pastor* (T & T Clark, 2019), 62.

<sup>209</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 167.

<sup>210</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 161.

more he lived and ministered from weakness and embraced the social shame.”<sup>211</sup> Such resurrection power produces hope in weakness and an ability and desire to minister vulnerably and humbly.

Highlighting the participation the Christian regularly enjoys with Christ and His suffering, Savage notes, “[The Christian] reflects in his person the weakness and humility of Christ and so must endure the same...sort of ridicule and scorn, and even physical abuse, which Jesus himself experienced in his dying on the cross.”<sup>212</sup> The path to life and fullness is, like our Savior’s path, reached through death; it must pass through death. Savage continues, noting specifically how Paul carries around the death of Christ. Noting the pattern Paul sets for all Christians, he writes, “He reflects in his person the weakness and humility of Christ and so must endure the same...sort of ridicule and scorn, and even physical abuse, which Jesus himself experienced in his dying on the cross.”<sup>213</sup> Paul communicates an unflinching appraisal of the costs of following a suffering Savior whom we must emulate. But he also focuses equal attention upon a resurrected Savior—risen to bring new life, power, and hope to the weary and the sufferer.

Confident in God’s resurrection power and content to follow his master who also experienced shame and indignities, Paul ministered vulnerably. Savage points similarly to the hope of resurrection power in the teaching of Paul and life of Christians. He notes,

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<sup>211</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 56.

<sup>212</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 175.

<sup>213</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 175.

“Paul did not regard suffering as an end in itself. He was intent on a higher purpose—that of manifesting the life of Jesus in his body.”<sup>214</sup> Gombis notes that Paul was unwilling to minister out of his own strength. If he did, Gombis writes, “He would not be drawing upon God’s resurrection power. For Paul, any other form or mode of ministry diminishes and marginalizes the power of the cross and forfeits any access to the transforming power of God.”<sup>215</sup> It is paradigmatic for Paul to emphasize weakness and vulnerability.

Speaking of Paul’s recollection of being lowered from a city wall in a basket to save his life, Gombis points out how these historical anecdotes serve to underscore Paul’s emphasis on being known as weak. He writes, “Paul is purposely avoiding impressive images and portrays himself as one who is faithful to the point where he has had to flee. He is weak. He is vulnerable. He does not portray himself as super-competent and powerful.”<sup>216</sup> Paul’s insistence upon boasting generally, and about his suffering and weaknesses specifically, offer a radically different worldview from both the ancient and the modern world and belie a radically deeper understanding of Christ and His work. Savage notes, “It is by boasting of human weakness that one comes increasingly to manifest in one’s person the perfect power of Christ...It is in succumbing willingly to...the sufferings of Christ—that one discovers what it means fully to live.”<sup>217</sup> The ability to view suffering, trials, and setbacks not as personal failures but as

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<sup>214</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 175.

<sup>215</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 57.

<sup>216</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 95.

<sup>217</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 177.

opportunities to rely more fully and boast more loudly of Christ's power changes how a pastor presents him or herself.

Howell similarly comments about Paul's counter-cultural refusal to boast in achievements, choosing instead to boast about his suffering and weaknesses. He writes, "Instead of hiding his weaknesses, or compensating for them, he blurts out in the open his maladies and inadequacies, as if they are trophies."<sup>218</sup> Howell notes further how the weakness of the cross of Christ became emblematic for the life and ministry of Paul. He writes, "The gospel is not about a powerful God or a God who masquerades briefly as weak... All measures of power are inverted, and shattered, by the humble, holy, compassionate, merciful and this weak heart of God."<sup>219</sup> Savage underscores from this 2 Corinthians text, "Paul means exactly what he says, that it is only in weakness that the power may be of God, that his weakness in some sense actually serves as the ground for divine power."<sup>220</sup> Guthrie sheds light upon the seemingly paradoxical nature of power made perfect in weakness. He writes, "He means that the power of God has its intended effect or fulfillment in contexts of weakness, that is, in trials and persecutions."<sup>221</sup> He adds further, "Paul, who is in relationship with Christ, identifies with Christ's weakness. He also, through Christ, participates in the manifestation of God's

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<sup>218</sup> Howell, *Weak Enough to Lead*, 127.

<sup>219</sup> Howell, *Weak Enough to Lead*, 127.

<sup>220</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 166.

<sup>221</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 594.

power. He expresses this as Christ's power 'taking up residence' on him."<sup>222</sup>

Christ's power and presence are made more manifest in Paul and in Christians through embracing, not eschewing, weakness. The consequences for the minister no longer to avoid or hide weaknesses are profound.

### **Cruciformity and the Emotional Life**

The challenges that the Apostle faced were not just of a physical nature—persecutions, dangers, and adversity—but also involved Paul's emotional life. Guthrie notes that what the Apostle experienced, "has moved from a wide variety of challenges that would have occurred periodically to a climactic burden—indeed the primary burden—that he carries on a daily basis."<sup>223</sup> Rosner et al. note how Paul models a pastoral heart in **2 Corinthians 11:28**, "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."<sup>224</sup> They write, "He spoke of the 'daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.' Paul never spoke other than as a pastor."<sup>225</sup> Paul did not model uber-competence, he was not a pastor who was always cool and collected and never sweating. Instead, Paul chose to highlight for the church and for all ministers his own struggles, suffering, and the cost of ministry to him personally. He did not stop with a throwaway comment, but he continued to share the price he was paying emotionally and internally to serve as a pastor. He writes further,

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<sup>222</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 595.

<sup>223</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 566.

<sup>224</sup> 2 Cor. 11:28.

<sup>225</sup> Rosner, *Paul as Pastor*, 2.

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.<sup>226</sup> **2 Corinthians 1:8-9**

Referring to this vulnerable admission by Paul of his fear, lack of control, and the trials he faced, Savage notes, “By faith Paul preaches the gospel, which in turn brings affliction, which then produces in him greater faith, which in turn, creates greater boldness of speech, which then provokes additional affliction.”<sup>227</sup> Gombis seeks to connect the cruciformity found in Paul to the emotional health of the pastor. Underscoring the theme of how biblical self-care flows from a high view of Christ’s work on the cross, he encourages, “Just as an individual pastor’s ambitions and fears are nailed to the cross...Some programs or dreams may go unfulfilled...Cruciform ministers will learn to know their limits and study their own lives in order to keep themselves in places of refreshment.”<sup>228</sup> Savage similarly highlights the transformative power of embracing the shame of the cross, the indignities of following a crucified Savior. He too makes practical to the pastor the ministry that Paul modeled. He writes, “Why must glory be revealed in shame? Because only in shame will the power of God spring into action...spreading life and power to more and more people, transforming them into the image and glory of the Lord...”<sup>229</sup> Why then would a minister remain paralyzed by the specter of failure or, worse, afraid of appearing incompetent or

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<sup>226</sup> 2 Cor. 1:8-9.

<sup>227</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 181.

<sup>228</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 129.

<sup>229</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 179.

foolish? Paul urges a relentless honesty about one's ministry and one's abilities not simply in the pursuit of empty authenticity, but to rest in and access God's power for the meek and for the weak.

Guthrie notes how God turns desperate situations inside out, granting a sense of purpose to life's traumas. He writes about the purpose behind the suffering that pastors endure, "So that they might abandon self-reliance entirely, placing all their trust in God, who alone has the power to raise the dead."<sup>230</sup> Note the linkage between forsaking self and independence and the power of the resurrection. The suffering—death-like in its expression and often overwhelming—leads to a newness of life through dependence and even joy in God's delivering, saving work. Savage agrees, noting the blessing that a cruciform mentality brings. He writes simply, "Where there is humility there, too, will be the power of God."<sup>231</sup> Cruciformity, in other words, produces a holistic effect upon the Christian or the pastor. It reshapes them spiritually and emotionally, but also attitudinally, which facilitates more healthy, productive relationships with others.

### **Cruciformity and Bowen Family Systems Theory**

The effects of embracing a cruciform posture as a minister begin internally for the pastor and extend relationally. Cruciform ministers will enjoy some degree of differentiation that enable them to resist the herding or togetherness pressure of the congregation. The cross allows us to take stands of principle according to Paul.

Thompson notes how the cross promises not just hope for our forgiveness, but hope for

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<sup>230</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 82.

<sup>231</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 167.

transformation. He writes, “Thus the cross is not only an event of the past, but the event that continues to transform God’s people. In his own suffering, Paul is the embodiment of the transforming effects of the cross. The transformation is not limited to Paul alone, however.”<sup>232</sup> Gombis concurs, “Cruciformity, therefore, does not at all mean that we allow ourselves to be pushed in all directions. It keeps us in the safest possible place—the death of Christ.”<sup>233</sup> Gombis notes further that a differentiated minister, shaped by the cross, facilitates better conflict management as well. He asserts, “Take the initiative to active truth-speaking, invitation, and weakness. You can speak the truth that conflict is an opportunity for mutual understanding.”<sup>234</sup> Michael P. Knowles is a professor of homiletics, scholar, pastor, and author. He commends Paul’s style and mindset to all pastors, writing, “Wherever preachers stand before their congregations conscious of the folly of the Christian message, the weakness of their efforts, and the apparent impossibility of the entire exercise...there, Paul’s homiletic of cross and resurrection is at work.”<sup>235</sup> The combination of self-awareness and biblical truth leads to freedom for the pastor. And the pastor cannot have one without the other: greater depth of and accuracy in self-awareness creates the need for Christ’s power and presence. The promise of that power—given only to the needy and weak—then conveys greater freedom and the joyful cessation of pretending and posturing.

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<sup>232</sup> James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Baker Academic, 2006), 144.

<sup>233</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 129.

<sup>234</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 131.

<sup>235</sup> Michael Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Brazos Press, 2008), 265.

## Cruciformity and Self-Understanding

Savage notes how the Christian or minister's self-understanding flows from his union with Christ. He points out that our union with Christ includes embracing the cross of Christ as our hope and identity. He writes, "For Paul, drawing inspiration from the cross, it means conforming to a Jesus of humility and shame. Few see anything impressive in the ministry of the humble Paul. Paul sees nothing impressive apart from humility...For Paul, it is the mystery of Christian ministry."<sup>236</sup> Jesus provides the key to understanding more fully this mystery of ministry. It is in losing one's rights, comfort, and control that pastors more resemble their Savior. It is, then, in dying that one finds one's life and the corresponding power of resurrection.

Gombis confirms this while noting the sobering realities for a minister who instead seeks glory, self-sufficiency, or acclaim. He writes, "Because of the reality of cruciformity, it is weakness that draws upon God's power. The cultivation of a powerful image, therefore, eliminates the possibility of drawing upon divine resources."<sup>237</sup> Emphasizing the Corinthian disdain for the offense of and implications from the cross of Christ, Savage notes, "They had missed this implication, they had set aside the supreme scandal of crucifixion...they were assimilating the cross to their own worldly and self-exalting expectations, expectations which represented the exact antithesis of the message of Christ

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<sup>236</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 162.

<sup>237</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 97.

crucified.”<sup>238</sup> When the Corinthians, or modern Christians, seek strength and competence while eschewing vulnerability and weakness, they miss out on enormous power.

Paul does not shy away from the tension of the great and impossible calling the Lord has given him and his inability to execute it on his own. In 2

**Corinthians 2: 14-16** he writes,

<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?<sup>239</sup>

Paul serves as a model for all ministers in addressing the challenge of fulfilling the awesome calling of preaching life and death to those being saved and to those perishing while recognizing their own abilities and limitations. Paul does not shy away from the calling, nor does he pretend competence for it either. He shares honestly his own insufficiency while seeking to satisfy his pastoral calling. Paul’s commitment to expressing vulnerability echoes throughout 2 Corinthians and invites ministers today to live and to pastor similarly. Gombis writes of the Apostle’s example, “He is vulnerable about the shame he has endured and the insults he has suffered for this ministry...God pours out resurrection power where there are cruciform postures and conditions.”<sup>240</sup> Thompson notes how Paul does not shy from talking about either his suffering or his

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<sup>238</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 160.

<sup>239</sup> 2 Cor. 2:14-16.

<sup>240</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 97.

imminent death for the sake of the gospel. He writes, “Against those who criticize his weakness, he describes himself as the captive in a victory procession on his way to death.”<sup>241</sup> Howell concurs, discussing why Paul chooses to share so counter-culturally. He writes, “Paul wasn’t being clever; this isn’t self-effacing manipulation. He *was* weak and relished being weak—because of his intimate relationship with the crucified Jesus, who became weak.”<sup>242</sup> Paul’s example invites pastors not just to try vulnerability or to explore their weakness publicly; he delights in and demands honesty about his incompetence, insufficiency, and inability. Paul woos the frantic, over-functioning, always fearful of making a mistake ministers to embrace their cruciform shape and to leverage their resurrection promises.

## **Resurrection & Ministry**

Paul looked equally to the cross of Christ as he did to the resurrection of Christ. As Christ’s death shapes and forever marks the both the life and the ‘feel’ of pastoral ministry, so the resurrection of Christ similarly propels the pastor and fuels ministry with the Spirit’s power and hope. Cruciformity leads to resurrection—there can be no life without passing first from death. A pastor unsurprised by and content with the suffering and ‘deaths’ of following and serving Jesus will also find great comfort and resilience in the benefits of sharing in Christ’s resurrection power and promises.

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<sup>241</sup> Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul*, 139.

<sup>242</sup> Howell, *Weak Enough to Lead*, 127.

## Resurrection & Hope

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.<sup>243</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

Savage amplifies this hope for Christians, noting, “For Paul resurrection was not just a future hope. It was a present reality...The day by day renewal of the ‘inner man’ may be identified with the progressive transformation of the ‘new man’ into the image of Christ and this with ongoing manifestation of increasing increments of glory.”<sup>244</sup> The promise of deep, on-going transformation in his inner man motivated Paul to endure and enabled him to view suffering positively. Savage continues, highlighting the import of this understanding of and connection to Christ’s resurrection work in an on-going way. He writes, “The affliction which once felt like a lethal weight around his neck now seems weightless in comparison to his eternal load of glory.”<sup>245</sup> The change occurs through faith, even if the circumstances do not improve. And eyes of faith transform often bitter suffering and infuse it with meaning and purpose. A similar change in perspective occurs as the minister views him or herself in light of the on-going rhythm of death and life, crucifixion and resurrection.

## Suffering and Hope

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus

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<sup>243</sup> 2 Cor. 4:16-18.

<sup>244</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 182.

<sup>245</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 183.

may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.<sup>246</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:8-12**

How does one today carry around in the body the death of Jesus and what would motivate one to do so? Thompson notes the counter-intuitive connection between a minister's morale and the suffering one must endure, as seen similarly in the life of Paul. He writes, "Despite his weakness, he does not lose heart, for his weakness is the occasion for the power of God. Indeed, as the ultimate sign of weakness, he carries around the dying of Jesus so that life of Jesus may be manifested in his body."<sup>247</sup> Thompson trumpets that the very channel for God's power and grace is the same vessel of challenge, weakness, and trial. To enjoy this power, one must embrace the need for it as well as the source of it.

Reflecting on these verses, Savage notes, "It is probably the cumulative weight of these physical afflictions which underlies Paul's comments in vv. 8-9."<sup>248</sup> But he goes further theologically, picking up the themes in vv. 10-11 where Paul experiences both death and life in ministry. Making an important statement about the nature of Christian ministry, he underscores, "It could well be argued that these two statements, more than any other in Paul, form the nucleus of the apostle's understanding of the Christian ministry."<sup>249</sup> Gombis notes how Paul's ministry is paradigmatic for all ministers to follow. Looking to Paul's self-

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<sup>246</sup> 2 Cor. 4:8-12.

<sup>247</sup> Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul*, 141.

<sup>248</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 171.

<sup>249</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 172.

descriptions about the hope for resurrection in ministry, he highlights Paul's axiomatic belief that life comes from death, that resurrection power follows suffering and indignity. Commenting on this text, he writes, "The treasure of the gospel ministry is proclaimed by weak and unimpressive ministers so that the power of the work of God in the world can be plainly seen to be supplied by God and not from those who minister."<sup>250</sup> Savage points to the afflictions and suffering Paul endures that emulate and map onto the life of Jesus. He explains, "Paul experiences—continually and physically—the sufferings of the cross. His affliction is an extension of Christ's."<sup>251</sup> Pointing to the hope found in this text, Savage notes, "So carrying about the dying of Jesus precedes a manifestation of the image, the glory, the new age and the fullness of life of Jesus Christ."<sup>252</sup> To experience the power and hope of Christ's resurrection, one must also share in the suffering and sacrifice of His death.

The Apostle Paul writes in Colossians similarly, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."<sup>253</sup> Savage notes how these texts provide a template for ministers specifically and Christians generally. He reminds, "In filling up the afflictions of Christ, then, Paul embarks on something which is neither new or exclusively eschatological but rather typical of the experience of God's people

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<sup>250</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 61.

<sup>251</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 173.

<sup>252</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 178.

<sup>253</sup> Col. 1:24

throughout the ages.”<sup>254</sup> Christians must follow their Savior down the path of suffering. But Christians will also then experience the resurrection power of their Savior.

Seeking to unpack more of the meaning of how Paul’s sufferings redound to the Christians at Corinth, Savage writes, “Paul reveals that his suffering (viz. his dying) works for the Corinthians’ salvation.”<sup>255</sup> All the pressure and pain and suffering he bore as an apostle has brought suffering to him and eternal life to them. That’s the rhythm for every minister and also the reality every minister seeks to avoid or shortcut. Gombis notes, “For Paul, the more impressive the minister the less God’s power at work. . . . God’s faithful ministers are regularly mistreated, beaten, crushed, and driven to despair.”<sup>256</sup> Consider the counter-cultural nature of that thought. Paul invites the pastor to embrace mistreatment, disrespect, even suffering for the sake of the gospel. And at the same time, he entreats pastors to shun the spotlight, the buzz, and the acclaim.

Knowles further notes how pastors can learn from and embody Paul’s example. He writes that what preachers have in abundance is, “a parade of daily reminders as to their own inadequacy, unworthiness and—dare we admit it—lack of faithfulness. Yes, these are the preconditions for grace, the foundations for preaching that relies on God ‘who raises the dead.’”<sup>257</sup> Guthrie affirms the rhythm of life springing from death and underscores the paradigmatic nature of the pastor’s suffering. He writes, “Ministers toil on a path of death so that those to whom they minister can experience life. The contrast,

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<sup>254</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 174.

<sup>255</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 178.

<sup>256</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 61.

<sup>257</sup> Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 265.

indeed the paradoxical relationship, between death and life in the crucible of authentic Christian ministry serves as theological comment on the ministerial sufferings described.”<sup>258</sup> Life comes both to the congregation and to the pastor through the vehicle of sufferings, even persecutions.

Paul further emphasizes the pattern of dying and living, writing, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed”<sup>259</sup> **2 Corinthians 6:8-9** He emphasizes the cross and resurrection as daily, needful realities for the Christian. He again underscores the cost of ministry while clinging to hope in a risen and reigning Savior. Savage notes similarly, “It is in being conformed to the death of Christ that one takes on the divine likeness...It is in being delivered over to death for Christ’s sake that one is transformed from one level of glory to another.”<sup>260</sup> Guthrie highlights these contrasts to emphasize the larger lessons the Apostle hopes to provide. He notes about Paul, “He is in a process of dying that they might really live: his life is poured out for them so that they might know real life.”<sup>261</sup> He goes on to note, “Authentic Christian ministry is costly to the minister. Yet it is the price paid with a purpose of advancing the kingdom of God in the lives of others.”<sup>262</sup> Paul underscores that no one advances in the kingdom without someone paying a price. Paul

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<sup>258</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 258.

<sup>259</sup> 2 Cor. 6:8-9.

<sup>260</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 177.

<sup>261</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 338.

<sup>262</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 338.

invites ministers both to this reality and to the concomitant hope that the reality brings with it in the resurrection power of Christ.

Paul's example invites more humility, more boasting in weakness, and more transparency for the local pastor. Savage comments, "If there is to be a demonstration of the surpassing power of God it will be in human self-negation."<sup>263</sup> Such a posture remains stubbornly counter-cultural today as it was in Paul's time. Paul continues to subvert the order and thinking of his culture and so demand that followers of Jesus embrace the attitude and the suffering of Jesus. Guthrie underscores the countercultural view of the Apostle. He writes, "Paul does not hesitate to point out those things that are truly shameful...The apostle does not buy into the power and so-called wisdom of the culture; instead, he points to the weakness and foolishness of the cross, and to the role of believers as 'the foolish' who shame 'the 'wise'".<sup>264</sup> Gombis rues similarly, "The deceitfulness of evil is that it plays to human desires for prominence and the desire to be associated with something significant, substantial, desirable, and impressive."<sup>265</sup> The authors lament that the natural bent of ministers is toward self-aggrandizement and that our culture encourages and rewards such movements toward self-promotion and self-glory.

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<sup>263</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 168–69.

<sup>264</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 334.

<sup>265</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 93.

