Faithful and Fractured

Responding to the CLERGY HEALTH CRISIS

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell
and Jason Byassee

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Proeschold-Bell, Rae Jean, author. | Byassee, Jason, author.
Title: Faithful and fractured : responding to the clergy health crisis / Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee.
Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Publishing Group, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017051464 | ISBN 9780801098833 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Clergy—Health and hygiene.
Classification: LCC BV4397.5 .P76 2018 | DDC 253/.2—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017051464

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Cover image: The Japanese art of kintsugi transforms broken ceramic vessels into beautiful and unique works of art using gold. The term “kintsugi life” highlights how you can employ this metaphor in your own life.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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From Rae Jean

I dedicate this book to the United Methodist Church pastors of North Carolina, who have constantly inspired and taught me.

I also dedicate this book to Robb Webb and Kristen Richardson-Frick, who are passionately committed to the United Methodist Church and who care deeply for the health of pastors.

From Jason

This book is for pastors and for those who care about pastors. I dedicate my portion of it to one of the latter group—Susan—whose elegance and kindness and desire for holiness made her a new mother for me.

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Preface

The Birth of the Duke Clergy Health Initiative

Ten years: that's how long I (Rae Jean) have been studying the health of clergy. Prior to this project, I had not once considered how clergy care for themselves. I had been studying health issues, like HIV, that are held up by society as public health concerns, and my work was funded by the federal government. Although the National Institutes of Health funds research on some occupations, clergy isn't one of them. But in 2007, a friend of mine was hired to work on a new grant awarded by The Duke Endowment to Duke Divinity School. The project goals were to understand and improve the holistic health of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. My friend asked if I would work as a part-time researcher for the project.

My first instinct was to say no. I knew nothing about clergy. More importantly, my work was devoted to health inequalities, and I doubted that clergy could be that unhealthy because, after all, they generally are educated and have health insurance. But as a researcher, I've learned it's best to get all the information and then decide, rather than to rely on assumptions.

I soon learned that clergy were crying out for help. Clergy would attend conferences together and be astounded by how much stress they dealt with, how many funerals they officiated for, and how many of them were overweight. Talk about stress and burnout was common. Their health insurance costs were astronomical, making it impossible for some churches to pay for a full-time pastor with health benefits. United Methodist bishop Lawrence McCleskey said at a meeting hosted by The Duke Endowment, "If we don't get insurance

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right for clergy, there won't be a church left to strengthen."[1] This statement garnered the attention of program officers at The Duke Endowment, which has a program focused on strengthening the rural church. When The Duke Endowment gave leaders from one United Methodist district funds to improve the health of their clergy, leaders from other districts raised an outcry, saying that *their* clergy needed the help just as much. This ultimately led The Duke Endowment to create a grant for the Duke Clergy Health Initiative.

As a community psychologist, I found this groundswell of interest compelling. However, clergy health was a departure from my typical work, and I really might have walked away had it not been for what I perceived as a lack of science behind these observations about clergy health. Of course clergy were gaining weight—that was true of individuals across the United States. And of course clergy health insurance was becoming more expensive—everyone's was! Before we decided clergy were a special case, I thought we ought to have systematic data. Later, I learned that there was in fact data behind The Duke Endowment's decision—reports showed clergy submitting more health care claims than the general population.[2]

So I put one toe in the water, and soon my whole soul followed. The Duke Clergy Health Initiative, stewarded by David Toole and eventually staffed by an extraordinary group of twenty-six wellness advocates, program implementers, data collectors, and staff, set out to understand the health of United Methodist clergy. We began by conducting thirteen focus groups so we could hear from clergy in their own words. The quotations in this book come from clergy focus groups held between 2008 and 2010 to understand ministry life and well-being from the perspective of pastors. Some quotes also come from clergy interviews held in 2014 and 2015 to understand positive mental health and burnout among clergy.

Percentages and other numeric data in this book come from the biennial surveys (described in the following paragraphs), in which all United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina were invited to participate; these were held in 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016. Most of the analyses for this book use 2016 data from clergy with current appointments (in other words, not retired clergy or those working outside of the UMC). We conducted most analyses selecting for clergy with full-time or part-time appointments to churches, and for those analyses the sample size is usually 1,105, although sometimes responses are missing for a few clergy. We limit some analyses to

1. L. McClesky, communicated at a meeting of The Duke Endowment, 2006.

2. Frenk et al., "Psychotropic Medication Claims"; Meador et al., "Church Benefits Association Survey."

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full-time church-appointed clergy (i.e., excluding part-time pastors), with a usual sample size of 852, although again, sometimes a few responses are missing. In one or two places, we report findings using survey data from before 2016 because either the question was not included on the 2016 survey or we compared the clergy data to other population data and wanted to keep the years of data collection comparable.

For each of these studies, clergy gave explicit consent to share their data, whether the data was a verbal quotation or a survey response. We promised to share their data only in ways that would not allow any single individual to be identified.

In 2008 we also conducted a survey of all United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.[3] This survey was remarkable in two respects. First, all currently appointed United Methodist clergy in the state were invited to participate. I argued against this approach—we researchers are used to sampling, and I didn't think we needed to hear from eighteen hundred clergy. But the two United Methodist bishops in North Carolina told me they would only endorse the survey if everyone was included. I mentioned already that I knew nothing about clergy, and this was lesson one: the United Methodist Church is a connectional ministry, meaning inclusion is paramount, even for something as tedious as taking a survey.

The second remarkable aspect of the survey was the high degree to which clergy participated. I learned a second lesson: clergy were really worried about their health and the health of their clergy brothers and sisters. They also knew that their responses would inform a health intervention designed specifically for them. Their response rate was an unheard-of 95 percent.[4] And the clergy didn't stop there—but neither did we. We made the survey longitudinal and repeated it in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016, and each survey wave had a great response rate. This is the only existing self-reported longitudinal data set of clergy health, which allows us to see how individual clergy do over time.

