

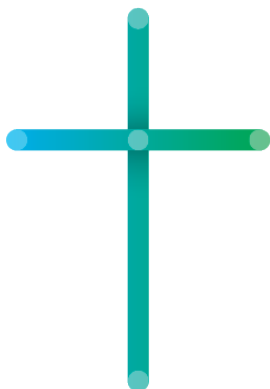
# A Burden Too Heavy?



Research Insights from the Flourishing in Ministry Project

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**FLOURISHING**  
IN MINISTRY

# A Burden Too Heavy? Flourishing in Ministry and The Work of Clergy

## Ministry Work and the Flourishing of Pastors

*The breadth of tasks performed by local church pastors coupled with the rapid switching between task clusters and roles that appears prevalent in this position is unique. I have never encountered such a fast-paced job with such varied and impactful responsibilities.*

-Professor Richard Deshon,  
Michigan State University

Dr. Richard Deshon is one of the leading experts on job analysis, a sophisticated research methodology for systematically determining the tasks, activities, and responsibilities of a particular job. He worked with the United Methodist Church to identify the major tasks and activities that comprise the work of a pastor. Dr. Deshon determined there are 13 major task clusters that comprise the role of pastor. These task clusters include a wide variety of activities

including administration, care-giving, facility management and construction, preaching and public worship, evangelism, and communication. The epigraph is his conclusion about the work of local church pastors. Dr. Deshon also determined that, to perform all of these tasks effectively would require 64 different personal competencies. He concluded that "it is almost inconceivable to imagine that a single person could be uniformly high on the sixty-four distinct knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics."

The U. S. Department of Labor (USDOL), through its massive O\*Net database of occupational information, produces a similar list that breaks down the work of local church pastors into ten task clusters including assisting and caring for others; developing objectives and strategies; developing and building teams; resolving conflicts and negotiating; thinking creatively; and guiding, directing, and motivating subordinates and volunteers.

The USDoL engages job analysis experts to develop its task cluster. Like Dr. Deshon, the O\*Net data show that the work of a local pastor is complex, sophisticated and very demanding.

In our 2013 Emerging Insights report we arrived at similar conclusions about the work of local church clergy. We noted that pastoral work seems to require an expert-generalist, someone



who is highly skilled at performing an extraordinarily wide range of tasks and activities. There are very few people who can be excellent at every aspect of pastoral work. Most individuals, in fact, are expert-specialists: highly skilled to perform some of these tasks, less skilled to perform others, and insufficiently skilled to perform still others. Pastors know this about themselves, and so they understand that the best ministry

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opportunities are the ones in which their highest skills fit or match the ministry context. For example, pastors highly skilled in evangelism are best suited to start new churches, those highly skilled in teaching will likely perform best in churches that emphasize learning and study, and pastors highly skilled in care-giving will likely serve most effectively at churches with extensive congregational needs.

## Understanding the Work of Local Church Pastors

Over the past four years we have conducted additional research into the work load and work demand of local church pastors. We find that six characteristics of pastoral work may create potential challenges for the wellbeing of clergy.

- 1) Ministry is high-stakes work. Ministry work comprises some of the most important and sacred dimensions of human life. For example, pastors are responsible for helping people engage in spiritual transformation and spiritual growth. Pastors care for people during some of the most difficult and tragic experiences in their lives. They lead spiritual communities toward transforming the world. There is a great deal at stake in ministry work. Little to nothing in ministry is trivial work. Pastors

must also be effective managers. Most are, in effect, running a business in addition to being the spiritual leader of a faith community. Almost all ministry activities carry the potential for making significant impact, and so the potential benefits of excellent performance are high and mistakes or failures can carry significant spiritual and financial costs.

2) Ministry work is complex, continuous and diverse: Switching costs are high.

As Dr. Deshon concluded, pastoral work comprises a continuous and diverse flow of complex tasks and activities. Complex activities and tasks require the application of higher-order knowledge, skills and abilities. Performing complex activities and tasks effectively requires intense focus and significant effort. Hard work is often the bare minimum required. There are very few mindless or easy tasks in ministry. Most work pastoral work demands high levels of cognitive effort (concentration, reasoning, problem solving, working memory, inference control, etc), physical stamina and emotional control.