## Confidence for the Broken

Paul goes to great lengths not just to articulate his own weakness and vulnerabilities, but to highlight these as principles for the Church too. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”<sup>266</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:7** He invites the reader not to minimize or avoid the reality of one’s weakness, but to recognize how its existence brings glory to God and hope for the follower of Christ through the power of Christ’s resurrection. Savage, commenting on the term for “jars of clay,” sometimes translated as “earthen vessels”, writes that all commenters agree about the meaning and import of the term. He notes, “Many believe Paul is using the term *ostrakinos skeuos* to illustrate his own weakness. In doing so he establishes a neat contrast between himself and the superlative power of God in the latter half of verse 7.”<sup>267</sup> He adds further what he describes as the paradox of Paul’s ministry seen in this verse. He writes, “The glorious gospel is borne about by those who are comparatively inferior, the powerful gospel by those who are weak...he is arguing that his weakness serves to highlight God’s strength.”<sup>268</sup> About the treasure given to us in the gospel, Guthrie points out, “God entrusts this treasure to fragile ‘containers,’ ‘jars of clay’...Clay jars were unexceptional, affordable, disposable, and put to a wide variety of uses in the ancient world.”<sup>269</sup> He goes on to explain Paul’s emphasis upon unassuming ordinariness and their fragility. He notes Paul’s reasoning was so that, “The extraordinary

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<sup>266</sup> 2 Cor. 4:7.

<sup>267</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 165.

<sup>268</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 166.

<sup>269</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 253.

power might be seen for what it is, power that comes from God and not from us...their very weakness and baseness focus attention on God's extraordinary power...The fragility of the human minister thus serves to keep the focus on the God of the gospel, not his messenger."<sup>270</sup> Humans generally, and pastors especially, eschew ordinariness, disposability, and weakness. Yet, without embracing the reality of the manner in which God has created us and the purpose for which we most glorify Him, we will strive after vanity, success, acclaim, and strength. And such striving will not only cut the minister off from the source of God's power and the promise of His presence with the weak and humble, it will prove to be futile, a chasing after the wind. Hope, resources, and power are all found in the most surprising place: Christians boasting in their inability and God's great love, mercy, and grace to the small, insignificant, and imperfect.

### **Power for the Needy**

Paul's theology of weakness confronts the pressure ministers feel to appear impressive, important, relevant. His cataloguing of sufferings and trials highlights the most surprising sources of power and foundations for boasting.

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one- I am talking like a madman- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.<sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.<sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not

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<sup>270</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 254.

indignant?<sup>30</sup> If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.<sup>31</sup> The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.<sup>32</sup> At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,<sup>33</sup> but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. 12:1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it,<sup>271</sup> **2 Corinthians 11:23 - 12:1**

Emphasizing how this passage is typical of Paul's self-understanding and thinking about the nature of ministry, Savage writes of Paul's counter-cultural tendency to highlight his weakness. He writes, "What his opponents regard as worthy of praise—competitive boasting and aggressive behavior—he condemns. What they deplore as ignoble and base—humility and meekness—he esteems."<sup>272</sup> The length and detail of Paul's account of his suffering on behalf of the gospel speak to several important ministerial realities. First, Paul urges Christians to recognize his life and its concomitant scars as normative. Second, Paul resolutely determines not to boast or draw attention to his accomplishments, gifts, or honors. And third, Paul invites the Christian and the leader not to shy from describing and recounting these sufferings and humiliations.

Guthrie further contrasts Paul's manner and leadership with his opponent's attacks and the mores of the broader culture. He writes, "His main point is that if he is compelled to join the false teachers in boasting, he will boast in his own countercultural way, focusing on various aspects of his ministry that display his weakness."<sup>273</sup> Paul paints a countercultural vision of ministry then and

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<sup>271</sup> 2 Cor. 11:23-12:1.

<sup>272</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 157.

<sup>273</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 573.

now, as timely and relevant two thousand years ago as today. The vision is also inviting to strugglers and welcoming to sinners who also happen to be in pastoral ministry.

Summarizing this incredible parade of horrors in Second Corinthians, Guthrie affirms, “Paul’s point is that authentic ministry bears a tremendous cost in terms of hardship and not for those given to leisure and comfort.”<sup>274</sup> Rosner et al. reference this so-called Fool’s Speech as evidence of Paul’s conformity to Christ and deep reliance upon the death and resurrection of Christ. Contrasting those other peddlers of religion who eschew suffering and view it as anathema to their glory and the truth of their claims, they write, “His boasting of ‘weaknesses’ in the ‘Fool’s Speech’ mocks their boasting of superiority and thereby authenticates him a minister of the crucified but resurrected Christ, while at the same time delegitimizing their claims.”<sup>275</sup> Thompson notes how Paul details this harrowing list of sufferings in a counter-cultural manner. He writes, “Paul repeatedly commends himself and ‘boasts’ because he has been forced by his opponents into professional boasting.”<sup>276</sup> The twist is that Paul’s boasting only includes deprivations, cruelty, and intense suffering on behalf of the Gospel. Using the specifics of this speech to inform pastoral thinking generally, Savage writes, “No matter how grim the situation may become...it never reaches the point where the apostle succumbs to

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<sup>274</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 265.

<sup>275</sup> Rosner, *Paul as Pastor*, 67.

<sup>276</sup> Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul*, 137.

ultimate defeat and despair. In Paul's mind this is a tribute to the surpassing excellence of God's power working in him."<sup>277</sup>

Power for the Christian and hope for ministry flow then from the promise of Christ's resurrection. Paul writes with hope, "Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence."<sup>278</sup> **2 Corinthians 4:14** Paul points to his reliance upon the resurrection power of Christ amidst difficulties, challenges, even persecution. Savage notes similarly, "This hope of a future resurrection has a profound impact on Paul's earthly existence...because he believes in a future resurrection of the dead he is presently willing to carry about in his body the dying of Jesus...Without faith in a future resurrection Paul's present suffering would be not only intolerable, but also meaningless."<sup>279</sup> Paul models both for the Christian and for the pastor the purpose discovered behind suffering and setbacks. He lifts the veil of circumstances, arguing, contra the Greeks, that suffering may come from the hands of capricious gods or simply bad luck. Contra the Stoics he does far more than reframe difficulties and endorse bracing up under and learning from them. Rather, he joins all suffering to the person of Jesus, whose own suffering we imitate and whose suffering provides meaning to our own. And, vitally, he links our suffering to Jesus' resurrection; reminding not just that these challenges will pass, but that they provide opportunity currently for more of Jesus' power and glory to shine through our lives.

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<sup>277</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 171–72.

<sup>278</sup> *2 Cor. 4:14*.

<sup>279</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 181.

Gombis writes further of the transformative power that such an understanding of Christ's death and resurrection can provide for leaders. Speaking of the health that this perspective can bring to a church or organization, he notes, "When Paul shapes his daily life by the death of Christ, his own life is flooded and sustained by God's resurrection power. And the more Paul lives this way, the more his churches and those to whom he ministers have God's resurrection life radiate into their lives."<sup>280</sup> Guthrie concurs, "Paul's boldness and endurance stems from his relationship with God, whose work in this world includes the defeat of death and hope of a future that transcends the present afflictions he experiences in his ministry."<sup>281</sup> Resurrection, in other words, was not merely a future hope for Paul, but a present reality, bringing power and hope and life to him even as he faced terrible suffering and difficulties.

Savage notes how this thinking and theology must transform our character and our self-understanding. Pointing to the fruit of Paul's teaching relationally, he encourages, "We know that to be weak in Christ means to share in his un-self-striving, self-negating, servant-like, God-centered faith."<sup>282</sup> Savage writes further about the transformative effect of resurrection power upon the Christian. He underscores, "The resurrection of Jesus is just as important as his death in determining the overall character of Christians. If the Lord Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christian existence as Paul knows it would cease to exist."<sup>283</sup> In other words, Paul offers the Christian and the

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<sup>280</sup> Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, 61.

<sup>281</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 263.

<sup>282</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 174–75.

<sup>283</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 182.

pastor alike good news, hope. Jesus' death places the sufferings and pain of the pastor in the perspective of good company—we are not alone. And Jesus' resurrection elevates our trials and challenges, introducing supernatural power, resources, and promise to the struggling Christian in the very heart of their weakness. The remedies, then, cannot be found in working harder, or even smarter. The hope is not simply found in a future promise. The pattern of death and resurrection, of losing one's life and finding it again, of joining Jesus in his suffering and reigning with Jesus in his resurrection, becomes emblematic to the Christian and paradigmatic for ministry.

The travails the pastor faces as well as the suffering every Christian encounters and absorbs meet the succor and hope of Jesus in 2 Corinthians. The pastor recognizes he is not alone nor abnormal in the experience of this suffering. He is preceded by his Savior and led by the Apostle. The 'deaths' one finds consistently offer the resurrection fruits of humility, modesty, and vulnerability. And those benefits will accrue to the Christian because of the reality and potency of the life and work of a risen Jesus. Paul's honesty and theological clarity offer the minister hope—this is normal; comfort—this is good for the soul and ministry; and strength—this will redound to the good and the good of your ministry.

### **Personal Piety and Spiritual Formation**

The literature emphasizes that a vibrant, intentional relationship with God is the primary defense against pastoral burnout and vocational attrition. Researchers argue that ministers often struggle to maintain their own spiritual vitality because the tools of their trade—Scripture, prayer, and worship—can become overfamiliar and professionally perfunctory. To cultivate resilience, pastors must prioritize personal spiritual disciplines such as

building rituals and maintaining accountability, ensuring their work for Christ does not supersede their interior life with Him. Ultimately, a pastor's personal piety serves as the reservoir that sustains them through the inevitable sufferings and pressures of long-term ministry.

### **Self-Care and Spiritual Health**

Self-care is defined in the literature as a stewardship of one's humanity, serving as a vital means to conserve and lengthen a pastor's ministry. Rather than being an act of laziness, true self-care involves the wisdom to rest and reflect, acknowledging that ministers are "people" before they are "pastors." Authors warn that many clergy operate on "spiritual fumes," failing to initiate the drastic lifestyle changes necessary to prevent total collapse. By embracing holistic health practices, pastors can remain fresh and effective, protecting their longevity against the corrosive effects of chronic stress.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST)**

The study of emotional intelligence and Bowen Family Systems Theory highlights the importance of a pastor's self-awareness and relational maturity. BFST provides a framework for understanding the church as an emotional system, helping pastors navigate interpersonal conflict and anxiety without becoming "triangulated" or overwhelmed. Literature suggests that ministers who cultivate emotional maturity are better equipped to maintain a "differentiated" presence, allowing them to lead effectively through congregational crises. This systemic awareness is presented as a critical skill for sustaining healthy, long-term leadership in a complex community.

### **2 Corinthians and Paul's Pastoral Theology**

A theological review of 2 Corinthians reveals that the Apostle Paul's ministry was

defined by a "theology of weakness" and a reliance on God's sustaining power amidst intense suffering. Paul's experiences provide a biblical template for modern pastors, demonstrating that resilience is not found in personal sufficiency, but in the privilege of bringing forth Christ and the gospel in "jars of clay". The literature connects Paul's endurance to his focus on the resurrection and the eternal weight of glory, which reframes temporal hardships. By embracing inadequacy and insufficiency while grounding their identity in the gospel rather than in external metrics of success, pastors find the spiritual ballast necessary to persevere through decades of ministry.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

#### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). To determine both the health of their tenures and the keys to their longitudinal callings, a qualitative study was proposed to explore the foundations of pastoral health generally and pastoral longevity specifically. To examine these areas more closely, the following questions guided the research:

1. How do senior pastors define pastoral health?
2. What personal and spiritual practices contribute to longitudinal pastoral health?
3. What challenges do senior pastors overcome to continue in longitudinally healthy ministry?
4. What benefits derive from a healthy, longitudinal pastorate to the pastor and to the congregation?

#### **Design of the Study**

To glean more information about this topic apart from the literature, a basic, qualitative study was created. Renowned sociologist, professor, researcher, and Georgia Bulldog, Sharan Merriam, notes the value of qualitative studies for learning in a

systematic manner. She notes that applied research, “Is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline.”<sup>284</sup> The stated goal of this research is to improve the quality of the practice of pastoring in a local parish over an extended period of time. For the purpose of this research, the researcher found eight PCA pastors and one formerly PCUS pastor who had served in one parish for more than twenty years and conducted one, ninety minute interview with each of those pastors. Merriam notes similarly, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”<sup>285</sup> Ninety minute, safe and anonymized interviews provide the space for participants to use words to describe their experiences more freely and broadly. At this point in the pastors’ careers, they were all on the far side of a healthy, longitudinally ‘successful’ pastorate. Only two remained senior pastors and both were nearing retirement, and the rest were either fully retired or mostly retired.

These interviews afforded the opportunity both to make sense of their experiences and to pass along their interpretations and conclusions. Merriam notes this process is at the heart of qualitative research. She writes, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives.”<sup>286</sup> The researcher then sought to organize the participants’ thoughts by coding and comparing their experiences both with the other participants and with the literature. The literature

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<sup>284</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (Jossey-Bass, 2016), 3.

<sup>285</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 6.

<sup>286</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

provided a baseline of existing theory with which the interviews sought to interact and to explore. Of this process, Merriam writes,

Most qualitative research inherently shapes or modifies existing theory in that (1) data are analyzed and interpreted in light of the concepts of a particular theoretical orientation, and (2) a study's findings are almost always discussed in relation to existing knowledge (some of which is theory), with an eye to demonstrating how the present study has contributed to the expanding the knowledge base.<sup>287</sup>

What emerged from the interviews and their interactions with both one another and the literature afforded the opportunity to seek findings inductively. The researcher was very interested in the overlap and dialogue between literature and practitioner as well as between practitioner and practitioner. Merriam notes, "Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon."<sup>288</sup> Following Merriam, the researcher pursued an inductive process seeking, "To build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses...build[ing] toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field."<sup>289</sup> The researcher pursued a semi-structured, inductive approach through qualitative research that sought to discover what themes and learning would emerge from the interviews.

### **Participant Sample Selection**

While the literature appears to suggest that pastoral effectiveness and fruitfulness increases after five years, the researcher is more interested in much longer tenured

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<sup>287</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 89.

<sup>288</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 23.

<sup>289</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

pastors. The researcher engaged in purposeful sampling, choosing pastors in the PCA, and one minister who preceded the PCA, who share similar training and educational backgrounds and subscribe to the same theological and doctrinal affirmations. The similarity of that sample set, including the facts that they are all white, men, and past middle age, provide opportunities to note similarities and differences within their lived, pastoral experience. The researcher also chose pastors who have stayed at the same parish for at least twenty years. Merriam affirms this type of sampling writing, explaining, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned.”<sup>290</sup> The similarities of the sample group were intentional and through those commonalities themes and patterns emerged worthy of evaluation and further study.

This study was conducted through personal interviews with nine, older pastors by means of Zoom. One was invited directly by the researcher and the other eight were invited to participate via an introductory email from the President of Covenant Seminary introducing the researcher, followed by further email correspondence. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate as well as recorded, verbal consent via Zoom. The researcher has met IRB requirements, and the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “no risk” according to Seminary IRB guidelines. In addition, after an introductory email in which participants expressed general interest, each participant signed the “Participant Consent Form” below to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants.

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<sup>290</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

## **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Jack Howell to investigate pastoral longevity, self-care, and spiritual habits and formation for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed. The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of the research is to investigate the insight of pastors on the impact of longitudinal pastorates upon themselves and the local church.
2. Potential benefits of the research may include pastoral understanding of the nature of healthy tenures at a local church including habits, practices, and insights gleaned over time. Though there are no direct benefits for participants, they may be encouraged by the experience of sharing their insight with an eager listener and learner as well as comparing their insights with other seasoned practitioners and pastors.
3. The research process will include interviewing nine pastors who will participate in recorded, live interviews that will be analyzed anonymously by means of a constant-comparative method.
4. Participants in this research will be interviewed for ninety minutes and will discuss various topics related to pastoral health, self-care, personal practices of piety, conflict negotiation and management, and the involvement of BFST upon their leadership.
5. Potential discomforts or stresses: only use of time. Participants will be interviewed by means of Zoom.
6. Potential risks: Minimal – the Human Rights Risk Level assessment is deemed “No Risk.”
7. Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
8. Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

## Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. Merriam describes this type of data collection as, “Usually, specific information desired from all the respondents in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But most of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time.”<sup>291</sup> The researcher followed the same set of questions for each interview, but allowed the participants to digress, change topic, and speak to what mattered most to them. More effective questions were discovered through pilot interviews with local pastors. Merriam affirms the use of pilot interviews by writing, “Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions. Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, but you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording...and which you should have thought to include in the first place.”<sup>292</sup> Armed with more effective questions, the goal was to follow the interests and passions of those interviewed to discern inductively from their thoughts and responses what lay at the core of their experiences, beliefs, and convictions. The researcher recorded video and/or audio copies of the interview by means of Zoom and voice recording software.

Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time. As the researcher reviewed transcripts of the interviews and began to code their responses, the constant-comparative method was utilized to draw out agreement and disagreement among the participants. Merriam

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<sup>291</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110.

<sup>292</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 117.

describes this method as, “The constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data.”<sup>293</sup>

The interview protocol contained the following questions:

1. Where did you grow up; go to school, seminary? What did you do prior to your last or current pastorate? How long have you/did you serve in X,Y, or Z church?
2. Tell me about times in your ministry that have been more healthy as a pastor.
3. What would suggest contributed to those times of health?
4. Has your definition of pastoral health changed over the years?
5. How would you describe your personal spiritual practices that have shaped your pastoral health?
6. How have your practices changed over the years?
7. To what extent, if any, have you employed or prioritized self-care? What did that look like?
8. What spiritual practices would you encourage a young pastor to engage in consistently that would lend themselves toward a healthy, long pastorate?
9. Describe some times of conflict in your ministry and how you endured during those.
10. What factors contributed to your ability to persevere through those and other trials?

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<sup>293</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 32.

11. To what extent have you relied upon or grown in emotional intelligence?
12. What Scriptures or themes from Scripture enabled you to persevere and flourish?
13. How would you describe the relationship between your long tenure and your preaching, counseling, leadership?
14. Given what you know now, would you recommend to a younger minister to seek to remain at the same church as you did, provided the Lord enables him to remain there?
15. How would you summarize, briefly, what you believe kept you enduring in ministry and persevering in the work?

### **Data Analysis**

As soon as possible and always within a business day or two, the researcher obtained a transcript of each interview using voice recognition software and reviewed for errors. The interviews and observation notes were transferred into computer files. They were printed, coded, and analyzed using the constant-comparison method to evaluate the data in between each interview and throughout the interview process. The analysis focused on locating common theological, psychological, and practical themes while paying special attention to points of tension or disagreement for deeper analysis. Where discrepancies appeared with later participants, additional follow-up questions were presented.

### **Researcher Position**

Merriam speaks to the pre-work for the researcher involved in this form of data collection. She notes, “Prior to interviewing those who have had direct experience with

the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions.”<sup>294</sup> Thus, an awareness and explanation of the researcher’s position, potential prejudices and biases are necessary. Researcher bias based upon beliefs, values, personal preferences, and experiences are unavoidable. For this reason, Merriam urges researchers to “identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher’s own interests.”<sup>295</sup> The researcher is a white, male, ordained PCA minister quite similar demographically, educationally, and theologically to those interviewed. There are additional sources of prejudice regarding the topic of pastoral longevity for the researcher.

The researcher explored both prior and current vocational experiences to uncover other potential areas of bias or prejudice. The Alban Institute points to a need for self-awareness and transparency through an intriguing study that reveals, “The greater the number of ministers who had served a person’s home church while [he was] growing up, the more likely he was not to persist in ministry.”<sup>296</sup> The study finds correlation between pastoral transience growing up and pastoral instability as an adult. The researcher admires and enjoyed only one pastor for his entire childhood and adolescence, a man who pastored the same church faithfully for more than forty years. The researcher further has served in only one church as a pastor for almost thirty years. The church the researcher pastors is a medium-sized church of around 500 members, some of whom the researcher

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<sup>294</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 27.

<sup>295</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

<sup>296</sup> Brown, *Restoring the Vow of Stability*, 162.

married, baptized their children, and now has begun to marry those children. Further, the researcher's local presbytery, or geographical collection of denominationally united churches, has been marked by long, steady, faithful pastorates. It has not been uncommon for pastors in the researcher's area to serve the same church for more than thirty years. Therefore, the researcher has found great value personally and relationally from long-term pastorates. The researcher is less certain about what has sustained and fortified his own ministry as well as that for those before and around him.

### **Study Limitations**

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited by its sample size and sample scope. As stated in the previous section, participants were purposefully sampled, and therefore the results are not formally generalizable. Participants were not theologically, ethnically and denominationally diverse, and therefore some of the findings may not extend beyond the researcher's context, though those who desire to appropriate the findings herein should test those findings in their particular contexts. As with all qualitative research of this kind, the reader bears the responsibility to determine what findings can appropriately be applied in part or in full in their own ecclesial contexts.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). This chapter provides the findings of nine interviews with very seasoned pastors who have led the same church for more than twenty years regarding their views upon pastoral longevity and health. Common themes and relevant insights emerged as the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do senior pastors define pastoral health?
2. What practices contribute to longitudinal pastoral health, including their personal and spiritual practices?
3. Beyond pastoral health, what challenges must senior pastors overcome to continue in longitudinally healthy ministry?
4. Finally, what benefits, if any, derive from a healthy, longitudinal pastorate to the pastor and to the congregation?

