Executive Summary
Understanding Clergy Resilience

Margaret Clarke, PhD

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Acknowledgements

Overview of the Study

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges and adversity. Resilience theory and insights from resilience research have been applied to clergy; however, there is limited published research directly investigating clergy resilience. The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of Christian clergy resilience in Canada to support its development through post-secondary training, ongoing professional development, and individual care. This mixed methods doctoral dissertation study received approval from the Research Ethics Board of the University of Saskatchewan. As data collection for this study occurred during June - August 2020, all findings were impacted by the all-encompassing COVID-19 global pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
1. What is the current nature of Christian clergy resilience and well-being in Canada, including what types of adversity do clergy perceive as impacting their levels of stress and burnout?
2. What variables, individual, social and relational, or contextual and organizational, do clergy perceive to impact their professional resilience?
3. What aspects of pre-service training and professional development are described as best helping to foster clergy resilience?

Methods & Participants

National online survey including quantitative demographic and scale questions and open-ended qualitative questions completed by **519** clerics of diverse ages, genders, denominations, and roles.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews with **13** clerics of diverse denominations, roles, and genders.


Interpretation panels composed of **10** professionals with experience as clergy, denominational leadership, educators of clergy, and providers of care to clergy who gave further insight into the survey and interview findings and the research questions.
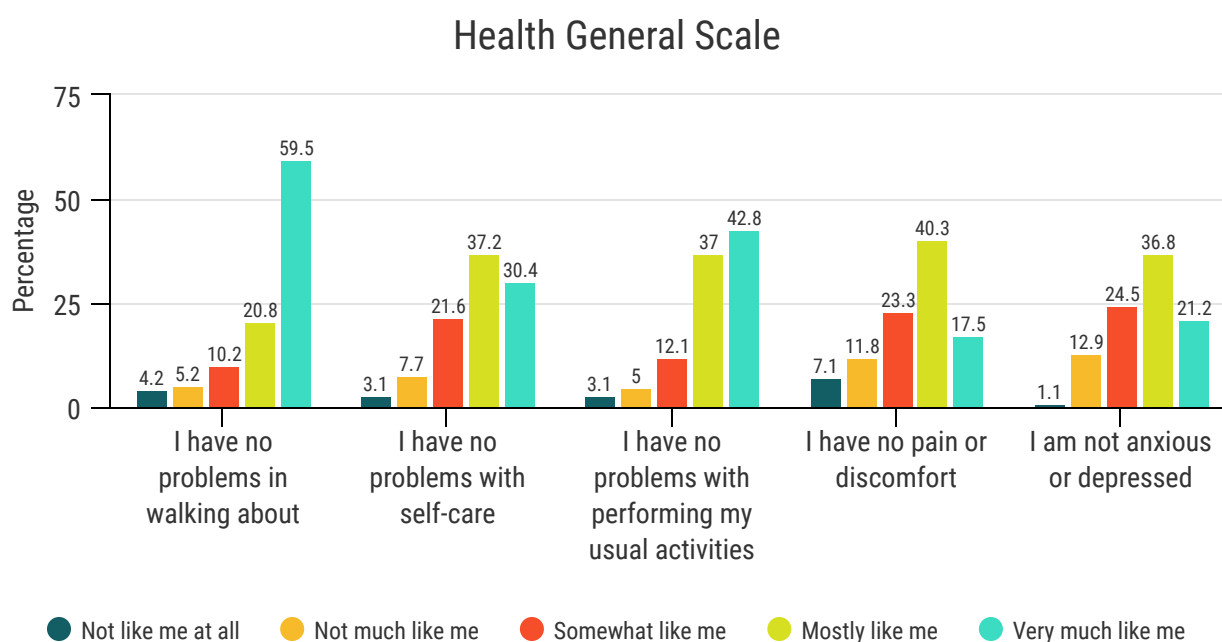
How are clergy doing?

A variety of scales were used to get a picture of the health, satisfaction, resilience, and grit of Canadian clergy. Given that the survey data was collected in June and July 2020, earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic, it is surprising to note that overall the scale responses were positive and there were no significant areas of concern flagged.

Physical and Mental Health

Scales were used to assess physical health and also satisfaction of clergy. First, clergy were asked about their current health today using a scale of zero to 100, with 100 indicating the best state and 0 indicating the worst state, with a **mean response of 75.6** (standard deviation 16.5).

