

Building Vibrant Ecologies of Pastoral Wellbeing

Matt Bloom

In his seminal 2006 book on pastoral leadership, Jack Carroll describes the work of clergy this way:

Being a pastor is a tough, demanding job, one that is not always very well understood or appreciated. Pastoral work is more complex than that which transpires in the hour or so a week that many lay people see the pastor in action as she or he leads worship and preaches. What happens during this time is surely of central importance to clergy and their parishioners, but it is not the only important thing clergy do. . . . [Moreover,] it is a job in flux. . . . It is made increasingly difficult by rapid changes in the pastor's work environment, including the broader culture in which pastoral work is done.

During several recent presentations, people have asked me if, after more than a decade of studying clergy, I am more hopeful or more worried about the state of clergy wellbeing. The answer is, I am both. First, why I am worried. However tough things were in 2006, they are getting more difficult for many clergy. The pandemic seems to have exacerbated many of the legacy issues that undermine clergy wellbeing: theological schisms between pastors and local church members, clergy isolation, work-life ten-

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sions, shrinking local church resources, and the invidious prejudice against female clergy and pastors of color do not seem to have abated at all.

Things are getting more difficult for local churches, seminaries, and denominations as well. A variety of powerful forces are at work: the lingering effects of the pandemic on social and economic conditions, shrinking church membership, intra-denominational disagreements, intra-church skirmishes over political issues, declining seminary enrollments. Even big grant-funded initiatives are not yet producing insights that can be widely useful. There are, of course, some bright spots, but the pandemic seems to have accelerated and exacerbated the conditions that make clergy wellbeing so difficult.

Now, why I am hopeful. Times like these, when so much seems dismal and uncertain, are the very times that can inspire us to be innovative and resourceful in ways that, in less chaotic and more comfortable times, we overlook. If ever we needed strong communities of faith, this is such a time. And so, if ever there was a time in which clergy wellbeing mattered, now is such a time.

After nearly two decades of research, we know a great deal about the things that clergy can do to support their own flourishing. And while self-care remains important for clergy wellbeing, we know that self-care alone is insufficient to ensure flourishing pastors. This is because there are ecologies of wellbeing that pastors, and all of us, are part of. Our individual wellbeing is shaped in profound ways by the important people, groups, and institutions that are part of our lives. The ecosystem of wellbeing that impacts clergy includes the local churches they serve, the seminaries that formed and educated them, and the denominational cultures and structures that govern their ministry lives.

I have thought about what I would want to tell each member of this pastoral ecosystem, and this reflection article is my letter of sorts to the members of this ecosystem. And because funders have an immense impact on what each of these other ecosystem members do, I include some thoughts about how they can contribute to strengthening pastoral wellbeing.

WHAT CAN CLERGY DO?

Take your wellbeing seriously. This may sound cliché, but it is also very true that engaging in fruitful ministry requires that you are flourishing. Our research confirms what many people have intuited, that flourishing pastors are a necessary prerequisite for flourishing ministries. And yet research also indicates that pastors tend to be more unhealthy than other adults. Research by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative indicates that there are a lot of unhealthy pastors, and we know for sure that unhealthy pastors cannot lead long-term, vibrant ministries. So, please, take care of yourself!

I know that you need help, support, and care from the other members of your ecosystem. But the one thing you have direct control over is your own self-care. We have found that effective self-care addresses four essential elements, what we call the four steps for flourishing.

Step Back

From time to time, step back from the flow of life and ministry to consider the state of your wellbeing. The key is to begin with both a holistic understanding of your wellbeing and a candid assessment of your wellbeing needs and goals. Our simple four-dimensional model is one tool you can use to step back (see www.workwellresearch.org for more information on our free WorkWell app), but almost any framework that has been well developed will work. Some pension funds offer their own wellbeing assessments, and those are often good or at least good enough.

Our model divides wellbeing into four parts that are tightly interconnected. Daily wellbeing is the quality of your daily life experiences and is the dimension that captures stress. Resilience is your capacity to deal well with the ups and downs of daily life and your capacity to adapt and grow. Authenticity captures how you feel about yourself, which includes self-worth, self-confidence, and the strength of your pastoral identity. And thriving includes the quality of social support you experience and the strength of meaning and purpose you have for your ministry work and life. Even with this brief description, you can be much more specific about where you are doing well and where improvement is needed.