### **Introductions to Participants and Context**

The researcher selected nine pastors within the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition who had served in one parish at least twenty years and had known fruitfulness and stability over their tenure. All but one were PCA ministers, with one having served in the preceding denomination, the PCUS, later in the PCUSA, and now in the EPC. He shares with the others the same confessional standards and theological background. All

names and identifiable participant information have been anonymized and changed to protect identities. All pseudonyms are gender consistent with the participants.

Jim served as senior pastor of a large, historic church in the wealthy suburbs of a mid-sized city in the Southeast for a quarter century and then continued serving the church after stepping down from his senior pastor role to become an associate pastor there. The church experienced renewal during his tenure there, planted several churches, and had significant city-wide impact.

Richard served as senior and organizing pastor of a large church in a growth edge, exurban area of the Southeast for more than forty years. He too has transitioned to an associate pastor role in which he continues to serve. That church has also planted churches, started a school, and is a fixture in the community now. Richard served his entire career at one church.

Henry was the organizing and senior pastor of a large church in a wealthy suburb of a large city in the Mid-Atlantic. Serving for more than forty years there, like Richard, he only served at one parish, leaving the church upon retirement. Henry's church also planted daughter churches and, like Richard's, enjoyed significant building programs.

Larry, in his ninth decade, saw the PCA form, but remained in the PCUS and later the PCUSA. He served as senior pastor of a large, historic church in a medium-sized Mid-Atlantic city. He saw significant renewal there and served there twenty-five years until his wife's health compelled an early retirement. Larry also led his congregation through major building programs.

Hudson continues to serve at a large, growth edge suburban church in the Midwest, continuing a ministry he began there thirty-three years ago. During his time

there the church has grown significantly, undergone a number of capital programs and improvements, and built institutional ministries like a preschool and a counseling center.

Bruce was the organizing and senior pastor of a large church in a wealthy suburb of a major city in the Southeast. He spent thirty-five years as the senior minister before becoming an associate minister, like Jim and Richard, at the same church where he was serving. He too led the church through multiple building campaigns and also enjoyed times of renewal in the church.

Mark served two congregations as senior minister in the Southeast for ten years each, one in a mid-sized university town, the other in a major American city. He has served in his current role as senior minister for twenty years much farther north in a large, highly educated East Coast city. He has led the congregation through renewal, building programs, and institution building like the other men interviewed.

Adam served for thirty years as the senior minister of a large church in the fast-growing, wealthy suburbs of a major southern city. He led the church through renewal, growth, and capital building campaigns. Also an academic, Adam persevered through decades of denominational change and led the church successfully in transition when he retired.

Brian served for thirty-one years as the senior minister of a large church in another fast-growing, wealthy suburb of a major southern city. Stabilizing a declining church, Brian led the church through significant renewal, growth, and building campaigns.

All of the participants have retired or are nearing retirement; all are white, male, PCA ministers—with the exception of Larry whose credentials are with the EPC—and all

enjoyed long, successful tenures relative to growth, stability, renewal, and institution building. Half served in suburban contexts of major metropolitan areas, and half served in the suburbs of growing, mid-sized cities. Their tenures range from twenty years to more than forty years, and they have all weathered significant conflicts and crises.

### **Personal Piety & Spiritual Formation**

All of the ministers described personal practices of devotion as necessary and indispensable to pastoral health and longevity. Without exception, each pastor described periods of personal renewal and significant growth spiritually. They all highlighted, nonetheless, the day-to-day disciplines that sustained them year after year. They pointed to a self-understanding resting upon Christ's finished work leading to specific practices day-to-day which included Sabbath observance, prayer and silence, and the presence and enjoyment of rich Christian community. For each of these men these practices flowed out of a time of spiritual renewal and the need for on-going vitality relationally with Jesus. They each underscored that these habits and disciplines did not make them successful pastorally, but sustained and strengthened them for the pastorate with all of its attendant challenges.

### **Identity Resting Upon Christ's Person**

All of the ministers described times in their ministry when they pastored largely in their own strength and through their own gifts. They each recognized the paucity of their spiritual habits and the need to glean and to rest in more of Jesus. Consequently, they all came to a recognition that they must prioritize time with Jesus. Henry summarized the object of pastoral longevity aptly. He recalled, "I had to learn early on

that that the goal in ministry has to be faithfulness, not success, and not even longevity. My goal has to be faithfulness to the One who calls me.” The singular drive to please the Lord, to remain faithful to Him, independent of success or ministry blessing, animated Henry’s ministry. Asked what he would tell a young minister asking how to remain faithful in ministry, Jim replied simply, “Know Jesus better. Know the actual person of Jesus better. And slow down. You’ll rest more, love more deeply, be more honest, weak and dependent. His righteousness will matter more than yours.”

Similarly echoing the themes of the necessity to slow down in order to know Jesus more deeply, more fully, Larry talked of a time early in his ministry. He recounted, “God just broke my heart because I realized that I had gotten so busy doing God’s work that I neglected my relationship with God. I went home determined to get less busy. And I did.” Larry and Jim both underscored the necessity to slow down, to set aside time deliberately to be with Jesus and to enjoy Him. In a new ministry setting, feeling a bit like an outsider, Adam spoke of his response and coping mechanism. He shared, “My options were limited, so I snuggled up to Jesus. That’s not all bad.” What a penetrating, lovely assessment. Undergirding the stresses and mitigating the inevitable loneliness of ministry was the person of Jesus Christ. And this Jesus was welcoming, available, “snuggle-able.” All the pastors agreed that such love for and commitment to Jesus stems from practices and doesn’t occur without intentionality and habit forming practices.

### **Identity Awakened by Christ’s Work**

Similar influences and thinking emerged from the pastors regarding their own spiritual renewal and vitality. Every pastor pointed to a time or a season where they—and often their wives—experienced renewal or awakening spiritually. The before-awakening

and after-awakening demarcation came through persistently as the ministers spoke about what sustained them over decades in pastoral ministry. They drew straight lines from their awakening to God's grace in Christ Jesus to their own pastoral resilience and even durability. To a person they all credited this time of personal and spiritual transformation as foundational for the rest of their ministries, and indeed, for the ways they pursued not just ministry but the practices of ministry.

Eight of the pastors spoke almost without exception about the outsized role Jack Miller, World Harvest Ministries, and Sonship specifically played in their lives and ministries. Miller (1928-1996) was a pastor, church planter, missionary, author, and professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia who wrote extensively about a recovery of grace found through the finished work of Jesus Christ. He founded World Harvest Mission emphasizing the life-changing realities of our adoption as children of God and the consequent freedom the gospel provides to give our lives away and to serve others.

Brian and his wife attended a Sonship week, led by Jack Miller himself. He related about that week and explained, "A real cornerstone of my life with the Lord was just to see the life of repentance and faith as a normal part of the Christian life." He shared further that the renewal personally became a hallmark of his church too. He shared,

It was a mark of our church. That kind of repentance and faith that leads to a joy in our forgiveness and leads to an honesty about our sin. That's one of the things that probably sustained me the most in my ministry was to see as a normal Christian life a growing sense of your sin, a growing sense of the grace of God.

Redefining the Christian life in light of grace strengthened and carried Brian's ministry forward as he saw himself more honestly but also more loved.

Hudson found similar renewal through the ministry of Jack Miller and the Sonship movement. The grace awakening broke like a wave over Hudson's life. He recounted, "The Sonship movement was explosive for me. I realized I had been living out of my own strength. That was a major healthy turning point—learning to live out of the gospel." Hudson shared about the burnout that preceded this renewal; he was "living by the flesh." After encountering the grace message he shared, "I became excited about the gospel being righteousness as a gift—and realizing I had to live out of that." The consequences for Hudson flowed far downstream. About a philosophy of ministry undergirded by grace, he relayed, "I needed to learn how to do ministry in grace rather than in my own strength. My preaching became more authentic." The message and power of grace allowed him to face and endure greater disappointment too. He passed along, "Approval from the Lord began to replace approval from people. I didn't have to be afraid of conflict or disapproval; I grew in gospel confidence."

Jim received his seminary education under Jack Miller and was similarly transformed by the message of grace presented there. He recounted, "I watched Jack repent, obey, and believe." Like the others, the message of the grace of the gospel shaped his vision for ministry. He stated simply, "The feel of faith is not strength. The feel of faith is dependent weakness. Not a single person in the Bible comes out *not* looking like a twit, except Jesus, and maybe Daniel." Such grace-drenched self-understanding tolerates weakness and promotes vulnerability, freeing the minister from the pressure of omniscience.

Richard also pointed to the influence of Jack Miller and the grace movement as critical to shaping his ministry and contributing to his pastoral health and longevity. He described his spiritual journey, “It led to a gospel transformation prodded by Jack Miller’s influence, discipleship, and sonship training, which all had a huge influence. Then coming in with Bryan Chapell and Tim Keller and others that wrote about grace and the gospel.” Like it did for Brian, the gospel renewal movement led Richard toward greater vulnerability and honesty with others about his own sin and struggles. Speaking of a conference where Jim was teaching and preaching, he relayed, “As he was pouring out illustrations of his failure, I just saw my own; it was paradigm shifting. He was just confessing his sins and his weakness, but in doing that I was seeing myself. He’s giving words, helping me understand myself.” The benefits of more deeply appropriating the grace of the gospel redounded to more than to the minister. The aftershocks of such personal renewal traveled through the congregation as well.

Like Hudson, the gospel message of grace of the Lord Jesus became paradigmatic for all of Richard’s ministry. He exhorted, “Young ministers have to get the gospel; that gospel paradigm is something you have to understand. You constantly talk about the gospel, and you never get it. You’re always learning it, applying it, figuring out how to make it your daily diet.” Richard went further, describing how the gospel of grace supplies an antidote and a cure to so many ministerial motivations. He described, “A lot of people go into ministry to try to prove your worth, your value; everyone is trying to mask their shame. Jesus’ righteousness is the only thing that covers your shame.” That desire for shame coverage permeates ministry and often becomes a source of conflict or burnout for the pastor. Richard noted, “You’ll use people and ministry to try to cover

your shame unless you get that. If your worthiness is in Jesus, then you don't have to seek bigger and better and brighter. You're not looking to embellish your salary or resume or clout, you're not trying to become more. You're freed of using ministry to try to become somebody." Richard connected the gospel of grace to contentment in ministry and freedom as a pastor.

He spoke further about grace motivating his pursuit of personal practices of devotion and piety. He relayed, "You're reading about it, you're nourishing yourself, you listen to other guys preach on the gospel. The more I get the gospel, I put my head on my pillow and go to sleep. I'm a beloved child. I'm being tucked in by my Father. In bed, all's well." Continuing the analogy of sleeping and waking in the gospel, he further recounted, "When my feet hit the floor, my first instinct is: you got to get to work; you got to bust it today because your worth is on the line." That daily amnesia toward the gospel alerted Richard to his daily, hourly need for more of Jesus, more of the good news of His finished work and subsequent acceptance. That type of on-going faith and trust in the Gospel provides confidence and inner strength to undergird a minister, enabling him to persevere and remain more content, joyful, and vulnerable throughout the trials and gyrations of ministry.

Bruce noted a similar awakening of grace that occurred to him and his wife early in their ministry. He shared, "I didn't really understand the gospel for the Christian life." Reading Francis Schaeffer express a similar reality became seminal for him. He quoted Schaeffer, "Since becoming a Christian I had heard nothing about the present value of the blood of Christ for my daily life." He shared excitedly about the transformation for himself and his ministry upon learning more about and resting upon the blood of Christ

day-to-day. He summarized, “That’s where real health came from. We became more grace-oriented, which increased repentance. Increased repentance led to a deeper understanding of identity in Christ. It created a culture of humility; that’s when things took off.” He suggested that circumstances reveal our need for Christ, which draws Christians into closer connection with Jesus as they believe afresh in their identity and in resurrection power received through the gospel by faith. He recounted, “When that paradigm became clear, our church took off.” Bruce credited the gospel awakening for his own growth as well as that for the church.

Mark similarly noted the connection between an awakening to grace and his own pastoral health. He confessed candidly, “I was driven by perfection—perfectionism—rather than a healthy, gospel-centered life. I realized God didn’t save me to make me perfect, but to make me His. Coming to terms with what the gospel teaches about where my real value is helped a lot.” Like the others, the message of the grace of the gospel permeated Mark’s philosophy of ministry and the way he related to others. He summarized, “Be a minister on your knees in your desperate need for the presence, power, and work of the Holy Spirit. Acknowledge your inadequacy, insecurity, and weakness. Remind yourself He saved you to be His; this is a privilege.” The consistency of the ministry of Jack Miller and the grace movement is striking to recognize throughout the ministers’ lives. And it figures prominently in the vision, outlook, and philosophies of ministry of each of these pastors for the rest of their ministries.

Larry, twenty to twenty-five years older than the others and outside of the PCA circles, also experienced renewal and tremendous growth spiritually early in his ministry. He alone was the minister not directly affected by Jack Miller, the Sonship movement,

and the emphasis upon grace that swept through Reformed and Presbyterian circles in the 1990's. His renewal is worth noting separately. Larry had been struggling in his new parish. He described himself as "a desperation choice" for the search committee as they had already been turned down twice. He came to a church in decline, a building in disrepair, and no youth group or even children in Sunday School. Larry poured himself into ministry for five years. He visited everyone in the congregation and worked extremely hard, preaching morning and evening as the only pastor. He described himself as feeling more depressed than he had ever experienced previously.

Someone in their church invited Larry and his wife to the 1975 Urbana Missions Conference where they heard Gordon McDonald teach every morning for four days from the book of Isaiah. In his four talks he summarized that the man of God must have communion with God, be a commentator about God, be a confronter for God, and be a comforter of God's people. Larry, fifty years later, still points to those talks and conference as the watershed for his ministry. It was after those that Larry got less busy, began to pray earnestly and significantly, and to depend less upon himself and more upon the Spirit's work in his life and ministry. It was also after that time that his church began to experience real growth and renewal. When asked by others at the time what was the secret, the cause of all the growth, Larry responded, "Some plant, some water, but God gives the increase. And God did give the increase." Throughout the rest of his career Larry continued to point to those insights and the subsequent changes he made in his life and ministry. And he highlighted how those changes provided meaningful health and deep relief, enabling him to persevere in ministry.

It is noteworthy that each of the ministers point to the work of one pastor as seminal for their lives, ministries, even their marriages. These pastors highlighted the teaching of Jack Miller, Gordon MacDonald, and Francis Schaeffer specifically. But they all share a similar emphasis upon both gleaning and resting in God's love for them in Christ Jesus. They all found themselves as a result more dependent upon grace and more awakened to their own sinfulness. They all highlighted Christ's sufficiency, reliance upon the Holy Spirit, and a subsequent vulnerability and openness toward congregants and elders alike. It is noteworthy to recognize that each of these men understood as causal the relationship between this awakening to their success and tenure in ministry. Humanly speaking, there was no more central, indispensable facet of their thinking and philosophy of ministry than their delight in and display of the grace of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Practices of Personal Piety**

### **God's Word**

The practice of extended time in God's Word surfaced consistently in all nine interviews. Warning against relying upon study as a substitute for devotion, Henry noted, "Separate study for teaching from devotional time—input before output. God doesn't love me more if I have devotions, but we still need deep, devotional engagement with God's Word. There has to be real soul-filling when God's Word grips you." Richard took a different approach with time in the Word for study. He shared honestly, "I have always struggled to read the Bible, memorize scripture, pray. I was saved by having to have

forced time in the Bible every week extensively.” Regardless of the reason, both pastors describe the necessity of regular, deep time in the Word.

Brian relied on regular feeding from the Word similarly. He recounted, “I’ve always done a Bible plan that has me read through the Bible once every two years that God uses to support and sustain me.” Jim similarly applied the practices of time in the Word and prayer to his life, but joined them to their need to be private, deliberate, and consistent. Referring to a quote from a Church Father, he shared, “Obscurity is the real nursery for spiritual vitality, when there’s no one but you and Him.” Sharing further he underlined the need for a dynamic, personal relationship with Jesus. He summarized, “Pastoral health includes working hard at communing internally with God, and working hard at relating profoundly with my family and congregants.” Hudson concurred, noting, “Personal devotional life—reading and praying—was trained early. I’ve always loved reading God’s Word.” Bruce noted similarly that these practices were long-formed and practiced. He recounted, “I’ve had daily devotions, journaled every day for 46 years, set up prayer meetings because I’m not great at praying alone.” Adam, pointing to the challenges he faced during his pastorate, noted, “I had to deal with God largely on my own. My personal devotional life is what got me through, humanly speaking. I’ve been pretty faithful and diligent about that over the years, and I’ve grown because of it.” All the men shared about how dependent they were upon the practices and rhythms of regular, intimate time with the Lord. They all recounted the salutary, perspective giving gifts these general practices provided their ministries. In addition to all these activities, they also shared about their resting from activity too.

## **Sabbath Observance**

The ministers shared a commitment to taking a day off, observing a Sabbath. They varied in the rigor with which they would consider violating it week-to-week. Jim had been taught much earlier as a young Christian the value of observing a Sabbath. He noted the Lord's desire for Christians to rest. He reported, "I'd always heard of the importance of rest—the Lord always wanted us to move toward rest." Larry spoke about his regular practice of Sabbath observance, noting, "I took a day off from regular work, although sometimes work intruded on that. Sometimes it was Tuesday and sometimes Monday, depending upon the week." Brian agreed, sharing, "I did take a day off that I observed pretty carefully. Thursday was my day off for a while. I did want to preserve Saturday for a day with the family and do the things that we needed to do as a family." Adam succinctly agreed, noting, "I was pretty rigorous about taking a day off—Thursday."

Richard set his practice of Sabbath observance in the context of Gospel freedom. He challenged, "If you're not doing Sabbath, you might be telling yourself it's because you're so important and your job's so busy, and it's usually because you're trying to cover your shame by your productivity. Getting the gospel allows rest, real rest." The men agreed they, their families, and their spiritual health were all aided by taking a full day off and protecting it with Gospel confidence and hope. The men similarly shared the importance of not just regularly studying God's Word and observing God's Sabbath, but of being quiet and practicing silence and prayer.

## **Prayer & Silence**

Henry spoke of the need for prayer as antidote to worry and fear. He shared, “Many nights I went to bed deeply worried about church problems. I didn’t want to burden [my wife] with these worries, so I would pray silently: ‘Lord, I’m really worried about this. I don’t know what to do.’ That kind of prayer became a real practice for me.” Similarly discussing the urgency for prayer that suffering and conflict aroused, Brian related what emerged, saying, “A deeper honesty with the Lord in my prayer time.” Jim similarly noted how prayer and silence quiet his soul and restore his heart. He affirmed, “I write my prayers because I’m very easily distracted. The phrase I use, I have a very noisy soul. Inside me it’s rarely very quiet and voices are rarely healthy.” Mark noted similarly the role that prayer plays in combatting the flesh and weaknesses. He shared, “I feel my inadequacies daily, my insecurities, personal struggles with weakness and temptation and sin. I get up and spend a lot of time in prayer as a result.”

The ministers shared about the need to find time each day consistently to pray and to be still. Jim practiced the habit of prayer similarly to Henry, but at the opposite time of day. He recounted, “I started getting up at five or five thirty so I could be quiet, read, pray, think. I continued doing that rising early and spending time alone.” Mark described his practice similarly, sharing, “I’ve maintained a pretty extensive prayer life early in the morning.” Larry, referring to his conviction regarding his personal, spiritual practices early in his ministry, noted consequently, “I deliberately set apart and took time for a period of personal devotions every day. I don’t mean just a quick prayer, but that I would spend time in the presence of God. And I found that unless I carved that out ahead of time, things interfered with it.” Larry went further describing the religious “busyness” that crowds out such time with the Lord in prayer and silence. He rued honestly, “All the

things pastors do neglect the most important thing. And I did, so I know that's true." The pastors shared that the practice of silence and prayer brought health, but they also shared about the role it played in their healing, protection, and comfort.

Due to pastoral isolation and loneliness, Adam spoke of prayer with similar urgency. About prayer specifically, he said, "That has really fueled my pastoral health. That verse from 1 Samuel 30, 'David strengthened himself in the Lord his God'—I've had to do that. I had nobody else. Where else could I get strength except from the giver of strength." Mark spoke similarly starkly, placing significant weight on his prayer life for his spiritual health. He shared, "I'm lost without a daily, extensive prayer life. Early on each morning, I get up and spend a lot of time in prayer and fresh surrender, and then just get into the day." The pastors agreed about the need for this time apart, but also about the intentionality demanded to sustain it. Despite its importance, other pastors relayed the challenges simply of continuing in prayer.

