

PASTORAL WELLBEING

PCA Pastors Reflect on the
Tensions of Ministry

PCA Retirement
& Benefits 

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DONALD C. GUTHRIE

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Pastoral Wellbeing: PCA Pastors Reflect on the Tensions of Ministry

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It feels like it's a matter of time before something tragic happens or I go out of ministry. It feels like half of the ministers that I've ever known are out, whether that's a moral failure or they just burned out ... And I want to know, do I have the longevity for this? Do I have the resilience? Because it doesn't seem like most do.

Introduction

The seeds of this project were planted over 10 years ago. In 2011 PCA Retirement & Benefits (RBI) commissioned a study to assess the financial health and retirement readiness of PCA pastors. While that survey was primarily financial in focus, it provided insight into other struggles of pastoral life. Pastors expressed the desire for help in their marriages, work-life balance, relationships, and physical health, as well as for advocates before their sessions. These ministers were crying out for help beyond the realm of finances.

Fortunately, the last decade has produced a significant amount of research related to pastoral wellbeing—holistic health that leads to flourishing over time on the hard road of pastoral ministry. We understand better the forces that challenge pastoral wellbeing as well as the practices, disciplines, motivations, and contextual realities that promote it. An important early work, *Resilient Ministry* (2013), identified five foundational themes for resilience and fruitfulness in ministry and told compelling stories of pastors' struggles, striving, and successes. Flourishing is promoted, the study found, by the presence of ongoing spiritual formation (2 Peter 3:18), intentional self-care (Acts 20:28a), growing emotional and cultural intelligence (Hebrews 4:15; Acts 17:22ff), healthy marriages and families (1 Tim 3:4-5), and developing leadership and management competencies (Acts 20:28b).

More recently, in *Flourishing in Ministry* (2019), Matt Bloom and his team reached similar conclusions. Their study of over 10,000 pastors linked resilience (18), authenticity (36), thriving (i.e., living with meaning, purpose, and connectedness) (47), and economic sufficiency (109; cf. 1 Tim. 5:17-18) to pastoral wellbeing. They also discovered that pastors are struggling. Nearly 25 percent find daily life very challenging and suffer from burn-out, shame, guilt, and declines in physical health. These are the

“walking wounded of pastoral ministry.” Another 25 percent are one small step from joining this group (7).

Thanks to this research, we know what contributes to pastoral health. We also know that many pastors are not healthy. There is a gap between the knowledge of what leads to wellbeing and the actual state of affairs for many pastors. What we did not know is how PCA pastors are doing. This study set out to answer that question by updating our 2011 research, this time focusing specifically on wellbeing. Using the five themes identified by *Resilient Ministry* plus Bloom’s theme of economic sufficiency, we surveyed PCA pastors to get a snapshot into their current state of wellbeing. We then conducted a series of in-depth focus groups to gain insight into the practices, conditions, and choices that promote and hinder wellbeing among our pastors. What we learned was both encouraging and alarming. The pastor quoted below captures the tension of the pastoral vocation. The struggles of pastoral ministry are very real, often hidden, and quite unique. At the same time, our pastors are passionate, engaged, and committed to their calling. But this tension takes a toll. Our conversations with pastors over the past year put a human face on the struggle:

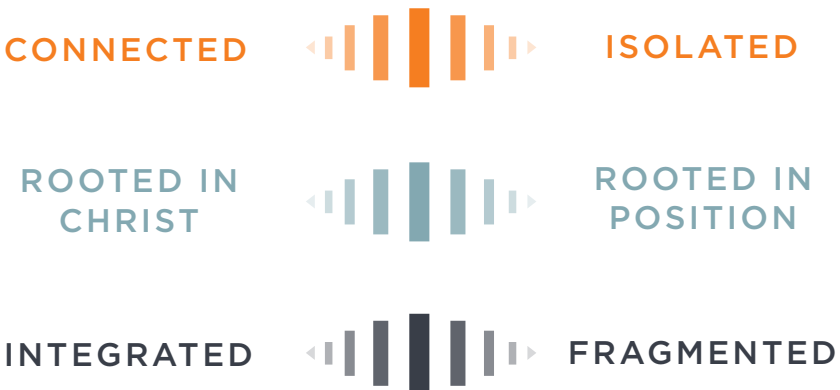
It feels like it’s a matter of time before something tragic happens or I go out of ministry. It feels like half the ministers that I’ve ever known or half the people I went to seminary with are out, whether that’s a moral failure or they just got burned out or they were just done ... And I want to know, do I have the longevity for this? Do I have the resilience for it? Because it doesn’t seem like most do.

This pastor speaks for many in our midst, watching his colleagues falter and fail, wondering if he has what it takes to make

it. We took on this project because we want to help. Our desire is that when the pastors of the PCA ask these questions, their answer is “yes” because they know they have the resources and support to flourish in ministry.

Until now, our efforts to help have been reactive - responding to pastors in need with help after the fact. Going forward, we want to be proactive. By God’s grace, this research will help us promote pastoral flourishing in our denomination, so problems are prevented. In that spirit, we stress that responsibility for pastoral wellbeing cannot fall solely on the pastors (Bloom 2019, 82). Local churches and denominations play significant roles in enabling pastors to flourish (87, 90; cf. Hebrews 13:17 and Paul’s bishop-like letters to young pastors Timothy and Titus). We share our findings with the hope that this material finds its way into the hands of sessions, diaconates, personnel and finance committees, and interested church members who will take up the call to come alongside our pastors in their pursuit of wellbeing.

The material that follows is organized around three tensions inherent in the life of a pastor that our focus groups articulated.



The first tension shows up in relationships where there is a pull between stultifying isolation and life-giving connections. The second tension is about identity: resisting the powerful lure to

root identity in the pastoral role rather than in the person and work of Christ. The third tension exists at the level of systems, asking whether pastors serve as fragmented solo actors or as integrated collaborators. Struggling well in each of these tensions, with support from the community, shapes habits and dispositions that lead to life and health.