In addition, we used these surveys and focus groups to design a holistic health program tailored to clergy. This program, Spirited Life, aimed to improve pastors' overall health—their minds, bodies, and spirits. During focus

3. We have published many articles from the 2008 survey that describe its methods. See, for example, Proeschold-Bell et al., "Using Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory." The Duke Clergy Health Initiative website provides a less detailed description and offers numerous findings in accessible formats at http://clergyhealthinitiative.org.

4. In research, the higher your response rate is, the less biased your findings likely are. For example, if we had a much lower response rate, we might worry that sicker clergy hadn't participated and that our findings would show clergy as healthier than they really are. The wonderful thing about a 95 percent response rate is that it allows us not to worry about whether our findings are biased in one direction or another—the data are essentially complete.

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group meetings, pastors reported that "self-care" sounds "selfish";[5] we therefore thought it important to start Spirited Life with a theological grounding. Participants first attended a workshop in which we cared for them, offering them a chance to be in the pews while other pastors gave sermons and served communion. The content of the sermons connected theology and health, often with a focus on incarnation. In one sermon, Rev. Ed Moore showed an image of the jars at Cana and compared those jars to pastors' bodies. If a pastor's jar is broken, it is harder to fill to the brim with the water about to be changed to wine. If the jar has integrity, however, it can hold God's grace much better. This initial workshop also included time to articulate personal health goals; we asked pastors to set goals themselves in order to encourage their own agency. We then supported pastors through health coaching for an extended period of time (two years) so they could make a behavior change, slip up, and still have the support of a health coach to get back at it.[6] Two years was also enough time to work on more than one goal, if desired. For interested pastors, we facilitated their participation in an online weight-loss and healthy-eating program and in stress-reduction programs. Because it's hard to stay engaged in healthy behaviors for a long time, we used additional workshops and a small grant to reengage pastors across the span of those two years.

Spirited Life was innovative in its long time frame and its combination of weight-loss and stress-management programming. We were all eager to find out if it made a difference in clergy health. Through rigorous research, we learned that Spirited Life led to clinically meaningful (and statistically significant) improvements for weight, waist circumference, blood pressure, and HDL cholesterol.[7] These physical health results endured across the two-year intervention, whereas most programs don't sustain results past one year. These results were also impressive in that other programs tend to target one specific outcome (such as blood pressure) and only enroll people highly motivated to improve it. By contrast, we enrolled all who responded and let them choose their health goals, and we still found significant improvements in the outcomes we measured.

To be clear, the significant improvements we found were in *physical* outcomes. Spirited Life did not improve depression or stress symptoms. A big motivation for this book was my frustration that Spirited Life didn't help pastors' mental health. I took this failure personally and worked together with our team to seek a more fruitful way forward, which ultimately led us

5. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Theoretical Model."
6. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Randomized Multiple Baseline Design."
7. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Two-Year Holistic Health and Stress Intervention."

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to the field of positive mental health—the focus of chapters 6 and 7 in this book. In addition, spread throughout the book are lessons we learned about providing programs to clergy and the concepts related to pastors' lives and behavior change that we consider essential.

If you've picked up this book and are a clergy person, I'm delighted by that. The findings and tentative solutions in this book are meant for you—I had you in mind the whole time I was writing. Likewise, if you are reading this book as someone who cares about clergy—either because you help run their health insurance program or because you teach them leadership skills or because you want to see congregations thrive into the future—know that I wrote with you also in mind.

Even though most of my knowledge is about United Methodist clergy, I hope that clergy across many denominations and faiths will read this book. Clergy face similar issues, even when theology differs. Studies on the work of diverse clergy show great similarities in terms of job demands, roles, and how clergy spend their time.[8] These studies cover mainline Protestant and other Christian clergy, as well as Catholic priests, and they occurred in the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand. It is true, though, that the clergy health issues in this book are most relevant to conditions in high-income countries. More research still needs to be done on clergy health in low- and middle-income countries.

You will see in chapter 1 that findings indicating health problems for United Methodist clergy also hint at a larger problem among clergy more broadly. Episcopal, Unitarian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations are among those who see distressing signals in their health insurance and claims data. Even though we draw on data from United Methodists (the largest of the "mainline" denominations in the United States), these findings are broadly relevant.

Reading this book won't require you to slog through research findings without a theological voice. Recognizing my limitations, I sought a theologian to offer a religious perspective throughout the book. I am grateful to Jason Byassee for joining me in this endeavor and for deepening my thinking, and hopefully yours, about clergy health.

Our two voices will alternate like the dialogue Jason and I truly had while working on this book. Most of Jason's insights take shape within the "Behind the Pulpit" sections, in which he sometimes offers theological grounding and

8. Carroll, *God's Potters*; Dewe, "New Zealand Ministers of Religion"; Frame and Shehan, "Work and Well-Being in the Two-Person Career"; Gleason, "Perception of Stress among Clergy and Their Spouses"; Hang-Yue, Foley, and Loi, "Work Role Stressors and Turnover Intentions"; Kay, "Role Conflict and British Pentecostal Ministers"; Kuhne and Donaldson, "Balancing Ministry and Management"; Noller, "Clergy Marriages."

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other times provides examples of pastors' experiences. These examples are true, although in order to protect pastors' identities, he has changed names and details and has merged multiple pastors' and parishioners' experiences. You'll also hear Jason's voice in some tables, lists, and sidebars throughout the book. We hope you'll find our dialogue both informative and applicable to your own circumstances.

Behind the Pulpit

Why Share These Findings?