Current Health

75.6	

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

Worst state   Best state
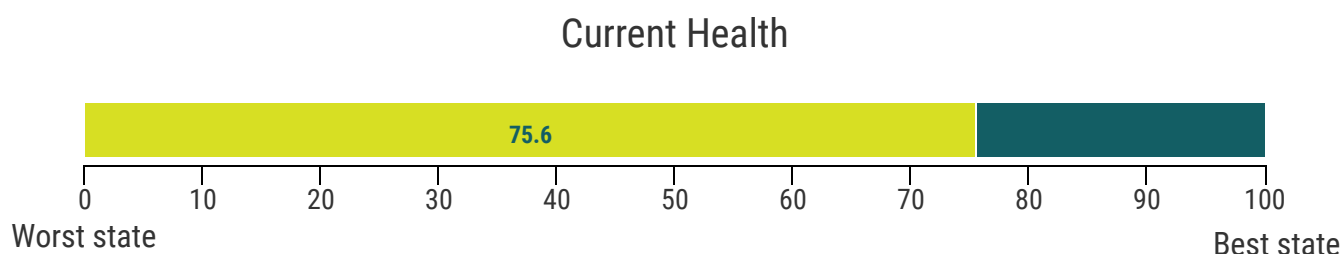
Second, a five-item scale about health in general in which participants' rated their physical and mental health on various statements on a five-point scale, with one indicating "not like me at all" and five being "very much like me." Scores can range between five, indicating health problems and 25, indicating no health problems. There was a **mean response of 19.3** (standard dev. 3.9). Responses to the different questions are broken down below.

Health General Scale

Legend: ● Not like me at all ● Not much like me ● Somewhat like me ● Mostly like me ● Very much like me
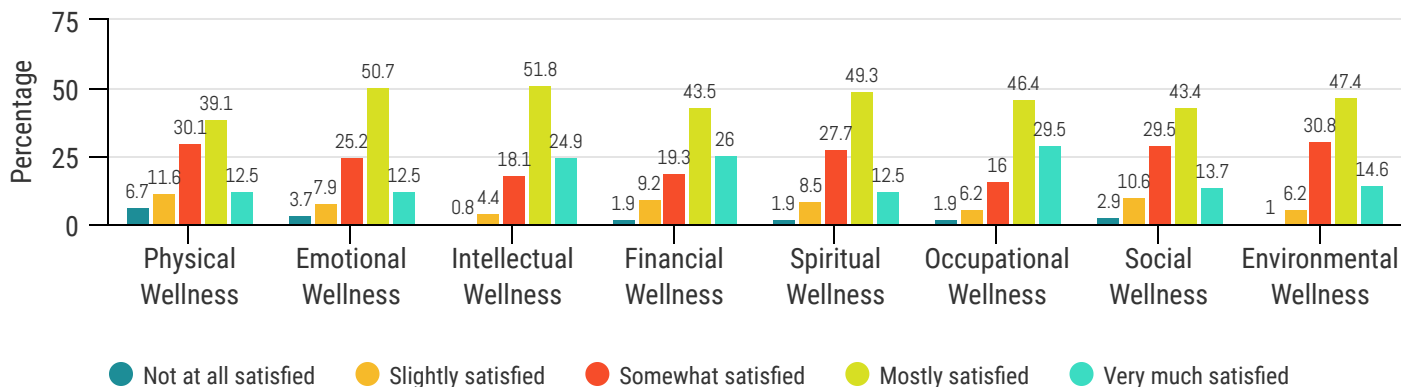
How are clergy doing?

Wellness Satisfaction

A holistic wellness satisfaction scale that included eight questions assessed clergy satisfaction with their wellness across various domains. Possible cumulative scores for this scale could range from eight to 40. The **mean response for this scale was 29.6 (**standard dev. 4.9). Clergy satisfaction was **highest with intellectual wellness and occupational wellness.** Clergy satisfactions was **least with physical wellness and social wellness.**

Wellness Satisfaction Scale

Legend: ● Not at all satisfied ● Slightly satisfied ● Somewhat satisfied ● Mostly satisfied ● Very much satisfied

Life Satisfaction

The Cantril ladder asked clergy to indicate their current satisfaction with their life and also their anticipated satisfaction in five years on a scale of 0 to 10. For current satisfaction in life, there was a **mean response of 8.3** (standard dev. 1.6), indicating a good level of satisfactions. For anticipated satisfaction five years down the road, there was an even higher **mean response of 9.1** (standard dev. 1.6).

