The Needs of Ministry Leaders and Their families:

A Review

Philip G. Monroe

Biblical Seminary

2007

The full-time Christian worker answers the call to serve, sustain, and shepherd the people of God. And yet these same individuals and their families have few opportunities to be shepherded. Though they themselves are sheep, shepherds often face their own spiritual, financial, and relational crises alone without adequate support or care.

The Unique Stressors for Ministry Leaders

The stress of ministry life is well documented. Evers and Tomic (2003) report an oft-heard complaint by pastors, "I do not know where my work starts and where it ends" (p. 331). The shepherd must be able to give pastoral advice to any problem "under the sun," get along with everyone, organize, manage, and ignite the passions of volunteers, preach well, and articulate his or her theological convictions (Evers and Tomic, 2003). McMinn and his colleagues (2005) provide a laundry list of the stressors ministers and their family face, including financial pressures, conflict and other unwelcome surprises, perfectionism, fear of failure, spiritual dryness, amount of administrative duties, loneliness/isolation, unrealistic expectations by self and other, living in the "fishbowl," living on church property, frequent moves, lack of support, boundary intrusions, emotional and sexual attraction to parishioners, marital distress, etc.

Despite these many stressors, Hall (1997) concludes that unrealistic expectations (by both ministers and laity), "appears to be one of the biggest difficulties pastors face" (p. 251). This finding confirmed previous research by Ellison and Matilla (1983) who discovered that many leaders struggle with the discrepancy between actual and ideal ministry activities. Not surprisingly, unrealistic expectations put significant stress on interpersonal relationships and management issues (Carter, 1999). While the presence of stress does not mean the Christian worker is unhealthy, continually high levels of stress

do place them at risk for burn-out and other related problems. Evers and Tomic (2003) report that a survey of Dutch reformed pastors suggest that the pastors struggle with higher amounts of emotional exhaustion and experience lower levels of feelings of accomplishment. One can easily surmise then that ministry leaders face stress at levels that lead to mental health problems, impaired service and leadership, inappropriate uses of power, and leaving the ministry altogether.

Sources of Support, Discipleship, and Care?

If the work of ministry families is fraught with stress, where do they find support, renewal, and healing? It appears that many seek support first in their own spiritual disciplines and personal coping strategies (e.g., reading, praying, hobbies, exercise, time away, etc.), a distant second in their marital relationships (e.g., talking to one's spouse), and rarely through outside mentoring, discipling, and/or accountability relationships (Meek, et al, 2003; Meek, et al., 2004, McMinn, et al., 2005). To paint this starkly, McMinn and his colleagues (2005) found that 76% of all acknowledged coping mechanisms by a group of senior pastors would be classified under the heading of private self-care, while 16% of their coping mechanisms would be classified as family support and only 8% of senior pastor coping mechanisms come in the form of outside relationships.[1]

When asked to consider what collaborative relationships they might form with professional counselors, only 7% of pastors in one study expressed an interest in doing so for personal reasons (though 84% would consider referring a troubled member of the

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[1] In a prior study, McMinn and his colleagues (as cited in 2005) asked clergy to tell their "single most important thing" they do to keep themselves healthy? 69% of the responses were classified as intrapersonal, 12% were classified as family, and 19% were classified by the researchers as community or external strategies.

congregation) (Lish, et al., 2003). Clergy and their families appear not to find adequate, safe, relationships during their ministry years where they may be discipled and renewed.

While full-time ministry families with strong family coherence and adaptability hold up well under stress (Ostrander, Henry, & Fournier, 1994), the family members may continue to feel isolated and lacking external supports, thereby placing more pressure on clergy marital relationships. Indeed, Warner and Carter (1984) report that a sample of clergy and spouses report higher amounts of marital distress than the general population. This same study reports that pastors and their wives experience considerable loneliness. Blanton and Morris (1999) found that stresses associated with lack of social support were more predictive of negative emotional and physical symptoms than did economic pressures.

Do pastors ask for support from their superiors? It appears they do not for fear of being deemed unfit for service (Gilbert, 1987) or not perceiving that support will not be forthcoming where they desire it most (Morris & Blanton, 1995). And yet they do complain that their institutions do not adequately support their needs. McMinn et al. (2005) found that one third of their respondents made unsolicited comments about the lack of support from the church and 45% made similar comments about their denomination.

Without Support, Shepherds Suffer…and Quit

Lacking support, Christian leaders quit their callings. In a recently published review of published data, Hogue and Wenger (2005) found that as many as 40% of pastors leave parish ministry for good. Their primary reasons? Twenty-six percent leave

due to conflicts and feeling unsupported by the denomination; 21% because they were burned out, stressed and overworked (ibid).

Missing the signs of sickness?

Given the high levels of stress for ministry leaders and their families **and** the rarity of outside support and mentorship, families *that stay* in the ministry are at risk for missing the signs of serious problems that might destroy their ministries. Although the incidence of depression, anxiety, and loss of hope may be the most prevalent stress responses, more sinister responses lurk just beneath the surface. Meek et al. (2004) surveyed MDiv graduates from five evangelical seminaries asking respondents if they experienced sexual attraction to a parishioner. Some 35% skipped the question entirely suggesting to the researcher that they may be unaware of their sexual feelings. Of those who did acknowledge experiencing sexual attraction toward a congregant, most dealt with it by themselves rather than seek support from a colleague. If sexual feelings are either denied or buried, it does not mean sexual temptation vanishes. In fact, when www.pastors.com surveyed 1351 clergy in 2002, it found that 54% had viewed internet pornography during that previous year (as cited at http://www.blazinggrace.org/pornstatistics.htm). While only 6% of pastors leaving the parish do so because of sexual misconduct (Hoge, 2005), these minority cases represent a staggering spiritual and economic cost to the body of Christ.

An Ounce of Prevention: Intentional Pastoral Renewal and Study

Much of the research into clergy stress, health, and coping points to the need for pastor families and their organizations to intentionally seek ways to support the health of the shepherd. Intentional families and organizations seek balance between work and play,

continuing education and spiritual renewal. Further, they collaborate to define appropriate expectations and to maintain marital and family health before problems begin.

In order to provide opportunities for pastoral renewal, clergy and their families need safe and non-threatening settings where they can discuss a wide range of matters without raising questions or incurring stigma. To this end, we desire to see the formation of centers designed to provide restorative study and care to those in Christian service who either experience a crisis in ministry or seek to prevent one from occurring. The goal is to provide comfortable and confidential facilities and resources for rest, study, renewal and/or counseling for individuals or families at a reasonable rate for up to one month's duration. We further seek to educate churches and organizations in the best strategies to ensure the health of Christian leaders.

Individual and denominations do not yet adequately support efforts to provide spiritual and emotional renewal for ministry leaders and their families. Granted funds might support a pilot program where small cohorts of leaders and their families join together to develop and refine best strategies that will help sustain ministry families, increase their spiritual vitality, address areas of burn-out or trauma, encourage on-going collaboration among these families, and enable ministry leaders to shepherd their own flock in these same areas.

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