I (Jason) am interested in this project because of the gospel's promise. Irenaeus says "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."[9] I'm part of a denomination with pastors who are remarkably unhealthy and thus less alive. That means we are not living the fully alive life that Irenaeus describes as the way of discipleship. To shift the image, we are fractured in a number of ways. Paul says we hold the treasure of grace in "earthen vessels," a charmingly modest image. But if those vessels are nothing but shards on the floor, we receive no grace, nor can we pass any on to others. Rae Jean's work documents these fractures clearly. So where's the problem *in our gospel*? How is the thing that is supposed to make us fully alive actually making less of us?

I've seen it go the other way too. Sometimes folks *get it*, and life with Jesus becomes the most alive sort of life there is. Sometimes even we clergy make progress toward better health. A buddy and I lumbered our way to finishing a marathon a few years back. With another set of friends at my church, I ran a half marathon to raise money for a ministry in our church. I've lost thirty pounds before putting forty back on, so I know the greater energy that comes from the former, the misery from the latter. And I believe Jesus is Lord over all life—including every bite we take (and don't take). Christianity has always been bound up with holy feasting and holy fasting on the way to fullness of life with God.

As a theologian, I will try to flesh out some concepts theologically, like "call" and "control" and "work." I will also bring to bear my experience as a pastor who has participated in surveys and studies like these alongside my peers. Rae Jean collects the data and interprets it; I offer some theological and pastoral shading along the way.

One of Christ's historic roles is that of healer, making the cosmos and all creatures fully well, as he shows through his ministry in first-century Galilee and Judea. Christians have founded hospitals and clinics ever since,

9. *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 153.

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demonstrating God's claim to be Lord even over disease and its distortion of human flourishing. The church has a strong history of caring for folks' physical health. But we have been more nervous about helping with mental health. Antidepressant medication was recently recommended to a clergy friend. She balked—perhaps thinking that if she were spiritually and mentally stronger, she wouldn't need it. The psychiatrist said, "You know most of your colleagues are on antidepressants, right?" The doctor may have overstated this, but he was giving this pastor (and caregiver) permission to accept care, allowing her to keep serving Jesus's church. My dad is a psychologist, so I grew up surrounded by mental health professionals. Though clergy and their churches have not always integrated the wisdom of mental health professionals into their lives, I would like to see this become integral to clergy and congregation health. I want to see my pastor colleagues more whole, more fully alive. I think life with Jesus is the best sort of life there is. And I want more of that life "that really is life" as Paul puts it (1 Tim. 6:19), for all of us, in pursuit together.

What to Expect

There is a true crisis in clergy physical health. We believe it stems from the stressors pastors face today and the expectations other people have of pastors, paired with pastors' expectations of themselves. In this book, we look at what it means to be called to holy work and how the deep sense that your work is sacred makes you more likely to sacrifice (even if unconsciously) your well-being. We also look at the external expectations. It is the combination of the two that sets the stage—for some clergy at least—for depression and stress.

To drive home to you the dire state of clergy physical health, we share robust numbers on what we know of pastors' physical health problems. We also make sense of the history of clergy health and why it's wrong to think that clergy used to be physically fit but aren't today.

In the final three chapters, we take you with us into the world of positive mental health—a world we wish we had known about sooner and one we think holds great promise for the promotion of mental health *and* physical health. The benefits of positive mental health hold for clergy and nonclergy alike, and in chapter 6 we delve into the science behind positive emotions. We then let pastors speak in their own words through quotes culled from interviews with ordinary pastors who have high positive mental health and are, by all accounts, flourishing. Their recommendations for sustaining positive mental health in ministry are the heart of chapter 7. Finally, we end by

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envisioning the future of ministry and suggesting what is possible now, in this very moment.

We know most of you don't have the resources or the calling to design clergy health programs. Even so, we hope that someone who reads this book does just that! For you, we've included an appendix with the gold nuggets from our experiences in designing integrated physical-mental-spiritual programs for clergy. We share our hard-learned lessons in the hope of benefiting others who, like us, create programs to improve clergy health.

Taken together, the chapters in this book should inform individual clergy striving to be strong ministers across the years; lay leaders aspiring to improve the environment of their churches; clergy supervisors interested in fostering a cadre of strong clergy; and maybe even program developers seeking to design programs to promote the physical and mental health of clergy, which will benefit us all.

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1

Creatures Doing the Creator's Work

> Twelve-hour workday. Three committee meetings. One breakfast meeting and one lunch meeting. Working with the Music Director to tweak the sound system in the Fellowship Hall for Sunday youth worship. Working with the Associate Pastor on Confirmation Sunday plans. At least three dozen emails and one dozen phone calls. Various conversations with folks about new members, revamped websites, capital campaigns, session retreats, NEXT Church, Sunday school classes and one member who asked how my family is adjusting to the move. *Honestly, I get to do this for a living. How awesome is that?*
>
> Steven Lindsley, Facebook post (May 7, 2014)

Ah, a day in the life of a pastor. Despite public perception, pastors do so much more than write and deliver Sunday's sermon. You likely know this already, or else you wouldn't have picked up this book. However, it's worth taking a minute to examine the content of a pastor's day, beyond its essential busyness.

The day is long. This particular pastor is writing a Facebook post during his first weeks at a new church, at the end of a twelve-hour workday (and you have to wonder, is posting about ministry life essentially doing more work?). This pastor broke bread while working, with both breakfast and lunch occurring during work meetings. It's unclear whether he ever got a break during the day or was able to have dinner with his family, but let's

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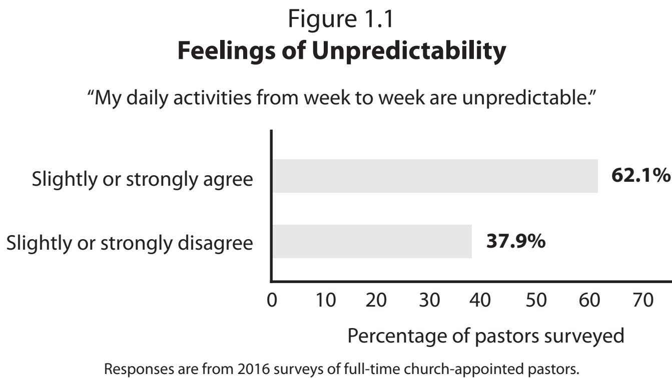
hope that he did.[1] The one dozen phone calls suggest frequent interruptions and a lot of work with people. Working with the associate pastor suggests a supervisory relationship, indicating that this pastor needs to have managerial and delegation skills. But perhaps most notable is the range of activities that fall within a single day, from attracting new members to raising money to communicating using the web to—almost laughably—tweaking the sound system!