Cantril Ladder - Current Satisfaction
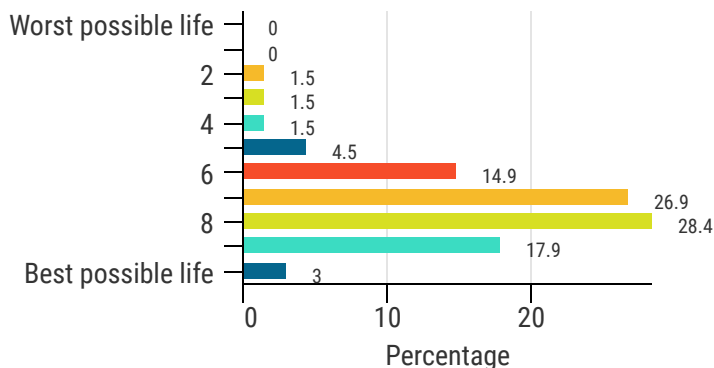
Cantril Ladder - Anticipated Satisfaction
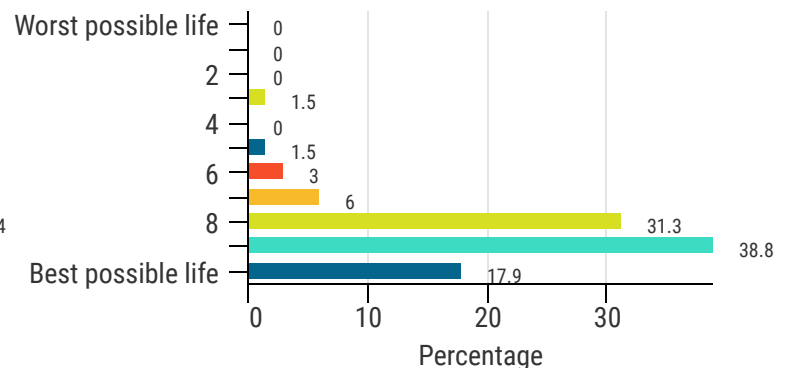
How are clergy doing?

Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction

The Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) scale measured the dimensions of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue. A number of ProQOL statements from the compassion satisfaction subscale received high ratings. High endorsement of the questions on the compassion satisfaction subscale suggest that there was an **elevated level of compassion satisfaction.** Responses to the different sbuscale questions are detailed below.