Any journey to flourishing begins with knowing where you are now and where you want to go, so undertaking a thorough, candid assessment is the place to start.

Step Easy

Another key insight from research is that no matter where you are in your journey toward flourishing, there is a way forward. You do not need to make big changes. In fact, *don't* make big changes because unless you make exactly the right big change, the negative repercussions will almost certainly outweigh the benefits. Effective wellbeing practices can take as little as ten minutes. And many practices can fit neatly into even the busiest schedules. A short walk in nature. A good night's sleep. Time with people who love you. Listening to inspirational music. Contemplative prayer. Engaging in your favorite hobby. Exercising. Savoring a favorite food. Reading an uplifting book. A daily devotional. These are just a few examples, and there are many more, so you can feel free to search out practices that will work well for you.

Once again, our WorkWell app provides a large and growing library of practices. But you can also ask your friends and family about theirs or glean some from your mentors and trusted advisors. The point is, find something that you think will boost your wellbeing and give it a try. The key is to *practice*, just do something *and do it regularly*.

Step Together

We are social beings, and as I have emphasized, our wellbeing is shaped in significant ways by the people we interact with most often. One key relationship for pastors is a good friend who is in ministry. No one can understand and support you as a pastor the way another pastor can. Commiserating can be a powerful antidote to ministry stresses and strains and celebrating ministry joys can be a huge boost to wellbeing. Even more, other pastors can help you see more deeply your ministry strengths. They can offer relevant insights into dealing with both the highs and lows of ministry work. It is worth the effort to find and build such friendships. We consistently find that many of the best pastor friendships happen across denominational lines, so consider looking outside your home organization to find good colleagues. One of my favorite examples is a group that included three Roman Catholic priests, each from a different order, and three female pastors, each from a different denomination. Many of these cross-denominational friendships begin among pastors in the same community, so coffee or lunch with another local pastor could be the start of something wonderful.

Another key part of stepping together is positive relationships with people outside of ministry work, people who know you as you, not just as Pastor You. Family is often a wonderful place for this kind of care and concern, and if this is true for you, consider partnering with family members to help each other flourish. But pastors find this kind of support in a variety of places, including affinity groups (e.g., book club, running group, buddies you watch sports with) and more intentional fellowships. People who know and love you beyond your pastoral role are an essential wellbeing resource.

And finally, whenever possible, find one good friend among the members of your church. There are many historical admonitions about the dangers of friendships with congregants, and I have read or heard many of them. And while there are nuggets of truth in some of these, they go too far when they forbid *any and all* friendships with congregants. Sure, many of us can tell stories about doomed relationships between pastors and lay members. And, of course, there are boundaries to be careful about, as there are boundaries in all relationships. But, more than a decade of research provides strong and compelling scientific evidence that pastors can form appropriate, fruitful relationships with members of their church. Furthermore, in our studies of more than 10,000 pastors, we have found that one of the most important determinants of flourishing is feeling that someone in your church loves and cares for *you*. We also have stories from hundreds of pastors about the positive friendships they have had with members of their church. Our data show conclusively that positive, caring relationships with members of your congregation are a boon to both your wellbeing and theirs. Our data also show conclusively that fruitful friendships between pastors and lay members are not only possible but are much more common than failed friendships.

Step Faithfully

Study after study shows that people who have a positive religious orientation also have the highest wellbeing. Positive religiosity includes things like trusting God for guidance, seeking the Spirit for inspiration, and leaning on the love of Jesus. Consider the positive ways you can bring your religious understandings to your wellbeing. What beliefs reassure and console you? What deep truths are the solid ground you can stand on when you face difficulties? What rituals or practices strengthen your connection to God's

love? Develop and use these because they are among your greatest wellbeing resources.

Consider linking stepping together and stepping faithfully by working with lay leaders to build a nourishing ecology of wellbeing within your church. We have developed a resource, available for free on our website, that church leadership teams can use to work together to ensure that all leaders flourish. This resource also provides a blueprint you can follow to imagine ways to expand these efforts to include your entire church.

I wish I could say with assurance that your local church and denomination are there for you, but I know for sure that *you* can be there for you. So, what step can you take today?

WHAT CAN LOCAL CHURCHES DO?