Richard admitted honestly, "I have always struggled to read the Bible, memorize Scripture, pray. You'll never see me write a book on spiritual practices." Hudson shared honestly, "Prayer has been very difficult for me. The ability to sit quietly in the presence of the Lord day after day has always been hard for me. It still is. So I work at it." The grace perspective, however, motivated him toward perseverance. He continued, "I'm going to do my prayer life poorly, but I'm going to keep doing it. And over time my prayer life has become more vital—not necessarily more organized, but more woven through the day." Even those who struggled with prayer and silence recognized the need to work on it, to continue to strive for more health in those areas. Their time in prayer and silence function as synecdoche for these ministers in that they recognize the point isn't

simply praying but being with their Lord. Their practices of and devotion to long, intimate time with their heavenly Father grow out of and reflect their relationship with the Lord and do not serve as a means to garner more of His attention or affection. The practice of prayer for these ministers was often joined to and buttressed by their commitment to living in vibrant community with other believers.

## **Community**

The pastors spoke warmly of the cohorts and small groups of which they were a part and the health and life that those brought into their ministries. Mark noted, “I’m in a small group of guys that meet annually, and we’ve traveled together some. That’s been really helpful. And I’m involved in a men’s small group here at the church, which I really love.” Henry spoke similarly about a small group of which he was a part over the years of his ministry that aided him. He participated in a denominational Senior Pastor’s Fellowship whose participants met to talk honestly about ministry. He shared, “That gathering was deeply recharging. It gave me space to talk with other pastors about ministry realities—all different personalities, different philosophies, yet God blessed each in distinct ways. I attended that fellowship for twenty-five years.” Henry went on to describe his participation with a small group in his church too. He reflected, “I led a small group, but I wasn’t dependent on a men’s group to keep me healthy either. The annual pastoral fellowship—reflecting on what God had done and what was ahead—was critical. Without that, I think I would have become isolated.”

Jim went further to describe a men’s small group that he began twenty years ago to study historic, Christian classic works. He recounts, “Very strategically I started this [group]. It just grew and grew, and it’s become probably one of the most valuable,

spiritually enriching times in my Christian life. It's just glorious." Brian shared similarly about the importance of an intimate men's small group. He relayed, "I had a group of men I met with. We would confess our sins to one another and talk about them. And that became a very important thing for me. I experienced a lot of support from these men during the difficulties I encountered." Small groups and pastoral cohorts all played consistently large roles in upholding pastoral health for these ministers. Interestingly, they pointed more often to relationships with their staff and sessions as additional sources of strength and encouragement for their pastoral health.

Brian also found community through different avenues than small groups and pastoral cohorts, though he emphasized the importance of knowing and being known no less. About what sustained his soul, he shared, "I think the support of the session and the staff was a critical part of that. Having people I could talk with and talk to about it was so important and valuable. I don't think I could have survived without people willing to walk alongside me." Jim noted the importance of the staff and pastoral team community as well. He recounted, "When our pastoral team was functioning well, it filled my heart very much. The necessity of the team being deep in trust, mutuality, vulnerability, friendship—it's very important." Mark also pointed to his staff and colleagues to provide him with support and sustenance over the long haul in ministry. He shared, "I get great joy in our staff. I worked organically with them, and it made working hard fun."

Richard underscored how much value he placed upon living in community with congregation and staff. He noted, "Being in a community, both as a church and with the staff that you get to work with, is vital, and I'm very often the recipient of their spiritual passion." He went further to describe, like Mark, the joy he received working with an

aligned team that enjoyed one another. He shared, “Work with people you like. I love the team I work with; I love coming to work.” When talking about entertaining other job offers, Richard stated honestly, “These are my friends. I can’t leave here. I like these guys. Make having fun and laughing a lot a high priority. If there’s not laughter in the hallway every day, something’s wrong.” The men all shared the lurking, ever-present dangers of loneliness and isolation in ministry. The role of community, in many forms, continued to mitigate those challenges to the life of ministry.

Bruce expressed the strength he received from community as stemming not just from depth relationally with staff and officers, but from his own honesty personally. He shared, “I was vulnerable with my elders.” He put an even finer point on his desire to lead openly beyond his Session, recounting, “There is no pastoral longevity without closeness, authenticity, and transparency. I told my people, ‘I’m hurting; I’m a performance junkie: I’m an approval addict; I feel like a failure.’ And men came alongside me, put their arms around me.” Bruce combined community with vulnerability and insisted upon its centrality to pastoral health. Adam shared openly about his isolation in ministry. He recognized, “I’ve pretty much lived on the lonely side of pastoral existence. That’s been okay. Jesus died alone on the cross. You learn things about the gospel in anything you do if you’re attuned to it.” Adam found community through intimacy with Jesus and it satisfied and sustained him. However these men found community, they all agreed that they needed it, the health and growth of their ministries depended upon it, and they grew as men and pastors because of it. Community is one of a handful of spiritual practices that aided and sustained men in ministry over the long-haul.

In addition to rhythms of personal piety, habits of self-care also aided and abetted their spiritual health.

### **Self-Care & Spiritual Health**

Reflecting a generation (or two) before discussions about self-care became *de-rigueur*, the pastors spoke with some inconsistency and even reluctance concerning self-care. Some openly mocked it, and others were not sure how to define it or what it meant. However, actual examples of the practices of self-care were met with less skepticism and even some enthusiasm. All pastors agreed that they could have done better regarding some of these practices earlier in their careers, but pled ignorance of them and spoke of the cultural pressures inveighing against them, precluding or thwarting the exercise of some of these practices.

### **Self-Care as a Means of Faithfulness**

The pastors spoke variously about self-care. Their responses reflected a broad array both of admiration for and engagement with the practices of self-care. Undergirding all thoughts of or practices concerning self-care is the concern for pastoral faithfulness. Henry broadened the aperture for what will sustain the minister year after year and spoke consistently about the calling to faithfulness. Beneath the pre-eminent vision for faithfulness to the Lord lies the question of *how* to remain faithful. Self-care becomes a means toward faithfulness, a pathway for seeking to remain faithful and durable in the pastorate. His thoughts merit quoting in full. He shared,

I had to learn early on that the goal in ministry has to be faithfulness, and not even longevity. If longevity to one place becomes the goal, that wouldn't fit the apostle Paul who went from place to place. The core issue

is this: Why am I in ministry? Is it because God is calling me to ministry, or because I think I can do it, or because I have a vision of what success looks like? My goal has to be faithfulness to the One who calls me.

To what extent, if any, do the exercises of self-care enable greater faithfulness as Henry described? And to what extent do these habits confirm a pastor's calling and fortify their ministry?

The pastors variously shared how these practices aided and buttressed the calling to pastoral faithfulness. Hudson tied his understanding of self-care to his own "grace awakening" spiritually. He recounted, "I began to see self-care as necessary, not indulgent. Self-care became a frontier with a few key outposts." Larry also tied self-care directly to spiritual health. About the necessity of self-care for pastoral effectiveness, he commented, "I would think to keep your relationship with the Lord fresh and vital and to take care of yourself. To take care of yourself emotionally and physically and spiritually." Larry tied all the elements of his humanity together in his approach to pastoral health and longevity.

Adam commented on the generational nature of the discussions of self-care, but also on the importance of these practices. Echoing Larry, he admitted, "Some of this is generational, but I do strongly believe if you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of others. If you weren't in a posture to do ministry, you couldn't help them."

Similarly reflecting a generational shift in understanding about self-care, Richard reflected honestly, "I have generally pretty negative feelings toward most of that. Most of it is self-absorbed narcissism, an easy product of our wealth, of our culture and ease."

Brian commented similarly, "My generation is not quite so concerned about self-care. I never really noticed that as a problem." Reflecting on this area of pastoral health

generally, Jim rued, “Body-care—I was less faithful with. I lived a pretty intense life. Discussions about that came later and I’m sorry for that. I’ve tried in my later years to be a lot better than that.” Yet, despite differences generationally in understanding, the majority of the pastors *did* practice forms of self-care that they attributed to their own health and longevity.

### **Exercise**

Mark attested, “Every morning my routine is to get up early, do some initial prayer, and then finish that prayer on the elliptical doing a hard run, with extensive stretching beforehand. I’ve done light weights and often will walk around the neighborhood.” Brian noted his habits similarly effusively. He shared, “I am very active physically. I ride road bikes and have done that for years, 100 miles a week kind of riding.” Adam relayed a similar commitment noting, “I exercised pretty regularly. That’s why I kept my sanity. Without exercise I wouldn’t have gotten through graduate school or the ministry.” While these pastors noted their success in the areas of self-care, they did not shy away from describing regrets and less than successful efforts too.

Mark admitted though he has been more faithful to exercise, he has not enjoyed similar discipline or attention to diet. He shared, “Where I fall short is diet. I’m overweight and I don’t want to be. It’s something I’ve committed myself to working on this year. I know I need it.” Hudson was similarly honest about inconsistent results in the pursuit of self-care. He admitted, “Physical fitness has been more uneven. I’ve had good streaks and bad streaks. Right now, I swim three days a week, use the elliptical two days and lift weights. Eating well has been inconsistent but improving.” Even while not “doing well,” Hudson acknowledged he should do more, try harder in these areas. Henry shared

similarly about regrets in these areas, “In the last ten to twelve years my health slipped a bit. I’ll be honest, I haven’t been the best steward of my health.” He went further to describe his situation more fully. He explained, “I’ll say plainly—I wasn’t as disciplined physically as I should have been in the last decade of ministry. This last year I’ve enjoyed getting back into fitness.” Both men acknowledge areas where their health was neglected and the steps they’re taking to improve it. Larry noted how as his wife’s health declined, he remained motivated to keep up exercise, go to the YMCA regularly, and play racquetball consistently. The pastors shared collectively about other needful areas for them to attend to that redounded to their health. Specifically, they spoke uniformly about the need for deep, meaningful friendships to sustain them in ministry.

## **Friendship**

Friendships remain vital for every Christian. Given the pressure of isolation and the often attendant isolation of a pastorate, ministers must prioritize friendships to enjoy durability in ministry. Larry placed having deep, abiding friendships as fundamental to pastoral self-care. He related, “The important part of self-care is to keep up relationships and have some significant relationships.” Larry related how his physician counseled him as he moved more into full-time care of an ailing wife, “Don’t neglect your own health. Keep up your exercises, keep up your friendships, have some interests that are not taking care of her.” Hudson also spoke directly about the importance of close relationships to his understanding of self-care. He recounted his growing understanding of self-care noting a key “outpost” of self-care was relationships. He found an older minister and a peer pastor and began meeting with them every other week for several hours at a time. He described those relationships as “huge for me.” He also found two other pastors to meet with

regularly. He described the nature of these relationships as, “not about business; they were about friendship and encouragement.” He also became close friends with two or three elders at his church. He shared, “I still talk with them two or three times a week.” Summarizing all of these relationships and the cumulative benefits to his life and ministry, Hudson affirmed, “That community—being surrounded by encouragement—was sustaining.” Even when not described explicitly as a form of self-care, the pastors all spoke positively and consistently about the need for deep, trusting friendships for the minister.

Mark spoke about the importance of friendships in his life and to his ministry. Speaking of a former pastorate, he related that there, “We had a lot of age and stage friends, and those friendships sustained some of that intensity. We enjoyed being together.” Referring to the benefits he derives from his pastoral cohort of close friends, Mark related, “There is more transparency with the minister’s group I meet with annually and stay in touch with regularly.” Bruce similarly underscored the importance of close, trusting friendships for pastoral health. He correlated pastoral health with friendships directly. He shared, “I developed friendships with other pastors, and honestly, what kept me at the church were relationships.” Brian spoke similarly to Hudson about the vital importance of close, honest friendships for sustaining one’s pastoral vision and ministry. He related, “I had a group of men I met with. And we would confess our sins to one another and talk about them. These were church members and that became a very important thing for me. I experienced a lot of support from these men during difficulties.” The most central friendship in one’s life is his spouse, and the ministers uniformly shared about the importance and benefits deriving from a strong marriage.

## **Marriage**

Given the centrality of marriage to happiness and emotional stability generally, it is no surprise that pastoral effectiveness is deeply affected and shaped by marital health. Hudson linked self-care directly to the health of his marriage. He stated plainly, “Marital companionship has always been part of my self-care, even in busy seasons.” Jim also placed his marriage relationship at the heart of pastoral health. When describing the indispensable ingredients to vitality, he shared, “Pastoral health to me includes working hard at communing internally with God, and working hard at relating profoundly with my family and congregants.” Like three legs of a stool, Jim placed family health alongside spiritual and congregational health. Richard placed the health of his marriage alongside his apprehension of the Gospel. He related, “If you’re dependent on success, then ministry’s going to be a very frustrating endeavor. The essentials, of course, is love your wife and pour yourself into your family.” Going further and warning to a warning, Richard went on, “If you’re not devoted to your family and take care of your wife, you’re a fool and you’re asking for it.” When describing his marriage and the blessings from it to his ministry, Larry reflected, “My wife was a great blessing. She was a great supporter. She was always active in the church, usually teaching Sunday School.”

Henry communicated about the burdens he could share with his wife, lightening his pastoral load. He commented, “I can talk with my wife about them and she can pick them up because she’s involved in some of the same things.” Beyond simply serving as strong supports and companions, the pastors went further to describe the invaluable, irreplaceable roles their wives played for them emotionally and spiritually.

Brian commented similarly when he noted, “A huge factor in my survival was my wife who was very supportive.” He went further crediting his marriage to his

longevity in ministry. When detailing the factors that contributed to his long pastorate, he recounted, “I think a wife, a strong marriage, God has given us that. And a wife who was a real partner with me in ministry. She has a real ministry mindset and values herself. Just having her support, her help, I think was huge.” Mark similarly underscored the importance of a strong, intimate marriage, stressing his wife’s benefits to his ministry. He described, “I’m thankful for a wife of [forty plus] years has been supportive all along through thick and thin and who’s been a real rock. She been a real hero in the story.”

Bruce described a particularly tender example of his wife’s support that embodied the unconditional love he enjoyed throughout his ministry. Describing a particularly challenging season of ministry, he recounted, “I was hanging on by my fingernails. I told my wife, ‘If God doesn’t show up, I’m going to end up in a rubber room.’ She said, ‘If they put you in a rubber room, I’ll move in there with you.’”

Examples of the partnership and strength in their marriages were often humorous. An anecdote of the partnership Brian enjoyed came when he described another church’s search committee’s communication with her about the prospect of moving. While Brian was out of town, the chair of the search committee called and spoke to Brian’s wife. He asked her about her husband’s thoughts about moving and taking the call. She replied, “I’m not sure what he’s thinking, but I can tell you what I’m thinking. I hate Florida and I would never move to Florida.” Learning of the conversation later, Brian simply said, “Well, okay, there’s the answer there.” Hudson describes how before their “grace awakening” he and his wife were “solid but hollowed out.” Hudson told his wife that they should do a marriage conference. His wife replied, “What would we say?” He shared, “God sort of hit me in the head through my wife saying, ‘Our marriage isn’t

everything I wanted it to be.’ And I was like, ‘you’re right.’ But it took a while to unpack that.” He confessed, “Our marriage was peaceable and committed, but it wasn’t intimate.” He describes her leading the way in both the grace awareness and emotional awareness journeys. He relates how for the next five years “grace and emotional intelligence shaped our marriage and relationships.” His wife, like the others described above, played an outsized role in her husband’s tenure and longitudinal success. Other forms of self-care contributed to these ministers’ perseverance as well.

### **Sabbaticals**

Similar to their posture towards the idea of self-care, the pastors describe an acceptance of the importance of sabbaticals coming later in their ministries. Mark is typical when he recounted, “I took my first sabbatical five years ago. I’ve been ordained for over forty years. I didn’t even know sabbaticals existed. I didn’t know anything about them. I just grew up thinking a minister is like everybody else—you work until you get vacation.” Earlier in his ministry, during a particularly challenging season of pastoring, Mark reflected back upon his desire for a sabbatical. With the wisdom of hindsight, he shared, “That was where I needed a sabbatical more than any place.” While his Session gave him a month off, a hurricane came, and they returned home prematurely without the rest for which he hoped.

Larry reflected on the generational challenges facing him as a minister regarding taking a sabbatical. Sharing about the bewilderment his congregants had for the practice, specifically for a younger minister taking one, Larry recounted “Some of the older people would say to me, ‘Why does he need a sabbatical? You never had one.’” Larry admitted as much but went to advocate, “Well, no, I didn’t. But I’ve always supported the

sabbatical. I think it's a very good thing because a pastor's always on call. I think it's good for him and his family to periodically have him have a sabbatical to refresh and renew." Larry's perspective is informative in that he belongs to a generation both unaccustomed to the practice of sabbaticals and resistant to pastors taking them. Yet, he recognizes their need and advocates for their use while not himself availing himself of them.

Late to the practice of sabbaticals too, Richard joined his growing understanding of sabbaticals to his growing understanding of the gospel. He described how, for his first one, he gave very detailed reports of all the books he had read, all the places he had visited, and the conversations he had had. He self-assessed, "I was totally works oriented. So I had to prove that I was worth having a sabbatical, that I'd used a sabbatical adequately. I had to prove that I'm worth getting it." Richard also advocates for them now. He described how the seven year sabbatical is great. He added further, "It's just not adequate enough. The sabbaticals need to be much more often than that. If you're really going hard and you know, you're in ministry, that's really asking a lot." Richard has become a sabbatical believer, offering them to non-ministry staff in his church. And he asks all pastors with whom he works not just to take regular sabbaticals, but regular, church-financed time away with their spouses. Two times a year the church pays for every pastor to take their wife for three days and two nights to connect, pray together, and have fun. Finally, Richard tries to extract himself from preaching and most church responsibilities every summer and take one to two months to read, think, pray, and strategize about the future. Self-care practices typically run along well-worn paths of diet, exercise, sleep, community and marriage. Sabbaticals were a late arrival to many of the

pastors in terms of their understanding of self-care. A final facet of self-care emerged from an unlikely place: how the minister handled their finances.

## **Finances**

Like a difficult marriage, challenging financial circumstances can produce aftershocks and stresses that directly impact pastoral effectiveness and resilience. Careful stewardship joined to greater contentment can mitigate some of these hazards and smooth the path toward greater pastoral enjoyment. Richard introduced how vital personal finances are to pastoral health and longevity. He stated simply, “I think being financially content is huge. If you’re constantly having a sense that you’re poorly compensated, and other people are making more money, and your peers in the church have nicer stuff, that’s really hard.” Richard attributed pastoral contentment directly to financial contentment. Hudson agreed, placing finances directly in the category of self-care. He shared, “Another newer frontier for self-care is finances. We’ve been blessed. We’ve lived modestly, saved when we could. We’ve had normal pastoral financial stress, but never prolonged crisis.”

Hudson spoke further, similar to Richard, about having to learn pastoral contentment when peers began to earn more. He shared, “Part of God’s work in my twenties was teaching me contentment. My college friends became lawyers and professionals and their lives accelerated financially while mine didn’t. That frustrated me deeply.” The answer for this came to Hudson from Jesus’ parable of the vineyard in Matthew 20. Hudson related, “The parable was a two-by-four to the head. ‘Are you envious because I am generous?’ And my answer was yes.” Both pastors highlighted the necessity of contentment for a pastor to endure and to flourish. And financial stewardship

may appear quite different from attention to exercise, diet, or friendships. But all these areas of pastoral attention and focus—quite different from the academics taught in seminaries and the practices common to the ministry—cumulatively shape a minister’s resilience and durability, for better or for worse. As all of these practices for self-care revealed, the pastor does well to focus upon his or her own health and wellness. The more attention paid to these habits, the healthier the pastors reported feeling and the more effectively they described their ministry. Care for oneself remains vital in the ministry, but care for others remains equally central. Pastoral ministry is, if anything, a people business, full of relationships and peppered with conflict, requiring skills and abilities to relate to and to serve others.

### **Emotional Intelligence & Self-Awareness**

The pastors described the need for the minister to grow in self-awareness and insight into others. Moving far beyond simply acting politely or being ‘nice’, the ministers went much deeper, discussing their motives and their hearts. They described their journeys to self-awareness as involving growing in both an awareness of self and an awareness of others. Henry began by describing how he’s learned about emotional intelligence by recognizing different personalities. He elaborated, “Instead of immediately focusing on where I disagree with someone, I try to see what God is doing through that person—the positives. A form of emotional intelligence is an awareness of others, trying to understand people rather than shutting them out.” Larry described emotional intelligence similarly in terms of learning to relate effectively to different types of people. He recalled being exhorted by his wife to ‘set that person straight’ after they heard an adult Sunday school teacher at their church say something theologically

heterodox. Larry's response was 'I don't think so.' He shared further, "I told her that would have embarrassed the person, whereas to let that go gives me the opportunity to still minister to that person and have them grow beyond their present understanding." Larry exemplified not conflict avoidance, but loving, wise leadership through not just preserving the teacher's dignity, but embodying the axiom relationally of 'living to fight another day.' The pastors delineated between an awareness of others and an awareness of self, describing both as vital and inextricably woven together.

