



Understanding Clergy Burnout: A Guide for Spiritual Directors Working with Religious Leaders

Arthur Gross-Schaefer and Steve Jacobsen

Many spiritual leaders suffer from burnout, depression, and loneliness. Studies show that “the phenomenon of clergy burnout is pervasive, affecting veteran and new clergy alike, cutting across all religious movements” (Gross-Schaefer and Weiss, 25). Numerous careers cause professionals to feel overwhelmed by excessive hours and stress, but most careers do not demand that a person always be a role model for a community of people. Whether one is a rabbi, priest, minister, or *imam*, the religious leader’s life is continually subject to meticulous scrutiny by his or her congregation and the larger community.

While this article is primarily based on our personal experiences—as Jewish and Christian spiritual leaders—we have both observed twelve significant causes of and offer seven healthy responses to clergy burnout. As more and more religious leaders seek spiritual direction to help them better understand their complex role, it is critical that spiritual directors better appreciate some of the causes and responses to clergy burnout. Clergy who actively engage in spiritual direction are taking active steps to prevent burnout, which contributes not only to the wellness of individual clergy but also to the health of their congregations.

Twelve Common Causes of Burnout

1. Expectations: “Can’t you meet our every need?”

A religious leader can feel overworked and stressed out by the expectations of his or her congregation’s board of directors. Clergy in general would say that the expectations placed on them are often unreasonable or focused in areas that should not be the clergy’s primary responsibility. Tasks such as visiting the sick, shut-ins, and potential new members can become time consuming. Expectations for a religious leader to become a major community leader or a dynamic sermonizer can become excessive. Hopes for growth in membership or contributions may not materialize. Faced with a growing distance between

the original expectations of the board and what is actually possible, clergy can become discouraged and resentful.

2. Role Conflict: “Be a strong moral leader but don’t offend anyone, because if people leave it will hurt the budget.”

Often people are drawn into a religious vocation because of a high sense of moral calling and a genuine desire to serve people. A conflict between serving the “needs” of the community and the cleric’s own social conscience can create a complex, seemingly insoluble situation. In addition, because of fiscal realities, many clerics live with pressure to increase revenue. For example, a common expectation of many clergy is to attract new members into the congregation. In order to do this, the leader is strongly encouraged to avoid doing anything controversial in public for fear of losing members or financial support. The concern for keeping congregants for financial reasons creates an unbalanced relationship between clergy and congregation. When clergy feel pressured to make decisions purely for business reasons or for the purpose of keeping members at the expense of their values, they may experience premature burnout and work-related stress.

3. Role Conflict: “Promote personal balance for others but work relentlessly yourself!”

It has been said, “Doctors are people who spend eighteen hours a day telling other people to slow down.” Clergy often experience a similar conflict between what their job requires of them and the call to model a balanced life. Albert Borgmann, a contemporary philosopher concerned with the effect of technology on our day-to-day lives, calls our culture one of “hyperactivity” (13). A spiritual leader who is always busy can be a source of pride for the congregation and, given our culture’s values, oneself. However, this way of thinking and living—residually operative in the minds of many clergy and congregants—can become arduous for clergy who put themselves (and their families) last and their congregations first.



"Tangata Wotu" — Megan Wagner



4. The Challenges of Multitasking: "Am I the last of a dying breed?"

Few professions implicitly require skills in as many disparate areas as the clergy profession. Clergypersons are often expected, both by themselves and by their communities, to be a great one-on-one counselor, a skilled presence in large public gatherings, an erudite scholar, an innovative teacher, a disciplined contemplative, a wise group leader, an astute financial manager, an effective fund-raiser, a competent supervisor of staff and volunteers, a prophetic voice in world affairs, a facility manager who knows how to light the pilot light in every heater—and someone who effortlessly leads a model personal and family life. If the multitasking cleric does not perform all functions effectively, he or she will often feel incompetent and ineffective while congregations become disappointed.

