



## What It Takes to Thrive in Ministry

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When you see pastors leading the service and greeting the congregation on Sunday morning, you see only a tiny snapshot of what their jobs entail. If you were to write up the actual duties of the average church pastor, it would not make an attractive job posting by most standards. "WANTED: Person to teach, preach, and disciple others by offering amazing insights every week. Master's degree required, doctorate preferred. Will actually spend majority of time managing a business operated by volunteers, setting up systems, managing conflicts and politics of competing priorities, and creating and defending budgets. Volunteers will simultaneously be friends, congregants, counseling clients, critics, and the bosses who decide your career path and compensation. You'll work on the day others are renewed and be expected to work the other days 'normal' people are in the office."



Yet each year hundreds of people choose to attend seminary to become church pastors. And when they actually get started in ministry, many are shocked and surprised by what working in the church demands of them and their families. Bob Burns, dean of lifelong learning at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as a pastor and a researcher in vocational ministry, points to a typical day on the job as an example of what contributes to this disconnect.

"A pastor could have lunch with a businessperson who's dealing with an ethical issue, then spend the afternoon working on sermon preparation, which is interrupted by three phone calls requiring pastoral care. The pastor then goes from there to the hospital, counseling a family with someone in crisis or even dying, and spends the evening at a church board meeting defending the way the budget is being spent."

Pastors average more work hours per week than other managers and professionals, according to Jackson Carroll, professor emeritus at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, and a long-term clergy researcher. Most pastors will admit, when asked about their personal and professional lives, that serving God in a church often also means loneliness, lack of opportunities for ongoing professional and personal development, and external and internal pressure to overlook one's own health in the service of others. The stresses of the job will cause many to choose (or be forced) to step away from church ministry altogether.

Alarmed at statistics on pastoral burnout and forced exits, the Lilly Endowment invested \$84 million in the early 2000s into research projects on pastors. Donald Guthrie, at the time a dean at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, enlisted fellow seminary faculty members Burns and Tasha Chapman to develop the Pastors Summit project. In addition to the Lilly data, the group had concerns about pastors' sustainability from a basic health perspective. "The research on the lack of physical and emotional health in our pastors was rather shocking to us . . . how many pastors were on sick leave due to stress-related illnesses, and how many pastors were obese, or had heart-related illnesses, compared to the general population," says Chapman.

The Pastors Summit focused not on preventing burnout but on identifying the positive practices required to stay in the pastorate. Participants were selected using criteria including strong ministry expertise evidenced by fruitfulness and overall emotional health in ministry. The Summit included 73 pastors, representing 26 states, who met in small cohorts three times per year for two years, along with their spouses and occasional outside experts such as psychologists. Each Summit meeting was recorded and transcribed, resulting in 12,000 pages of material to be analyzed, which eventually became the book *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (IVP Praxis, 2013). The researchers found that five common themes emerged, areas in which pastors and future pastors should pursue growth to establish their ministries for the long haul: spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management.

A participant in the Pastors Summit summed up the challenge to pastors: "Most people in our church have a life that is like a stool with three legs. They've got their spiritual life, their professional life, and their family life. If one of these legs wobbles, they've got two others they can lean on. For us, those three things can merge into one leg. You're sitting on a one-legged stool, and it takes a lot more concentration and energy. It's a lot more exhausting." The one-legged stool analogy highlights how a pastor's spiritual life, family life, and identity as a human being in a professional role can all blur together. "That is unusual in most other professions and very hard on pastors as people," says Chapman. "And that's the big challenge. They think vocational ministry in general is going to be one way . . . having long quiet times, preaching and leading Bible studies . . . and the complexity and demandingness of it, the loneliness and the amount of expectations, are surprising."

And they don't always learn that in seminary. "Pre-professional ministry training usually focuses on knowing the right content and on developing skills to accomplish ministry tasks," says Guthrie. "As important as these are, they are usually not the reasons that people leave ministry. Rather, ministry-killing issues are matters of life skills, behavior patterns, and character." Chapman speaks to groups around the world on this topic, and she consistently hears three reasons why people leave church ministry: conflict, lack of resources, or flagrant sin (usually sexual in nature). She says attention to the five themes can not only help pastors avoid a ministry-ending crisis, but actually help them be healthier human beings as they serve in a complex and difficult job.

### Spiritual Formation

If pastors are going to stay in ministry for the long haul, they first need to be maturing as Christians, both personally and interpersonally. It may be surprising to realize that many pastors struggle in their personal walks with Christ. As one pastor at the Summit said, "Look, I may

be a pastor, but I'm an inch deep. My life is filled with incessant activity and little prayer. 'Contemplation' is foreign in my vocabulary and nonexistent in my life."

Pastors also told researchers that they struggle with worship because they are distracted during services at their own church. Several participants found that they could refresh themselves by finishing sermon prep on Saturday morning so they could attend a Saturday night worship service at a large church in the area, even if they just stayed for the music portion. Others found it helpful to take the bulletin home as a guide for private worship during the week.