Jim took a broader perspective, describing emotional intelligence as a growing awareness of self. Jim shared vulnerably, stating that he realized that his relationships with others were defined by fear. For him, growth in emotional intelligence flowed from maturity and progress in confronting and quieting this fear. He noted the critical role that Jesus' life and work have played in this process of growth. He communicated, "I'm not humble—I'm frightened. And the closer I've gotten to Christ, and the more I've believed the realities of the gospel, the less ferocious fear has been in my life." Jim linked spiritual maturity with emotional maturity. He shared this process as, "The cultivation of emotional pleasure in God. The stewardship of the emotional volatility within me. And the vulnerability to face what I really feel with the appropriate person—those who need to know what I feel." Confronting and beginning to quell these fears has led to subsequent healthier relationships with others. Jim highlighted this connection, "As I've grown as a Christian, I can steward the inner life better, and I'm more willing to be appropriately vulnerable."

Like Jim, Hudson spoke of his growth in emotional intelligence as involving both an awareness of self and an awareness of others. He too described the growth

spiritually as connected to the growth relationally. He shared about an awakening first within himself that led later to how he treated others. He realized the only emotion he really felt was anger. He described himself, “My hard-driving work ethic meant I constantly felt frustration—at elders, at people, at disorganization. It felt godly. Beneath it was sadness I didn’t know how to access. The gospel gave me freedom to find that sadness.” Hudson’s ability to relate to and to care for others flowed from his own ability to recognize, name, and to submit his emotions—the beautiful and the ugly—to the Lord Jesus. His emotional intelligence—caring for and sensitivity to others—depended upon and was limited by his own ability to care for and to understand himself more fully.

Mark shared a similar journey first inwardly before it manifested outward evidence of relational and spiritual fruit. He spoke about the relationship between his growth in emotional intelligence and his developing self-understanding. He noted how crippling his drive to performance and perfectionistic tendencies were to his ability to relate well to others, particularly in conflict. He observed about himself, “When you work hard and believe your value is greatly caught up in your work and your production, then there’s pushback, it can be terrifying, it can lead to panic.” Mark went on to describe some of the roots of this fear and its antidote. He related, “I was driven by perfection—perfectionism—rather than a healthy, gospel-centered life. God didn’t save me to make me perfect, but to make me His. Coming to terms with the gospel teaches where my real value is.” Bruce concurred noting the disconnect between what he knew and how he acted. He recounted, “I knew I was going to heaven, but because I was trusting performance for God’s pleasure—and because I’m a perfectionist—I felt God would always be disappointed in me. I wasn’t elevating the beauty of Jesus enough.” Mark and

Bruce both confessed to perfectionistic tendencies, the subsequent need to externalize their sense of value and security, and the hope and healing that came through a richer understanding of the gospel.

Richard shared similarly, noting the pastoral liability that not understanding oneself deeply leaves for ministry. He commented, “A lot of people go into ministry to try to prove your worth, your value. To try to mask their shame.” In other words, pastors must seek to understand more of the presence of that shame, and also the roots of it. Without excavating more accurately the basis of one’s true identity, pastoring can become a frustrating, often bewildering exercise in seeking to find, to soothe, and to identify the seminal motivations and the longitudinal hurts and needs within the minister himself.

Adam noted a similar path of personal exploration and freedom that came from the gospel that helped him battle pastoral and personal temptations. He described himself as, “an insecure overachiever.” That awareness led him more deeply to Jesus. He related, “I learned that my significance came from being a child of God, I didn’t feel the need to pastor a big church or be known. I’ve been through trying to be significant by running with the right crowd. The gospel freed me from that.” The pastors shared the freedom that the gospel brought to their self-awareness. The finished work of Christ and the love of the Father enabled them to remain unafraid to see less attractive parts of themselves. And in seeing themselves more honestly they were in turn hungrier and more needful for the grace and mercy of Jesus. Mining their fraught ambitions, vain-glory, and personal fears uncovered the treasure of a larger gospel, a more beautiful Jesus. Without this work

of self-awareness and discovery they would remain incapable of applying more deeply the comforting, healing balm of Jesus.

### **Emotional Intelligence and the Journey Within**

Humility about self leads to love for and compassion toward others. The journey to greater emotional intelligence for these pastors began with greater recognition of their own emotions and the harm they caused others. Later they found tremendous relief and comfort emotionally in the gospel and Jesus' finished work for them, which led to more mature, healthy relationships with others. For instance, Bruce described in plain language what develops emotional maturity and intelligence in a minister by dividing pastors into two groups. He remarked, "One group thinks everyone else is an asshole. The other group thinks, *I'm* the asshole. I think emotional health develops much more readily in the latter group." Richard spoke similarly about the binary created by biblical honesty about oneself and how it shapes love for others. He noted, "We can't run around and act like we're good people and these are the evil people of the world. We're a collection of broken people walking to heaven together."

Richard concurred with Bruce's binary distinction, noting that without greater pastoral self-understanding and humility, ministry can quickly become a means of meeting one's own needs even to the detriment of those you're seeking to serve. Of the efforts a pastor makes to cover one's sense of inadequacy he observed, "You'll use people and ministry to try to cover shame. Doing that will only damage other people and ultimately is going to make them feel *more* shame."

Bruce noted what the positive fruit of relating well to others that self-understanding can produce, sharing, "People begin to experience you not as abrasive or

arrogant, but as humble, teachable, broken, and hungry. That produces a passion for Jesus and for people.” Care for and sensitivity to others flows first from an honest and accurate assessment of oneself. Bruce tethered healthy pastoral care with sensitivity to oneself and one’s failings. Describing the fruits of this self-understanding, he painted a picture of what this emotional intelligence might look like. He shared, “A man who’s been deeply broken—who therefore knows the gospel is life—and who knows that that the only thing people truly need to hear is the beauty of Jesus.” Bruce suggested that the content of one’s preaching and the tenor of one’s leadership become shaped by the twin forces of one’s honest self-appraisal and the corresponding salve of Christ.

When asked about how to sustain ministry over years and decades, Richard pointed to elements of emotional intelligence connected to his unseen, inner drives and motivations. He noted the importance of, “preaching the gospel to yourself. Don’t think very highly of yourself. The purpose of ministry is not to cover your shame, embellish yourself.” Continuing along the theme of the importance of discerning darker, deeper drives that animate the pastor, Bruce noted archly, “What developed emotional intelligence in me was deep brokenness.” Like Richard, he succinctly summarized some of the critical ingredients for pastoral longevity that relate to emotional intelligence. Honest, accurate self-understanding, joined to a saturating knowledge of Jesus’ beauty and work on the cross, leads to pastors who are humble and teachable, sensitive and caring.

### **Deepening Self-Awareness & Resilience**

Like diet, exercise, and good rest, deepening self-awareness produces tangible benefits for pastors seeking longevity. The pastors noted how a greater understanding of

themselves enabled durability in ministry. When discussing the threats to pastoral durability and longevity, Henry spoke of the critical need for pastors to understand themselves and their motivations for ministry. He rued, “For those who leave ministry after five years, I’d ask: What were you expecting? Respect? Fulfillment? Belonging? A loving community that meets your needs? Sometimes people enter ministry with expectations that can’t sustain them.” Implicit in Henry’s comment is the deficit in self-awareness and the correspondingly damaging consequences often present in pastors. Mark noted similarly the false narratives with which he must wrestle in an on-going, often daily, labor. Referring to the pressures to succeed, perform, and measure oneself by others and numerical metrics, Mark stated, “Those skeletons are still there, and I still have to fight those things. I have to make sure not to be quick to measure myself against what happened a year ago or against what friends are doing or not doing.” Richard spoke similarly about the temptations of comparison and seeking bigger and better that flow from a limited self-knowledge and an inadequate grasp of motivations and identity. He underscored the freedom that the gospel brings to these challenges, noting, “If your worthiness is in Jesus, then you don’t have to seek bigger and better and brighter.” Having a settled sense of self, flowing from a clear, albeit honest, evaluation of one’s inner life and motivation protects one from the snares of pastoral ambition and the pitfalls of seeing churches or members as means to a greater, more ‘glorious’ end for yourself.

Jim too noted how constant the effort toward this more honest, humble self-assessment must remain. He shared how this journey parallels the often inverse nature of Christian growth—the more one grows, the less one truly understands. He shared, “As I’ve gotten older, my sense of clear vision about myself has changed. I’m much more

aware of how much I don't know about myself." Thus, like Mark, continuing work in self-understanding remains imperative and on-going.

Like Larry, Jim was also shaped through the teaching of Gordon Macdonald. Jim grew in emotional awareness and capacity to care for others following a meeting with Macdonald. He shared, "I learned when I spoke to him that I was vulnerable in public because I didn't know how to do it in private. It was too scary, and my wife was paying a dear price for that. Appropriate vulnerability has grown out of deepening my walk with Christ." Jim noted the relational cost of low emotional intelligence and maturity, but also how the gospel serves as both an accelerant for growth and a remedy to these deficits.

### **Deepening Self-Awareness & Relational Humility**

The salutary benefits of growing self-awareness include navigating relationships of all kinds with more wisdom and competence. Mark linked self-awareness with subsequent humility that lubricates and cushions pastoral ministry. He underscored, "I try to be honest with myself, with my wife, and with our leadership, in the reality that even after all that, I'm still weak and desperately need the gospel." Relating these personal insights to a broader pastoral vision, Mark went on to confess, "You are flawed, needy, broken. Begin on your knees; acknowledge your inadequacy, insecurity, and weakness. Remind yourself He saved you to be His." Brian followed a similar line of thinking relating his slow, imperfect growth in emotional maturity and intelligence to gospel hope and healing. He recalled that he, "Really was an idiot as a pastor and missed the boat in so many ways. I marvel at the patience and inefficiency of God. It took so long for me to learn those things; I'm like, 'God, you put with a lot for your bride under poor leadership from me.'" Richard agreed with a similarly honest self-understanding and the

paradigmatic ways this vision shapes one's pastoral theology and practices. He noted, "You constantly talk about the gospel and you never get it. You're just always learning it, applying it, figuring it out. The power of confessing your failure honestly is just paradigm changing; one of the greatest over-arching principles of Christian living."

Self-understanding, buttressed by a deeper gospel understanding, leads to self-disclosure and vulnerability. Hudson and Bruce corroborated the pattern of vulnerability flowing from greater emotional awareness and corresponding humility. Hudson commented about how this gospel understanding, joined to spiritual freedom, leads to kindness and healthier relationships pastorally. He highlighted, "Accept one another as Christ has accepted you. Because God changes hearts, I don't have to beat people into submission. We win others through gentleness, patience, and endurance—trusting God to grant repentance." Bruce noted similarly the linkage between emotional self-awareness and the care of others. He shared, "As my emotional awareness increased, I could tell the difference between when I was being intense and when I was being passionate. That awareness is such a gift. I can say, 'I'm sorry, you probably experienced intensity from me. I was feeling insecure and come at you too strong.'" If pastoring depends upon healthy relationships and fruitful conflict, these pastors indicated that those relationships depend in turn not upon technique, niceness, or being polite. Rather, they urged a resolute self-awareness forged by the fires of God's conviction and steeled by the promises of Christ's reconciling, restorative work.

Reflecting on the power that the gospel provides to sustain ministry and to deepen relationships, Brian began with a clear sense of himself. About this growth in self-awareness and emotional maturity, he summarized honestly, "Humility, not taking

myself so seriously; an ability to release the church to Jesus and not carry the burden of the church on my own shoulders, but let Jesus carry that burden. To have less control of things in the church and to be okay with that.” Acceptance of less control of the church, for instance, flowed from a self-acceptance of his own limitations. The pastors spoke consistently of how deeper self-awareness led not to navel-gazing or self-absorption, but to greater freedom and self-giving love for others.

### **Deepening Self-Awareness & Freedom**

The pastors spoke openly about the freedom that the gospel brought to their relationships, including their expectations of themselves and of others. Adam, secure in who he was in Christ, felt freer to trust Christ with His Church. About numerical growth in attendance he noted, “Growth was often treated as the primary sign of faithfulness, which I never bought.” Brian commented similarly on the relief personally and pastorally that comes from resting in and trusting the King of The Church. He relayed, “Remember that this is Jesus’ church and not yours. And He is King and head of the church. He is the one who decides who comes to your church and who doesn’t. Be okay with the gifts God has given you and remember how often Jesus spoke of loving one another.” Brian weds love for others to a healthy humility and highlights how both of those grow in the soil of Christ’s Kingship and care for His Bride. Henry agreed, noting how a secure sense of self in light of the gospel shapes one’s pastoral priorities. He related, “First, have the right goal: faithfulness to the One who called you. Then faithfulness in practical things—to your wife, in big and small matters, in obedience to Christ. Let your goal be faithfulness, not church size, not visible success, not even longevity.” The freedom resulting from an

accurate, unflinching view of oneself—one that rests upon Jesus to cover our failures and overcome our weaknesses—leads to hope that feels like relief.

Brian looked similarly to God’s power and goodness both to him and to his church that brought freedom and relief. He shared, “God knows what he’s doing. And I just need to accept that more and that this is who I am. And there’s great freedom in that.” Brian viewed his continuance in ministry as dependent upon an honest self-understanding joined to a deep appreciation for the work of the gospel. In other words, he attributed pastoral resilience directly to rigorous self-awareness and the concomitant apprehension of Jesus’ work in response. He summarized this pattern, “Repentance and faith that lead to a joy in our forgiveness and leads to an honesty about our sin. I think that’s one of the things that probably sustained me most in my ministry was to see that as a normal Christian life.” The pastors describe a pattern of recognizing oneself with honesty and humility, turning to Jesus confidently and joyfully, and then loving those around them in light of the love they have received.

### **Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST)**

Many of the pastors attributed their growth in self-awareness and how that translated relationally specifically to a school of thought pioneered by Georgetown University psychiatrist, Murray Bowen. Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) argues that the family is the key emotional unit in a person’s life. The family is a ‘system’ comprised of all its members who remain deeply interconnected and influenced by one another’s behaviors, habits, and decisions. BFST looks from generation to generation to recognize both patterns and pathologies. Building upon a growing awareness both of self and others, it urges separating what one thinks from what one feels. BFST recommends

remaining connected to one's family while also seeking intentional autonomy and separation emotionally from one's family.

### **Importance of BFST**

Brian spoke of his exposure to BFST through the writings of Edwin Friedman and Jack Shitama. He described how redundantly he spoke about what he learned from BFST. For instance, he talked about the theme of a “non-anxious presence” so often that it became tiresome to his congregation. He related, “I mentioned it frequently because I find it such a biblical and helpful way to view how to be in midst of messy relationships. It became a part of the way I did ministry.” Elaborating further, Brian mentioned how it informed his approach to conflict. He summarized some of the important insights of BFST that he has adopted, sharing, “I need to stay present. But I need not control and be anxious here. I need to understand who I am and be responsible for myself and not responsible for others. But I can love them and stay present with them.”

### **Differentiation & BFST**

About the implications of BFST for his ministry, Hudson shared further, “I realized I could survive disapproval. I didn't know the word differentiation then, but something shifted. Slowly approval from the Lord began to replace approval from people. When someone attacks me, I don't have to crumble. I can hear what they're saying without letting it penetrate to the deepest place.” Hudson further described how as the gospel grew larger to him, the opinions of others grew smaller. He stated joyfully, “Even though I'm a mess, God delights in me. I don't need to measure my days by admiration or disapproval.” Adam spoke similarly, exemplifying the liberating power of a

differentiated self in the power of the gospel. He summarized, “My significance isn’t tied up in my relationships with people. It’s tied up in my relationship with Jesus.” The work of ‘gospel differentiation’—of being separate from and not fused with others, while also remaining in relationship with and connected to others, particularly during times of stress and conflict—fills the human soul with meaning, strength, and confidence.

Examples of significant church conflict serve to underscore the value these pastors found through their own growth in differentiation. Mark recounted the experience of a very tense, long-remembered church meeting. He lamented, “For two hours they went after me and what we were doing. Some of them shouted. I just kept my cool and said, ‘Listen, we’re doing everything we said we would do during the interviews. I think it’s the right thing. But if I’m not the pastor for you, I totally respect that.’” Mark was able to stay ‘apart’, while remaining present with his critics and antagonists. He was also able to separate himself from this role as ‘pastor’ and welcome criticism, even verbal abuse.

Henry described a similarly intense period early in his ministry and the benefits that redounded throughout the rest of his ministry. He described, “That trial by fire—the seasoning of learning not to react, not to get angry, not to throw pastoral temper tantrums—was formative. When criticism felt unfair, when people were locked in conflict and both were upset with me, I had to learn not to return evil for evil. That seasoning was essential to becoming healthier as a pastor.” Every pastor must grow more adept at and comfortable with conflict to endure in the ministry. Like Mark, he learned to be less reactive, more calm, and—essentially—more loving. The ability to stand in and

take the criticisms and ‘abuse’ and misunderstanding without responding in kind is a mark of emotional maturity and spiritual sensitivity.

Bruce also described a significant period of conflict that overwhelmed his church for an extended period. His response was to move toward a more differentiated position emotionally. He shared, “I decided I wasn’t going to try to make anybody happy. I was going to preach and teach God’s Word and call it like I see it. If all sides got ticked, fine. I know my own issues surfaced, especially my approval addiction, wanting to please everybody.” Bruce shared honestly about the challenge and the calling to deal more exactly with his own tendencies while also taking concrete steps to allow himself to be less controlled by emotions, conflict, and anxiety. It was a challenge, a tension, but the solution was not to become accommodating, becoming more malleable to and agreeable with the opinions swirling about him.

### **Pastoral Confidence & BFST**

Many of the pastors described the benefits that BFST afforded them in times of crisis at church. Richard spoke of the benefits of remaining present while separate in times of turbulence and difficulty in ministry. He inverted the typical apprehension about or avoidance of crises, sharing, “Pain, difficulty, crisis are just gospel opportunities. You can advance the gospel exponentially faster and deeper in those moments than in the regular rhythm of church life.” A gospel confidence joined to a commitment to remain present and non-anxious enabled him to navigate crises with wisdom and perspective. He noted the leader needs, “To stay calm in the storm. There’s something about when the storm blows, you actually slow your heartbeat down, you actually get focused. It’s a gift to see what the appropriate steps are to move forward and to address the issues.” To

navigate such challenges calmly, non-anxiously, requires a secure sense of self, independent of the approval or disapproval of those around him.

Similarly counter-intuitively, Jim talked about how he grew to understand and to appreciate his critics and their criticisms. He had a missionary once counsel him about these critics, “‘These people are very good for you. You should spend much time with them.’ That became thematic for me: move toward the people with whom you have conflict.” Mark spoke almost identically about how he tries to think about his critics and antagonists. He noted, “We need them—those troubled people—I need them. Those tragedies, I need them.” Not playing the victim and seeing the providential role that antagonists, critics, and even tragedies play in one’s own spiritual growth enabled Jim and Mark to move toward and not away from the other. And seeing God’s role in the conflict depersonalized it and created an opportunity for growth in them and blessing to the congregation.

Hudson spoke of the transformation that BFST had upon his life as it related to others. Early in his ministry he realized, “I had no boundaries” and it overwhelmed and exhausted him. He described his response and his overall mindset related to others. He confessed his approach was, “Love them more; care for them more. I felt hostage to their needs. People’s disappointment with me controlled me. If someone was disappointed, it would absolutely debilitate me.” His breakthrough came from his sister, a therapist, who began to talk to Hudson about differentiation. Without using the term she said, “‘You’re not responsible for saving everyone.’ I couldn’t hear it.” Slowly, through the work of grace, community, and counseling, Hudson became more alive to himself, his emotions,

and the potency of God's grace for him in Christ Jesus. And it liberated him and his ministry, strengthening him for decades of ministry.

Henry also mentioned the tension that arises when facing an ocean of unmeetable needs and needing to care for himself and his own needs. As Hudson realized later in his ministry, Henry affirmed, "I didn't feel like I had to constantly respond to whatever was most urgent in someone else's life while my own life went unattended." Henry's sense of self and absence of neediness for the approval of or affirmation from parishioners liberated him from serving as the 'chief need-meeter' of hundreds of congregants. Adam described the balance between love and boundaries aptly. He noted, "You try to be nice to people, even when you think they're full of beans. If you believe God is in it, you put on your flak jacket and deal with it. If you have to be liked by everybody, you're going to have a hard time in ministry. There are hard times in ministry. Sometimes you weep." Adam stressed kindness and presence while also communicating a willingness to endure conflict and absorb criticism. That tension between remaining connected while remaining apart, an individual, was woven through each of these pastor's self-assessments. And it led to hard-won, costly growth and maturity that they expressed. And that growth, after exacting a high cost, also propelled them further in ministry and kept them engaged in pastoring long-term.

### **Conflict Navigation & BFST**

Many of the pastors described how, as their self-understanding grew alongside their engagement with BFST, they handled conflict more effectively. Hudson described how BFST helped him grow resilient in conflict. He attributed success in longitudinal ministry in part to appropriating some of these concepts. Namely, he shared, "I survived

in ministry because both of these things happened—I learned I didn’t have to be afraid of conflict or disapproval. And internally I grew in gospel confidence.” Deepening gospel trust permitted others to be unhappy with him and enabled him to absorb more negativity and criticism. Hudson appropriated from BFST the reality that dysfunctional groups adapt to their weakest members. He shared, “That explained the dynamics I’d been facing at church.” He added, “Friedman taught me when dealing with toxic or dysfunctional people, we overstate persuasion. Boundaries, not arguments, are what matter.”

