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ORIGINAL PAPER

Ministry-Related Burnout and Stress Coping Mechanisms Among *Assemblies of God*-Ordained Clergy in Minnesota

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Abstract Clergy members suffering from burnout face both personal and professional complications. This study assessed occupational burnout and stress coping mechanisms among ministers affiliated with the *Assemblies of God*, a denomination that has received little attention in previous burnout-related studies. A cross-sectional design was employed using two instruments with acceptable psychometric properties. Approximately 65 % of those surveyed were either suffering from burnout or on the verge of burnout. Statistical differences in coping mechanism use were found between those who were and were not experiencing some level of burnout. The results of this study add to the existing understanding of occupational burnout among clergy members and ways in which burnout may be alleviated.

Keywords Religion · Mental Health · Burnout

Introduction

Occupational burnout is defined as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy" (Maslach et al. 2001, p. 397). Current data illustrating the full extent of occupational burnout in the USA are currently unavailable; however, compiled statistics cited by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

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(1999) indicates that a large percentage of workers experience stress, the precursor to occupational burnout. While workers in all professions may be prone to occupational stress, those working in "human services" professions may experience occupational stress and burnout at particularly high levels (Maslach 2003, p. 189). Human services can include any profession that exists to aid people in their time of need and "improv[e] the overall quality of life of service populations" (National Organization for Human Services [NOHS], n.d., para. 1). Clergy members, who are not only responsible for fulfilling their spiritual responsibilities as the head of their congregations, but who are also frequently called upon for variety of other duties necessary for the well-being of the general public, likely experience higher levels of burnout. Clergy members' classification as a "helping profession" has prompted concerned researchers to examine potential levels of work-related exhaustion among this at-risk group. The results of these studies have confirmed elevated levels of burnout among those serving in the ministry (Francis et al. 2004; Francis et al. 2011; Lewis et al. 2007; Raj and Dean 2005).

An assortment of both intrapersonal and external factors associated with higher levels of burnout has been identified, such as "lack of control, unclear job expectations, dysfunctional workplace dynamics, mismatch in values, poor job fit, extremes in activities, lack of social support, [and] work-life imbalance" (Mayo Clinic 2015, para. 4). Previous studies have also identified prevalent risk factors related to burnout among clergy members, specifically including "loneliness and isolation" (Scott and Lovell 2015, p. 91), "emotional exhaustion" (Barnard and Curry 2012, p. 149; Doolittle 2007, p. 31), neurotic feelings (Joseph et al. 2011; Miner 2007), clergy members who are younger in age (Francis et al. 2009; Randall 2007), clergy members who lead small congregations (Francis et al. 2009, p. 249), and clergy members who lead churches where "high stress and conflict" are present (Doolittle 2010, p. 93).

The negative implications of long-term occupational stress and burnout are many. A thorough literature review by Rosenthal and Alter (2012) revealed a strong association between occupational stress and cardiovascular issues. Further, a study of over 100 counselors conducted by Puig et al. (2012) showed that those suffering from occupational exhaustion were less likely to engage in physical activity and less likely to practice healthy eating. Hallsten et al. (2011) examined occupational burnout among 4,000 workers employed in helping professions. The results of this study revealed that those with higher levels of burnout were more prone to "long term sickness absences" (p. 181).

Kay (2000) stated "church ministers often face the challenges of multiple, ambiguous, and conflicting roles" and there may exist a conflict between the priorities of the minister and the expectations of the congregation (p. 119). While individual job expectations of clergy members differ by denomination and individual churches, clergy members are typically responsible for the general oversight of all church functions, preaching, providing counseling, acting as a visionary for the church, supervising fiscal management, and much more (Kay 2000). These multiple undefined roles, combined with a lack standardized working hours, and conflicting expectations between clergy and the congregation may pose a significant amount of stress on clergy members to fulfill all expected and perceived roles (Kay 2000). Grosch and Olsen (2000) also explained how an instinctive desire to do what is perceived as "necessary" for the betterment of the congregation may influence clergy members to work beyond their capacity to the point of exhaustion. This concept was evidenced by Kuhne and Donaldson (1995) in an observational study of daily clergy-related duties, noting that the work was "face-paced and unrelenting" (p. 147). Clergy members in their study rarely took breaks from their daily responsibilities and sacrificed meal time, evenings, and home/family time to deal with church-related issues (Kuhne and

Donaldson 1995). Overworking to the point of exhaustion and burnout presents two problems. First, the clergy member suffering from burnout will potentially diminish their capacity to effectively lead their congregation, for which they may now have decreased motivation and desire to serve (Grosch and Olsen 2000). Second, pressure to meet the needs of the church may cause the clergy member to push aside the needs of their families, therefore causing potential domestic conflicts (Grosch and Olsen 2000).