A pattern of neglecting spiritual formation is often established in seminary. "The pastor who doesn't read the Bible devotionally was the seminarian who didn't ever read the Bible devotionally," says Guthrie. He challenges seminarians and those who aspire to seminary to not wait until they finish the educational process to form good habits. The time demands will not get easier when one moves into ministry, especially with the consumeristic approach many people bring to churches today. "The demands and expectations of well-meaning, goodhearted church folk are kind of outrageous," he says.

So how can congregations help? One way is to encourage or require pastors to take adequate days off. Participants in the Pastors Summit discussed planning for the equivalent of one Sabbath day and one day off for running errands. Participants were creative in how this worked, with one taking a half-day Sabbath from noon to four on Saturday, and another half-day on Sunday afternoon, and then taking Monday as his day off work.

The research also found that pastors—and seminarians, for that matter—need to schedule time for intentional reflection as a part of their spiritual formation and overall leadership. "Pastoral ministry tends to move from one thing to another, with very little opportunity for structured or unstructured reflection on what I've done, where I've been, where I'm going," says Burns. This concept of reflection appeared as a necessary element in all five themes that emerged from the research.

The issue that surprised Guthrie most in the Summit was how isolated all the pastors were. Participants were thriving ministers, yet many had few people with whom to share their lives. The authors suggest that this happens because pastors are always wisely calculating, consciously or unconsciously, whether people in the congregation can be trusted with a pastor's deeper concerns. The answer is often no. A pastor's wife in a cohort said, "I love the small group I'm involved in at my church. But I'm not about to go to the group and tell them, 'My husband's sick and tired of this church and wants to leave.' " She wasn't the only one who shared feelings like that. She was the norm, says Guthrie.

The Summit participants examined in depth the lack of deep friendships and accountability relationships that would help with continued spiritual growth. Unable to find those within the church walls, many pastors confide only in their spouse. "The spouse is a nuclear waste dumping site for all the really hard processing and conversation," says Chapman. "We encourage pastors to consider how to break that isolation and find other talking partners who understand their world. That requires peer groups, probably others in vocational ministry and most likely outside their church context or denominational ministry context," she says. Out of 77 Summit participants, only 3 reported "confidants" within their church or from among church ministry co-workers. "My short answer for seminarians about how to thrive in ministry is to build a team," says Guthrie. "Submit yourself to your team, receive from your team, and contribute to your team . . . and don't wait for a sign to appear or until you're in a crisis."

## Self-Care

The second theme that emerged from the Pastors Summit was self-care: prioritizing physical and emotional health. Burns and Chapman were troubled to learn that 33 percent of pastors in one denomination in a European country they visited were off work for stress-related health issues. "We think we can separate the spiritual aspect of our lives from the rest of our lives . . . that's bad theology, this idea that somehow I can always stay up late because I'm doing spiritual work, that somehow my body's going to put up with that," says Chapman.

In Acts 20:24, Paul said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." Self-care for pastors is about living in a way that prevents burnout and allows them to actually finish the race. Churches might consider the radical idea of providing gym memberships or discounts for pastors, similar to many secular companies that recognize how better physical health increases the productivity and longevity of employees. One Summit pastor said, "Over the last six months, I began running again. I found that when I am upset after a meeting or mad over offhanded criticism, and then I run, those feelings just seem to melt away." Another idea to help churches help pastors that emerged from the Summit: limit the number of nights a pastor can be in meetings at church.

The emphasis on self-care needs to start in seminary. "Seminarians should not shoot to get As," says Chapman. "There's probably a lack of basic self-care if they are trying to get As in all their courses." Seminarians who wish to be thriving pastors have a co-curricular responsibility to figure out what it means to be healthy in marriage, family, and self. "To have hobbies, to have interests outside of what I'm doing here," adds Burns. "To learn how to develop those so I'm healthier when I get out into the ministry with the demands that are being placed upon me."

Guthrie says that their book has received some criticism that promoting self-care in seminary encourages mediocre preparation. To this he responds, "We would say that some people actually do need to work on their course work, and learn the discipline of having something to say when they have the opportunity to say it. What we're saying about being healthy should not be used as a shield to cover being unprepared."

## Emotional and Cultural Intelligence

The third theme to emerge from the Pastors Summit was the importance of cultivating emotional and cultural intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to proactively manage one's emotions and to appropriately discern and respond to the emotions of others. The

authors were surprised to also identify a complementary theme of cultural intelligence: pastors need to recognize and adapt to cultural challenges and the cultural context in the background of their own lives and of others in their churches. One Summit pastor said, "When I was in seminary, I was taught how to preach and how to exegete the Scriptures. I wasn't taught how to exegete people . . . I didn't know that pastoring is dealing with people and their messiness."

Pastors in the Summit reported being out of touch with their own emotions and unaware of how those emotions are displayed in non-verbal cues. Summit participants found it very helpful to spend time examining how their family of origin forged and shaped the way they relate to other people. They also noted that daily prayer, worship, and journaling may help pastors develop greater emotional intelligence. The Summit found that cultural intelligence also helps pastors recognize their tendency to think that their own background and approach is the only right one.