While not quoting BFST specifically, Larry reflected freedom from conflict while seeking to approach differences wisely. Coming in new to an established church with many holding different theological views than him or the denomination, Larry had a choice of how to respond. He remembered, “I tried to pick my battles and know that everything wasn’t worth making it a big issue. I think that it would have been very disruptive if I had come in and just made it a big issue initially.” Wisdom proved the better part of valor for Larry and enabled him to continue pastoring and relating effectively even to those with whom he disagreed.

Similarly, Hudson described the fruit of this internal work that freed him to fight less and to love more. He illustrated the non-anxious approach as, “Not to punch back. I tried to remain kind and gentle. The balance of non-reactivity combined with clear structure and support has been essential.” Jim embraced a model of conflict engagement also shaped by BFST that emphasized moving toward those with whom you have conflict. He described a model of “pray, love, serve,” in that order, to care for and to remain connected to those with whom he was in conflict. He summarized this pattern with equanimity, because, “My job is not to be the one that fixes it, but you never give up

praying, loving, and serving.” He described the pattern as both freeing to him and dignifying to the other party. BFST served to steel these pastors for the inevitable conflicts they faced; it fortified them against growing detached and aloof from their congregants; and it also emboldened them to remain near and present with them amidst tension, anxiety, and conflict. Undergirding all of that remained their secure identities in Christ Jesus, a strength and confidence found beyond this world and greater than this life and its vanities. Given the crucible each of these pastors faced, forged through the furnace of suffering, trials, sleeplessness, worry, and assaults spiritual and relational, they offer some final wisdom regarding ministerial longevity.

### **Ministry and the Power of God**

Larry reflected upon the hope and comfort he found through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. He underscored as a “life verse” that “The message of the cross is considered foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” Larry rested on the promise of God’s power throughout his ministry and was liberated in his preaching and teaching that—apart from the Spirit’s regenerating work—the message of Christianity, the message of the cross, is foolishness. Larry took that truth to heart and believed Paul’s promises of the Spirit’s work. Henry concurred and spoke of the same reality and the life it provided. He realized, “My call is to proclaim Christ, teach the Bible, share the gospel, and leave the results to God. That became a ministry motto for me. It enabled perseverance. I could do ministry without arrogance and without despair.” Henry was freed by God’s sovereign mercies to take neither too much credit for success nor too much blame in lean years. Larry fleshed that same teaching out further. When asked how his church grew so much, why it experienced such

revival and renewal, Larry responded, “In the Scripture some plant, some water, but God gives the increase. God did give the increase; I didn’t do it.” Such confidence emboldened and focused Larry’s preaching as he, “resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” He declared, “I sought to always keep that the focus of my preaching.” Larry described the goal of his ministry as to keep Christ pre-eminent and to preach nothing but Christ and His cross.

### **Ministry and the Power of Weakness**

Reflecting upon his very long, fruitful tenure at one church, Jim labeled the advantages of a long pastorate starkly. He shared, “If we only stay until we get so well known that people are unimpressed with us and then we leave? That’s a prescription for spiritual bankruptcy. When you stay somewhere for a long time, people get thoroughly unimpressed. That’s wonderful because the only person they ought to be impressed by ain’t you.” Jim expresses a deeply counter-intuitive and counter-cultural thought: the goal of a minister is weakness, not competency. The goal is exposure and vulnerability, not pretense or pretending. And he suggested that a certain way to achieve that is to stick around long enough to be known, really known, by one’s congregants. He went further, describing the temptations of leaving a pastorate before one is deeply, more fully known. He suggested, “One of the greatest, most profitable benefits of long-term presence is you really have to trust Jesus. You can’t run on your gift package; it’s going to run thin. Christ has got to be preeminent. The feel of faith is not strength. The feel of faith is dependent weakness. And anybody that thinks that strength is, is in real danger.” Jim describes a style of leadership and an approach to self-understanding and presentation starkly at odds with our culture and even typical pressure in the local church. Larry

sought to make Christ preeminent in his preaching. Jim recognized that Christ must become preeminent amidst the dearth of our gifts and impotency of our abilities. Jim shouted, ‘weakness is our hope’ to pastors and reminded them that the longer they stay at a parish, the more weaknesses are seen, known, detected. Unusual advice, indeed.

Henry shared that sentiment of pastoring openly, even weakly. He described the trials experienced from one of his children who wandered from the fold that compelled him and his wife to depend upon Christ and to share with the Church openly and deeply. He shared, “Our child forced us into transparency.” His wife commented later, after her child had come back to the faith, that the turnaround would have been so much easier if it had occurred earlier in their lives. But she reflected, “It would have changed our ministry; it made us more open, more transparent.” A key verse for Henry came from Hebrews 11:33-37 that “some conquered kingdoms, others were sawn in two.” He noted, “That passage helped me set realistic expectations early on. Faithfulness, not visible success, is the measure.” Henry reflected humility, akin to Jim’s call to weakness and Larry’s dependency, that provided rich resources of hope, courage, and resilience.

Brian, looking back similarly on a long ministry and fruitful pastorate, was able to see lots of blessing and a lot of failure too. He described this time of reflection as, “a sweet time. Just experiencing the Lord’s grace and his goodness and marveling at his patience. But there’s still regret. I don’t think I have any shame because I’m willing to talk and be honest about it. But there is regret. But then there’s also just joy in the goodness of the Lord.” That thought and quote can serve to summarize this section and chapter. It possesses unalloyed confidence in God’s goodness and promises while also reflecting an unvarnished, unflinching honesty about oneself. And that combination—

ruthless humility joined to joyful confidence in what the Lord is doing amidst and despite the pastor—is what carried these ministers through their pastorates. Gone were the demands for success and the pretense of competence. In their place came the comfort of knowing oneself more deeply while not turning to despair or shame. And buoying all of it was a sublime, strengthening vision of Christ’s sufficiency, Christ’s preservation, and Christ’s commitment to His Church and to its ministers. The ministers join their voices to St. Paul’s promise, “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” **Romans 5:5**

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<sup>297</sup> Rom. 5:5.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors maintain healthy, longitudinal tenures in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). This chapter provides the findings of the following research questions that guided the qualitative research:

1. How do senior pastors define pastoral health?
2. What personal and spiritual practices contribute to longitudinal pastoral health?
3. What challenges do senior pastors overcome to continue in longitudinally healthy ministry?
4. What benefits derive from a healthy, longitudinal pastorate to the pastor and to the congregation?

In this chapter I hope to interpret the findings, highlighting where lived experience confirms existing scholarship and where the unique contexts of pastors within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) offer new or divergent insights. By integrating these perspectives, the study concludes with practical recommendations for pastors and churches seeking to foster healthier, more resilient tenures in an era of high ministerial turnover.

The pastors underscored and explored the following themes related to pastoral longevity and durability:

- **Personal Piety and Spiritual Formation:** Participants emphasized that a vibrant, private relationship with Christ—distinct from professional duties—is the foundational requirement for long-term endurance.

- **Practices of Personal Piety:** The research identified specific "rhythms of grace," such as prayer, Scripture meditation, and Sabbath-keeping, which provide the spiritual weight necessary to withstand the pressures of the office.
- **Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness:** The findings highlighted that pastors who last in ministry possess a high degree of self-awareness, allowing them to manage their own anxieties and emotional triggers effectively while awash in a consistent sea of relational conflict.
- **Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST):** A significant theme was the application of systems thinking, which enables pastors to navigate congregational conflict and power dynamics without becoming "triangulated" or burned out.

## **Convergence Between Literature and Findings: Core Themes Confirmed**

### **Spiritual Health Redefined**

The first non-negotiable for all ministers, particularly those seeking to maintain long-term, healthy pastorates, must be their own relationships with Jesus. Despite all nine of the pastors interviewed having enjoyed significant success—as defined by growth, attendance, stability, and maturing capital projects and institution creation—none of them defined spiritual health remotely in those terms or along those lines. They all chose to define spiritual health in often unseen, profoundly intimate, relational ways and always in terms of their own repentance, faith, and love for others. The literature agreed; the writers are voices in the wilderness of crying out, “be faithful not successful.” Amidst a surfeit of

church growth literature and the voices of the sirens crying out “larger, bigger, more,” these authors and pastors pleaded for health, rest, and modesty about one’s gifts and ambitions. Health to them was independent of the success or strength of the church they served. Without mentioning Esau, they all exhorted, “don’t sell your birthright for a pot of stew.” Don’t lose your family for ministry; Don’t lose your soul in or to ministry; Don’t neglect your soul in ministry; Don’t lose Jesus in ministry.

I found the pastors encouraging, bracing, and universally convicting in these areas. Their faithfulness inspires and challenges me. Their modesty and demands to give Christ the glory for any success or fruit convicts and humbles me. The literature’s insistence on tending to one’s soul first and primarily echoes these pastors’ commitments and lives. They spoke of Jesus and His beauty constantly; they marveled at His patience and kindness repeatedly; and they rested in His commitment to them and to their churches confidently. Absent were any how-to’s or recipes for success or growth. Missing were any “be like me” or “pastor like this” exhortations. Instead, they pleaded variously and simply to not lose your first love. It appears to me that this maxim, iron-clad in its importance, was the key to their joyful longevity. It was not necessarily the key to successful ministries, but it was the key to durable, sustainable, and valuable pastorates.

And the key to that key, as it were, is not in the pastors’ grasp of Jesus, but in their resting apprehension of His grasp of them. The biggest take-away is not to love more, love better, love more passionately—even if it’s Jesus Christ as the object of that affection and devotion. The most profound insight for me is the peace, comfort, and courage that flow from delighting in and remaining surprised by the Father’s love, the

Son's finished work, and the Spirit's commitment. I would be terribly remiss, frankly doomed, if I left this study believing resilience and durability rested upon my efforts. The shock of grace isn't just that He deigns to use us at all. The outrage of grace is that He does that despite our hearts, behaviors, and performance. And, all the while, He remains tenderly merciful, delightfully kind, and surprisingly patient with His ministers.

This is not an argument for simple pietism. No question, the literature commends and the pastors illustrate drawing upon deep reservoirs of teaching, truth, and promises to sustain them. But the bright lights of the Father's tender mercies became illuminated in new and nourishing ways in the very difficult, often dark, times in the pastors' leadership. The rich theology they all had would not have been as precious to them, nor would they have been as desperate for it, without the concomitant suffering and challenges common to life and ministry and without deepening honesty about their failures. All the incredible teaching of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition remains latent spiritually until activated by need, by desperation, and by brokenness. The way to "victory" spiritually is through loss; it is by dying that one finds resurrection hope, life, and power. Both the posture of the pastor and his appetite for spiritual hunger must remain characterized by and boastful about weakness, failure, and inconsistency.

If that sounds self-defeating or depressing, I suggest the opposite. I simply do not believe any pastor is going to win in this life; no pastor is going to beat death, suffering, or sin and its malignant consequences. But, incredibly and invitingly, it is in this inescapable losing, and through these very failures, that the pastor both discovers himself and Jesus. Without the commitment to honesty about brokenness and inadequacy, the pastor grows only in self-deception and dishonesty. And without the commitment to hope

in Christ's super-abundant grace on his or her behalf, the pastor can only become despondent, ashamed, and afraid. But, when the match of our insufficiency is joined to the fuse of Christ's ability and sovereignty, explosive grace breaks out in the pastor, the church, and the community. For there, finally, radical honesty is met with radical love; rest is provided for the bone-tired minister; and hope is provided for a hungry, similarly broken, congregation.

The answer is not greater commitment to and creativity with spiritual disciplines, as important as those are. Nor is the answer self-care pursued to the exclusion of rightful duties and responsibilities, as hard as those are often to adjudge. Spiritual practices that speak to heart and mind, emotion and intellect, and self-care that involves limits, boundaries, and wisdom must all be based upon and shaped by the finished work of Jesus. The *sine qua non* has to be, can only be, the beauty, sufficiency, and love of Christ our Savior. The literature spoke to and the pastors shouted about the necessity of the priority of Jesus in the lives and hearts of the minister.

The external conflicts and challenges and the internal inconsistency and failures provide the clearest moments of truth: is the gospel enough? Is Jesus sufficient for all these hurts, betrayals, conflict, and disappointments? Can Jesus continue to use, let alone care for, a minister as sinful and inconstant as I am? I believe both perseverance in the Christian life and in ministry depend entirely upon resting in the preserving, gracious work of Another. It is only in Jesus Christ and never in my greatest successes or worst failures that the questions above can be adequately addressed. And the grace of the gospel shouts, sings, and declares now and henceforth that the gospel is enough, Jesus is entirely sufficient, and the Father delights to use weak, vacillating, ambivalent ministers.

Redefining success in terms of faithfulness, while resting pre-eminently in Jesus' faithfulness to us, was a hallmark of these ministers and the literature. In other words, Jesus was both the goal and the strength; Jesus was He who sustained and He who made the trials lighter and the weaknesses boast-able. For the pastors, moving beyond their training and the underlying truths of their theology to a vital, intimate, dependent relationship with Jesus Christ remained critical for longevity and central perseverance. How these insights and breakthroughs occurred was interesting to explore.

### **Spiritual Formation as the Non-Negotiable Foundation**

Both the literature and the interview findings converge on the centrality of spiritual formation for pastoral longevity. The researchers cited above emphasize historic spiritual disciplines—prayer, Sabbath, silence, Scripture, and community—as essential to resilience and identity formation. The pastors confirmed these practices not merely as ideals but as lived necessities, with long-tenured pastors consistently describing them as the primary means by which they endured seasons of fatigue, discouragement, and conflict.

The commitment to these practices served as ballast for the ministers, freighting their efforts with meaning, purpose, and hope. These practices also served as fuel for the ministers, as underscored by the literature, activating them to persevere, seek to repair, grow, and sustain ministry. The literature and the practitioners agree that pastoral ministry is hard, emotionally and spiritually exhausting. Left to themselves and their resources, all pastors would quit, lose their souls, or become fraudulent imposters. These practices propelled them onward, deepening their resolve and strengthening their courage. Like spoons conveying medicine, however, it is vital to remember that the

disciplines themselves do not heal, comfort, or embolden. The medicine is Jesus Christ, and these habits connect the pastor's illnesses to the medicine of the cross; they join the pastor's weaknesses and inabilities to the healing of the resurrection. In and of themselves they remain rituals—dry, dusty, and impotent.

It is important to highlight that the practitioners did not presume to practice these disciplines perfectly or exhaustively. While all agreed to their importance, they all speak of approximate execution. Some went further, confessing their own failures and incurable struggles with some of the disciplines. But they confessed that without these practices, however imperfectly applied, they would have gotten into significant danger and trouble as ministers. These practices were guardrails to protect and fuel to continue.

### **Spiritual Renewal as Critical for Depth & Vitality**

The literature did not describe or define spiritual health or durability with the lens of “renewal.” But all of the ministers shared about a time when their thinking and practices changed, shifted for the rest of their pastorates. At some point the truths have to become both real and personal. All the theology and practical instruction have to become clarified and energizing. The grace of the Lord Jesus must become more beautiful than both the ministry itself and the attendant costs that ministry inevitably incurs. The ministers, despite the distance from when this transformation occurred for each of them, continue to point back to this time and spoke of it as seminal, a nodal event for the remainder of their ministries.

What is at the heart of the breakthroughs is not some form of easily replicated revivalism, but a deeper apprehension of grace and the finished work of Jesus Christ. The literature spoke more modestly about such a renewal, preferring to write more simply

about practices and habits and protections from burnout. The pastors, however, found these breakthroughs as spiritual north stars, guiding not just the rest of their ministries, but shaping how they did ministry day to day and year to year.

My first insight into pastoral longevity above is that one's relationship with Jesus must be real, dynamic, vital, and fresh. It must be characterized by devotion and shaped by dependence. Again, it is not the love of the minister for the Father, but the Father's love for the pastor that must animate all Christian ministry. My second is of the work that must go into maintaining the relationship. That commitment to the relationship with the Lord flows from His preeminent commitment to us. "We love because He first loved us." 1 John 4:19<sup>298</sup> We seek to grow in our apprehension of His love not to earn more of His favor—we have all the favor He could ever provide—but to provide sanity and succor to our hurting, hungry, and anxious hearts. My third insight, flowing from and related to the previous two, is there must be a time of spiritual clarification.

Clarity is needed both for what the minister really needs and for how Jesus meets those needs abundantly and lovingly. The pastors uniformly reflected back upon their times of renewal as one of humbling and one of exhilaration. They all looked back to this time as one where they began to think less of themselves and more of Jesus. Clarity comes most powerfully when pastors begin to recognize their lack of fitness and the thinness of their gifts and the limits to their personalities. Clarity breaks through, like sun through the fog of inaccurate self-understanding, at the moment of pastoral despair. The pastor then begins to grow desperate for Jesus and His Spirit; he begins to take himself less seriously and to interact with others more humbly. But he also—now freed from self-

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<sup>298</sup> 1 John 4:19.

love and shame—begins to delight in weaknesses that point to Christ and begins to boast in newfound vulnerability, freedom, and acceptance in the Father’s love. These experiences of renewal bring clarity to ministers and durable understandings of grace and God’s power at work in them, despite them, which sustain and motivate them year after year.

### **Self-Care as Stewardship Rather Than Self-Indulgence**

The literature reframes self-care as a theological and vocational responsibility, countering perceptions of its self-centeredness. The pastors reinforce this framing through pastoral testimony, showing that sustainable ministers intentionally practiced rest, exercise, boundaries, and relational replenishment. The findings demonstrate that self-care was not episodic but habitual, integrated into rhythms of life rather than reactive responses to crisis.

Some generational differences emerged with the pastors regarding self-care. Eight of them are Baby Boomers and one from the Greatest Generation. None were trained in these habits to protect themselves and to steward their resources. In fact, several appeared puzzled by the theme and were skeptical of its benefits. But, confusion notwithstanding, they all did practice forms of self-care. And when they did not, they all knew that they should and communicated resolutions to improve. It was at this seam of growing knowledge and retrospective perspective that some of the more tender insights emerged.

Even if the pastors began to enjoy and to practice more of these habits later in their ministries, they all acknowledged their healthful benefits and rued their previous neglect. They all confessed to some form of over-working and over-functioning earlier in their ministries. They all confessed to not addressing adequately challenges of their

weight, exercise, or diet at points in their careers. And, confirming the prevalence of self-care wisdom now, they reported that they should have done more or better.

The challenge for younger ministers will be quite different from the challenges that faced this population. Their struggle may be more related to living with too much self-care and too many boundaries. They have the potential to avoid the cross and the calling of Jesus to find their lives by losing them. The Scriptures don't condone laziness any more than they recommend needlessly over-working and over-functioning. Both extremes miss the heart and the benefits of self-care. These pastors modeled a lovely self-awareness both critical of the cultural streams they floated in and often distinct from the generational currents pulling at them.

### **Emotional Maturity and Self-Awareness as Sustaining Factors**

The previously cited literature argues that emotional intelligence and systems awareness are critical for navigating conflict and anxiety in congregational life. The pastors corroborate this reality by revealing that pastors who sustained long tenures demonstrated increasing self-awareness over time, particularly in recognizing internal drives such as people-pleasing, over-functioning, and fear of failure. Emotional maturity emerged as a key differentiator between endurance and attrition.

Most ministers know that their relationship with Jesus is indispensable to health and longevity in the pastorate. No one likes to feel hypocritical or fraudulent. Similarly, most ministers likely recognize the work necessary to maintain that relationship, to remain connected with the Lord and to function in light of His grace and promises. Many in Reformed and Presbyterian circles would avoid talk of renewal experiences or epiphanic moments. But all professionals, ministers included, would be able to talk of a

time when their career became a calling, when the truths they believed sank in more deeply and fueled the rest of their working life. The pastors reflected that the clarity was often accompanied by an exhaustion of their own resources and an awareness of their inabilities. I suspect that not nearly as many would argue for the need for emotional intelligence and self-awareness for successful pastorates.

A conclusion emerged from this study that the critical lynchpin for ministerial longevity centers upon two facets of the same core motivational question: discovering why one ministers and what will keep you serving. Uncovering and wrestling with darker motivations and drives is uncomfortable, often unpleasant work. The literature argues, and the pastors confirm, that without that work, the minister can do great damage to him or herself and to the congregations where they serve. Emotional intelligence is more than reading a room; it is more than awareness of the feelings of self and others. It recognizes that much of ministry is emotional and psychological and most of it occurs in the context of relationships. Managing those feelings depends significantly upon understanding those emotions and their origins.

An enormous part of pastoral longevity is enduring and managing conflict with others. Ministry is about caring for people in crisis, by definition and necessity. How one manages and handles all that stress, sadness, and conflict makes or breaks pastoral resilience. Redundant criticism, hurts and betrayals, layered on top of ceaseless sadnesses and crises, sandwiched between stress of weekly, public deadlines, and nestled upon small business-sized management of volunteers and staff will either drive one out of ministry or further into the arms of Jesus and His Spirit's sustaining power.