Members of local churches, you are the hope of the world when it comes to clergy wellbeing. If I stretch the ecosystem metaphor a bit more, local churches form the local habitat pastors live and work in. You, local church members, create powerful conditions that either foster or impede the wellbeing of your pastors. As such, there is so much you can do to help your pastor flourish, and most of these things are simple, small acts of care and concern. Among the ways you can help create ecosystems of wellbeing for your pastor and your church, the four that follow stand out as opportunities for immediate action.

Show You Care

Among the most helpful things you can do is simply show you care about your pastor, as a person and as your pastor. It turns out that pastors are people too, like us in all the ways that make us human beings. Like you, they appreciate words of gratitude, gestures of kindness, small acts of caring (and big ones too), reassuring comments, and expressions of concern. Your smallest gestures matter, so just as a small word of kindness can boost your pastor's wellbeing, a small criticism can undermine it.

One really powerful way to show you care is to affirm your pastor's ministry gifts and graces. Finding ways to be specific with your pastor about how she is creating fruitful ministry will be a major boost to your pastor's wellbeing. Too often, all pastors hear from congregants is where they are falling short or failing. Of course, constructive criticism may be

warranted in some situations, but even that can be delivered in respectful ways. Even more so, researchers consistently find that the best way to help someone grow is to first affirm their strengths. With a positive foundation of self-confidence, people are much more open to addressing opportunities for improvement.

Step In

It can be very difficult for pastors to address the mistreatment they receive from church members. There are many reasons, and most of them have nothing to do with the fact that a pastor's skin is too thin. Hurtful behaviors hurt, regardless of how strong a person is. So, find ways to help pastors deal with mistreatment. If you witness another member being unkind, at least give your pastor a little bit more love, but also consider taking your concerns to the perpetrator. Matthew 18:15–16 offers sage counsel for us about how we can appropriately intervene.

Share Ministry Work

Several years ago, a researcher did a rigorous analysis of the work local pastors do and concluded by saying that it was almost inconceivable that any one person could do all of it. So, pitch in whenever you can. One of the best ways I have seen this done was leaders of a small church who asked the pastor to list five ministry activities he felt very confident he could do and five that he needed help with. Each of those leaders made the same list of five ministry activities they could help with and five they were ill equipped to do. Their goal was to create a safe environment for everyone to be candid, including the pastor. Together, the pastor and lay leaders developed an entire system of ministry support. Not only did they find ways to get more ministry work done at a higher level of effectiveness, but that activity created better, more positive bonds between the pastor and lay leaders.

Create Ministry Breaks for Your Pastor

It is terribly difficult for many solo pastors to find a way to take time off from ministry work. Going away is just the start. They need to be able to disconnect from ministry for a period of time so they can rest and rejuvenate. Time away means that pastors have no responsibilities other than responding to a true emergency. Pastors need to know that competent people are tending to ministry activities and church needs. Gather with other church

members and create real opportunities for your pastor to take restorative breaks from regular ministry work.

You are just one member, but one member who truly cares can make a world of difference for a pastor. Genuine, heartfelt acts of support are almost always beneficial, so be encouraged to try one new thing to show your pastor that you care. And if you can join together with a group of like-minded members, the impact you can have on the wellbeing of your pastor and your church can create a ministry habitat that will support vibrant, flourishing ministry well into the future.

WHAT CAN DENOMINATIONS DO?

If local churches are the hope of the world for clergy wellbeing, denominations are world-makers for pastors. There is a lot that denominations can do to support pastors. But denominations are usually very slow to change, and often it is at the judicatory level where there are the greatest opportunities for strengthening ecosystems of wellbeing. Three factors stand out as having the greatest potential impact.

Stand with Pastors

The incredible and persistent loss in church attendance and membership is a concern and grief for many of us. Stopping what appears to be a mass and growing exodus is, of course, a priority for denominations. The result is often increased pressure to stop the exits, grow churches, be relevant to contemporary ministry needs, create vibrant ministries, and the like. In addition, judicatory and denominational leaders are almost always as overworked as are local church pastors. The combined effect of these two forces is that many pastors do not receive the care and support they need from their denomination. They feel “left to survive alone on a hostile island,” as one pastor described his experience leading a dysfunctional church. More than half of the pastors we survey or interview report that they do not receive the denominational support they need. And most of these pastors say they could not count on the help and support of their denomination if they faced a serious disagreement with their local church. “It is a lot easier to fire one pastor than fire the members of a church,” as one very experienced pastor told us. Sure, there are some people who are not equipped for local church ministry, but many so-called poorly performing pastors just need

a little help. They need to be reminded that they can be effective pastors. They need support in developing the skills and abilities required for new ministry needs. And they need to know that their denomination “has their back,” that leaders believe in them and are there to stand by and with them through the joys and sorrows of ministry work.