A particular challenge for pastors is workaholicism. "They get tired of volunteers saying 'no' to their requests, so they'll take way too much on themselves," says Burns. "A wise pastor once said to me, 'I need to be willing to let things be done about 70 percent as well as I could do them myself and to be happy with that.' " Future pastors should also recognize that the job requires them to "wisely disappoint people." In the Gospels, one can read how Jesus often disappointed people by not meeting societal expectations or handling ministry in the way they expected.

A Summit pastor shared, "The stress of ministry has pushed me and my marriage away from the practices of emotional honesty, reflection, and dialogue. I am also very prone to blame my failures on my schedule, my wife, and my parishioners. I definitely can feel the difference when we take time to cultivate our marriage, when I participate at home, when I say 'no' to things that are not a priority, and when I contemplate and pray."

### Marriage and Family

To sustain the stresses that come with church ministry, pastors also need to focus on marriage and family; that is, spiritual and relational health in relationships with their spouse, children, and extended family. Initially, the Pastors Summit was going to focus one session around topics related to marriage and family, but it quickly became clear that spouses are integrally involved in pastors' ministries. One pastor shared at the Summit, "When my heart is broken, or when I'm angry, I don't go to the elders. I don't go to other pastors. I go to my real pastor, who is my spouse."

Pastors' spouses also struggle to find confidants in their own church. They have many friends, but not people they can speak to with no filter. "Those people are rarely found in the church where you are serving because of dual relationships, a technical term in the counseling profession," says Burns. "The pastoral life is constantly full of dual relationships, where the person you are counseling about the condition of his or her marriage one moment, in the next moment could be the person who is critiquing you on your annual review or setting your salary."

The stressors unique to a pastor's marriage and family are especially shocking for younger seminarians and younger pastors, says Chapman. "They come out of a culture that says 'I can do my thing vocationally, and my spouse can do their thing vocationally'. But the pastorate is going to involve your entire family, including your children, in ways you can't predict." A Summit participant recounted how, after a tense board meeting, an elder went home and vented to his wife, calling the pastor "an idiot," with their son in earshot. The next day, the elder's son got into a fistfight with the pastor's son at school after telling him his dad was "an idiot." Both were suspended.

Before they even begin their ministry, future pastors should consider identifying boundaries to protect the emotional health and safety of their family. Summit participants described developing a continuum of "need to know" in relationships that is unique for each pastor's family and spouse. Meeting with other experienced pastoral couples, or even a professional counselor, may be helpful to establish these boundaries. The Summit participants noted a particular need to assure pastors' children that ministry challenges are not their fault, and that God can provide for the problems their parents are facing.

### Leadership and Management

The fifth and final theme to emerge from the Pastors Summit was leadership and management: pastors must accept that ministry in a church requires them to lead and manage, even if they don't feel gifted for the work. "People go to seminary thinking that they will be preaching, teaching, training, and discipling. And all the studies show that at least half of the time, pastors are involved in leadership and management responsibilities, such as leading meetings, planning agendas, putting together budgets, program development, or developing and working with volunteers," says Burns.

The Summit research found that all participating pastors struggled with expectations of success. Burns says that pastors often need to accept that they may not pastor a large church and may instead serve in a smaller congregation. And they need wisdom to wisely disappoint the expectations of their congregants. In the book *Leadership on the Line* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), authors Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz wrote that "exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb." Pastors need to manage expectations of time and attention, friendship, and the pressure to produce star-caliber sermons each week like the "celebrity" pastors people listen to on podcasts or television.

In *Resilient Ministry*, the authors note, "Jesus might as well have also said, 'Where two or three are gathered together, there are politics.'" Ministry often requires negotiating between people with competing interests and different levels of authority. The book contains a lengthy discussion of power structures in the church, but one key takeaway is the suggestion that pastors develop "relationship capital." New pastors can be intentional about building relationships with key groups in the congregation to have "capital" that they can spend when they must make unpopular decisions.

Future pastors will also benefit from work on developing listening skills, speaking the truth, and handling conflict. In the Bible, conflict is

often used by God as a catalyst for growth. Successful Summit pastors saw conflict as part of their ministry and not an intrusion upon it.

Part of this management skill set is an understanding of how to handle emotions, both their own and those of others. “We practically say, ‘Welcome to seminary. We’re broken people, the counseling office is right there.’ What I mean is that we want them to experience counseling, and the process of working on their own brokenness and their own emotional health as seminarians, before they go out into ministry,” says Chapman. In the years since the Pastors Summit, Chapman said, she’s been intentional about increasing the family of origin work completed by seminarians.

People considering ministry can keep these themes in mind as they examine potential seminaries and graduate institutions. Burns identified a helpful question to ask in the search: “Is this a school that is going to treat me as a brain on a stick, or is this a place where they’re going to look at me as a whole person and think about helping my formation as a whole person and not just an intellectual or a theologian?” Careful consideration of co-curricular development offered during one’s training can help many avoid burnout and stay in ministry for the long haul.

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