These three tensions are wellbeing factors in their own right. They also influence the wellbeing themes that have emerged from prior research. In the chapters that follow, we will explore each of the tensions and illustrate their interaction with various of the six wellbeing themes. Finally, we will end with a proposal for concrete steps to bring wellbeing to pastors.

CHAPTER 1

Relationships

CONNECTED



ISOLATED

“**There are few more lonely jobs than being a pastor ...** And lack of safety can exacerbate that loneliness. You have to be careful almost everywhere. Being a pastor is a great privilege—but I don’t think we ever really do enough business with the loneliness of it.”

Reflection on Scripture & Scholarship

1

CREATION

The Christian story begins with relationship. The opening words of scripture speak of God as creator and spirit, hinting from the beginning that God exists in relationship (Genesis 1:1). This hint is amplified later as God, contemplating the creation of men and women, addresses himself in the plural: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Here we listen to our creator God in the relational act of conversation. And when he creates image bearers, he makes two people. Later he clarifies the point by saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Our relational God created us for relationships, and our wellbeing depends on intimate social interactions.

Research agrees. Studies from around the world routinely find that “positive, caring, nurturing relationships are among the most important conditions for wellbeing ... the need to be loved, accepted, and cared for is regarded by researchers as a fundamental human need” (Bloom 2019, 81). Human wellbeing is connected to, and dependent on, care from others. This point applies to pastors in at least three ways:



“Pastors, as persons created in the image of God, need to be in relationships” (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 81).

- ✚ Pastors live in a “social ecosystem” that includes significant others (family and close friends), similar others (peers who share experiences), church members, and denominational leaders (Bloom 2019 83-92).
- ✚ Pastors with strong relationships are more likely to be mentally healthy (Proeschold-Bell and Bayassee 2018, 128).

Focus group participants expressed this creational need for connection. For instance, “I want a place that is safe, where I can be fully vulnerable and be accepted.” For others, close relationships bring “accountability, encouragement, and a place to vent.” The reality is pastors “can’t be in the room without being peoples’ pastor. They know I’m their pastor. They can’t shake that.” Friendships can create venues where pastors have “an ability not to be on duty.” One pastor described the urgency for relationships: “There’s a crisis point in all of our lives when we have to decide whether we’re really full human beings and need to keep pressing for friends, or if it’s just safer to stay away.”

Research and practical experience show the effort is worth it. Whether experienced in a morning bike ride, an evening by the fire, or a time to pray, close relationships are vital to overall wellbeing. One pastor put it starkly “I’m thriving because I’ve got healthy relationships.”

2

REBELLION

Unfortunately, human sin and the brokenness of the world east of Eden hinder the cultivation of healthy relationships. As Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they turned against each other. Their relationship was now marked by dishonesty, isolation, blame shifting; their future became clouded by suspicion and the abuse of power (Genesis 3:8-16). The scriptures are littered

with fractured relationships: Cain’s murder of Abel; Abraham’s lies about Sarah; Joseph’s brothers’ treachery; Absalom’s rebellion against David; Paul’s separation from Barnabas due to a disagreement over Mark; Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. We know this reality well because we have inherited similar relational disabilities. Everyone needs and craves healthy relationships, yet they are difficult to make and maintain.

Pastors experience this difficulty acutely. The authors of *Faithful and Fractured* found that almost 30% of pastors only “sometimes” or “rarely” get the support they need from others (Proeschold-Bell and Bayassee 2018, 128). Our research revealed that 38% of PCA pastors struggle to find safe, trusted friends with whom to process life. Even more alarming, 50% reported that they routinely fail to receive care from the body of Christ. Focus group participants gave voice to both of these concerning trends.

When we’ve had friends in the church, it has always come back to bite us. We have people we are friendly with, but [seeking trusted friends], every time it has been bad ... We don’t have a set of friends that understand ministry dynamics.

Another lamented “together as a couple, we feel very alone.” This kind of isolation is damaging to wellbeing, because positive relationships between pastors and members of their church are “one of the single most important causes of flourishing” (Bloom 2019, 82).

3

REDEMPTION

Thankfully, relational futility is not the end of the story. The

aftermath of our fall into sin wrecked relationships but did not utterly ruin them. As Adam and Eve heard God’s judgment, they also heard his promise of mercy, his pledge to send an offspring to undo the effects of the fall (Genesis 3:15). That promise reverberated through scripture until the birth of Jesus who Paul describes as “‘the offspring’ who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). We look to Jesus, then, for the restoration of all things, including relationships, and to the church as the venue where it will play out. In the church, Jews and Gentiles—who were formerly alienated, strangers, and far off—have begun the process of reconciling. Christ has “made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” Thus, in Christ, alienated people reconcile with one another as we are reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:14-16). Indeed, Paul can go so far as to say that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Pastors play a crucial role in the church’s call to create communities that demonstrate this kind of relational intimacy. At the same time congregational relationship are vital to pastoral wellbeing.

Congregational support is essential. Pastors who report having better relationships with the congregation of the local churches they serve have much higher wellbeing. (Bloom 2019, 87-88).

But their job is complex because they both lead and participate in the process, and many hesitate to build relationships within their congregation. In spite of the potential dangers, pastors should cultivate relationships within their church (Proeschold-Bell and Byassee 2018, 68-69; 72-74).

Because of the complexity, a caveat is warranted. Pastors and congregants must account for the nature and closeness of their

relationships. *Resilient Ministry* applies the helpful distinction between allies (people who share our values yet operate across a boundary and thus, cannot always be loyal) and confidants (people who have few, if any, conflicting loyalties and with whom we can be much more open) (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 42, 81-82). Pastors must exercise caution not to mistake allies for confidants and thus not overshare. While healthy boundaries are crucial for congregants (Proeschold-Bell and Byassee 2018, 134), pastors should seek such friendships and congregations should cultivate them.