Whether for the protection of the physical and emotional health of clergy members, the well-being of their families, or the advancement of their congregations, a better understanding of occupational stress and burnout among clergy members is essential. The present study seeks to add to the existing literature in two ways. First, the researchers focused on examining levels of burnout among a Christian denomination (*Assemblies of God*) that has not been previously studied. Second, the researchers further added to the work of Doolittle (2010) by examining stress coping mechanisms that may help relieve occupational stress and burnout.

Methodology

Assemblies of God

The *Assemblies of God*, a Christian denomination with origins dating back to 1914, currently maintains over 12,000 active churches throughout the USA, with over 30,000 clergy (Minnesota District Council Assemblies of God, n.d.a). In the state of Minnesota, there are currently 230 active churches and approximately 1000 clergy members (Minnesota District Council Assemblies of God, n.d.a). While the number of *Assemblies of God* members in the state of Minnesota is unknown, worldwide there are approximately 67 million members (Assemblies of God 2009). The *Assemblies of God* maintains a multitude of active ministry endeavors in Minnesota including age- and gender-specific ministries, global missions, and church planting (Minnesota District Council Assemblies of God, n.d.b).

Instrumentation

The two constructs assessed in this study, occupational burnout and stress coping mechanisms, were each measured with a separate scale. *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory*© (Alban Institute 1991) was used to quantify burnout levels among those serving in the ministry, and The *COPE Inventory* (Carver et al. 1989) was used to assess coping mechanisms used by clergy members.

The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory© *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* was originally developed in 1991 by Roy Oswald (Alban Institute 1991). The instrument consists of 16 items that measure specified feelings and attitudes related the occupational duties of ministers scores were originally designed to be categorized into four levels of burnout, ranging from "Burnout is not an issue for you" to "You are a victim of extreme burnout" (Alban Institute, n.d., as cited by the Anglican Diocese of Fredericton 2013, p. 5–6).

For the purposes of this study, burnout classifications were condensed to three categories to limit issues of unequal sample sizes. Specifically, those having met the criteria for burnout and extreme burnout were combined. Mean score substitution was used for instances of missing data. Results from the present study revealed high internal consistency reliability (ICR) for *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* ($\alpha = .95$). Similar ICR results

($\alpha = .90$) were found when the psychometric attributes of *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* were examined by Francis et al. (2009). Full permission to use *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* was granted by the Alban Institute.

The COPE Inventory© The *COPE Inventory* was introduced by Carver et al. (1989) and was designed to measure 14 coping mechanisms. A 60-item updated version of the *COPE Inventory* (used in the present study) assesses humor as an additional mechanism (Carver 2007). In the present study, ICR scores for all coping mechanisms ranged from $\alpha = 0.159$–0.888. However, in studies conducted by Clark et al. (1995) and Carver et al. (1989) more consistent and favorable ICR scores were noted.

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, both surveys were distributed via email and data were collected using *Qualtrics Online Survey Software*©. A listing of current email addresses was obtained from a local representative of *Assemblies of God* Church and permission was granted for use in the current study. Participants were given 1 week to respond to the surveys after which time a reminder email was sent to all potential participants and an additional week to respond was granted. A total of 52 useable surveys were collected and used for analysis. Initially, 75 participants responded to the surveys; however, 23 surveys were discarded due to missing data.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* version 20. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency and dispersion) for *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* items and coping mechanisms assessed by the *COPE Inventory*. Moreover, Pearson Correlations were used to assess the statistical association between burnout and all 14 coping mechanisms. Further, independent sample *t* tests were used to assess differences in coping mechanism usage between those who burnout was not an issue and those who were experiencing some degree of burnout. In addition, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in burnout scores between Senior Pastors, Associate/Youth/College Pastors, and those Pastors who were classified as "Other" (e.g., Missionaries). Pastor ranks were collapsed to three categories to again limit variations in sample size among the groups.