5. Conflict Between Vision and Reality: "It sounds as if you've become disillusioned."

Clergy often enter their vocation with a high sense of personal calling and moral vision. After time passes, a gap develops between what the cleric hoped to accomplish and what he or she actually accomplishes. Negative thoughts of doubt and disappointment can create feelings of depression and disillusionment, and the gap between the original vision and the congregational realities widens over time.

6. Public and Private Boundaries: "Why are they stealing glances at my shopping cart?"

A clergyperson's personal and family life is often a topic for public examination. His or her children's behavior is seen differently—either they are expected to have better behavior than the average child, or, if they are misbehaving, the behavior is attributed to the burdensome fate of being a "preacher's kid." People have often implicit expectations of what a clergyperson's spouse should be doing or saying. Pastoral daydreaming includes wondering, What would life be like if I were just a normal person?

7. Financial Pressures: "Why can't we take exciting vacations like all our friends?"

The spiritual life does, indeed, include a strong call not to get caught up in conspicuous consumption or material

achievement, but a simple comparison of the lifestyle of most North American clerics with those of developing countries reveals, of course, that we are living affluent lives. Nevertheless, the desire to provide for one's family and to provide opportunities for one's children can come again and again into conflict with the financial limitations of the clergy profession.

8. Living in a Different "Time Zone": "Why can't we ever go anywhere on weekends?"

Many people are free to use weekends and holidays for family-centered activities, time away for couples, recreational opportunities, or visiting friends or relatives. Not so for most clergy. Weekends and holidays are usually times of concentrated work. While there can be benefits to having family life rooted in the religious practices of a community, there is also a lack of freedom that, year after year, can take its toll.

9. The Delicacies of Leadership: "But I can't just tell that person he's fired."

Unlike a lawyer, businessperson, therapist, or doctor, who can refuse to take a patient or a client, clergy generally don't have the ability to "drop" a congregant. Those "difficult" congregants are often only a small group but take up a significant amount of time and can cause seemingly gigantic problems and pressures for the religious leader.

10. Physical Health, Stress, and Depression: "You seem tired."

Clergy are suffering from declining physical health. According to Wells, "In about every Christian denomination today, churches across North America have one thing in common: a pastorate whose health is fast becoming cause for concern." The typical Lutheran pastor, for example, works sixty to seventy hours a week in a sedentary job. He or she does not engage in physical exercise and has symptoms of depression and high blood pressure due to considerable work-related stress. A study published in 1993 found that Protestant clergy have the highest amount of work-related stress and the next-to-lowest amount of personal resources to cope with their stress. Halaas contends that "today's clergy have greater demands and less support, both physical and emotional, from staff and volunteers."



11. An Ambiguous Role in a Changing Society: “What is it you do, anyway?”

Since the 1960s, North American society has become increasingly secular and pluralistic. As Robert D. Putnam describes in the comprehensive sociological study *Bowling Alone*, North Americans are increasingly individualistic, privatistic, and unwilling to support volunteer organizations. As a result, it can be difficult for many people to know what role, if any, clergy play in everyday life. The result can be a clergyperson's feeling displaced and discouraged. As one pastor said, “I feel like I'm working for the railroad in an era of jet travel.”

12. The Yardstick of Success: “So, how is it going? Is the congregation growing?”

When congregation membership is not “up,” people can instantly read that as a sign that the cleric must be failing in some way. In a culture that honors growth more than faithfulness, mobility more than fidelity, and simple numbers over stories of quiet service, life is often tough for clergy. High-stakes assessment, based on numbers alone, cannot tell the true story of a congregation's success or achievement.

Seven Healthy Responses to Dealing with Clergy Burnout

Having briefly described twelve potential causes for clergy burnout, we turn now to offering seven possible responses for clerics and the spiritual directors, board of directors, and congregations who work with them.