Compassion Satisfaction Subscale

Legend: Not like me at all · Not much like me · Somewhat like me · Mostly like me · Very much like me
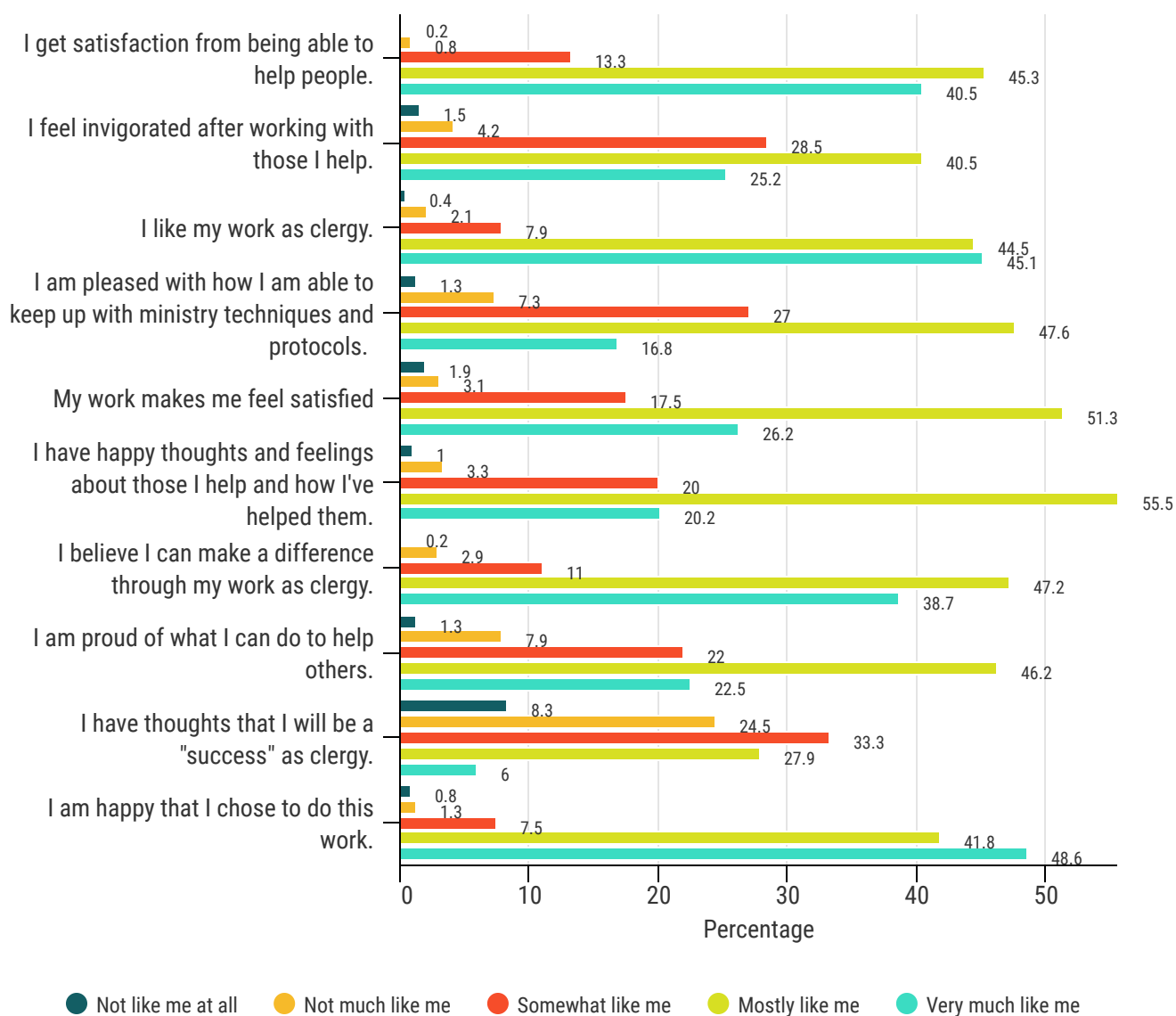
How are clergy doing?

Professional Quality of Life: Burnout

The ProQOL burnout subscale considered factors of exhaustion, anger, and depression. The ProQOL cut points **did not flag any areas of concern related to burnout**. Responses to the different burnout subscale questions are broken down below. This scale reverse scores positive statements marked with an * below.