A continuous flow of tasks means that there is always another task, another activity, or another project in a pastor's workqueue. There is little to no downtime and few if any lulls in the flow of ministry work. Pastors are on-call most days, evenings, and nights for emergencies

or other parish needs. The constancy of work can create its own pressures: ministry work can at times seem unrelenting and never ending, yet the perceived importance of pastoral work creates a sense that everything must be done because every work activity or task matters. We heard many stories about days comprising more than twelve hours at work, after which pastors may take work home to continue during what should be their off-work hours.

A diverse flow refers to "switching costs" between tasks. The knowledge, skills, or abilities (KSAs) required to complete one task are different from those required to complete another. So, moving from one



Clergy with children at home experience higher work stress.

task to a different one requires switching to a different set of KSAs. For example, a pastor may walk out of a meeting about church finances and into meeting to care for parishioners who are facing a major life challenge. This switching between

one set of KSAs to another is costly in terms of cognitive effort, behavioral control and emotion regulation. There are few easy hand-offs from task-to-task. The complexity and switching costs of pastoral work place intense demands on resilience capacities. The constancy of work means that there may be few opportunities to rest and to replenish resilience capacities. This means that over time pastors may have chronically high levels of stress and fatigue and chronically low levels of resilience.

Multitasking is not a solution. In fact, researchers have debunked multitasking as a myth (see Resources below). Rather than actually doing several things at once, multitasking is really giving short bursts of attention to first one activity then another. This rapid back-and-forth of attention undermines performance. Studies also show that multitaskers may be more prone to attention deficit and other learning and performance problems.

3) Ministry work is punctuated by unexpected events. Pastors know and expect that the flow of ministry work can, and likely will be suddenly and sometimes dramatically changed by problems or issues which upset the tenuous “balance” in work tasks that a pastor has established. We used the term “punctuated” to capture the fact

that emergencies are also surprises. As one pastor put it “the needs of my congregation do not happen within a typical nine-to-five work day. You just never know when or where someone will get sick, injured or die. Sometimes it can be very hard to feel adequately prepared for emergencies when they happen.” Punctuations can also include emails that are framed as requiring immediate attention, the problems or “fires” that arise and must be resolved, or the sudden changes to schedule or deadlines that may occur. These punctuations must be attended to followed by a rapid return to the queue of normal ministry activities. Pastors must respond to these abrupt interruptions, but figuring out how to prepare is difficult.

4) There is little structure or guidance for prioritizing ministry work. Pastors are responsible for prioritizing their work, yet as we have already described they may have limited control over a significant portion of their work. In addition, deadlines are tight--as soon as one Sunday is over pastors must begin planning for the next one. Parishioners want their email or call answered quickly. Mistakes in prioritizing can lead to misallocation of personal and other ministry resources, and may leave important things undone or done poorly. In addition, pastors may feel over-managed by lay and

denominational leaders. Sometimes they feel punished for failing to meet another person's deadlines and priorities. As a consequence, most or all activities and tasks are treated as high-priority and, therefore, pastors may feel compelled to make time for everything. Consequently, work may never end. One more senior pastor described "wading through the daily onslaught of emails" while also trying to fit in daily ministry

**1/3** of solo pastors say they have little to no help for covering ministry needs.



activities as "a never ending battle to get it all done."

5) The downside of the turn toward more digital and less in-person communication. Longer-tenured pastors described a past in which relational connections with parishioners predominated. In the current environment, most communication

is indirect through emails, texts and social media. One pastor told us "[In the past] the congregation and I knew each other. We talked to each other. We didn't just hammer out a fast email, we took time to share and explain things. That gave us room to really understand and to really connect. Now, a text or brief email is much more common. It is hard to really connect with someone in this way." Whether this remembered style of ministry was ever a reality, the point these pastors are making is that interaction norms in the current ministry environment tend to be arm's-length through technology rather than personal and relational. These modes of communication can have several potentially pernicious outcomes. First, they can truncate communication to just the basic content that a person wants to provide. There is little to no opportunity for personal connection. There is, for example little to no attention to or opportunities for the exchange of care and compassion. Communication is only about "the facts" and so the personal and the person are left out.