1. Allowing Barns to Burn Down: Developing honest expectations for oneself and one's congregation.

Many of the causes for burnout and discouragement lie within the psyche of the cleric and are often based on beliefs and assumptions that over time prove to be illusory and cause disillusionment. Parker Palmer offers an insight into the experience of disillusionment (26-27): when we are disillusioned, we are sad, defeated, empty, and perhaps feeling betrayed; something we believed or trusted in has been taken away. Palmer notes, however, that the word suggests that what we have lost is an *illusion*; we believed in something we thought was real, but it was not real at all. Rather than mourn the loss of illusion, we might want to consider

accepting the “disillusionment” with gratitude—after all, we've realized we trusted something that turned out to be more mirage than reality. In *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck decided to define *mental health* as “dedication to reality,” which entails a constant reorientation based on experiences. As the old Zen saying has it: “Barn burned down—now I can see the moon.” Our “barns” of innocence and ambition sometimes burn down, and we mourn all the accomplishments and personal meaning we were going to store in them—but now we can see a reality beyond the barn that before was hidden.

Practical steps involved in accepting reality include the common array of choices useful in self-awareness: self-reflection through journaling, talking with colleagues or mentors, and finding therapists or spiritual directors who can facilitate our self-discovery.

While the development of insight into who we are is crucial, so is developing insight into our chosen or experienced situations. The call here is to develop a basic understanding of the people and group dynamics with which we are dealing. We can begin to build images and working models of how we interact in our profession and other situations based on newer, more accurate insights. For instance, the organizational analyst Gareth Morgan, in his book *Images of Organization*, identifies eight different metaphors for analyzing organizations. We can see them as machines (“This place runs like clockwork”), organisms (“This place is dying”), and so on. Of the eight metaphors, one of the most useful for congregational life is the metaphor of “psychic prisons.” All of us bring into our interactions our own “psychic” dramas that we are living out, and we invariably cast other people into roles in that drama. To some congregants, we will be the authority figures, to others the granddaughters they never had, to others the ideal parents they long for. Congregations are rich with psychic dramas involving people's hopes, fears, prejudices, and ambitions—we play all kinds of bewildering roles without even knowing it. Like transference and countertransference in personal counseling, these dynamics cannot be simply understood, addressed, or eliminated. People and congregations are complex! We can choose to see them as the cause of our despair and burnout, or we can choose to see them in all their complexity—a mixture, like ourselves, of virtues, hopes,



and dreams, as well as self-interests, anxieties, and hidden motivations. Building personal and communal awareness can be a key to avoid getting trapped in situations that lead to burnout and despair.

A new perspective of congregants is not an invitation to cynicism. The writer who coined the term *servant leadership*, Robert Greenleaf, once noted that a key to being a leader is to not expect *anyone* to be perfect. If people were "perfect," leadership would be easy. Because people are not, it becomes a noble art and practice. Our spiritual traditions encourage us to blend a reverence for each other with honesty: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We need the "wisdom" of realistic expectation to blend with the "innocence" of our calling. Blending wisdom and innocence can lead us to seek models for our working life blessed by both love and honesty.

We therefore resolve to do the patient and continuous work of identifying our own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of the individuals we serve and the congregation as a whole. We continuously develop and rework realistic models of the congregation and situations we are facing. If we desire numerical and financial growth, it is well worth the time to keep asking, "What is our actual fiscal situation? How feasible is conspicuous growth, given the many factors involved? Is it truly possible, or are we just denying an inevitable decline? If growth is possible, what am I going to have to give up that I enjoy doing in favor of the necessary tasks? Or, if I want to promote social justice in the congregation, what kind of projects are most likely to *truly* connect with people's values, time, and aspirations (rather than choosing my own personal projects and passions)? Am I ready for the steady, supportive work that will be needed to not only inspire but also educate people?"

We must become more realistic about what we can and cannot do. Our shopping cart will invariably be an object of curiosity for people who need to see us as moral exemplars. We will often make less income than our congregants. Like it or not, we work on weekends. Sometimes we face the daunting task of dismissing an employee. In all these occasions, seeing our situations as rich sources for personal insight and professional wisdom can help us move from burnout to a more realistic, accurate view of our self, our congregation, and our cultural setting. We

let the barns of our illusions burn down that we might see the moon that has been hidden behind them.