This pastor spent his day moving from one different task to another, quite likely at a pace set by others, with interruptions, and with little opportunity to see a particular project or decision through to completion. This pastor also drew on diverse skill sets throughout the day. Studies have shown that toggling between tasks that involve different skill sets can result in a particular kind of stressor termed "task switching." In fact, toggling from task to task can be harder on someone than doing the same very stressful task all day—because the very act of changing gears costs mental resources and can slow a person down and lead to errors.[2]

Figure 1.1
Feelings of Unpredictability



Responses are from 2016 surveys of full-time church-appointed pastors.

This pastor had a very long day. He did not mention driving, but pastors who serve in rural areas often make long drives in order to do things like visit parishioners in hospitals. Also, this pastor did *not* mention preparing his sermon for Sunday, but I'm sure he thought about it and maybe even worried about it. As we heard in one clergy focus group, "Sunday always comes right on time"—even if you're not ready for it!

1. Darling, Hill, and McWey, "Understanding Stress and Quality of Life for Clergy and Clergy Spouses"; Wells et al., "Relationship between Work-Related Stress and Boundary-Related Stress."

2. Monsell, "Task Switching."

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For this pastor, this particular day did not involve any crises, but it is quite in the nature of clergy work to require adjustment and readjustment as new priorities arise. Sometimes these new priorities mean performing a funeral during a full week when Sunday's sermon isn't ready yet. Other times, new priorities can come in the form of parishioners in crisis. Studies have shown that, among people in the United States seeking help for a serious mental illness, nearly a quarter approach clergy as their first line of professional support.[3]

Although 74.8 percent of full-time church-appointed pastors reported that they don't mind advance scheduling, 25.2 percent slightly or strongly agreed with the statement, "I do not like to make appointments too far in advance because I do not know what might come up."

Even though this pastor's day was lengthy, long hours in and of themselves do not seem to be a problem for the mental health of clergy. The weeks of Advent that lead into Christmas and the observances during Holy Week, leading into Easter, may be among the busiest times of the year for pastors, but pastors see work during those seasons as essential—core to their calling—and because they carry such great meaning, those times of the year are not the most stressful for clergy. In fact, in looking at our survey data, there was no relationship between the number of hours worked per week and depression or anxiety. Working long hours when one is energized in ministry is not necessarily a problem.

What does seem to be a problem is when pastors feel like they can't ever take a break from ministry work or when they feel guilty for not doing enough.[4] Our survey data give us an idea of how common these pressures are among clergy. Pastors working in poor areas, whether rural or urban, face extra pressure from the economic stagnation, resource-deprived schools, and lack of hope for the future experienced by their parishioners. The gospel message works well in such circumstances, but the toll on pastors is real.

When asked, "Over the past year, how guilty have you felt about not doing enough in your role as clergy?," 25.6 percent of full-time church-appointed pastors in 2016 indicated they felt moderately guilty, and 9.5 percent said they felt very or extremely guilty.

Consider also the numerous meetings each week for things like spiritual growth or building and maintaining the church. The pastor cannot possibly organize and attend all the events, and doing so might in fact undermine the church by undercutting the feeling of ownership of the members. Churches rely on parishioners—who are essentially

3. Wang, Berglund, and Kessler, "Patterns and Correlates."
4. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Using Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory."

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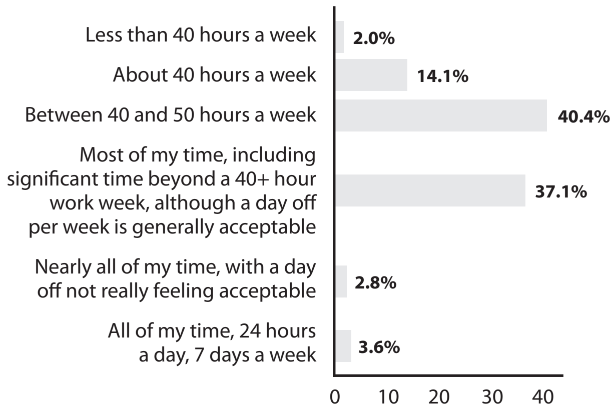
Figure 1.2
Expectations for Availability

"How much of your time do you think church members expect you to make available to them?"



Responses from full-time church-appointed clergy in 2016. In 2014, the responses to "most," "nearly," and "all of my time" totaled to 6.5 percentage points higher; interventions with NC clergy and congregations may be making a difference.

unpaid volunteers—to conduct much of this work.[5] The pastor has to notice who is good at what and develop the skills of volunteers. And the number of volunteers needed can be numerous: volunteers for the finance committee, building maintenance, hospitality events, childcare, helping the pastor develop a vision for the church, and many other tasks. In one focus group I led, a second-career pastor who used to work for a large company emphasized how hard it is to lead volunteers and, more generally, to work within the organizational structure of the United Methodist Church.

> In many small churches, there's a lot of stress. I came out of working in a company with a $7-million-dollar budget and a number of people that I was in charge of, and I did not have the pressure and stress that's on me in the ministry of three churches. You just have a control in industry that you don't have [in ministry]. If you had a disruptive individual that wasn't a team player, you could fire him! Your CEO . . . was readily down the hall and available for discussion about problems. Now, he's in Raleigh and he's not available. Your district managers are tied up in paperwork and everything else and not able to come to the churches or to the locations where you need them to help relieve that stress.