4

RESTORATION

Thankfully the day will come when God's people will see the end of our "ministry of reconciliation" where we "regard no one according to the flesh" but as new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16-18). Revelation's glimpse into heaven celebrates Christ's victory which has "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9) and pictures a multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" united in worship, equal before the throne of Jesus (Revelation 7:9). Earlier, the prophet Isaiah foretold the new heavens and new earth and the day of rejoicing for God's people who will live without fear, sickness, or death but thrive in safety and in a peace so profound that even natural enemies like wolves and lambs will graze together (Isaiah 65:17-25). These are glorious pictures of the end of God's story, when Christ returns to make all things new.



Ministry Tension One: Relationships

RELATIONSHIPS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Spiritual Maturity and Self-Care

Pastors see relationships as vital for spiritual maturity and self-care. As one pastor observed, a group of friends can provide the relational safety, vulnerability, and accountability that lead to growth. Another said, “what’s instrumental and life-giving towards spiritual care has been accountability.” This emphasis on accountability was echoed by many pastors. Others highlighted the need for a safe place to honestly deal with sin and doubt. For instance, “having safe people to be real with about my spiritual life” feeds maturity and hedges against isolation. Loving, supportive friends can also provide much needed rest. Many pastors build this into their schedule.

I tell my neighbor if I don't text him on Thursdays, my day off, then I'm not sabbathing well. He keeps me accountable. No matter what, we sit outside and enjoy the weather. That's always been my way of protecting my Sabbath, no agenda.

One participant summed it up bluntly: “These guys [his ministry cohort] are probably number one in spiritual formation for me.” In contrast to an isolated approach to life and an individualistic approach to spiritual growth, connection is vital.

RELATIONSHIPS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Emotional Intelligence & Cultural Intelligence

Relationships are also key to healthy Emotional Intelligence (EQ). Focus group participants consistently reported the influence of others on their self-awareness and other-awareness. Influences include spouse, counselors, friends, and mentors who provide safe places to process.

I have places where I process stuff and have conversations without fear. My best friend is willing to call me on my stuff when I'm starting to do my typical "I'm alone and have to hunker down and get it done and be angry at everybody" thing.

My wife is emotionally safe for me to be honest about the things that I'm dealing with. I have a counselor I meet with every other week. I have two older pastors that are not connected to my world.

Cultural intelligence (CQ)—the art of “reaching across the chasm of cultural difference in ways that are loving and respectful” (Livermore 2009, 17)—is challenging. In our survey, 55% of pastors reported they seldom incorporate a variety of cultural perspectives in ministry. Yet our focus groups voiced the need for regular contact with cultural others to gain appreciation, awareness, and the willingness to learn from them.

CQ requires relationships such as “close friendships with people who are from other cultures.” It demands being “intentional with

friendships outside of church and non-Christian friendships.” It means “actually interacting with someone who views life differently.” And motives matter. To grow in CQ we must “cultivate friendships, not pursue friendships to use the other person to feel better about themselves. That means time and investment.”

Thankfully, the investment can pay off. When we participate in relationships across cultural boundaries with a willingness to listen and learn, we can grow in CQ. During the racial turmoil of 2020, one pastor opened up about his struggles:

In a sermon I said, “I don’t have any black friends.” A black pastor in town got a copy of my sermon. He called and said, “You don’t need to say ‘I don’t have any black friends’ anymore.” We’ve been meeting since then. For me, listening to someone who’s coming at things from a different racial, political, and theological perspective, it’s been good. I had a [merely] theoretical understanding of cultural intelligence.

RELATIONSHIPS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Marriage & Family

Healthy marriages thrive in a network of relationships broader than the marriage itself.

What hinders [marital strength] is my desire to isolate, self-protect, self-soothe. I find that what benefits my marriage are my friendships outside my marriage. What keeps me from isolating is [showing up] regularly with friends

or neighbors. That then allows me to have an adult relationship with my wife rather than an immature codependent relationship.

Sadly, many ministry marriages lack such friendships with 64% of PCA pastors reporting that they and their spouse struggle to enjoy trusted friends. One reason is the fraught nature of pastoring potential friends.

There's a tightrope we have to walk, especially when it comes to how much we want to share with other couples in our church. These are folks we trust, who we would consider friends, but there's still that little bit of a separation that comes from being a pastor and pastor's wife.

Another pastor reflected on how marriage compounds a difficulty pastors already face.

I feel like as a pastor, it's hard to find a genuine safe area to have friendships. But when you try to add a couple, it multiplies the complexity. I don't think we could fully be safe with couples within the church.

Yet ministry marriages can thrive. Pastors and their wives do find close friends in the church.

We're fortunate to have a few couples in our congregation with whom we can travel, have

a good time. I don't have to feel like I have to power play. They don't project anything on me and they're okay seeing me mess up.

They also seek friends from outside the church, and perhaps outside the faith.

Our closest friends right now don't know Jesus. They have categories our church friends don't have. There's an allowance to wrestle in a continuing way with our unbelieving friends that isn't present in the church.

RELATIONSHIPS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Finances

The role of relationships in finances comes down to three questions: Who knows? Who cares? Who helps? Thankfully our pastors are often able to answer those questions positively.

Being at (church name) has been a blessing because there are people to answer small things, and a couple of personal friends that we are constantly going to. And I think without those friendships, we would have not been able to put two kids through college.

One hardship pastors face is the need to advocate for their own finances.

As a senior pastor you generally are advocating for salary and benefits for your staff. No one does that for you. Even with great elders, the dynamic is “how little can we pay the senior pastor?” You have to speak up and advocate for yourself and that’s a lonely position.

Ideally, elders should take a proactive role to ensure their pastors are well cared for. Thankfully this does happen.

I’m blessed to have great elders who do their best to make sure my earthly needs are taken care of. We have a forthright conversation every year on how that’s going. Thankfully one of them is gifted in finance. If it comes to advice, I’m able to ask him.

Pastors need caring, informed advocates within and beyond church leadership.

RELATIONSHIPS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Leadership

Leadership requires building trusting relationships for kingdom co-laboring.

I’ve realized time spent together can’t be understated, to have them in our home, around my family, to see our marriage up close. And for that time to have no agenda.