Emotional awareness examines pastoral reactivity and triggers; it explores how and why a pastor becomes dysregulated emotionally and how to return to equilibrium. Emotional intelligence, emphatically, is more than being nice and polite and effective. It recognizes that one's own gifting can become buried by one's emotional weights and interpersonal conflicts. It realizes that one's very effectiveness is limited by not just how one can play in the sandbox with others but how one understands oneself. Much of that emotional intelligence depends upon deep, introspective, and often painful work. A pastor can't recognize how much of his ministry is driven, as one pastor stated, by shame management unless he's familiar with the sources of his shame and comfortable with exploring and wrestling with those springs of self-contempt. A pastor can't realize how much of his ministry is driven by fear, as one pastor stated, unless he does the hard work of digging at the roots of the fear and his story and his shadow side.

Trying to do ministry without more deeply understanding oneself and how one is interacting with external stimuli—be those hospital visits, angry emails, or a crummy sermon—is like trying to box with one arm tied behind one's back. I would suggest it is almost as important to pastoral health and longevity as the practices of the Christian life. Certainly, one can be a Christian without emotional awareness and sensitivity. But without emotional maturity and increasing depth one cannot be an effective minister who counsels wisely and empathetically, who preaches not just to the congregants' heads but their hearts too, who navigates conflict with humility and courage, or who tells the truth. This type of emotional intelligence is much more than authenticity. It seizes upon the desires for authenticity and explores how to present both Jesus and oneself more honestly but also more biblically wisely.

And, critically, the journey toward greater self-discovery and honesty about one's hurts, needs, drives, and tendencies occurs most felicitously when the pastor rests confidently in the Father's love for and providential care for every detail of his or her life. Emotional intelligence and the journey within flows from a secure relationship with one's Heavenly Father. The Father's love produces security to face darkness within. The Son's work provides assurance that no habit, tendency, or recurrent failure can change the pastor's standing or confidence. And the Spirit's comfort sustains the minister, energizing and conforming him more and more into the image of the Son, Jesus. Gospel confidence must secure the foundation and catalyze the pursuit of emotional intelligence and awareness.

## **Divergence Between Literature and Lived Experience**

### **From Prescriptive Models to Adaptive Practices**

The literature often presents structured models of spiritual disciplines, self-care, and leadership development. In contrast, the pastors revealed that they rarely followed formalized systems; instead, they adapted practices contextually over time. What mattered was not strict adherence to prescribed models, but long-term consistency, flexibility, and realism shaped by pastoral context and season of life. But a baseline remained for each of the pastors, however they pursued a goal. They all knew what they needed to attend to; the ways they attended to those things over the course of their ministries. They all spoke, for instance, of seasons of parenting that restricted their abilities to travel, speak, exercise, or even do their devotionals as they had previously.

But they all adapted to those seasons and continued doing the things they knew they needed.

Similarly, none of the pastors spoke legalistically or even prescriptively about their practices. In fact, several joked that they were “terrible” at their devotions or “horrible” about exercise. They continued to stress their importance and agreed that they were seeking to improve upon them, however meagerly. They spoke universally about their own needs for these practices. Open handed about how others might interpret and emulate them, these pastors never spoke with a “shall” or “must.” How a pastor chooses to practice these disciplines or to design his or her life remains subject to wide variety and broad interpretation. The pastors embodied that flexibility and adaptability while also liberating their rhythms from legalistic burdens.

### **Idealized Community Versus Selective Relationships**

Previously cited researchers strongly emphasize broad Christian community, accountability structures, and pastoral friendships. The pastors nuanced these emphases, showing that pastors sustained longevity not through wide relational networks but through a small number of trusted relationships. Depth consistently outweighed breadth, and intentional selectivity proved more sustainable than generalized expectations of communal support.

Once more, flexibility characterized the pastor’s practices. For one it was an indispensable annual gathering of a lot of ministers, for another a small pastoral cohort from college and seminary. All the pastors spoke of friendships with both elders and parishioners eschewing the often conventional wisdom not to be close or intimate with those from your own congregation. The literature was divided on this particular topic

with some arguing to find friends—needful as they are—outside of one’s congregation and others recommending close friendships could be found and cultivated within one’s church. The literature and the pastors underscored that ministry can be, and often was, quite lonely, and real intentionality must be put into seeking and developing same-sex friendships to buttress one’s ministry and to insulate oneself from isolation.

### **Theoretical Understanding Versus Experiential Integration of Family Systems Theory**

Bowen Family Systems Theory is presented in Chapter 2 as a robust interpretive framework for understanding congregational dynamics. A theme that emerged from the pastors while they did not explicitly name or formally apply systems theory concepts, yet most practiced its principles intuitively. Differentiation, non-anxious presence, and boundary-setting emerged experientially rather than academically. The teaching prescribed in the literature became hard won habits and patterns for the pastors through the maturing that suffering rendered.

Only several of the pastors knew the terms or had studied BFST, but all knew intuitively to remain relationally connected to opponents or critics while also seeking to remain emotionally separate from them. Most of the pastors could articulate a tendency to over-function and some of the older ones continued to defend that work ethic as a necessary and appropriate response to duty. Those who were self-critical of that work ethic recognized their shadow side impelling them and the allure of the praise or the comfort that such additional labor brought. All the pastors knew not to respond in kind to emotionality and anxiety. Again, only a few would frame their responses in the argot of a Bowenian non-anxious presence. But they all spoke of taking down the temperature

emotionally and serving as mufflers, not amplifiers. They all modeled a remarkable kind and humane composure that sought to love critic and flatterer alike. All had done tremendous work to feel comfortable in their own skin and to grow in personal security. None had arrived, of course, but they all recognized they needed to keep growing in their sense of self and relationships with others.

These teachings from BFST have been immensely important to me, and I was very pleased to find them on the tongues and in the habits of the pastors and throughout the literature. It's hard to parse the difference between emotional intelligence and the deep influence of BFST. One can be, of course, emotionally mature without ever learning about BFST. I do believe that the principles of BFST will appear, as they did for these pastors, in emotionally mature pastors even without the training or exposure.

So many pastors go into ministry to please others and to garner their approval. Other ministers go into the pastorate to be right and to share a platonic ideal of moralism to a people or society that doesn't get it. Whether a pastor is a people-pleaser or a jeremiad preaching prophet, an understanding of these drives is vitally important to one's health and the well-being of the church. Emotional intelligence, with its work on story, one's shadow, and gleaning more of one's drives and motivation, helps illuminate these blind spots in the minister. But equally strategic is to know how to combat these tendencies.

BFST arms the minister with the tools to resist the pressure to get along, be liked at all costs, and to preserve the peace. It fortifies the minister to stand apart, practice unpopular positions, and to resist the twin pressures of relational cut-off or fusion. Churches are littered with cut-offs and broken relationships among the people of God,

which appear only more common today as an increasingly broad circle of people have been classified as toxic or unsafe and deserving of cancelling or being cut-off. Churches are also profoundly tribal, loyal, and self-protective institutions. Those tendencies can also lead to fusion, group think, and a circle the wagons attitude at any time there is tension, anxiety, or conflict. That tendency too can harm a church's health, blind it to its own solipsistic tendencies, and paper over real differences.

Church leadership that fights for both truth over mindless conformity and relationship over Jesuitical exactitude will produce healthier congregations. Pastors who can remain in relationship with antagonists and critics model not just the love of Jesus, but bring the calming peace-making endorsed by Jesus. Pastors who gently but lovingly call out failures and mistakes, even at the risk of alienating the tribe and upsetting the peace, cultivate healthier, more trusting and more resilient congregations. We live in age where *pathos* appears to be the only effective form of persuasion, often to the expense of *logos* or *ethos*. Social media reward the most shrill, inflammatory, and caustic. More than ever, pastors must seek to turn down the emotional temperature while hearing the concern or the fear behind the shouting. BFST helps parse what's being said and amplified by fear and, like oil on water, BFST then helps settle congregants and debates alike and provides space for the Spirit to work and cooler heads to prevail.

### **Emergent Themes Unique to the Findings**

The findings above confirm what previously noted researchers have found and lead to further insights. Three new findings emerged from the qualitative interviews that include a redefinition of success, an understanding of conflict as normative and potentially salutary, and an acceptance of limitations for the minister.

## **Redefinition of Success Over Time**

While the literature critiques performance-driven ministry, the themes that emerged from the pastors demonstrate them actively redefining success across decades. Numerical growth, approval, and visible impact are diminished in importance and replaced by faithfulness, relational depth, and long-term formation. This reframing functions as a key resilience mechanism. Again, from a denominational perspective, each of the pastors was very successful. But they all redefined success quite differently from the way the broader culture and evangelicalism define it.

All of them pointed to healthy marriages and loving relationships with children as key benchmarks of pastoral success. They all talked about lasting, durable friendships with congregants and church leaders as a mark of success. And, vitally, they all defined success preeminently as continuing to walk with and to enjoy Jesus amidst and despite the vicissitudes of ministry. I believe these lessons accrued over time and often come as a result of suffering. But absent from the pastors' descriptions were the sizes of congregations or achievements or victories. In their place I found a lovely, compelling modesty and humility; a thanksgiving to be in ministry still and walking with Jesus at all.

## **Conflict as Inevitable and Formative**

Researchers cited above treat conflict primarily as a stressor to be managed; pastors treated conflict as unavoidable and often instrumental in pastoral growth. Long-tenured pastors interpreted conflict not as failure but as a crucible for maturity, boundary formation, and clarified leadership identity. Given the normativity of conflict and challenges relationally and interpersonally, the way a minister navigates these challenges will determine pastoral contentment and satisfaction to a significant degree. The literature

and pastors often described an inverse relationship between spiritual health and church health. All of the ministers described very difficult periods of on-going, seemingly intractable conflict and modest growth or retrenchment. They all commented about how those were, spiritually speaking, some of the richest, most important times in their ministries. The pastors described these crucibles as vital for bringing them to the end of their resources and into the arms of their very capable, loving Savior and Lord.

While the literature focused less on overt suffering, it underscored an ever-present specter of challenge, a relentless tendency toward conflict, endemic to all ministry. The literature assumed that burnout remained a constant threat and not an unusual outcome for ministry. The burnout it repeated and stressed were far more quotidian, insidiously normal for all pastors, occurring through year after year of often dry, spiritually difficult ministry. The pastors all spoke, vulnerably and often *sotto voce*, of significant suffering and even *little t* traumas. They pointed universally to Jesus and His sustaining grace in those times as they looked to the Spirit to sustain and to protect them.

Interestingly, with the exception of Burns et al., the literature did not talk much about the importance of a strong marriage to sustain decades of ministry. Perhaps it assumed it, as it did touch upon both the need for intimate friendships and deep, spiritually meaningful community. To a person, the pastors all spoke of the strategic importance of their marriages. Specifically, they described the strength and wisdom of their wives and the costs they too paid for a ministry life. They repeated their need for and reliance upon the intimacy and friendship of their spouse, particularly in times of darkness and suffering.

## **The Role of Aging, Limitation, and Acceptance**

A theme largely absent from the literature but prominent in the findings is the pastor's growing acceptance of personal limitation. Physical aging, emotional finitude, and constrained capacity were embraced rather than resisted, contributing to healthier expectations and sustainable ministry patterns. I would describe the pastors all as very high-achieving, remarkably competent men. It would not be unfair to describe them as driven and goal oriented. What continued to emerge from their voices and hearts were not metrics for success or recipes for achievement, but love. They spoke variously and repeatedly of their love for their staffs, fellow ministers, their communities, and always their children and spouse. All of them are grandparents, one a great-grandparent, and all spoke of their deep affection for this next generation and their spiritual hopes for those kids. They were speaking of legacy and what they were leaving behind.

For several of the pastors this became very evident in their successful succession plans and transitions to younger senior ministers. I found this quite striking. It is worth noting their ability to stay at the church they founded or where they were the long, deeply loved incumbent and successfully hand over session leadership, weekly preaching responsibilities, and the other attendant perquisites of the organizing or senior minister. Again, this willingness to diminish in importance for the good of the institution became part of their working definition of success and it's wildly counter-cultural and even counter-intuitive to consider. Success then became letting go and stepping aside well. Success became recognizing one's weaknesses and limitations and seeking to highlight the strengths and abilities of another. Success became the long-term institutional health of the church, even if that included less of the pastor's gifts and leadership. I really

appreciated their postures, and it corroborates the deep spirituality and maturity referred to above.

All of the pastors looked at their final congregation where they had served the longest with a vision for its perpetuity. They described capital campaigns, relentless institution building, and fundraising in generational terms. They all knew they were off or soon departing from the stage. Yet, they longed to see the church healthy, stable, kingdom oriented, and missional. Most of them ministered through COVID 19 and witnessed a final period of division, rupture, and dissension in their ministries. Many spoke quite poignantly of how, despite all of their years, and all their teaching, and all of the emphasis upon Jesus and His grace, schism still occurred and relationships were still ruptured. Their pastoral hearts remained grieved by the losses and separations. Yet, by the end of their careers, they were not surprised by the conflict or the absence of health in the local church. The Church remained, even to the end, alas, The Church. It remained full of saints and sinners and saints who continued to sin. It remained full of betrayal and conflict and loss. The pastors did not minimize or disguise these setbacks with maudlin sentimentality and religious gloss, nor did they appear judgmental, harsh, or unforgiving. They did, however, refer to regret and disappointment and sadness.

This stuck with me and remained a key insight into pastoral ministry and longevity: no one finishes unscathed; no one retires fully celebrated and venerated; no church reaches full sanctification. Ministers and churches alike remain works in progress, full of exciting advances of the gospel and incredibly dispiriting losses, conflict, and relational alienation. Despite the renewal that had broken out and the literal hundreds and hundreds who had come to faith and renewal through their ministries, COVID provided

yet another reminder that The Church is often more influenced by culture than Scripture, more shaped by politics than by the Spirit. Retirement or transition following such a tumultuous time in our nation and world left the ministers with clarity about their work and their hope.

Without the security that the gospel provides, without the hope that the finished work of Jesus offers, or without the love that the adopting commitment of the Father brings, the ministers would have been disconsolate, bitter, and likely cynical. But by this point in their ministries and spiritual journeys they had lost the naïve hope that the church would act appropriately or reasonably. They had lost their need to be admired, loved, and respected by all. They had lost their demand that everyone else agree and conform to their thinking. All of those losses, however, brought with them the freedom and the promise that Jesus really was enough. They had the promise that Jesus was building His Church and would finish His work, that these saints were not, in fact, reflections of pastoral effectiveness, but sinners in need of Jesus' blood and righteousness and incurably unfixable spiritually in this life.

## **2 Corinthians as a Template and Respite**

The literature review of 2 Corinthians reveals a profound theology of weakness that serves as the bedrock for pastoral resilience. Paul's rhetorical list of sufferings in chapter 11 is not a bid for sympathy and not only a demonstration of his devotion despite an immense personal cost. It is also a counter-cultural and counter-intuitive bid to embrace weakness and suffering as constitutive parts of Christian leadership. The apostle's "theology of the cross" suggests that the heavy emotional, spiritual, and psychological burdens of the calling—when carried year after year—actually become the

theater for God's power and the platform for His glory. As the scholars noted, Paul was sustained by the reality that he was merely a "clay jar" containing a treasure, ensuring that the "extraordinary power belongs to God" rather than the minister. Such a perspective allows a pastor to view burnout symptoms or ministerial trials not as symbols of weakness or as definitive failures, but as warnings that invite deeper dependence and build greater humility and joy.

Interestingly to me, not one of the ministers pointed to 2 Corinthians for inspiration and hope and direction as pastors. When queried, they all spoke of different passages and teachings from the Scriptures. But, they all embodied Paul's teaching in that epistle through their navigation of the final chapters of their public ministry. They recognized that none of them were competent or sufficient for the work of ministry themselves. They all spoke lightly of their abilities and humbly about the ways their congregations hurt them. They recognized that they too were jars of clay, carrying around in their bodies the death of Jesus that through their ministry the life of Jesus might result. They boasted about failures and told on themselves in embarrassing ways. And they paid a price for their labor. Ministry never became a glide path, never became easy. It remained fraught with temptations, filled with spiritual warfare, and redolent with sadness and disappointment. And yet, they absorbed the criticism, metabolized the conflict and division, and continued preaching Christ and Him crucified. They knew that their glory and reward awaited them, and if Jesus didn't entrust Himself to mankind, nor should they. With the writer of Hebrews they, "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly

one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”<sup>299</sup>

### **Integrative Insight: What the Research and Findings Together Reveal**

Taken together, the research and the pastors demonstrate that pastoral longevity is not sustained by technique, charisma, gifts, or even endurance alone, but by deep spiritual and character formation over time. The literature provides the theological and conceptual scaffolding, while the findings reveal how those principles are embodied imperfectly, patiently, and contextually. Longevity emerges not as the result of avoiding weakness, but of learning to minister faithfully within it. Longevity is built upon a foundation of spiritual practices not done perfectly, but sought consistently. Longevity is maintained through habits of self-care that speak to the humanity and limits of every pastor. Longevity becomes secondary and joy in ministry primary when Christ is pre-eminent, and His love, power, and righteousness grow more precious than fame, attention, success, or career. Longevity becomes more likely when suffering is not avoided or minimized, weakness is embraced, and vulnerability is pronounced. Ultimately, and fundamentally, longevity is never the goal, nor are comfort, security, or safety in ministry. The goal remains and must be Christ and Him proclaimed, Christ alone beheld, enjoyed, and rested upon.

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<sup>299</sup> Heb. 11:16.

## Recommendations for Practice

### Recommendations for Pastors

#### Seek to Know Christ Doggedly and Humbly

There can be no substitute for a vital, intimate relationship with the risen Lord Christ for the minister. While that's true for every Christian, the calling not to lose one's first love, to abide deeply and consistently in Christ the Living Vine, is of paramount importance for the minister. Jesus' warning, "apart from me you can do nothing"<sup>300</sup> should strike fear in the heart of every pastor. The longer one is in ministry or the more well-trained, the easier it becomes to rely upon technique, experience, learning, and natural gifts. While not uncommon, such self-sufficiency leaves the pastor more susceptible to temptation and less spiritually fortified to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. Additionally, and vitally, it cuts off the minister from the well-spring of joy and hope and wisdom. Left untreated, the minister operates more and more independently and self-confidently while also less humbly and dependently leaving the minister spiritually dry, morally stigmatic, ethically blind. Without renewing intervention from the Father, the minister becomes more susceptible to bitterness, burn-out, exasperation, and the fruits of the flesh. The ever-more confident and competent pastor remains in dire need of fresh and deepening repentance joined to dynamic faith in Another.

Ministry is hard, painful work. The pastor's resilience and durability depend upon the on-going succor of the Spirit to comfort, soothe, and direct. The pastor's vitality and freshness depend upon deepening and soul-developing connection to the Living Head's

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<sup>300</sup> John 15:5

love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy. The pastor's identity and courage depend upon resting in and a growing appreciation for the Father's adoption, care, and guidance. Without these supports—indispensable to the minister and inextricable from a dynamic relationship with the Lord—the minister risks mistaking duty for devotion. He risks prioritizing the love and respect of others above the perfect love of God. He will pastor not by keeping in step with the Spirit, but by his own misshapen ideas and misplaced identity.

I'm not suggesting that ethical or moral failures are the direct result of a poorly maintained devotional life. Nor am I positing conversely that ministerial success or longevity results from one's intimacy with the Father and spiritual connection through the Spirit to the Son. But.....a minister is more aware of temptation and potential failure through abiding and seeking spiritual help and insight. Such thinking is not novel nor pietistically innovative. It echoes Calvin's axiomatic teaching that the more one learns of God, the better one understands oneself; and the more one's self-understanding grows, the more deeply he will know of and enjoy the Lord's person and work. Congregations and the minister's own family need him to link fresh insights and revelations from his spiritual journey to his own story, emotions, and needs. A minister who chooses the comfort of ignoring these internal, emotional needs may appear competent and collected, but neglects opportunities for deeper repentance, fuller faith, and more robust love for others. The congregation and the pastor both remain more safe and more healthy when the minister himself is growing in dependency, honesty and vulnerability, and in the consequent humility that leads to joy and freedom.

### **Seek to Know Yourself: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

Pastors will remain crippled by and limited in their ministerial ability and depth without concomitant growth in self-understanding and personal honesty. The pastor must remain committed to exploring and remaining curious about his shadow side—the darker motivations, the lurking sinful patterns, and the often-hidden realities beneath self-perception and public visibility. Intimate, same-sex friendships and agreed upon, caring accountability from one's spouse and elders can help illuminate blind-spots and needs and activate greater curiosity and spiritual exploration. Similarly, a commitment to recognizing and pursuing the roots of one's negative emotions aids deeper self-awareness and provides greater opportunities for reliance upon and appreciation for Christ's finished work. Without such efforts the pastor will need Jesus appreciably less and rely upon the Spirit significantly less. Worse, the pastor will regularly and invariably hurt others and engage in conflict much less effectively.