5. Carroll, *God's Potters*.

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Pastors must be good leaders on small and large levels. They demonstrate leadership on a smaller level when they identify talented parishioners and work with them, and they demonstrate leadership on a larger level in where they choose to put their—and the church's—energy. On both levels, pastors are highly visible, and their work and actions (even those unrelated to work) are often judged.[6]

Behind the Pulpit

Rent-Free Living

Folks in the recovery community sometimes give out this sage advice: Don't let anyone live in your head rent-free. If they're not adding value to your life, kick them out of your thoughts. I wish it were that easy.

I got to know Beth early in my time as head pastor. Her presence brings to mind a different saying, this one from out on the Canadian prairie: be wary of whoever meets you at the train. That is, the first person welcoming you to the stop on the prairie is there for a reason. He or she wants something from you or is alienated from the rest of the community and wants to get to you first. So it was with Beth. She had great energy for starting ministries, had a heart for reaching the community, and came to worship like she was hooked up to a homing beacon. She was cheerful when she saw me, and when she hugged me, she smelled good—like being-close-to-grandma good.

Till she quit showing up for anything. A friend saw her and asked where she'd been: "I just can't do it right now," Beth said. Then I started hearing things from her friends. "Beth says you only care about the younger people." "Beth says you've wrecked her Sunday school class." "Beth says you're out of town too much." I was tempted to turn this last complaint around on her: "If you think I'm gone too much, you must like it when I'm here!" But logic was not what Beth was after. She was after hurtful story lines that could undermine me. That the story lines were mutually contradictory didn't matter any more than it matters for attack narratives in partisan politics. Folks eventually assume that where there's smoke there's fire. And Beth made plenty of smoke.

I tried going to her directly. We'd have a friendly visit, but no behavior change resulted. I tried sending notes. Sometimes these received thanks but no behavioral alteration. I tried asking her friends what was eating her. "Beth just gets that way," they said. But then I started wondering about these friends. Why

6. Lee and Iverson-Gilbert, "Demand, Support, and Perception."

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were they listening to her? Why were they passing on these critiques if there wasn't a shred of truth in them?

Then the really damaging accusations started to fly. "Beth says your salary is x." The figure was some 60 percent more than I actually made. I wanted to reply, "I thought making money was no crime in this country," or, "I plan to make that one day, when I deserve it," but I didn't. I just said that Beth didn't know what she was talking about. And I told the askers what I actually made. In Methodist land you can find our salaries with a few clicks of a mouse. These salaries are public for reasons of accountability and history, and they have always been. In my case, as one of the higher paid people in the conference, this should have encouraged my fellow church folks to help keep me from the danger of wealth, about which John Wesley often preached. But here it was being used to suggest I was out of touch, elitist, overpaid, and not worth it. The bizarre accusations kept coming. I'd broken Beth's confidentiality. I'd run off all the old people. I'd also run off all the parents of young children. Again, these claims were impossible to square with the facts on the ground. But they were coming fast and furious.

I could guess at where this pain all came from in Beth's past, but that didn't matter. In terms of our church, I could see her point. The new members joining our church were disproportionately from my age group—parents with young kids. As they joined, it drastically changed the dynamics in the Sunday school class that Beth was teaching, and she missed the folks whose kids had been placed in another Sunday school class to accommodate growth. This was not planned by me or anybody else; it just happened (and has continued since I left—no credit for me!), but it affected her life and left her feeling unhappy. I had no idea Sunday school classes were competitive! Shows how naïve I was. In a strange, roundabout way, you could blame me for this, even though not a single dime was moved in the budget and no plan was made by the staff to make these things so.

One thing I actually *did* do was scratch the children's sermon from our liturgy. Children's sermons go on too long. They patronize the kids. They bore the adults. I did this after years of advocacy for the change by our children's minister, our children's ministry team, and our worship committee. The few people who wanted to keep the children's sermon weren't usually the children's sermon preachers. Those who peached the children's sermons did their best with a dated practice, worked hard at it, often produced good fruit from wretched soil, and seemed relieved, for the most part, by this decision. The complaints came from the children's sermon preachers' friends, who worried that the sermon-givers were being disrespected. We continued to have children come forward during worship—but they did so to lead. They blessed something or someone, laid

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hands on it for prayer, and took an active part in leading our worship. It was a great change, and I couldn't have thanked our children's minister more for suggesting it. But it *was* genuinely change, and it prompted the comment about my running off the parents of young kids. This demographic actually thanked me for the change (and the kids, frankly, didn't care either way, although they can tell when they're being used as a prop). It was the right thing to do, and doing the right but potentially costly thing is called leadership. I exercised it. And Beth resented it.

In the end, it turned out that I was safe from Beth's machinations. Sometimes she went too far in public, and when she did, it won me support. She would be so extreme that even her friends had conversations with me afterward and left feeling reassured, fortified, and newly confident in my leadership.

But what if that all hadn't been the case? What if we were in a smaller church and Beth's voice were louder, amplified in a smaller echo chamber? What if she had contributed a significant portion of the budget? What if she had been, frankly, more convincing? What if folks hadn't been inclined to give me the benefit of the doubt?

Even though things banked in my favor, Beth clearly got in my head. I'd recite emails I'd like to send her. I'd rehearse speeches I planned to give to her friends. I'd anticipate places her arguments would pop up in committee meetings and refute them in advance. I still do! Instead of strategizing how the church could creatively do ministry in our community, I was sparring with Beth in my mind.

I had a lot of the things one would imagine goes into being happy: a big church, a decent payday by church standards, lots of support, and an affirming congregation. And I felt stressed all the time. Some of this depends on one's internal motor—I've wrestled with anxiety and depression at various times in my life, something that can make me more prone to feel stress (Rae Jean discusses this more in chap. 3). Some of it is just the nature of the job—folks see someone in a visible position of power and naturally look for that person's flaws. I get it. This scrutiny comes with standing up in front of people and daring to speak of God. Sometimes their minds wander from my words: "He's gained weight." "He's more arrogant than I thought." "Wait, that's outrageous!" And naturally some of this comes from folks' own lives and has nothing to do with me.