Resource Pastors in Precarious Ministries

One of the first pastors I interviewed was a young black woman in her first appointment, a small rural church in the Midwest. She was the youngest person in her church and the only person of color in her church. She was also the only person of color in her town and in her county. We met during her third year at that church, and, as she reported, things were getting better. The first two years had clearly taxed her wellbeing greatly. She admitted that there were still things she did not fully understand about the local culture, such as the central role that hunting played in the lives of her congregants. And, there were things her congregation did not understand about her, including why always offering chicken and watermelon in dinner invitations to her was off-putting. And, unfortunately, at times there was outright prejudice from the local church. It was, objectively, a very demanding and difficult ministry appointment.

More than ten years later, she is the senior pastor at a large church. She clearly has tremendous gifts and graces for ministry. She left that first church with members asking her to stay and moved on to several other very positive ministry appointments. But those first difficulties still weigh on her. She needed some extra support from her denomination in that first appointment. Support in the form of expert counsel on how to read and understand local culture and on ways of dealing with conflict as well as a little extra time away from ministry to rejuvenate would have made that situation less difficult. And, perhaps most of all, she needed other pastors to affirm her call to ministry, especially in those dark nights when she doubted it herself.

Help Foster Truly Positive Pastor-Local Church Matches

Most of the problems that exist between pastors and local churches could be avoided by creating better matches—getting the right pastor to the right church. Mapping the pastor’s ministry gifts and graces onto the church’s ministry needs and goals is part of this. I have sat in on many

meetings in which pastor candidates meet the lay leaders of a church looking for a new pastor. These are usually pleasant enough, but rarely are they candid enough. Pastors are reluctant to share their ministry weaknesses for fear of appearing unsure of themselves. And church leaders tend to gloss over the messier parts of their church, such as failed ministries or conflict among members. The skill-ministry match requires a candid assessment of what the church needs and what the pastor can offer.

Even more important is a theological match; the pastor and church have to share common beliefs about what it means to be a Christian, what this particular church's role is in advancing God's work, and what proper ministry looks like. More and more, we hear pastors describing fundamental tensions between themselves and church members around these basic but essential understandings. Younger pastors who are ministering to older churches are particularly likely to report that this tension is a major impediment to their ministry work, and we have found it has a strong, corrosive effect on their wellbeing. I think this is one of the most important reasons young pastors leave ministry; they cannot see a way to be a pastor in conditions like the ones they have experienced. Many pastors echo this pastor's description: "I spend so much time managing conflict about *small* matters, like which hymns we sing, that we never get to the heart of ministry."

This tension seems to be getting worse. One of our pastors was fired from her church because she continued to talk about Jesus. Members of her wealthy church did not want any more talk of this man who loved and cared for the poor and marginalized; they just wanted "a nice Sunday worship experience." Sadly, her denomination declined to intervene. Of course, this is a rather extreme example, but it points to the quieter, but still detrimental, struggles that too many pastors report experiencing.

WHAT CAN SEMINARIES DO?

I recently read Dan Aleshire's new book in which he comments on the state of theological education, especially as it relates to the education of future pastors. He calls for a major shift in which theological schools foster the "development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God, fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership." His point is

that seminaries need to focus on forming men and women for real ministry, including supporting the formation of a positive pastoral identity. I am convinced that a shift of this kind is essential. I would frame some of the key elements in a different but, I think, complementary way.

Foster Formation of a Strong, Coherent Pastoral Identity

Another consistently strong finding in our research is that pastors flourish when they can be authentic, that is, when they can be the unique pastor God created them to be. Each pastor has unique gifts and graces and a unique way of *being* a pastor. Pastors who enter active ministry with a strong, coherent identity are much more likely to flourish over the short and long runs because they can be authentic in the various contexts of ministry they work in. They have the foundation they need to do ministry now and to grow and develop further as a pastor. These pastors are adaptable and resilient. They are able to craft ministries that are both effective for their church and properly aligned with their own skills, beliefs, and ministry style. These pastors are well equipped to navigate uncertainty and conflict.