Our elders have increasingly played a shepherding role, rather than simply a governing role. As we've entered particular crisis situations together, it's built trust [in our] relationship.

Pastors must navigate the fine line between allies and confidants in the midst of building these trusting relationships.

I don't find [safe relationships] among the staff because I can't get away from being their boss. I trust the leadership, [but] I don't find [safety] fully with my elders. There's the fear that if I really share my thoughts, I don't know what that's going to do with my elders.

As much as possible, we try to keep amongst our session and staff both the ally and confidant culture. We ask very forthright questions. I personally feel very safe, very calm. I can share anything with them.

CHAPTER 2

Identity

ROOTED IN
CHRIST



ROOTED IN
POSITION

“

I'm a professional Christian.

But the reality is that if I rely on my professionalism, it's not going to work well.”

”

Reflection on Scripture & Scholarship

Earlier, we heard a focus group participant lamenting his lack of a place to be “off duty.” This raises the issue of where a pastor finds his identity. Identity is “the way we understand who we are, what makes us the unique person God created us to be” (Bloom 2019, 37). People with a “balanced, secure, and positive identity” experience greater wellbeing, stronger resilience, closer relationships, better marriages, and are better leaders and colleagues (37). Most people have distinct life domains for work, worship, and family. But for pastors these often merge, leaving only one source of support, structure, and solace in hard times and making pastoral life like a “one-legged stool” (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 15). As one of our focus group participants lamented “almost every relationship is somehow connected to the church.” Thus, the pastoral identity becomes all-encompassing.

This can be self-imposed. One pastor noted “Being a pastor is not just what I do—it is very much who I am. I live that persona twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year” (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 15). It can also be imposed from the outside. Another pastor said “the people in my church have no idea about this area of my life [a hobby]. They only see me as a pastor, regardless of time or place” (15). Such identity contraction is toxic to pastoral health. Christian pastors are authentic people under God (Bloom 2019, 68) who need to cultivate a “life narrative that integrates ... all of the complex and contradictory aspects of who [they] are” so they can feel like whole people (Bloom 2019, 40). This is the identity tension pas-

tors face: grounding their identity in their pastoral role or resting in the person and work of Jesus.

Identity can be examined through the framework of Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, Restoration. At creation God gave everything necessary for a secure identity. Most crucially, he made men and women “in [his] likeness ... in his own image” (Genesis 1:26, 27). As Kidner observes, this “imprint[s] on the mind the central truth” that people are like God “by definition” with innate dignity (Kidner 1967, 55). God also commanded “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” over it (Genesis 1:26, 28). Humanity’s created vocation is to take the raw materials of creation and “make something of the world” (Crouch 2013, 23), which undergirds life with meaning and purpose. All of this is in the context of secure, intimate relationships. Adam and Eve were intimate (“one flesh”), vulnerable (they were “naked”), and safe (“unashamed”) (Genesis 2:24). Likewise, God himself walked with them, cared for them, and sought them out (Genesis 3:8). These creational realities (the divine image, a divine vocation, and divinely ordered relationships) imbued them with an identity as secure as God himself, because it was linked to God himself.

Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God damaged each of these. After the fall, the image of God remained (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9), but sin left men and women in need of renewal “after the image of him that created him” (Colossians 3:10; cf. Ephesians 4:24). Likewise, humanity’s vocation endured, but the aftermath of sin brought pain in childbirth (be fruitful and multiply) and futility in work (exercise dominion, fill and subdue the earth) (Genesis 3:16-19). Work, twisted by sin, became fraught with frustration (Genesis 3:18), destructive rather than creative, and a false basis for human identity (Genesis 11:1-4). Finally, human relationships, created safe and intimate, became infested with shame, deceit, and blame (Genesis 3:7-13). Instead of walking with God, Adam and Eve hid from him in fear and were rejected from his presence. In one act of rebellion, Adam and Eve did violence to God’s image, their vocation, and all relationships and so dam-

aged the foundations of their identity.

Pastors live and minister in the aftermath of rebellion, often trying to find their identity in their work rather than Jesus' work for them. Some are simply people pleasers with "fragile egos" (Proeschold-Bell and Bayassee 2018, 25-26). Others grasp for control, failing to trust that God is in control (28). Still others "[give] sacred meaning" to their job. Pastors who do this are more likely to work harder, struggle to set limits, load inordinate significance on external markers of success, and attach higher stakes to failure (23-25). In extreme cases, pastors adopt what Bloom calls a "one-dimensional identity." He tells of a minister so absorbed in his job that even to his wife he was "Pastor Joe." He treated family the same as parishioners. Predictably, his life and work suffered (Bloom 2019, 41). Jesus' words in John 15 are apt: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." Too many pastors succumb to the allure of an identity based solely on their role and fail to abide in Jesus.

However, in Christ there is hope greater than the danger. Just as our rebellion damaged all creation, so Jesus' redemption will restore all creation (Wolters 2005, 69). Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 2:24 pledge that the image of God "is being renewed ... in righteousness and holiness" for those who are in Christ. The same is true of our vocations. Paul urges Christians "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). Work done in line with the interests of Christ (Philippians 2:21) and the priorities of his kingdom can be fulfilling, creative, productive, and deeply God-honoring. Christ is also healing broken relationships. He reconciles people to God, people to one another (Ephesians 2:14-16), and the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18). Jesus is not merely saving our souls. He is restoring the building blocks of a secure identity.

Pastors who build their identity in Christ and his redeeming work bear the fruit of wellbeing. The disciplines that lead to spiritual formation—such as sabbath keeping, repentance, private and

corporate worship—help pastors abide with Jesus. Suffering can redirect our focus away from our accomplishments and toward what God is doing in us (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 45-46). Learning to pause and reflect before God can draw us into deeper communion with him and avoid the trap of serving Jesus while missing intimacy with him. All these protect us from a shaky, self-made identity by grounding us in Christ. So grounded, pastors can stop acting a persona and live as the person and pastor God has made them to be (Bloom 2019, 55).