Results

Demographics

Among the 52 clergy members who participated in this study, the majority (65.30 %) held the position of "Senior" or "Associate" Pastor. The number of years these clergy members have been serving the ministry varied greatly, ranging 1–52 years ($M = 23.20$; $SD = 12.41$), as did their ages (Table 1).

Clergy Burn-out

Results from *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory* indicated that the majority of the clergy members surveyed (65.40 %) were either bordering on burnout or experiencing burnout to some degree (Table 2). More specifically, among those currently experiencing burnout, six

Table 1 Demographics of the sample

Age	*n*	%	Primary position	*n*	%
25–29	4	7.70	Senior Pastor	28	53.80
30–34	6	11.50	Associate Pastor	6	11.50
35–39	2	3.80	Youth Pastor	3	5.80
40–44	5	9.60	College Ministry Pastor	2	3.80
45–49	8	15.40	Missionary	7	13.50
50–54	10	19.20	Other	6	11.50
55–59	8	15.40			
60–64	4	7.70			
65–69	2	3.80			
70+	2	3.80			

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for burnout categories

Category	*n*	%
Burnout is not an issue	18	34.60
Bordering on burnout	21	40.40
Experiencing burnout	13	25.00

participants (11.50 %) were classified as suffering from extreme burnout. Upon closer inspection of the individual elements of *The Clergy Burn-Out Inventory*, it was evident that the highest noted mean scores involved intrapersonal aspects of burnout, such as feeling "Used up and Spent" ($M = 3.15$; SD = 1.5113), "Fatigue and Irritation" ($M = 3.06$; SD = 1.305), and "Guilt" ($M = 2.85$; SD = 1.487) (Table 3). Results of a one-way ANOVA failed to reveal any significant differences in burnout levels between Senior Pastors (Group 1) ($M = 43.07$; SD = 19.490), Associate/Youth/College Pastors (Group 2) ($M = 40.85$; SD = 14.439), and "Other" Pastors (Group 3) ($M = 36.03$; SD = 10.132) [$F(2,49) = 0.795$, $p > .05$].

Coping Mechanisms

The coping mechanism most commonly used was "Religious Coping" ($M = 14.52$; SD = 1.698), which included such practices as more frequent prayer and seeking divine assistance. Other commonly utilized coping mechanisms included "Planning" ($M = 13.43$; SD = 2.147) and "Positive Reinterpretation and Growth" ($M = 13.06$; SD = 2.137). "Turning to Substance Use" was the least frequently cited coping mechanism ($M = 4.02$; SD = 0.139) (Table 4). Results of the Pearson Correlations revealed negative statistically significant associations between burnout and three health-conducive coping mechanisms ("Positive Reinterpretation and Growth," "Active Coping," and "Planning"). Contrariwise, four positive statistically significant associations were found between burnout and what could be considered as "unhealthy" coping mechanisms ("Mental Disengagement," "Focus of Venting Emotions," "Denial," and "Behavioral Disengagement") (Table 5). A series of independent sample *t* tests were used to identify potential differences in coping mechanisms between those who are not currently experiencing burnout ($n = 18$) and those experiencing some degree of burnout ($n = 13$) (Table 6). Statically higher scores were found amid those experiencing burnout for the

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for the Clergy Burn-Out Inventory

Item "The extent to which…"[a]	*n*	Mean	SD	Minimum score	Maximum score
I feel used up and spent	52	3.15	1.513	1.00	6.00
Fatigue and irritation are part of my daily experience	52	3.06	1.305	1.00	6.00
I feel guilty about what is not happening in this parish or with parishioners	52	2.85	1.487	1.00	6.00
I feel supported in my work	52	2.81	1.534	1.00	6.00
I am suffering from physical complaints (aches, pains, headaches, etc.)	52	2.67	1.438	1.00	6.00
I find myself frustrated in my attempts to accomplish tasks important to me	52	2.65	1.385	1.00	6.00
I am biding my time until retirement or change	52	2.58	1.526	1.00	6.00
I have enthusiasm for my work	52	2.56	1.526	1.00	6.00
I am feeling negative or cynical about people with whom I work	52	2.54	1.228	1.00	6.00
I am invaded by sadness I cannot explain	52	2.42	1.227	1.00	5.00
I find myself spending less and less time with my congregants	52	2.40	1.498	1.00	6.00
I am becoming less flexible in my dealing with congregants	52	2.40	1.225	1.00	6.00
My humor has a cynical and biting tone to it	52	2.37	1.253	1.00	6.00
I invest myself emotionally in my work in the congregation	52	2.16	1.194	1.00	5.00
Sexual activity seems more trouble than its worth	52	2.14	1.372	1.00	6.00
I blame others for problem I encounter	52	2.08	1.117	1.00	5.00
Survey total[b]	52	40.84	16.576	17.00	84.00