2. Strategic Modeling for Clergy: Self-assessment wellness audit

While one path away from burnout is an adjustment of our own expectations and assumptions, another is the use of simple tools that can help clarify the situations we find ourselves in and the choices available to us. Using tools can be analogous to going to a physician, who is able to examine our vital signs and blood tests and say, "Aha—here's what seems to be the problem, and here's what we can do."

The "self-assessment wellness audit," based on a business time-management model, is designed to help the spiritual leader better understand those areas he or she wishes to explore and how to prioritize activities. The audit has been used by clergy as a self-assessment tool and takes around twenty minutes to complete.

Following are some sample questions from the self-assessment wellness audit.¹

Personal Skills

To what extent do you possess sermon skills?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent do you possess fund-raising skills?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

Survival Skills

To what extent do you possess conflict resolution skills?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent do you possess techniques to deal with anger?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

Expectations

To what extent have you achieved your financial goals?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent have you met the expectations of your community members?
Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently



Appreciation, Colleagues, Communication

To what extent are there mechanisms in place to effectively clarify and deal with rumors about you?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent are you treated with respect?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

Mirroring of Values

To what extent do your values mirror those of your community?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent does the board of directors take time, on a regular basis, to determine if they like what their community is becoming?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

Support Environment

Does your community support time for family and individual pursuits?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

To what extent are issues of burnout, frustration, and anger appropriately dealt with in your community?
 Insufficiently 1 2 3 4 5 Sufficiently

When the audit is completed, the cleric will have gone through a process of prioritizing activities, which will help the religious leader to be more focused and less anxious. Ideally, buddy and affirmation systems are available to provide critical support in the process of completing a wellness audit.

3. The Institutional Values Audit: A valuable tool for lay and professional leadership

Each religious community has its own set of ethics and values based on its past and present constituency. The institutional values audit, adaptable for any religious institution, is used to help determine the values of the congregation so a clergyperson can better understand the culture in which he or she is working and its impact on what he or she is becoming. In Walton's book, *The Moral Manager*, the author makes the following conclusions about secular companies, which are

applicable to religious communities:

1. Few organizations step back often enough to assess the character of their workplace.
2. If such an assessment were properly and objectively conducted, it could be very revealing of the organization's character.
3. An assessment of an organization's workplace character is probably the most serious exercise an organization will ever perform.

An institutional values audit should be viewed as the congregation's wellness tool (Gross-Schaefer and Zaller). The creation of such an audit develops a system of awareness while simultaneously acting as a self-regulating tool. This audit raises clergy, staff, and congregants' awareness of unethical behavior, thereby heightening ethical actions and preventing corruption within the institution. Using the audit can become a very powerful force for change. Key categories that must be included in an institutional values audit are social responsibility, open communication, treatment of employees, confidentiality, respect of employees, community values, business relationships, leadership by example, human investment, and ecology.

The following are sample questions from a model institutional values audit for religious institutions, which attempt to incorporate the aforementioned key categories.²

Community Advocacy: An Ardent Advocate for Values in the Community

1. Does the religious institution take public stands and contribute its resources to public issues?
2. Is the religious institution known as a leader in issues of social concern?

Open Communication: Keep Members Informed Honestly about All Relevant Matters

1. Are decisions made in an open and honest manner with an opportunity for input from all relevant sources?
2. Does the congregation membership feel that they have free and open access to the religious institution's leadership?



Fair Treatment for All Members: Safeguard the Ability to Exercise Independent Judgment on All Matters by Avoiding Undue Influence and Conflicts of Interest

1. Do all members feel that they have equal access to the professional and support staff?
2. Does the professional staff provide services equally to all members regardless of their financial contributions to the religious institution?

Confidentiality and Respect for All Members: Avoiding Gossip and Cliques, and Maintaining Confidentiality

1. Is private information about members (e.g., emotional stability, marriage, and financial status) kept confidential and used appropriately?
2. Does the religious institution leadership actively avoid engaging in gossip?