Thankfully, the day will come when all will be made new. When Christ returns, the image of God in us will be perfectly restored and “we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). When Christ returns, relationships will be perfectly restored (Revelation 5:9, 7:9). Our guilt and shame before God will be healed and it shall come to pass that “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be their God” (Revelation 21:3). Finally, when Christ returns, our vocations will be healed. Isaiah 60 foretells the end of all things as a great city, a “center of commerce” that receives vessels, goods, currency, and thrums with vocational activity (Mouw 2002, 20). Revelation 21 elaborates, describing the new Jerusalem, descending to earth, free from tears, sadness, mourning, pain, and death (Revelation 21:1, 4). In this hope we can say with Paul “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the [pastoral] life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).



Ministry Tension Two: Identity

IDENTITY & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Spiritual Maturity, Self-Care, & Marriage

Pastors often struggle with “performance-ism” that induces them to ground their identity in their work rather than in Christ, to the neglect of their own spiritual growth and self-care. There are two sides to the struggle. As mentioned earlier, churches can impose this on pastors by reducing them to “walking job descriptions,” (Bloom 2019, 68) failing to see them as whole people, and burdening them with unrealistic demands. One participant lamented, “It’s common for churches to set unreachable expectations for their pastor.” As a result, it’s “terrifying” to advocate to his session for boundaries on his time and realistic job assessment standards. But he was also honest about how his own pride and ego can lead him to self-impose the same kinds of burdens.

The real issue is pride and a heightened sense of self-importance, which causes us to hide that we’re not keeping up, not able to accomplish everything, we’re slipping, we’re falling behind, and we don’t want to ask for help because we don’t want to look like a failure.

Fear and insecurity are also prime drivers of role identity.

We take too much glory in being busy. Sometimes it’s fear. There’s a constant struggle to justify your existence [because of] the expect-

tations projected upon you, the people who want you to respond to every demand and be more than you can be. Pride can take you down that road, but there's also a component of fear that you're not doing enough.

Fear was a common theme:

My fear of man gets in the way. My idols of performance and productivity get in the way.

Things I allow to hinder [spiritual maturity] would be fear of man, people pleasing.

At the end of the day, it's whether you're going to fear God or fear people.

Pastors and those who care for them must remember that freedom to pursue the spiritual disciplines can put to rest the fear and pride that inhibit intimacy with Jesus and encourage pastors to root their identity in Christ. One pastor linked prayer and scripture to an identity distinct from his role:

When I set aside [time] to get away from the office and spend time in prayer and the word ... that reminds me of who I am in Christ, apart from ministry.

Devotional practices can remind pastors they are God's children, not God's employees. "A regular devotional every morning where

I start with scripture and with prayer” frees one pastor from the “struggle of feeling like I work for God, but I’m not really his child.” Even periods of suffering, if received with a willingness to reflect and learn, can mortify ego and nourish intimacy with Jesus. “Suffering has drawn me closer to Jesus in my identity and my calling and [diminished] my delusions of grandeur.”

In the experience of several pastors, self-care nourished spiritual maturity and encouraged a secure identity in Christ by granting permission and time to practice spiritual disciplines. Routine, intentionally planned time away from the office, unplugged from other people, aids prayer, meditation, and reflection. Retreats and other periodic times to “get away, decompress, and not be the pastor” are equally spiritually restorative.

Finally, a pastor’s marriage is crucial to a healthy life in ministry. But an insecure identity, flowing from his own fear or a church’s overreach, can undermine marriage. One pastor in our focus groups honestly admitted:

In all my years of ministry, my wife and I don’t have close friends. I ask her, how come you don’t have friends in the church? And she said, ‘It’s because of you’ ... because of my role in the church.

There is sad truth in her words. There are structural reasons why pastors and their wives find it difficult to distinguish the person from his role. In ministry:

Almost every relationship is connected to the church. There are times when I want to be off and not hang out with employees and officers.

For reasons like these, it is important for pastors to cultivate their marriage independent of pastoral duties. One participant recalled how he and his wife prioritized their marriage in the hardship of church planting:

We focused on our relationship with a weekly lunch date. And during that time we could talk about anything, but not about the church. We got away like that to foster that the church is not a mistress.

In sum, healthy self-care, prioritizing the spiritual disciplines, and attending to marriage apart from the pastoral role all encourage a secure identity in Christ.

IDENTITY & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Emotional & Cultural Intelligence

The capacity for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 103) also contribute to a secure identity. Our survey revealed that PCA pastors are relatively fluent at EQ and our focus groups confirmed that pastors feel well-equipped, especially in their ability to grasp the emotional state of others (EQ other). One result of high EQ is differentiation, “the ability to know who we are, apart from others” and “define oneself” (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 28). It is a classic skill for strong identity construction. But it is notoriously difficult. Consider the ease with which some pastors can be controlled by others’ emotions. One pastor admitted “differentiation is probably one of the hardest things for me. I feel like I take on [others’ emotions]. If I get a disgruntled email, it will mess me up.” Another agreed:

I am aware of other people's emotions, but from a place of insecurity. I deal with the idolatry of caring too much about what others think about me. I paid attention to their emotional reactions, but it wasn't healthy. As I grow in grace, I'm getting over that insecurity.

However, healthy emotional responses to others can nourish a healthy identity. The capacity to share and receive emotions freely and remain calm comes through “knowing God and knowing where our identity is in Christ.” Moreover, reflective practices such as journaling can bring balance and health to our relations with others. The challenges of relating in a mature way with other people can be opportunities “to reflect back on my own need to grow closer to the Lord and cling to him.” Maturely dealing with the emotions of self and others both flows from and feeds a secure identity in Christ.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) also contributes to identity formation. At its most basic, cultural intelligence demands admitting we do not know something and have much to learn from cultural others. It means “giving myself the freedom to not know something, to be okay with not knowing something.” This is not easy. Another pastor confessed “when I feel awkward or don't understand something that's happening, or I can't contribute to a conversation, I found myself withdrawing ... this is my protection mechanism.” Yet he continued “learning to ask God for wisdom and staying in has helped me learn and helped me connect to people better.” Another added that learning from cultural others provides “great insight into my own self. This is something that I'm weak in and I need to be honest about.” This sort of humility is necessary to put on the new identity (“new self”) Christ promises to his people.