Burnout Subscale

Legend: Not like me at all | Not much like me | Somewhat like me | Mostly like me | Very much like me
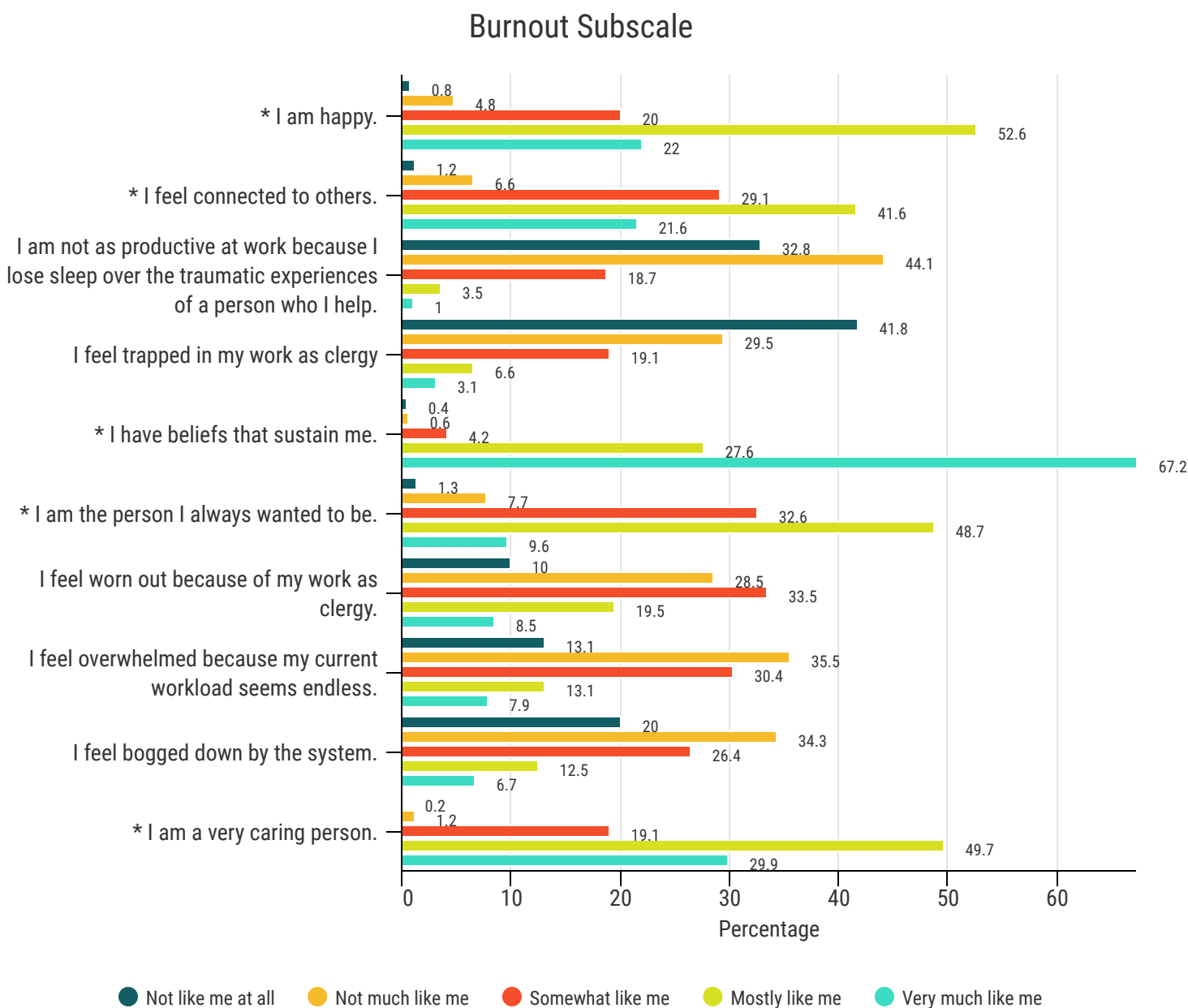
How are clergy doing?

Professional Quality of Life: Secondary Traumatic Stress

The ProQOL secondary trauma scale considered negative feelings and fear associated with secondary trauma. The ProQOL cut points **did not flag any areas of concern related to secondary trauma**. Few clergy respondents supported statements from the secondary traumatic stress subscale. The secondary traumatic stress findings suggest that **the nature of adversity clergy experience may be more everyday adversity rather than trauma-related adversity that results in secondary traumatic stress.**