Second, misunderstandings of meanings and intentions are more likely with these modes because people do not have the non-verbal signals that can be very important for effective communication. Nor do they have opportunities to work out misunderstandings together. A basic

feature of human experience is that we are highly sensitive to the negative, especially in interpersonal relationships. We therefore tend to watch for, notice and dwell on the negative rather than the positive. For social interactions to be perceived and remembered as positive, there must be a clear and strong positive element that outweighs any negative aspects. Furthermore, when communication is incomplete, we tend to fill in the gaps assuming the negative rather than the positive.

Third, some researchers have argued that these modes of communication can have the effect of making people feel they are being treated as objects rather than people. This occurs in part because richer personal connections are difficult to make and miscommunication is more likely, but also because the very mode--email, reports, memos--signals that the receiver of the communication is just another object in the environment rather than a human being with innate dignity.

For pastoral work, technology-based modes of communication can jeopardize a sense of personal connection and community that is so central to ministry work. The predominance of what we will call "impersonal communication" undermines the flourishing and the rich interpersonal connections that are

fundamental to wellbeing. Furthermore, over time the predominance of impersonal communication may erode the nourishing community in which ministry work must be done.

6) External change is rapid. External changes comprise the fast-paced and seemingly constant evolutions and revolutions of the social, legal, and financial contexts in which ministry work is embedded. These external changes can create ministry opportunities, but they can have a direct and negative impact on ministry work and pastoral wellbeing. These external changes can endanger the dignity, safety, health, psycho-social and spiritual wellbeing of both those people pastors are caring for and pastors themselves. In addition, external changes can dramatically impact, for example, the flow of ministry work, the outcomes toward which ministry work is directed, and the way pastors' time and effort must be allocated. These changes may be experienced as requiring that effort be redirected from the ultimate concerns of ministry to concerns of much less importance. For example, one pastor described a months-long conflict with several parents about whether Sunday morning services could be adjusted to make room for playoff games in a youth soccer league. The pastor described many hours spent in meetings, phone

calls and emails over this issue that, as she put it, would have been much better spent doing real ministry work.

## Summary

To be sure, while ministry work is demanding, it can also be deeply engaging, absorbing, and meaningful. But the very things that make pastoral work so meaningful can also make it extremely taxing. The potential for over-investments in ministry work are high since it can be difficult for pastors to find the tipping point between positive engagement and over-sacrificing, between fatigue due to a ministry job well-done and exhaustion due to over-investing. Lay leaders can be important allies in helping pastors--they can work with clergy to prioritize and manage ministry work, they can assume areas of responsibility in which pastors feel they are less skilled, and they can provide much-needed support and care for pastors.

## Additional Insights from the Flourishing in Ministry Program

- Flourishing in Ministry: The New Science of Wellbeing
- Never Alone: Social Support and the Wellbeing of Clergy
- Burning Up in Ministry
- The “Stages” of Flourishing

## Other Resources

- New York Times, How to Make the Most of Your Workday, accessed July 3 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/business/how-to-improve-your-productivity-at-work>.
- Earl Miller, Here’s Why You Shouldn’t Multitask, According to an MIT Neuroscientist, Forbes Magazine online, accessed July 3 2017, <http://fortune.com/2016/12/07/why-you-shouldnt-multitask>.
- The Myth of Multitasking, accessed July 3 2017, <https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/the-myth-of-multitasking-2/>. Stephen R. Covey. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.



# Our Research Program

The Flourishing in Ministry Program is a major, long-term program of research designed to understand and support the wellbeing of clergy and ministers. We study the lives and ministries of women and men spanning Christian religious traditions including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, and Historically Black. As part of our on-going research project we have gathered surveys from thousands of pastors and conducted life-narrative interviews with several hundred clergy. We are gathering daily life information from pastors to learn more about how ministry life unfolds day-by-day.

This series of reports provides information about current research insights and results. We will continue to publish and share more reports as we advance our research.

The Flourishing in Ministry team is located at the University of Notre Dame. Our research is supported by the generosity of the **Lilly Endowment, Inc.**

We invite and encourage pastors, judicatories, and denominations to join our project. Pastors can sign-up at our website and receive their own wellbeing profile. Judicatories and denominations can receive detailed information about the wellbeing of their member clergy.

Much more information is available at our website:

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