CHAPTER 3

Systems

INTEGRATED



FRAGMENTED

“

I learned to process the emotions and anxiety of the church

... how I was engaging the system and how I was contributing to unhealth. That forced me to think through how I engage those things from a personal level, how it affects family, and how it shaped and formed me as a pastor.

”

Reflection on Scripture & Scholarship

The third ministry tension, systems, might sound a bit abstract. However, the concept of systems is simply a way to name the reality that pastors – as they think, speak, act, make decisions, and do their work – are emotionally interconnected with other church members and leaders, as well as with the whole church. The scriptures are full of examples of living systems. Consider the church at its birth. Acts 2:42-47 describes a group of people quite aware of their individuality and their connection. They had unity, intimate fellowship, sensitivity to diverse needs, and a distinct faith in God held with attractive winsomeness. They were, in other words, a healthy system that understood their interconnectivity. To the extent that pastors today understand and reflect on the implications of how their churches are emotionally connected, they too can lay the groundwork for health.

In our survey, we found that as a group, PCA pastors are relatively comfortable processing their emotional life and attending to the emotions of others. This chapter primarily draws from our focus groups to explore the ministry tension of systems, which is a tension of awareness and intentionality. Bluntly put, do pastors see themselves and their churches as fragmented individuals, each pursuing their own goals and doing their own work, essentially autonomous from each other? Or do they understand that their church is “wired together” emotionally and thus work to achieve the emotional maturity sufficient to manage anxiety in the system so it can move toward health? This is the pull between fragmentation on one hand, and a mature grasp of integration on the other.

SYSTEMS THEORY; AN OVERVIEW

Systems theory posits that when people engage in long-term, close relationships, they become emotionally connected, such that each member affects, and is affected by, the behaviors and emotions of the others. Systems are “wired together” like a flock of birds who fly as individuals but can often turn or land as a group, seemingly by instinct (Herrington et al 2020, 39-40). The actions of one person or group will not and cannot remain isolated but will inevitably influence the emotional responses and register of the rest of the system. Research has shown that systems tend to behave according to a set of observable rules (40). For their own wellbeing and the health of their churches, pastors must cultivate emotional maturity to proactively manage their own emotions and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie 2013, 103).

ANXIETY IN THE SYSTEM

The first reality of relational systems is the effect anxiety has on the group. Anxiety is our physical and emotional response to threat (Herrington et al, 44). Systemic anxiety is a legacy of our sinful rebellion against God. In the beginning God created a world in harmony. Men, women, and the created order were at peace (Genesis 1-2). But as soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their relationship turned fearful, suspicious, and guarded. What could have been healthy self-awareness became shameful self-consciousness (Genesis 3:10). Their responses to God’s questions became reactive and blame shifting (Genesis 3:12-13). And since then, every relational system has struggled with anxiety in the face of real and perceived threats.

As anxiety rises, our heart rate increases, our sensitivity heightens, and physiological processes that allow us to act quickly and without much conscious thought kick in (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 44-45). In situations of real threat, these responses can be lifesaving. But sometimes an incident triggers anxiety

that lingers, amplified over time by a series of anxious reactions to relatively small things until it gains a life of its own. This is chronic anxiety (45). Edwin Friedman, one of the early scholars of systems theory, believes “that the climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership” (Friedman 2017, 59). A chronically anxious system will display Reactivity (intense reactions to events and people); Herding (valuing unity at the expense of dissent or reasonable discussion); Blame Displacement (seeing yourself as a victim and blaming others rather than taking responsibility for your own actions and behaviors); Quick Fix (looking for an easy solution to complex problems that alleviates symptoms rather than seeking growth); and Poor Leadership (leaders who lack the courage to remain calm in the face of anxiety, stay true to the mission, and stay connected to all members of the system) (60). Leaders like pastors must learn to recognize anxiety in the system as well as their own anxious responses so they can remain a calm presence as the system pursues its mission.

INDIVIDUALITY & TOGETHERNESS

A result of anxiety is the interplay of two opposing forces that push us in different directions. The force of individuality propels us outward as we strive to be unique individuals, distinct from others (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 48). In contrast, the force of togetherness pushes us from the outside in, urging us to conform, please others, and fit into the group (49). On their own, these desires are not inappropriate. God made each of us unique people with a variety of gifts to serve one another and the church at large (Ephesians 4:12-13; 1 Peter 4:10-11). We are diverse members of a complex body, equipped to make novel contributions (1 Corinthians 12:1-12). But the same God calls diverse people to unity (Ephesians 4:1-3), and the love of Christ is meant to bind us together in harmony (Colossians 3:14). God’s people are defined by Christ, and the differences that divide us in society become relativized under the unifying love of the gospel (Galatians 3:27-28).

It is good and right to express our God-given individuality and seek God-honoring togetherness. But under the influence of sin, each can go too far. Individuality can lapse into a selfishness that privileges our desires and agendas and uses or degrades others (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 49). Similarly, togetherness can make us so dependent on the good opinion of others we compromise our contributions, or we demand conformity, stifle dialogue, and inhibit good faith disagreement in favor of false peace (49).

DIFFERENTIATION

In response to these tendencies, leaders must pursue “differentiation of self” (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 28; Friedman 2017, 75). Differentiated leaders define and control themselves while allowing others to do the same. They stay connected but do not allow others to determine their behaviors or emotional reactions. They are calm in the face of anxiety, take responsibility for their own emotions, and can achieve distance from an anxious situation to observe what is really going on (Herrington, Taylor, and Creech 2020, 28-29). Differentiation is a mark of emotional and spiritual maturity. The life of Jesus shows him exhibiting healthy differentiation in numerous systems. He stayed connected to his family but prioritized his Father’s mission over their desires (see Mark 3:31-35; Luke 9:57-62). And when Peter attempted to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross, Jesus rebuked him but did not cut him off so later he was able to restore him (Matthew 16:17-19; John 21:15-29).