[a] Possible scores range from 1.00−6.00. Lower scores indicate a more positive/healthy response

[b] Possible scores range from 16.00−96.00. Higher scores indicate higher levels of burnout

coping mechanisms of "Behavioral Disengagement," "Mental Disengagement," and "Focus of Venting Emotions." In contrast, statistically lower scores for the coping mechanism "Positive Reinterpretation and Growth" were found among those not experiencing burnout.

Discussion

The results of this study further confirm high prevalence of burnout (or nearing burnout) among clergy members (Francis et al. 2004; Francis et al. 2011; Lewis et al. 2007; Raj and Dean 2005). Given the harmful outcomes of prolonged burnout, the combined body of research on occupational burnout serves as a call to action to clergy educators, health professionals, and others who are in a position to help those serving in the ministry. There are currently 30,000 clergy members serving the *Assemblies of God* (Minnesota District Council Assemblies of God, n.d.a). The extensive prevalence of burnout (or nearing burnout) among ministers means that many are at higher risk of personal health problems

Table 4 Subscale scores for COPE Inventory

Subscale	*n*	Mean	SD	Minimum score[a]	Maximum score	Cronbach's α
Religious coping	52	14.52	1.698	9.00	16.00	0.541
Planning	51	13.43	2.147	7.00	16.00	0.737
Positive reinterpretation and growth	52	13.06	2.137	8.00	16.00	0.745
Restraint	52	12.19	2.077	8.00	16.00	0.541
Acceptance	49	11.94	2.115	6.00	14.00	0.539
Active coping	48	11.44	1.832	8.00	16.00	0.508
Use of instrumental social support	52	11.31	3.116	4.00	16.00	0.831
Use of emotional social support	52	10.35	3.497	4.00	16.00	0.888
Suppression of competing activities	51	9.78	1.604	6.00	14.00	0.159
Humor	52	9.46	3.287	5.00	16.00	0.878
Mental disengagement	52	9.27	2.474	4.00	15.00	0.526
Focus on venting emotions	52	8.21	2.725	4.00	13.00	0.766
Behavioral disengagement	52	6.92	2.512	4.00	14.00	0.759
Denial	52	4.85	1.227	4.00	9.00	0.350
Substance use	52	4.02	0.139	4.00	5.00	[b]

[a] Possible range from 4.00−16.00. Higher scores indicate that the participant practiced this coping mechanism often

[b] Negative covariance discovered among these items

Table 5 Significant correlations between burnout and coping mechanisms

Coping mechanism	*r*-score	*p* value
Positive reinterpretation and growth	−.362	.008
Mental disengagement	.393	.004
Focus on venting emotions	.379	.006
Active coping	−.288	.047
Denial	.462	.001
Behavioral disengagement	.480	.000
Planning	−.336	.016

(Puig et al. 2012 and Rosenthal and Alter 2012). Further, with over 60 million members within the *Assemblies of God* (Assemblies of God 2009) and countless others who are served by the church, the negative ripple effect of pastoral burnout on the populations they serve could prove devastating. People count on clergy members for spiritual guidance, counseling, mentoring, providing essential services, and much more. How can someone effectively provide for others when they physically and emotionally shattered?

By examining how different variables, such as coping mechanisms, are related to occupational burnout, we are better equipped to address the problem. While it is not possible to conclude from this study whether differences in coping mechanism use are a result of burnout or a factor preceding burnout, they do provide a much needed starting