Secondary Traumatic Stress Subscale

Legend: Not like me at all — Not much like me — Somewhat like me — Mostly like me — Very much like me
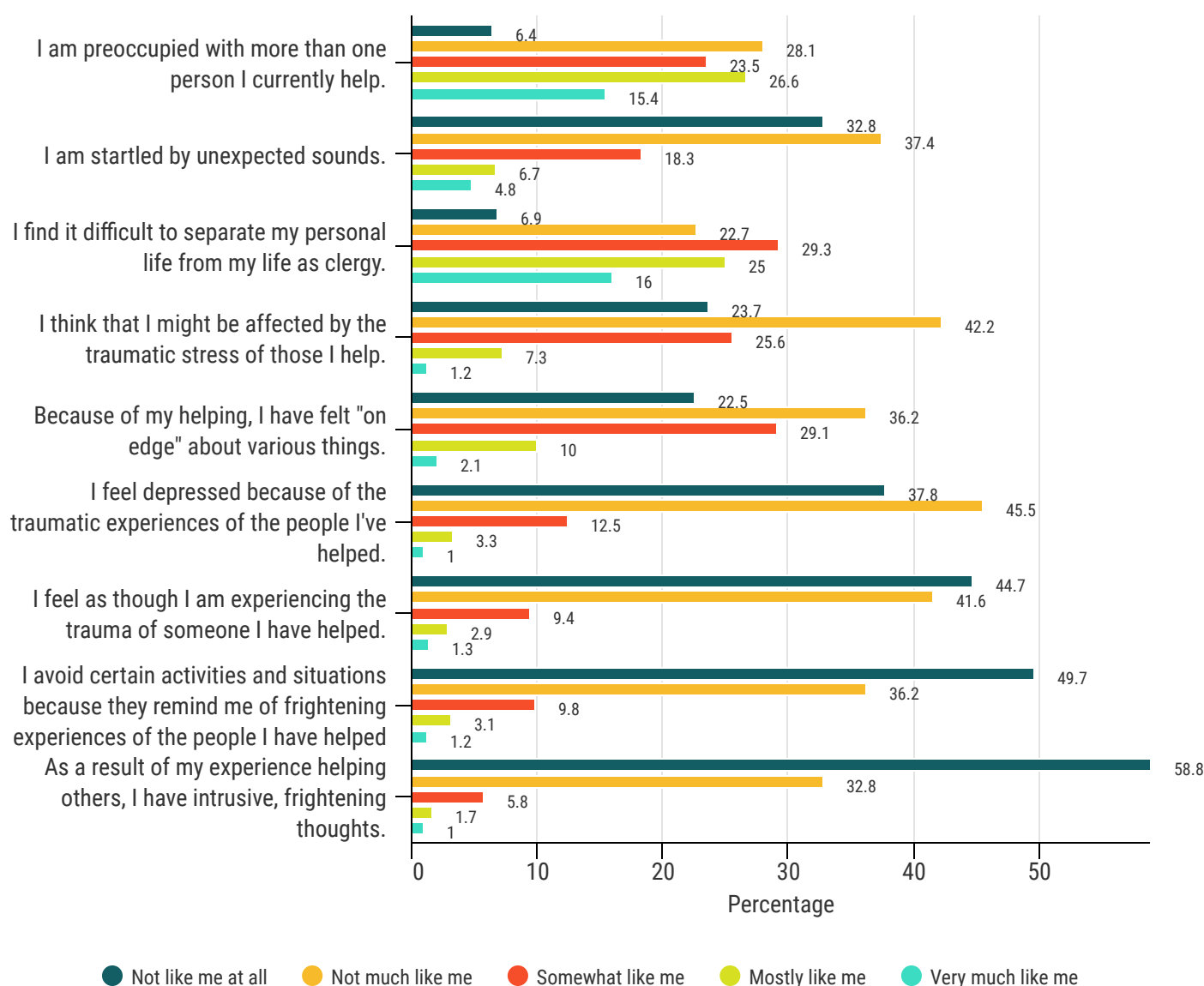
How are clergy doing?

GRIT and Resilience

The Grit-S scale is an eight-item scale that "measures trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals" and is comprised of two distinct facets of sustained stamina and effort (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 166). Duckworth and Quinn (2009) found that Grit-S significantly predicted less lifetime career changes. Resilience is an inherent aspect of grit (Stoffel & Cain, 2018), making grit an interesting aspect of consideration. Participants rated eight questions related to aspects such as setback, focus, goals, and diligence on a five-point scale ranging from "very much like me" to "not like me at all." GRIT scores can range from one, which means "not gritty at all" to five, which indicates "extremely gritty." The **mean GRIT response from clergy was 3.6** (standard dev. 0.6)

GRIT ─┤ 3.6

**Not gritty   Extremely
at all   gritty**

The Ego-Resiliency Scale (ER 89) is a 14-item self-report scale for ego-control and ego-resiliency using five-point scale (copyright@1996 American Psychological Association. Reproduced with permission). Possible cumulative scores for this scale could range from zero to 56. Score interpretation is as followings: Very Low Resiliency Trait (0-10), Low Resiliency Trait (11-22), Undetermined Trait (23-24), High Resiliency Trait (35-46), and Very High Resiliency Trait (47-56). For ego-resiliency, the mean response from clergy was 45 (standard dev. 4.9), **indicating "high resiliency trait."**

The Impact of Flourishing Congregations and Age on Clergy

Age and congregational flourishing were two factors that resulted in statistical difference in clergy responses to the scales. First, age was a factor that impacted three scale responses. **Clergy who were 70+ years old had higher Grit-S score** than all other age groups. Age also impacted Cantril scores with those **clergy 60+ reporting higher current satisfaction** than those who were younger. However, **older participants had lower health today scores**.