But it does. I want people to be pleased with me. Too much so. It's one reason I went into this job. Jesse Helms, the late, staunchly conservative senator from North Carolina, used to joke that the other side could nominate one Mortimer Snerd to run against him and that guy would immediately have 45

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percent of the vote.[7] He slept at night knowing that nearly half the electorate wanted him out. I could have 5 percent of people unhappy with me and it would ruin my day. This is, of course, ridiculous psychological math. I advise against it. But I could never figure out how to do the job without that sort of counting.

Another pastor friend said something wise: whatever you do in ministry, 10 percent of people will adore the ground you walk on, 10 percent of people will hate your guts and actively work for your ouster, and 80 percent of people will shake your hand, say "good sermon, preacher!" once a week, and not think about you again till the next time they turn up.

Our problem is often one of meaning. We go into ministry because we want to be part of Jesus's saving lives and of his coming kingdom, which will renew all things. And then we can't see how our jobs have anything to do with those things. Fill out these forms. Go to these meetings. Get gossiped about. Where's the drama we sought? The life-changing, earth-restoring avalanche of grace we wanted to be part of?

Stanley Hauerwas exaggerates only a little when he imagines a parishioner asking a pastor if he can pick up her son Johnny from school and take him to ball practice. The pastor has the time in the afternoon and can't think of a reason to say no. So he does it. He's well on his way to becoming a quivering mass of availability, to paraphrase Hauerwas.[8] We're not sure what ministry is for, so we act desperately nice in every circumstance, foisting our neediness and desire to please all comers. We went into ministry to change lives and society, and we end up being nibbled to death by ducks, as Hauerwas has been known to say.[9] That's not martyrdom. It's pathetic. No wonder so many ministers flame out with money or sex troubles when they don't eat themselves to death. These are signs of despair. A Catholic friend of mine nearly worked himself to death for his diocese. His bishop stopped his freneticism with these wise words: it's good to be a martyr but not to the bureaucracy.

What's the answer? A bigger gospel. One with a crucified Jew who rules the cosmos. One where resurrection changes all our systems of power and glory. One where we ministers are profoundly secondary because Christ and his church are first. A gospel big enough to take up a cross and follow Jesus is the answer to every human challenge. It has to be the answer here too. I was never quite able to keep the concerns about criticism out of my head, but I think part

7. "Conservative Icon Jesse Helms Dead at 86."

8. This story and phrasing is attributed to Stanley Hauerwas, Christian Ethics lectures (Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, spring 1997).

9. This phrasing is attributed to Stanley Hauerwas, Christian Ethics lectures (Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, spring 1997).

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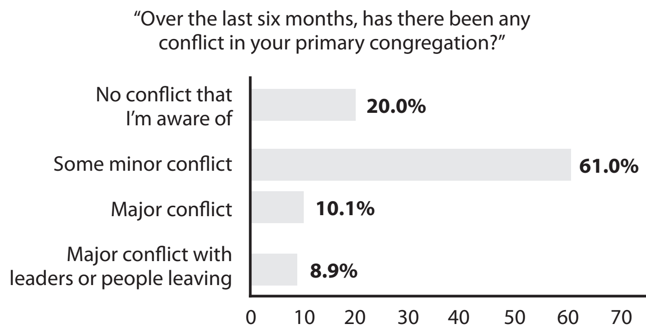
of the answer is walking alongside other people—clergy and parishioners—who are intent on focusing on the gospel and reminding us—yes, even us clergy—of the cross.

Clergy Work: Roles and Opportunities

Anecdotally among United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy, the most stressful seasons are (1) Charge Conference, which involves reporting church membership and financial numbers to the bishop and (2) the annual evaluation of the pastor by the church leaders. These are two times when UMC clergy are being judged, and I'm sure other Christian traditions have an analogue. Being judged creates a particularly difficult kind of stressor for clergy both because it is interpersonal in nature and because the judging is of the clergy person's work, which is sacred to them. Clergy want to do their absolute best in the work they are called by God to do, and falling short is stressful to them in a way that is less likely to be the case for people doing work they do not consider to be sacred. Being judged by congregants may also occur in a public way, which can be shaming and emotionally difficult. We will delve more into holy work in chapter 2.

Churches are led by many people, and that's intentional because it allows many people to do God's work. However, this can also lead to disagreements that can turn into battles. Consider first that pastors are paid by the church to lead the church. This situation itself is tricky—who has final decision-making power: the pastor or the church leaders? Or the bishop? Or even God?

Figure 1.3
Presence of Conflict



Responses are from 2016 surveys of full-time church-appointed pastors.

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Also, when thinking about why work in the church may involve conflict, consider the diversity of the parishioners themselves and the differing opinions they may have on how a pastor's time is best spent. One parishioner may think that visiting parishioners who are too sick to come to church is paramount, whereas another may think that growing the church through focusing on the youth ministry is most important. These are matters of opinion in which no one is clearly right or wrong. With many directions possible, pastors can end up trying to focus on everything. As one pastor told us, "Every person sitting in the pew has a separate job description for our job. And when you put it all together, it's an impossible task. Part of our job is to help them understand what our real job entails and what their job entails as well."

The difficulty of a pastor's job description has also been written about by L. Gregory Jones, who likewise acknowledges that the sheer diversity of tasks and having essentially multiple bosses can make the work seem fragmented and undesirable.[10] He suggests that churches and pastors should reorient pastors' work to focus on the process—the process of bearing witness, building relationships, and fostering practices of faithful living—with their sole boss being God.