Seminaries are the right place for pastors-in-development to learn about and craft their own unique expression of the qualities and characteristics that all pastors should possess and then find the special pastoral qualities that are uniquely theirs. At its essence, seminary is the place where students can develop answers to fundamental questions about what it means for *them* to be a pastor.

Self-Discovery and Personal Identity Formation

I put this element second, although in practice it comes first. For me to know what kind of professor I could and should be, I had to first know what kind of person I am: my strengths and weaknesses; defining characteristics like my personality; my enduring preferences; and the values and beliefs that are central to my understanding of myself, the world, and my place in the world. It is only out of a coherent, authentic understanding of myself that I can form a coherent, authentic identity as a professor. The same is true for everyone, including pastors. This means that seminaries may have to help students through a process of self-discovery so they can more fully understand who they are as a person and then understand who they can be as a pastor. Without this self-understanding, students will take on a pastoral persona they cannot fit into.

Theologies of Wellbeing

Given all the wonderful ways seminaries challenge and stretch student's habitual ways of thinking about things, seminaries could also help students understand and embrace the importance of wellbeing, their own and their church's. A significant number of pastors we have worked with share stories that indicate they struggle to fit their own wellbeing into their operative theologies. Statements like "Well, Jesus and most of the disciples died for their ministries" are all too common responses to our questions about pastors' theologies of wellbeing. Helping pastors form a solid theological basis for flourishing would have a life-long impact.

WHAT CAN FUNDERS DO?

As someone who has been blessed by the largesse of funders, I appreciate the vital role they play in the ecosystem of pastoral wellbeing. But funders exert enormous influence on what pastors, local churches, seminaries, and denominations do. With due respect to all their good intentions, there are ways that I think funders can contribute even more to the flourishing of pastors. Two stand out to me as having significant potential impact.

Synthesize Key Insights across Projects

Whenever I have attended a large conference of fellow grantees, I can tell there is a treasure trove of knowledge among the many good people in attendance. Much of the knowledge and wisdom they have about what is working and what is not working, however, remains untapped. There is also much to be learned from digging into both successful and unsuccessful projects. We need to gather all that wisdom, distill essential insights, and develop resources that can be broadly shared. A synthesis of this kind would need a team of highly trained individuals, and it would take time, but the insights that such a project could yield could be revolutionary in their impact. Books are one element of this kind of synthesis, but they are static. An active, interactive community of learning could support deeper insights, faster dissemination, and rapid design of new initiatives based on those learnings.

Truly Listen To and Follow the Counsel of Outsiders

Like many institutions, funders can be myopic. Whether they realize it or not, they are prone to groupthink, and so even their new initiatives are often a recapitulation of previous themes. Some do seek input from people outside their organization, which is commendable. But even among these, they too often *think* they are integrating that input when, in fact, they are following their own understandings. There is simply no way a small group of people can fully grasp the complexity of pastoral wellbeing. To truly be relevant and helpful, funders need to incorporate the wise counsel of outsiders in more meaningful ways. Simply listening to outsiders does not lead to the truly innovative funding priorities that could really make a positive difference for pastors. How, then, can these funders truly integrate the knowledge, insights, and advice of key outsiders? I imagine a funder that convenes a group of outside experts and lets that group establish funding themes and programs!

Convene the Ecosystem in Meaningful Ways

Funders are in an ideal position to bring all of the key ecosystem members together and to facilitate meaningful action. For example, bring key leaders from a denomination, several of its seminaries, and a range of churches together to candidly explore wellbeing among its pastors. This group would be charged with identifying factors that both foster and inhibit pastoral wellbeing across the life cycle of pastoral ministry, from pre-seminary to retirement. The group could also be resourced to experiment with new initiatives. This is, of course, a brief sketch of one idea, but I raise it to illustrate the unique potential funders have for fostering truly vibrant ecologies of pastoral wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

My ideas about how members of the ecology of clergy wellbeing might support the wellbeing of pastors and churches are meant to offer a rough sketch of how a concerted effort among these key stakeholders can make a lasting difference in the lives of pastors and churches. This chaotic, uncertain, worrisome time can be the impetus and opportunity to address pastoral wellbeing in groundbreaking ways. Pastors need such a response. Churches need it. Our country and our world need it.

NOTES

- 1 Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 20.
- 2 Daniel Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), 73.