Second, clerics' sense of their congregation flourishing impacted their overall health score, Ego-Resiliency score, Grit-S score, and Cantril scores. **Clergy who indicated their congregation was flourishing had higher overall health scores** compared to those who disagreed with the statement "generally, your congregation/parish is flourishing." **Clergy who agreed that their congregation was flourishing also had Ego-Resiliency scores**. Also, **clergy who indicated their congregation was flourishing had higher Grit-S scores**. Cantril current and anticipated **life satisfaction scores were also statistically higher for those clergy who agreed that their congregation was flourishing**.

The impact of age and congregational flourishing on clergy are essential for better supporting clergy. The connection between clergy well-being and resilience and the sense that their congregation is flourishing is one that needs to be investigated further, as it may be that **clergy who do not perceive that their congregation is flourishing need extra supports**. Also, understanding that with increased age there are positive outcomes for clergy in the areas of grit and sense of current life satisfaction but less holistic wellness satisfaction suggests that **clerics need different supports based on their age and development**.

What challenges and adversity do clergy face?

Qualitative data was collected through the open-ended survey questions, interviews, and interpretation panels related to the challenges and adversity clergy face. Clergy encounter a variety of adversity in their roles that impact them. These challenges fell into the categories of workload, expectations, isolation, and personal challenges and are discussed in some depth in the following pages.

What challenges and adversity do clergy face?

Workload

Workload includes the aspects of of time demands, emotional and spiritual needs, role complexity, changing nature of ministry, and relational dynamics and conflict. Clergy experience a sense that the time required to meet the needs of their role is more than is reasonable and that there is not sufficient time to meet the demand. The intensity and complexity of emotional and spiritual needs that clergy encounter make it challenging to have a sense of progress or results and can lead to a sense of burden for some clerics.

Clergy are required to engage in complex and diverse types of work requiring varied skill sets, including aspects such as human resources, finances, vision casting, congregational care, pre-marital counselling, meditation and interpersonal conflict, death and grief, suicide, crisis response, mental health support, marketing and social media, and response to natural disasters. The changing nature of ministry, such as changing organizational structures, practices, or leadership and unexpected crises, is a challenge for clerics. The relational nature of clergy work is quite challenging, both within and between the congregants and other staff.

Expectations

Clergy experience expectations and pressures including societal expectations, denominational expectations, congregational expectations, financial pressure, self-expectations, and barriers on women. Canadian societal expectations are considered skeptical of clergy, with a sense of apathy or even hostility towards spiritual matters and organized religion. Denominational expectations can be considered unreasonable and not aligned with the cleric's or congregation's priorities, resulting in conflict.

Expectations from congregants on clergy can be unrealistic, varied, and opposing related to their spiritual life, schedule, and ministry priorities. Financial pressure can be a challenge due to the interdependence of congregational finances and personal finances and systemic beliefs that hinder open conversation about clergy compensation. Self-expectations arise from having high standards in serving God, the spiritual importance of ministry, pleasing congregants, or clerics feeling they need to earn their salary. Finally, barriers on women were adverse as some women experienced gender discrimination that limited their opportunities and influence, as well as limited peer support from other clerics.

What challenges and adversity do clergy face?

Isolation

Isolation is arising from geographic isolation, peer competition, theological and cultural differences, relocations and schedules, role separation, decreased energy, and peer competition. Geographic isolation due to clerics ministering in rural or remote locations limited resources, such as medical services, social venues, contact with family and peers, and placed limits on ministry opportunities.

Theological and cultural differences between some clerics and their denomination, their congregation, the community, or peers can lead to isolation or sense of culture shock that isolates them from meaningful relationships in their ministry context. Relocations and ministry schedules can disrupt personal supports and hinder some clerics from connecting with family or friends who do not have the same schedule or live nearby. Decreased energy due to the workload demands on clergy can hinder some from engaging in activities outside of ministry due to a lack of social energy to invest in developing supportive relationships.

Role separation can be a barrier to making friends for many clerics, especially in their congregation, leaving some clerics who lacking deep friendships and feeling lonely. Peer competition due to comparison and judgment among clerics towards one another hinders trust and accessing peer support.

Personal Challenges

Personal challenges include questioning one's calling, spousal or family conflict, health issues, and lack of self-awareness. Questioning calling made ministry difficulties hard to navigate. Spousal or family conflict was a challenge and considered a hinderance to their resilience. Health issues, such as aging, chronic diseases, and mental health issues or challenges with exercise, diet, and sleep were problematic for clergy. Lack of self-awareness was viewed as creating an emotional vulnerability in the clergy as their personal tendencies, unacknowledged needs, or emotional immaturity hindered their ministry.