Lacking this theological perspective, MyPlan.com regularly publishes job descriptions to help students and professionals make career decisions. In the 2017 clergy job description, twenty-one tasks are listed and thirty-six skill sets presented.[11] Although many jobs have a similar number of tasks and skill sets required, the skills for clergy strike me as more diverse. The tasks include caregiving, interpretation and meaning-making, writing and public speaking, hiring and directing paid and unpaid staff, educating youth and adults, fundraising, making financial decisions, strategizing to grow, and organizing civic and interfaith events. In addition to working within their own organizations, clergy also work with the public.

Table 1.1 Skill Sets for Clergy

Importance (out of 100)	**Skill Set** (items here were chosen for their diversity from thirty-six listed)
83	Resolving conflicts and negotiating with others
78	Assisting and caring for others
78	Organizing, planning, and prioritizing work
77	Communicating with persons outside the organization

10. Jones, "Job Description."
11. "Clergy," O*NET 20.3 database.

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77	Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
74	Interpreting the meaning of information for others
74	Getting information
73	Making decisions and solving problems
72	Thinking creatively
70	Interacting with computers
69	Training and teaching others
68	Judging the qualities of things, services, or people
68	Communicating with supervisors, peers, or subordinates
65	Providing consultation and advice to others
64	Developing and building teams
60	Developing objectives and strategies
59	Coaching and developing others
58	Coordinating the work and activities of others
56	Performing administrative activities
51	Analyzing data or information
50	Selling or influencing others
48	Documenting/recording information
41	Monitoring and controlling resources

Source: http://www.myplan.com/careers/clergy/description-21-2011.00.html.

When the tasks and skills of clergy are laid out in a long list, it becomes apparent that the core work of ministry occurs between people—between the pastor and parishioners, between and among parishioners, between the pastor and community members, and every other sort of iteration. Even when everyone assumes good intent, ministry work is ripe for misunderstandings and differences of opinion, leading to potential conflict.

How does conflict arise among well-intentioned Christian people? What does conflict look like in a church, and how do pastors experience it? The answers to these questions are best described with a story from experience.

Behind the Pulpit

Navigating Conflict

During the four years that I was head pastor of a large church, the church did well. The church grew by some 15 percent, brought in more money each year

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and flipped big deficits into big surpluses, added a worshiping community, sent folks to seminary, and grew in depth and breadth of impact. I loved that church, and they seemed to love me.

Most of them anyway.

There were a few parishioners who kept me up at night and made me wonder how long I'd get to keep my post. Once I remember telling a buddy before a meeting that I expected to be heated, "They're coming after me with the long knives tonight."

Did I really mean it? That church leaders were coming to administrative council bent on slaying me? I think I did. I was that anxious. We pastors tend to be pleasers, as you may have heard. We thrive even more on folks' encouragement and approbation than most other humans. We pastors got enough pats on the head earlier in life for doing God stuff that we went to seminary and into church work. And then all of a sudden the place from which we've always gotten showers of encouragement becomes a place from which we get stinging, blistering, bilious criticism. It's like the inhaler that is supposed to keep you alive suddenly starts puffing sand into your lungs instead. Or needles.

Take that night when I was convinced the long knives were coming. We had a staff problem. I was new to this senior pastorate and only thirty-six years old, promoted above my "station" on the job ladder to a 1,300-member multisite church in a vibrant college town in the Appalachian Mountains. And I'd supervised exactly zero people before. None. Zilch. I knew how I liked being supervised from previous jobs and figured I'd do that. More importantly, I knew how I *didn't* like being supervised and figured I'd avoid that. I'd tell people the truth, look them in the eye, get to know their families, and encourage their flourishing in life and work, and together we'd set off on an adventure of church growth on the way to changing our community. We'd make up a merry band traveling together to churchly and social and financial bliss. The church grows and people think well of you. Your pay increases and ministry colleagues envy you. Your kids have what they want, you go on cool vacations, your spouse is happy, and everything hums in sync. (You may detect from my tone that not all my motivations were entirely holy.) I could do this supervision thing. How hard could it be? People generally like me, and I'm good at getting them to do what I want. It's why I landed a job like that in the first place.

So suddenly I was at the head of a table of a dozen staffers, each responsible for ministering to hundreds of people. I knew what it was like to sit in another seat around a table like that. You needed to turn up on time, be prepared for the meeting, be ready to advocate for resources for your ministry area, escape with as little extra work appended to your portfolio as possible (curse the words in every job description: "other duties as assigned"), and move on. But suddenly

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as a staff supervisor, my job was to get us all rowing in the same direction—not pulling against one another for attention and resources but pulling together in one direction, making one another better on the way to the whole being better. There's a reason skewerings of office culture like *The Office* and *Office Space* are so delicious: because it's much easier to be cynical about institutions trying to do what I had to do than it is to sit in that chair and actually do it well.

And I didn't always do it well. I was with a friend recently who was reporting on his institution's new executive: "He's fired a few people," he said. "And we don't really do that around here." I know what he meant. They're a small shop. Harmony is valued above all else. Firing someone is awful. In the church, you're commanded to love. We boil that down to being nice. And being fired is not nice. Ergo we fire no one. It's really, really hard to get fired in church. Because people in chairs like mine are often cowards. We want to be liked above all else, so we'd rather bear with subpar performance than take the heat that comes from firing someone. We're wrong to do this, as I hope you can tell my description here implies. "We're commanded to love people—not to employ them," a wise older friend says.

Lucky for me, as a proud member of the coward club, I never had to fire anyone. We set a new direction as a congregation—staff and lay leaders rowing together—and some were called to do other kinds of work elsewhere. Bless them—they've each done good ministry before and since moving on. But one narrative about the changes in our staff became particularly damaging for me. It was that I was running off the older members of the staff. This was demonstrably false. Our oldest and our youngest pastoral staffer both left of their own accord. Both had done great work at the church, and both went on to do great work elsewhere. But appearance is reality in politics and in church. And in this case, my own profile—my relative youth as a senior pastor—lent to this false appearance. I *was* change. I looked young, and it seemed like the folks I brought in were even younger. Again, it *seemed*. One replacement hire was decades older than the person who left, but it didn't matter. The grumbling began. "He doesn't like old people." People said I was only interested in the young people in our church. The elderly better get ready for a season of being ignored.