Ministry Tension Three: Systems

SYSTEMS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Emotional Intelligence

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our focus groups reflected directly on this theme as they discussed EQ and topics like emotional reactivity, differentiation, and overall awareness of system anxiety and dynamics. One pastor set the tone, “What’s really helpful for me is understanding family systems.” Another admitted, “I had personally never heard of emotional intelligence until I got to my current church.”

It is important for pastors to learn to incorporate a systems perspective in their churches:

It was processing the emotions and anxiety of the first church I served in. Some of that I had categories for but I took a leadership class and reengaged [systems ideas] with a lot more experience and age. Now I also had examples to think through—what other people were doing and how I was engaging the system and contributing to unhealth.

Learning emotional intelligence comes through conflict.

It took a relational crisis [to make me aware of EQ]. I was over-identifying with some people, [getting] sucked in, not setting up boundaries,

and losing sleep. That [revealed] that I don't have the right perspective on this. I need someone to help me think through how I'm processing conflict in the church.

And it's not just one conflict, but iterating on a series of conflicts that teaches these lessons:

There's an emotional spiral: Conflict. Reflect on what happened. Learn from that. Next conflict. [With conflict or] differing opinions, we have to process what's going on. It provides fodder for self-reflection and growth.

Other catalysts for learning a systems perspective include spouses, counselors, books, and other educational materials. Peer cohorts are especially valuable, as they provide venues of safety and commonality that permit serious discussion of personal and emotional issues without fear of judgment or sanction.

The goal of this group is to be a safe place. Most of us have [shared] the deepest struggles we're going through. This will not happen on our sessions. This will not happen with the couple that comes over for dinner. We're all struggling with similar types of things.

In the final analysis, systems skills and the emotional maturity necessary to navigate the terrain of conflict, anxiety, and emotional reactivity are learned over time. They must become more than just a behavioral checklist and instead be worked into the

fabric of the system.

[Emotional intelligence] is part of our culture. It's in our language, it's how we think through how we're dealing with conflict and relationships. Ideas like differentiation and how we're processing, why am I feeling the way I'm feeling right now? Is it because of the person, what they're saying, who's in front of me now, or is it because of my own insecurities? To be part of our church staff, you have to be able to read, invest in those things, and be accountable.

Pastors and leaders who embrace this mindset put themselves in a position to thrive in their vocation and life. Emotional maturity is directly related to ministry health at large:

My first call was in a chronically anxious system. I spent five years there and realized if I didn't learn how to function in an emotionally healthy way, I was not going to be a pastor anymore.

SYSTEMS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Marriage

Marriage is another area rich with potential for growth in cultivating a systems perspective. One pastor ranked his wife “numbers one, two, and three” in the top five people who influence his growth in emotional maturity. Pastors’ wives frequently help them with self-awareness. Sometimes the help comes by providing a calm, listening ear and another perspective.

I would say I'm a verbal processor to my poor wife. She's my first line of defense on emotional intelligence and she's very calm and cool. She's the cool side of the two of us.

My wife helps me manage. When something's happened, I'll be angry and animated. Then my wife will talk me off the ledge and I can respond in a way that's healthier.

At other times, the help is direct.

My wife is a big factor [in my emotional growth]. She sees it and calls me out. Or we get in a fight and then I realize, Oh, I'm feeling this way. And I didn't know it until I bothered her.

Spouses can also mirror things back to a pastor that he cannot see about himself:

There are moments where I vent and am consumed with thoughts that come out of my mouth. And then I will say something like, 'I can't even hear from God. He's so quiet right now.' And my wife will say, 'I don't know how you could hear him because you're so loud.' Those are priceless moments of God using her to be a mirror and a governor to my emotions.

In a similar vein, one participant observed:

[My wife knows] me best and speaks in ways that I don't always appreciate. I heard somebody say that the longer you're married, the more the voice of the Spirit sounds like your spouse.

Sometimes, spouses help without saying anything at all. "My wife ... will be transparent with me ... in our relational dynamics she helps me in self-awareness, sometimes without saying anything." Elaborating, his colleague added, "not so much that she brings it up, but I can tell when my emotional and cultural awareness is off, when there's some friction with us. That's usually a sign."

Wives can also provide havens of safety where pastors are free to honestly process about their emotions: "my wife is at the top of my list. She is emotionally safe for me to be honest about things I'm dealing with."

SYSTEMS & THE WELLBEING FACTORS

Leadership, Finances, & Self-Care

For pastors, leadership skills are tantamount to systems skills. Pastors must account for emotional connection, anxiety, and healthy differentiation as they perform their duties. Even in seasons of success, these issues are in play.

On paper, there's a lot of things that would say we're thriving this year, despite all the challenges. We've had the best financial year ever, we've got increased attendance, we've added two staff members. And yet everybody's feeling tension and pressure.

In dealing with unresolved conflict on our staff, I have been made aware that things we're dealing with are tremendously common. I was not aware of how common these things are.

Many pastors struggle with issues like conflict, anxiety, and ministry politics. Some cite structural reasons for the hardships.

Within Presbytery ... it's straight to business and there's no space formally created to relate to each other. That's not structured into the time. That signals to you the way things are structured, that this is a dangerous place where you have to isolate.

A few describe gratitude for friendships they have within the presbytery system. "A huge part of my job satisfaction and personal health is related to the sense of friendship and brotherhood I have in our Presbytery."

In a calling so fraught with relational challenges, pastors must intentionally seek out relational health. It helps to frequently reflect on a question one pastor posed: "How can we still move towards people, even in the midst of conflict?" This question strikes at the heart of healthy differentiation. Structured time to build relationships helps:

We regularly meet. Conflict is inevitable. So how you do conflict makes all the difference. When I wasn't regularly walking with people, then I would commit what I heard a guy call assume-icide, which is, I would kill people with my assumptions.