Pastoral maturity is hard-won; its cost is exacted from suffering and losses and heartbreak. Without accompanying repentance and faith, the pastor's growth in wisdom can mask as cynicism and even bitterness. Without the foundation of the spiritual depth mentioned above, no pastor would want to explore the treacherous territory of his own story or brokenness. Only confidence in the finished work of Christ catalyzes humble curiosity and child-like humility in the always-learning pastor. A larger and larger cross and Christ enables the pastor to discern how his family of origin and personal wounds and stories affect his pastorate, his motivations, and his coping mechanisms amidst hurt, loss, and betrayal. A larger and larger gospel also liberate the pastor to receive criticism with humility and to seek forgiveness with those he has hurt or offended. A more robust

and beautiful message of divine forgiveness and hope provide comfort amidst the inevitable pastoral failures and errors of judgment or knowledge.

As stated above, without an ever-growing understanding of and ever more present, intimate, and tender relationship with Jesus, it is simply impossible to imagine one growing as a pastor. Without a larger and more beautiful Jesus, the minister remains willfully blind to his own patterns and drives. He crouches in defensiveness, doubles down on self-righteousness, and demands conformity from those around him. Without this tender, patient, merciful Jesus, the minister loses empathy, kindness, and humility. Without this Jesus, curiosity is replaced by dogmatism and egos remain brittle and insecure. Without this Jesus, success, approbation, and appreciation become indispensable to feed the soul-starved, emaciated character of the pastor. The pathway to this Jesus—larger, more gracious and patient, and overflowing in love and mercy—remains growth in self-knowledge and the courage to recognize increasingly and more deeply one's tremendous need for our majestic Savior.

### **Seek to Minister Out of Weakness**

The culmination of a growing relational depth with Jesus and deepening awareness of self—good and bad—will liberate the minister from pretending, posing, and posturing. Confident in the Lord's love and Spirit's work, the pastor no longer needs to carry the congregation on his back and no longer feels responsibility for them to grow, approve, or conform to his desires. The sheep remain the property, exclusively and eternally, of the Great Shepherd. Shorn of the need to impress and lightened by a growing apprehension of Gospel's power and security, the pastor will begin leading as Paul did: humbly, vulnerably, and counter-culturally.

The minister will begin to delight in weakness, failure, and setbacks as opportunities to highlight the Lord's sufficiency and supremacy. He will look for opportunities to confess dependence and acknowledge inadequacy. He will no longer need to be right, be the expert, or need to know the answer. Rather than feeling shame in those moments, however, he will rest confidently in He whose work it is and whose Church it has always been. He will help create a culture that welcomes the not-yet and the incompletely sanctified. He will seek to build an environment where perfection and high performance are eschewed and more human-sized, sober expectations for one another provide space for growth and grace for setbacks. In such an environment, congregants will more freely confess sin and failure, staff will more confidently take risks in ministry, and the officers will more joyfully lead and share vulnerably.

I am not urging complacency any more than I'm suggesting an anti-nomian approach to God's Law. I am suggesting that we all—maybe pastors especially—take ourselves too seriously and thus miss out on God's grace and the Spirit's work. I am not encouraging mediocrity or inappropriate authenticity in the name of honesty. I am seeking to drive a stake in the heart of Christian perfectionism that neither reflects the truth about ourselves nor reflects God's great love for and delight in our journey, halting and imperfect though it be. I am decrying churches and ministers that preach justification by grace but function gracelessly in relationships whether that looks like self-righteousness and judgmentalism or avoidance and indifference. I am lamenting ministers who preach *sola gratia* and load congregants with burdens that their souls cannot bear. If we believe in the sufficiency and the primacy of grace, let's live like it's true for pastors first and pre-eminently. If we believe in the beauty and power of grace in Christ Jesus,

let's not hide from our weakness and inability, pretending to have it far more together than we do or could. In other words, let's imitate a weak and suffering Savior and follow a criticized, mocked apostle to gospel freedom.

### **Prioritize Emotional Health Over Ministry Activity**

Flowing from a deepening understanding of their motivations and drives and buttressed by a growing appreciation and love for Jesus, pastors must grow in emotional health and stability. Pastors must grow in awareness of their over-work and its attendant over-functioning. The ability to say no to more needs and even opportunities requires wisdom and maturity. But the pastor is helped immensely by recognizing the self-love and vanity endemic to so many ministerial yeses. The pastor will remain incapable of disappointing others, fearful of not impressing others, and unwilling to sacrifice the praise and recognition of others without a firm sense of identity rooted in Christ and His gospel. Which is all to say, without deepening self-understanding and emotional maturity, the spiritual life of the minister will decay and diminish.

Due to the public-facing and often performance-imitating facets of the job, every pastor remains tempted to become a performer, a skilled religious professional who nonetheless becomes an impersonator of a disciple of Christ. The ability both to recognize this and to combat it with repentance and faith is vital to the integrity of every minister. The fruit of that recognition in part will appear in the courage to say no to more busyness, frenetic doing of good, and always-urgent need-meeting to focus upon the better thing, the more vital thing—namely, soul care and emotional health.

The stress pastors are under includes inevitable public pressures, performance demands, and vicarious trauma. To care for people and to minister to them in their

weaknesses and brokenness is to expect the metabolizing of a significant amount of suffering. Some pastors deal with the sadness and disappointment through the numbing agents of alcohol, pain-killers, food, or even over-work. Some deal with it by compartmentalizing to such a self-protective degree that compassion, sympathy, and even tenderness can become rare. A related type of coping can appear like cynicism, bitterness, and despondency. A final form of coping can appear less like flight mechanisms and more like fighting responses. These pastors become angrier, more critical, significantly more self-confident, and unable to tolerate difference or hear criticism. However a pastor copes, the reality remains that pastors *must* deal with all the emotional weight and baggage somehow, hopefully in healthful manners. These might include regular exercise, the pursuit of hobbies and avocations, the cultivation of deep, trusting friendships, and the prioritization of intimacy and vulnerability with one's spouse.

Growth in emotional health and self-awareness are the vital ingredients for this ministerial recipe of coping with endemic stress, sadness, and brokenness. Growth in these areas, when joined to on-going spiritual health and vitality, takes these—disappointments at best and traumas at worst—to the Living God who alone can comfort, guide, and provide solace and perspective. That is where real and lasting healing for the minister occurs—at the feet of Jesus, nurtured by a compassionate, kind Heavenly Father, and tended to by our indwelling Holy Spirit.

Growth in emotional health and self-awareness also provide the minister with flexibility, the willingness not to take oneself too seriously, and the ability to continue to adapt to changing circumstances amid equally sinful congregants. These growth steps enable the pastor to nurture a sense of humor borne from an outlook of God's grace that

can make light of himself without tearing others down. The growth steps facilitate pastoral maturity amidst ceaseless change, swirling and chaotic current events, and tragedies large and small. Emotional health and self-awareness root the minister in his truest, most stable identity while leaving him honest about self and humble with others. The anchor is Jesus, fixing the pastor to security, safety, hope, and wisdom despite all that swirls about him.

### **Embrace a Holistic Humanity through Committed Spiritual Formation & Self-Care**

Pastors must continue to resist the seductive temptation to conflate ministerial busyness with spiritual depth. The research highlights that work for God that is not nourished by a deep interior life will eventually be contaminated by ego and a need for approval. It is recommended that pastors develop a personalized "Rule of Life"—an intentional structure of spiritual disciplines that includes not only Sabbath observance, prayer, and Scripture, but also contemplative silence and retreats. By moving from "doing" for the Lord to "being" with Him, pastors can ensure that they are serving out of an "overflow of intimacy" rather than running on the fumes of an empty spiritual tank and the residue of their personality and natural giftedness.

Spiritual formation also requires a courageous commitment to the Fourth Commandment. Practicing a true Sabbath—where, as Scazzero and Earley note, one stops working to "surrender to God in trust"—is essential to remind the minister that the world does not depend on them. By pushing into counter-cultural sabbath and counter-intuitive silence, these practices demand the minister grow in knowledge of himself while enjoying the Lord more fully as well. The two needs again remain inseparable: to grow

spiritually, one must grow emotionally, and to grow emotionally more mature, one must also grow in depth spiritually.

Pastors should view self-care not as a luxury or a sign of slackness, but as a vital stewardship of the body and mind required to deliver the message of the gospel. Further, pastors should pursue hobbies, exercise, and "kinesthetic spirituality" and physical rhythms of rest to mitigate the accumulation of ministry stress and to combat incipient burnout.

### **Cultivate "Holy Friendships" and External Accountability**

To endure the isolation inherent to ministry leadership, pastors must move beyond friendliness and professional networking toward "holy friendships" characterized by transparency and mutual truth-telling. Pastoral longevity is rarely a solitary achievement; it requires a support system that includes peers, mentors, or professional counselors who are given permission to ask challenging questions. Pastors are encouraged to be rigorously honest with at least one accountability partner, breaking the cycle of self-deception, secret-keeping, and pastoral transience by inviting others into their private struggles and joys.

### **Adopt a Systems Perspective on Conflict**

Finally, pastors should utilize insights from Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) to navigate the inevitable problem people and church contention that drive many to leave the pulpit. By developing emotional and relational maturity, a pastor can learn to metabolize conflict without taking it personally. Understanding the church as a relational system allows the minister to remain a "non-anxious presence," preventing the

metastasizing of cynicism and enabling them to stay put during the difficult middle years of a pastorate where the most ministerial fruitfulness is often found.

## **Recommendations for Churches**

### **Embrace the Full Humanity of Your Pastor**

The biblical anthropology of Scripture liberates the local church from believing their pastor is anything but human. As a son of Adam or daughter of Eve, he or she inhabits both a body of sin and God-given limitations and finitude. The local church then must recognize their pastor as sinner and struggler, modestly gifted and dependent, and human-sized and inadequate to the biblical calling. Such a vision of their pastor—as biblical as it is humbling—will free both church and pastor to pursue lives of humility and hope, of joyful dependency and vulnerability. Gone will be any expectation of pastor as savior or even high performer. Thoughts of pastoral perfection will evaporate as the sunshine of Christ’s sufficiency and the Spirit’s work appear.

### **Encourage a Deeper Spirituality and Maturity in Your Pastor**

Spiritual depth and maturity are often hard to measure and impossible to compel. Church search committees and Sessions nonetheless must seek to explore and to encourage growth in these areas. It is in their best interests to engage in these areas early and often. Search committees willing to probe areas of emotional health will save their congregation years of frustration and mountains of conflict. Sessions committed to prioritizing the spiritual health—not just the professional competencies—of their minister will reap the rewards of livelier, deeper scriptural insights as well as a more joyful, teachable, humble leader.

Practically, by inquiring about pastoral busyness and church calendars, Sessions can do the counter-intuitively protective thing. Instead of urging more, more, more, they can help pastors slow down, get less busy, and focus upon Christ and His inestimable benefits. While Sessions cannot manufacture spiritual health or renewal in their pastor, they can create more opportunities for the Spirit to do those things in him. They can invite, model, and offer accountability for the means of grace, sabbaths, and silence and challenge Peterson's "bastard sabbaths" with their pastor. They can urge time away and apart, time with friends and time alone with spouse, and time in hobbies and exercise. They can support regular, funded sabbaticals, insist upon ample vacation time, and offer conferences and retreats based not on skills or learning, but upon renewal and spiritual health. They can entice the pastor to counseling with encouragement and remuneration. All of these commitments and efforts will accrue to the pastor's health and likely longevity as well as redound to the blessing and growth of the congregation.

There is much the Session can do similarly to model and to stimulate emotional health. Beginning with an interest in and a non-judgmental curiosity about the pastor's past and story, the Session can invite more pastoral introspection and awareness of the forces beneath the surface at work in his life. The Session can model mutuality of sharing, vulnerability, and a shared recognition of one's brokenness and spiritual neediness. Even if they find that they have a pastor prone to hiding, tending toward pride and the maintenance of the appearance of competence, the Session can help grow the minister through their own examples. By transparently sharing their own struggles and embracing their weaknesses, a Session invites the pastor into a life of greater honesty and vulnerability. This environment of acceptance and affirmation provides the security the

pastor needs to flourish, providing a blueprint for how they, in turn, should treat their congregation and family

I am not suggesting that the Session ignore immoral or unbiblical behavior, nor am I encouraging ethical laxity in the name of honesty. Rather, I am inviting the Session to embrace a more expansive view of love for their pastor. Much of what chafes a Session is often not a matter of immorality, but of immaturity; many irritations are not rooted in biblical differences, but in expressions of insecurity. A Session can foster pastoral longevity by enduring these growth opportunities and absorbing the friction of a pastor's developing maturity. The call, then, is for patience, kindness, gentleness, and a more holistic understanding of the person behind the pulpit.

The calling for the Session is to view the pastor not as an employee to be managed or a tool for the growth of the organization. He is instead another Christian saved by grace but marked by sin and wounded by others. The Session can help the pastor both remain longer and to grow deeper by seeing him as more fully human. By receiving consistent acceptance and care apart from his performance, the pastor encounters grace and unanticipated mercy that lead him into a more settled security in Christ. By consistently and gently seeking to understand what lies beneath the surface of the pastor's life and heart, the Session helps him grow in self-awareness, deeper repentance and faith, and a more secure sense of self. By consistently managing, sharing, and repenting of their own emotional needs, the Session can lead the pastor into a fuller experience and deeper appreciation of Christ's work, Word, and healing.

Finally, the Session can support pastoral longevity by engaging conflict in a non-threatening manner that reassures the pastor that his role is secure amid disagreement.

They can avoid the twin dangers of enmeshment and groupthink, on the one hand, and cut-off and distancing, on the other. By approaching conflict with honesty about personal triggers and prior wounds, they can contain emotional fallout and prevent unnecessary escalation. In this way, they depersonalize conflict, accept differences, and, above all, pursue a love for one another that leverages conflict to build deeper trust and relational longevity.

### **Recognize Your Pastor as a Sinner**

The pastoral search committee and congregation alike must agree that the illusion of hyper-competence is far worse than the reality of modest, muddling saints desperate for the grace of Jesus and the work of His Spirit. A church culture that welcomes pastors as sinners and strugglers will themselves become more free and joyful in the grace of the gospel. The agreement to be sinners together will bond pastor and parishioner in mutual dependence upon Christ's work and power and lower expectations to biblically appropriate levels. A culture committed to not hiding or minimizing sin or failure will, necessarily, cultivate rhythms of confession, vulnerability, and consequent humility. The church culture becomes one that is more free to experiment and to fail while not taking itself more seriously than it should. I'm not suggesting flippantly a disregard for God's Word or Law nor an anti-nomian approach. I am urging a more rigorously honest and biblical approach to self-understanding from the congregation and the pastor. When these two, compelled by integrity and convicted by the Spirit, move toward honesty, they must make much of Christ. They become desperate for grace and joyful at the reception of it. Their conspiracy to delight in Christ's finished work welcomes other, limping Christians and creates a culture surprised by the Father's great love for them.

The chances for pastoral longevity increase as the pastor is freed not to hide failings or fears and as he is invited to struggle and to muddle publicly and vulnerably. The congregation is similarly welcoming and encouraging to the pastor as they eschew perfectionistic expectations and rely more fully upon the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such reliance will manifest as more dependent prayer and greater forgiveness, long-suffering, and kindness toward one another and to their leaders. A congregation seeking to inhabit and to embody a culture of grace is not, emphatically, a morass of low expectations and a swamp of sub-biblical behaviors. It is, however, a place of refuge for the rescued sinner and a beacon of hope for the imperfectly sanctified and not-yet-fully-formed. In that place of safety, a pastor can grow and persevere, and a congregation can delight in grace not just for conversion, but for all of the Christian life.

### **Recognize Your Pastor as Modestly Gifted**

When the church finds courage to look for and to follow a fellow sinner as their pastor, they will also recalibrate their expectations of him, of the ministry, and of one another. The search will focus upon integrity and character and recognize that, apart from the Spirit's blessing, every minister appears modestly gifted and limited. In a culture drunk on optimization and hyper-focused on productivity, the church must offer and lead their pastors in humility and modesty about their abilities and aptitude. It will require biblical faith and courageous self-awareness to see the pastor as a human sinner, bounded by infirmity and limited constitutively. But, far from offending the pastor or scandalizing the congregation, such awareness can bring relief, freedom, and escape from the tyranny of unbiblical expectations. The pastor will not find himself saddled with fantastical demands to be everywhere while being everything to everyone. The church will not

pretend that his preaching, leadership, vision, or industry could alone grow and mature the congregants. Together they would grow in dependency, prayer, and hope for the Lord of The Church to do the very things He promised as Hell is pushed back and the Kingdom of God advances.

The chances for pastoral longevity increase as the congregation places biblically sane expectations upon the minister called to lead them. Together, congregation and pastor will grow not in contempt for all the gifts lacking in the other, but in gratitude for whatever gifts are present, however modest or even latent. The hope, pre-eminently, for both pastor and parishioner is not in gifts or charisma or personality, but in desperate dependence and joyful reliance upon God's Spirit. The hope is found for both parties in God's promises to bless small things, to use weak things, and to glorify Himself through the inadequate and the incompetent.

### **Recognize Your Pastor as a Human-Sized**

A church aware of its limitations and joyfully expectant upon the work of the Spirit will liberate the minister to pastor and to inhabit a human-sized ministry. The church will then insist not upon over-work and demand over-functioning but affirm rest and balance. The officers of the church will help the pastor lead in Sabbath observing and protection of time with family and in life-giving hobbies. The officers, recognizing the limits of their pastor and the cumulative toll stemming from the work of ministry, will insist upon regular sabbaticals, consistent vacations, and dogged efforts to maintain days off. A church aware of pastoral limitations will also encourage things needful for the health of the minister's marriage, the cultivation of strong same-sex friendships, and the freedom to not know or to be wrong. Again, I'm not implying a willful ignorance of

Scripture or confessional standards, but a determination to encourage the pastor to have limits, to be fallible, and to have feet of clay. The hopes for pastoral longevity increase in a church culture that allows and even encourages the pastor to be first a human. The congregation will find itself more accepting and subsequently more compassionate toward the pastor struggling as they do.

### **Recognize Your Church as Part of a System**

Beginning with the pulpit search committees and continuing through the officers of the church, the local church must seek ministers who recognize and boast in their own infirmities and inabilities. Happy is the church that finds a minister who recognizes and is not ashamed to be a jar of clay. Healthy is the church that finds a minister who leads the church in vulnerability and weakness. Sane is the church that looks not to the pastor to fix them or to be more to them than another sinner desperate for grace.

A church looking for a leader marked by grace and dependent upon the Spirit will eschew the fantasy of the omni-competent leader and repent of the temptation to create job descriptions that only Jesus could meet. The search committee and Session for such a grace-marked church will probe and encourage their potential minister about his spiritual practices while pledging to help him make space and priority for time alone, time in silence, study, reflection, and rest. The church will be well served by committing to help the pastor take days off, encouraging the minister to take all the generous vacation time allotted, and providing not just time, but resources to enjoy regular sabbaticals.

The church will be better led if it invites and honors more disclosure from pastors about their inadequacies and even their failures, when appropriate to share. The church will be more accessible if it encourages human-sized ministry that recognizes limits and

is sensitive to the relentless pressure and emotional cost of pastoring. The church will be more welcoming if it grows less offended by and judgmental about sins and sinners, desiring to proclaim the sufficiency of Jesus for all failures and normalizing the on-going and incomplete work of sanctification. The church will be healthier if it seeks friendships with and not just services from their pastor, seeking to live as pilgrims together through a difficult wilderness journey replete with tears, sorrows, and joys. The church will be saner if it eschews a focus upon attendance and giving metrics, demanding and expecting growth at the cost of the minister, his family, and his time off. The church will be more confident if it entrusts its mission to His good hands and plans and seeks to pray for Kingdom advance without looking to a pastor to do it all. The church will be more secure as it grows more comfortable with disagreement and differences, seeking to understand and to expect the best from one another. The church will grow more loving as it pushes into conflict with one another by remaining connected to one another, refusing to cut-off relationally, and seeking to avoid—even at great cost emotionally—a herd mentality, tribalism, and a demand for uniformity. And the church will be more beautiful if it asks its minister to avoid partisanship, legalism, and moralism. The church will grow as it leaves public worship astounded by the grace of the gospel found in Jesus Christ, as it is fed in public worship by the exhaustively complete work of Jesus embodied in the sacrament, proclaimed from the pulpit, and re-enacted through the liturgy.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on the reasons behind pastoral health and longevity. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for the prospect of

keeping ministers longer and healthier in their parishes. Much of the literature speaks more to avoiding or recovering from burnout and less about intrinsic or gospel-centered motivations for building and maintaining healthy spiritual practices. More study could explore the intersection of a Reformed understanding of the gospel of all grace with an exploration of emotional health and life. Similarly, seeking to apply Bowen Family Systems Theory to a robustly biblical vision of our humanity, Christ's work, and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in one's sanctification would be of great benefit to the church. I would be interested in more study of what makes pastoral friendships, particularly within the church, powerful, safe, and life-giving, and what thwarts or threatens those and how they can be better cultivated and nourished.

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