This was really dangerous. If the greatest generation folks are dishonored, everybody will be displeased. Who disses Grandma and gets away with it? Further, those folks give more than younger people. They often have more resources. They grew up in a time when giving to the church was relatively unquestioned as an institution. And they show up in greater numbers. If we were going to reach the new folks we all wanted to reach, and the young people that the general denomination had told us for years we *had* to reach, I needed the older folks' help. To have a wedge driven between them and me was not helpful to the mission.

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And then I made things worse.

"What are you going to look for in Suzanne's replacement?" someone asked at the long-knife meeting, innocently enough. Forty-odd pairs of eyes looked at me. They were disproportionately older. Although we had more young members in the congregation, it takes new folks a while to trickle into leadership, and folks who've been in the church for years tend to suggest their friends and accept assignments themselves more readily. I started reeling off what we needed: someone hungry to serve, someone who could look after our older people, someone who could preach and lead and offer pastoral care. Then I said it.

"Somebody young."

This was preposterously stupid. I'd played right into the hands of the backhanded gossip about me. It would have been illegal to act upon; you can't discriminate based on age in your hiring. This person would have elder care among her responsibilities. It was ridiculous to prejudice the coming hire toward somebody young. I'm not sure what I was thinking. Enthusiasm is often associated with youth, but I should have known better. I know that I can find a trainload of sorry young people who quit putting their heart into their work years ago, not to mention a slew of older people who have spirits and work ethics that shame their younger peers.

I didn't even mean what I said. But I'd said it. And now it was out there, on the record (somebody was taking minutes), for folks to see and tell their friends. Way to dig your own grave, genius.

By the end of the meeting, some of the saints around the table had thrown me a lifeline. One sympathetic man said, "I'm sure you don't mean to limit us to young people." I looked at him—a lay leader I admired, whose approval I really wanted. No, needed. I could tell he was disappointed in me and trying to help me out. Another saint sitting by him had a daughter in pastoral ministry. He spoke up to say that she ministered effectively to the elderly as a twenty-something herself. "Maybe we need a young person with an old soul," someone else helpfully suggested. The meeting was not a total waste. In fact, they took my gauche comment and jujitsued it into something fruitful.

But there was also real damage done, and it was my fault. *And that's where stress comes from*. In this church I had every advantage one could wish for. The congregation had been led so well for so long that it could survive a lousy pastor. Perhaps that's part of why I was sent there. I had time to learn on the job leading a healthy church that needed no quick or instantaneous turnaround. Dozens of pastors in our conference would have given a significant bodily appendage to be appointed there. But I was sent instead. And there in public I said the stupidest thing imaginable. Maybe I'd heard once too often that the church

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has to have younger people or we'll die. Maybe I was just comfortable working with folks younger than me. Or maybe my own pride and ambition, my own desire for the wrong things (see my comments above about the sort of growth I longed for), some correct observations about what was holding us back, and some hackneyed thoughts about what would fix it, all mixed together to become dramatically unwise words. My sin, lack of experience, and anxiety hurt my efforts and made things worse.

Even so, I had supporters aplenty and growth to point to. Rotating leaders is natural—I had to find my own team. The folks who quit had their own patent issues, obvious to all observers. And the tussles with the staff gave way to genuine mutual respect and love and to the hiring of new staff that immediately made us all look better (just not always younger!). But imagine if I'd had fewer supporters, no growth, or lasting conflict—then what? And plenty of folks in much tougher appointments have one or more of those things. During those four years, I couldn't sleep at night, even though I often had significant protection from the denomination that never really had to mobilize on my behalf. What if there'd been none when the wolves circled?

I wasn't out of the woods yet, though. Sometimes people don't just *seem* to be after you; sometimes they really are! To paraphrase the joke about paranoid people: it's not paranoia when they really *are* out to get you.

Clergy Skills Meet the Real World

Ministry is complex. The people and circumstances that the pastor inherits in a specific church are important. As Jason illustrates, just one parishioner—even a parishioner out of sync with most of his peers—makes a difference. Also, in the midst of complex interpersonal relationships and leadership decisions, what goes on in the pastor's mind is incredibly important, and the company that he or she keeps in talking through these leadership decisions can change the trajectory of the church, whether during times of conflict or of calm.

With the constant presence of cell phones and ready access to email, parishioners likely expect pastors to be more reachable today than ever before. Clergy were surely available when a parishioner died a century ago, and they are today too. But now there may be additional expectations of easy and immediate access to pastors, even for less weighty events.

There is also a sense in the United States today that we all deserve to be heard, and yet there isn't clear etiquette around when and how we speak. I'm thinking in particular of my neighborhood listserv and how, due to the

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more anonymous nature of the posts, people can say terrible things that they would never say to someone's face in a conversation. Thoughts that before may have been suppressed are now voiced, quickly and in ways that can be rapidly spread to others. Pastors have always had to contend with rumors, but now those rumors can fly more quickly.

These challenges are not unique to clergy. However, one difference is that clergy have many different responsibilities involving many distinct skill sets, which opens pastors up to more expectations and more criticism, and also to a large number of people—very few of whom see the whole picture of the pastor's work. The other difference, as stated before but worth repeating, is that a pastor's work is sacred to both the pastor and the parishioners. No pastor I know wants to be seen as whining about his or her sacred work. At the same time, the work and its context are challenging. In spite of that challenge, or maybe because of it, many pastors would second the Facebook post included at the beginning of this chapter, which concluded, "Honestly, I get to do this for a living. How awesome is that?"

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