Human Investment: The Provision for the Physical, Psychological, and Economic Welfare of Present, Potential, and Former (Retired) Employees

1. Does the religious institution provide fair benefits (e.g., pension, social security, medical) for all of its employees?
2. Does the religious institution have an employee handbook that clearly sets forth its policies for vacation, sick days, family leave, disability, and so forth?
3. Does the religious institution handle contract negotiations in a timely and ethical manner?

Ecology: Efforts to Minimize the Negative Impact of Its Operations on the Natural Environment

1. Has the religious institution taken sufficient steps to conserve natural resources?
2. Does the religious institution attempt to support energy conservation and recycling activities?

Ethics: The Intentional Development of an Environment That Supports the Use of Ethics in Making Decisions and Implementing Policies

1. How seriously does the religious institution consider ethical issues when making decisions?
2. If the day-to-day activities of the religious institution were to be made public, would most members be proud of their association?

Creating and completing both a wellness audit and an ethics audit is time well spent on improving the cleric's self-awareness as well as the religious organization's culture. Using these tools as aids for measuring and understanding dissonance between a person's values and his or her actual activities can help curb frustration and dissatisfaction while ultimately cultivating a healthier religious institution.

4. Moving from an Employee Relationship to One Based on a Mutual Covenant of Respect and Mission

Negotiating an employment contract can be an opportunity for both clergy and congregation to deal with the very real legal and financial issues of the relationship and to also set forth the very important spiritual-religious nature of the relationship. The approach one takes during the pre-negotiation and negotiation period, which requires self-examination of one's feelings and motivations, will influence not only the tone and substance of the negotiations but also the future relationship between the religious leader and the congregation. Using terms such as *covenant* rather than *contract* help to make the mental shift that can actually affect how and what ends up in the agreement. Here is an example of a covenant (Gross-Schaefer and Gan):

Ethical Covenant between Congregation _____ and _____

We agree to work together toward these goals:

- ✦ To be understanding and supportive of each other's needs: emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and financial.
- ✦ To respect and recognize each other as unique creations that need understanding, encouragement, and space for growth and change.
- ✦ To strive for the fulfillment of the needs of each other with full knowledge that these needs may, at some time, be in conflict one with the other.
- ✦ To urge each other toward the recognition and fulfillment of the promise that is within each of us, to the end that we might together make our lives purposeful and together become coworkers with God in the process of creating and repairing the world.
- ✦ To work for the perpetuation of our people and religion in our community.



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A Suggested Strategy for Values-Based Decision Making

Define the problem carefully and be certain that all of the pertinent information has been gathered. Too often we act without taking the time to obtain necessary information.

1. List all the parties that you believe may be affected by the decision (stakeholders).³

2. List all the personal and work-related values involved in the decision.⁴ These values may include the following:

- ◆ Honesty (truth telling, candidness, openness)
- ◆ Integrity (acting on convictions, courage, advocacy, leadership by example)
- ◆ Promise keeping (fulfilling the spirit of commitments)
- ◆ Fidelity (loyalty, confidentiality)
- ◆ Fairness (justice, equal treatment, diversity, independence)
- ◆ Caring (compassion, kindness)
- ◆ Respect (human dignity, uniqueness)
- ◆ Citizenship (respect for law, societal consciousness)
- ◆ Excellence (quality of work)
- ◆ Accountability (responsibility, independence)

3. List all the possible alternatives of what you can or cannot do. Often we believe that we have only a limited number of options when there are several others that may resolve the situation in a way that produces either the greater good or the least harm.⁵

4. Choose and prioritize.

A. Of all the parties you listed above, select the one that you believe is most important for purposes of making this decision.

B. Of all the values you listed above, select the one you believe is most important for purposes of making this decision.