Table 6 Comparison of coping mechanisms between burnout categories

Coping mechanism	Groups	Mean	SD	*t* score	*Df*	*p* value
Behavioral disengagement	Burnout is not an issue	6.33	2.425	−3.262	29	.003
	Experiencing burnout	9.15	2.304			
Positive reinterpretation and growth	Burnout is not an issue	13.83	1.823	2.394	29	.023
	Experiencing burnout	11.92	2.629			
Mental disengagement	Burnout is not an issue	8.00	2.249	−2.833	29	.008
	Experiencing burnout	10.38	2.399			
Focus on venting emotions	Burnout is not an issue	7.61	2.477	−2.449	29	.021
	Experiencing burnout	10.00	2.944			

ground. Detrimental forms of coping were associated with higher levels of burnout. The results of the independent sample *t* tests confirmed higher scores in "Behavioral Disengagement," "Mental Disengagement," and "Focus on Venting Emotions" among those experiencing burnout compared to those who were not. At the opposite end of the spectrum, healthier or more constructive forms of coping were associated with lower burnout scores. Further, "Positive Reinterpretation and Growth" scores were statistically higher for those not experiencing burnout. These results coincide with the outcomes of Doolittle (2007, p. 34–35) who found that "active coping," "planning," and "positive reinterpretation and growth" (stated as "positive reframing") were associated with "personal accomplishment." Further, Doolittle (2007, p. 35) also concluded that "self-blame, disengagement, venting, distraction, and denial" were correlated with negative outcomes, such as "emotional exhaustion." The results demonstrate that when faced with a stressful situation, clergy members should see the situation as an opportunity to better themselves and take active steps to address the issue rather than avoiding the matter. While it is generally considered healthy to talk about personal feelings and express emotions, excessively voicing displeasure or using venting as a primary form of coping should be avoided. Those who serve in a support system for ministers should also actively discourage situational avoidance and excessive venting of emotions.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was limited to *Assemblies of God* clergy members in one state. In order to establish greater generalizability of the results, additional studies should continue to examine burnout and mitigating strategies among a larger population. Further, the length of the instruments combined with the online distribution method plagued the response rate. A larger sample size would have been desirable, and therefore, reassessment among the Minnesota clergy population would also be necessary to confirm the results of this study. Moreover, multiple instruments for assessing burnout coping mechanisms exist. Researchers should continue to assess the suitability of these instruments.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of this study, the results herein provide direction for primary prevention interventions or assisting a clergy members already suffering from burnout. Understanding coping mechanisms that are associated with both low and high levels of stress and burnout provides health educators with opportunities to design new interventions and implement evidence-based programs. The extent to which seminaries and

other theological programs currently include stress and burnout reduction as part of their educational programs is unknown. However, based on the results of Doolittle (2007) and the present study, it is recommended that all seminaries and ordination programs expand their curricula by specifically addressing how coping mechanisms are both harmfully and healthfully associated with burnout. If no intervention approaches currently exist, schools should explore the feasibility and appropriateness of adding new courses or implement stress and burnout reduction into existing curricula.

In addition to specifically addressing coping mechanisms in seminaries and ordination programs, the General Council of the *Assemblies of God* has recommended sabbaticals as a way of enhancing mental well-being among clergy members (General Council of the Assemblies of God 2016). The General Council serves as the overarching general leadership body of the *Assemblies of God* and is made up "of all ordained and licensed ministers" within the denomination (General Council of the Assemblies of God 2015, p. 100). While the General Council does not dictate the duration of clergy sabbaticals, they do provide a biblical basis for their existence and describe this experience "as a time of healing, restoration, and renewal in body, mind, spirit, and vision" (General Council of the Assemblies of God 2016, para. 3). An evaluation brief from the Louisville Institute indicates positive health-related outcomes for those who have partaken in sabbaticals (Richter 2012). Such outcomes include a greater, more durable loyalty to the people of the church and "that the sabbatical had tangible benefited the people of the church" (Richter 2012, p. 3). It is possible that clergy members may be hesitant to go on sabbatical due to their convictions and devotion to their congregation (Grosch and Olsen 2000). Based on our results, the governing bodies of the church, as well as members of the congregation, should actively encourage their clergy to go on sabbaticals and evaluations should be conducted to further assess their effectiveness. Other methods shown to mitigate stress, burnout, and exhaustion include participation in short-term outpatient, faith-centered therapy (Muse et al. 2016), having a solid personal support group (Spencer et al. 2009), and maintaining "a positive attitude toward prayer" (Turton and Francis 2007, p. 70). This study provides future direction for both quantitative and qualitative researchers as well as health practitioners who should continue to look at coping mechanisms as a mitigating factor for occupational burnout.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Special Note "Clergy Burn-Out Inventory," developed by Roy M. Oswald, published in *Clergy Self-Care: Finding A Balance for Effective Ministry* (Alban Institute 1991) (c) The Alban Institute, used by permission.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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