Encouraging others in the system builds the relational capital necessary to stay differentiated, so that “even when we have times of conflict, they know that I’m for them and I’m seeing good things.”

When pastors and sessions work to cultivate emotional maturity in churches, the health of the system produces many benefits. Healthy sessions learn how to navigate conflict and grow trust.

Trust is created where everybody has a chance to share their views and speak into something. Even if there’s disagreement, there’s understanding and the freedom to speak. Trust comes from healthy conflict.

Settings like that, in turn, create safe places to openly discuss difficult topics such as finances. Finances can be taboo for pastors, who must often advocate for their own salaries. Reflecting on financial advocacy, one pastor spoke for many when he said, “it’s a lonely space... because I don’t have anybody advocating for me.” However, emotional maturity can grow a church’s capacity to have open conversations about money: “We have a very open culture about [finances] that’s grown over the years.”

As these quotations reveal, pastors who struggle with the tension of systems struggle not only for their own health, but for the health of their churches, families, and leadership teams. Our hope is that these overlapping relational systems can band together and equip pastors to struggle well together, so the church can thrive and the gospel can advance.

Conclusion

AN INVITATION TO ONGOING CONVERSATION & REFLECTION

We hope this study is not an end but a beginning. It illuminates the very real struggles that come with a pastoral calling and highlights opportunities for growth. Put to its best use, it should catalyze a series of ongoing, overlapping conversations about pastoral health. One thing we have learned is that wellbeing is a team sport. So, in conclusion we address various members of the team.

Dear pastor. We hope you see something of your experience in these pages. Your colleagues have shared with admirable vulnerability because they want to help all pastors move toward wellbeing, including you. After reading what they told us, we encourage you to act so you can be a healthier pastor, husband, father, and friend. First, consider the scriptural grounding of this work. What scriptures challenge or inspire you to further reflection? How can you best live out the image of God in your life and ministry? What one practice can you adopt that will help you experience intimacy with Jesus? Second, as you go back and examine the ministry tensions and 6 wellbeing themes, where do you feel the tension of ministry most acutely? In what ways might this be self-inflicted? What practical step can you take to grow in relational connection, an identity rooted in Christ, or a systems perspective on your church? Finally, who do you need to talk to and what conversation do you need to have with them? Perhaps it's your spouse, a mentor, or a friend outside of your church. Maybe you need a counselor or help from professionals like RBI. Whoever it is, reach out. Our parting advice to you is connect, don't isolate. Isolation will slowly kill you, but connection brings life.

Dear pastor's wife. We address you as possibly the most underappreciated, overlooked, and isolated person in the church. But

our research shows, and common sense confirms, that you are also the most crucial earthly person for the health of your husband. That means your health is equally crucial. In light of this, how do the scriptural truths outlined above bring you hope? Which promises keep you clinging to Christ by faith? We encourage you to ponder the ministry tensions and honestly reflect on how they impact you as a pastoral spouse. In which of the six themes of health do you need help? How can you get it? And who can help? Are you suffering in silence? Do you have friends outside the church? Who honestly checks on you? Our encouragement to you is to reach out, find friends and activities inside and outside the church, and be honest and vulnerable about the help you need.

Dear Ruling Elder. You are in a prime position to bring about change and create a ministry context where your pastor and his wife can thrive. You are a leader in the church. How do the scriptures outlined above challenge you to greater faithfulness in your role? Where might you broaden your understanding of the fullness of God's redemptive story? What reminds you of the beauty of the gospel? As you think about the ministry tensions, ask yourself how your pastor struggles. How do you know? Who do you need to ask? How can you treat your pastor as a whole person and not a "walking job description?" Also, bring this material to your broader leadership team and challenge them with the same information and questions. And ask yourself the same questions we asked the pastor, only in reverse? Who do you need to talk to? What conversations do you need to have? What do you need to ask your pastor and his family, and how can you create a safe environment so they can answer honestly? What resources should you consult as you make important decisions? As an elder in Christ's church, we hope that you take this opportunity and equip yourself to pastor your pastor. He, his family, your leadership team, and your church will reap the benefits.

Dear church member. You might be reading this and wondering what you can do to help. We leave you with similar questions. Begin with scripture. Have you ever considered how the gospel

story applies to matters like pastoral health? What one thing did you learn that you will take into your life of faith? How might you need to repent, rejoice, or recalibrate your attention? As you read about the ministry tensions, did you know pastors are pulled in these competing directions? What surprised you? What alarmed you? How could you relate differently to your pastor and his family? How can you advocate for them? Who do you need to talk to? Who can you befriend? What call should you make or note should you write? How can you be an ally to people who so often feel isolated and alone? Perhaps the best message you can send to your pastor is “I am for you. Even through challenges, I am with you.”

Pastoral work is hard and it is good. It is discouraging and it is thrilling. It is vital to the priorities of God’s kingdom and it is an ongoing act of submission to Jesus. And it can be incredibly isolating. As we have analyzed the data and listened to dozens of pastors share about ministry and life, it is clear that connection is the overriding theme. When people have meaningful connections to others who love and care about them and an abiding connection to God through Christ, the road to holistic health becomes smoother. Until Jesus returns, there will always be struggles. But we pray this material equips pastors to struggle well, with others, toward holistic health that leads to flourishing over time on the hard road of pastoral ministry.

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The past decade has produced a significant amount of research related to pastoral wellbeing—holistic health that leads to flourishing over time on the hard road of pastoral ministry. We now better understand the forces that challenge pastoral wellbeing as well as the practices and disciplines that promote it. This project assessed the wellbeing of PCA pastors. We surveyed nearly 900 PCA pastors to get a snapshot into their current state of wellbeing and conducted 16 in-depth focus groups to gain insight into the practices, conditions, and choices that promote and hinder wellbeing. We found that pastors wrestle with a series of ministry tensions that pull them between healthy and unhealthy approaches to life and ministry. Pastors told us that the struggles of ministry are very real, often hidden, and quite unique. At the same time, they are passionate, engaged, and committed to their calling.



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