C. Of all the options you listed above, select the one you believe will cause the greatest good or least harm.

5. Make a decision based on the above priorities.

6. Devise a strategy that will effectively implement your decision.

It is critical to note that the list of values above is solely for example and that each individual or institution must create its own list of core values. For some communities, a core value may include reflecting on what Jesus would do or how one is obligated to repair the world or to act as a messenger of God. This is a highly effective tool to help find consensus as a way to avoid or reduce conflicts. It is a good tool for a religious leader to use with a committee or board of directors to help the group move to a place of resolution.



7. Changing the Situation

Often the causes of burnout can be addressed while remaining in a particular position and congregation. However, sometimes the cure is to change one's position. Many times, of course, change involves a move to a new congregation. Lessons learned in the original situation can be applied skillfully in the new one. A sense of new beginning can be a great fountainhead for hope. As is often said, "It was time to move on."

Another option is to change one's area of specialization. Someone who has been a "generalist" can find renewal by working more with the sick, with youth, or with other demographic groups. Someone who has had a focused job can find stimulation and new life by becoming a "generalist." Some clergy have moved from large congregations to much smaller pulpits or to college ministries.

One final option is to consider leaving the pulpit or the profession altogether. Some have chosen to go into academia, non-profits, or the business world. Some have left the profession to become therapists, lawyers, and businesspeople. Leaving a clerical position and changing jobs can mean a new phase in a lifetime of service and faithfulness rather than the end of such a life. More and more spiritual traditions are recognizing that great spiritual work is done not only by clerics but also by laity acting with faith in public and private roles. If we are meant for something else, burnout can be the cry for positive change rather than just the failure of our situation.

Leaving a religious vocation may, on occasion, involve a crisis of faith in God and in ourselves. It is important to separate feelings of emptiness, despair, and stress arising from the circumstances of our profession from our living faith. Continual communication with our own spiritual directors can help us keep perspective.

Holstein believes that when one is in the process of being reinvented, it is important to experiment and test oneself within the new area of change versus spending time in self-reflection and self-assessment. Holstein contends that "only actionable information comes from experimenting and interacting with people in that area you're exploring."

Conclusion

It is critical for religious leaders to develop a healthy balance of selflessness, self-awareness, and self-care in their work. They must cultivate a practical and soulful skill of knowing when to say yes or no and what to expect from themselves and their congregations. They also must be able to delegate responsibilities to others in order to meet their communities' goals. They have to help their

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leadership or board of directors understand values and create and implement reasonable covenants of expectations and performance. A spiritual leader cannot be "all things to all people," and that has to be understood by all parties.

The cleric's health is an issue of deep concern to all religious communities. The mental, emotional, physical, and psychological health of one's spiritual leader should be a primary concern. If a community's spiritual leader is not seeking proper balance, how can he or she lead that community in the spiritual direction? When *imams*, pastors, or rabbis are engaged in an ongoing journey of development and maturation, they are not only preventing their own burnout, but also serving as personal models of how to live faithfully in a perpetually changing culture and world. Spiritual direction and other tools are critical factors for increasing healthy ministries and healthy clergy. ■

Notes

1. Parts of the audit—focusing on prioritizing, goal setting, activity development, buddy system, and affirmations—have been omitted but may be obtained by contacting Arthur Gross-Schaefer at agross@lmu.edu.
2. Adapted from Gross-Schaefer, *Ethics Audit*. (For a copy of the model audit for a religious institution, please contact Arthur Gross-Schaefer at agross@lmu.edu.)
3. This part of the decision-making model is based on stakeholder analysis—responsible ethical decisions involve considerations of the impact of the decision on the network of persons who have a stake in the decision. Accordingly, a decision that does not take into account the way in which it may affect others is not ethical, regardless of its actual consequences.
4. This part of the decision-making model is based on absolute values—this theory believes that there are certain ethical principles that are universal and that impose an absolute duty on a person. Immanuel Kant referred to such duties as *categorical imperatives* because they allow for no exception.
5. This part of the decision-making model is based on utilitarianism—this theory requires the ethical person to evaluate the likely consequences of contemplated conduct and weigh the good the act may

produce against the harm it may cause. Simplified: "the greatest good for the greatest number."

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