What resources support clergy resilience?

Qualitative data was collected through the open-ended survey questions, interviews, and interpretation panels related to resources the clergy consider to help them be resilient. Clergy engage with a wide variety of resources that help them to bounce back from the challenges and adversity they face in their roles. These resources were divided in the areas of spiritual life, relational supports, personal aspects, and organizational practices and are discussed in some depth in the following pages.

Spiritual

Relational

Supportive Resources

Personal

Organizational

What resources support clergy resilience?

Spiritual Resources

Spiritual resources fall into four areas, including theological meaning-making, clear calling and identity, partnership with God, and spiritual practices. First, theological meaning-making arising from the beliefs and theological values of clergy has an overarching influence on the perception of ministry and the adversity clergy face. Second, a clear and affirmed calling to ministry is a source of motivation and encouragement for clergy.

Third, partnership with God is a grounding resource that strengthens clergy in difficult times as they view ministry as God working through them, causing them to pray and look to God for guidance. Finally, spiritual practices, both individual and communal, are important resources for clergy resilience and can include a wide range of practices such as prayer, scripture, spiritual writing, retreats, silence and solitude, confession, worship, sermons, being in creation, sacraments, small groups, liturgy, mass, the daily offices, and journaling.

Supportive Resources

Relational Resources

Seven types of relational supports are valued by clergy for the support they provide and include: spouse and family, friends, peers, mentors, supervisors, congregational, and professional supports. Spouse and family support were a key resource for clergy resilience, as spouses often share a collective sense of ministry calling and offer clerics grounding, balance, boundaries, a sounding board, problem-solving, and sharing the ministry load. Second, friends, both outside and inside of the church, are relationships that allow clergy to be honest about the challenges of ministry; however, friendships inside of the church require consideration of the dual roles. Third, peer relationships, both within one's denominational tradition and from other traditions, are appreciated due to the common understanding of ministry which provides opportunity to share ideas and resources and also talk through ministry issues with someone who understands.

Fourth, mentor support is valued as it offers ministry guidance, wisdom, and care, especially during early ministry. Fifth, supervisor support from denominational leaders, local lay leaders, or a supervising pastor is also viewed as a resource for resilience. Sixth, congregational support from a positive church culture and expressions of encouragement, affirmation, care, and recognition of work is helpful for clergy resilience. Finally, professional supports, especially professional counsellors and spiritual directors, are helpful for providing emotional care, relational engagement, and bringing insight into clerics' spiritual life and how God has been at work.

What resources support clergy resilience?

Supportive Resources

Personal Resources

Personal aspects that support resilience include balance, caring for health, boundaries, self-awareness, lifelong learning, institutional alignment, and personal attributes. First, balance is important for a pattern of sustainable rhythms that prioritized family, personal life, recreation, fun, and spiritual, mental, physical well-being. Second, caring for health involves attending to diet, exercise, and rest through regular routines and also involved taking sabbath and vacation. Third, boundaries such as the ability to say 'no' to expectations, enables clerics to maintain the balance of time and energy between personal and ministry needs. Relational, emotional, mental, and physical boundaries also help resilience through healthy disengagement with ministry work.

The fourth area of personal aspects is self-awareness, which includes the processing of emotional wounds, insight into congregational dynamics and the impact of these on one's self, and an understanding of one's unique gifting and grace for one's imperfections and need for growth. Fifth, lifelong learning through formal education or professional development enables flexibility, self-reflection, and growth. Sixth, institutional alignment of the cleric's values and vision with their denomination, congregation, and team enables resilience as it decreased friction and conflict and lead to a sense of flow. Finally, personality attributes like extroversion, optimism, realism, flexibility, adaptability, compassion, and diplomacy are considered resources for adapting to adversity.

Organizational Resources

Organizational practices that support resilience include the six aspects of provision, role flexibility, rigorous pre-service discernment and preparation, early ministry support, skill-specific training and supports, and relational opportunities. First, provision of being cared for financially, and having access to health care plans, professional development opportunities, housing, and sabbaticals, is a resource for resilience. Second, role flexibility in setting one's schedule, being trusted with the freedom to minister based on the cleric's sense of God's calling, and to make their own decisions was beneficial. Third, rigorous pre-service discernment and preparation processes that involved screening for personal fit in ministry and discerning call to ministry was considered foundational for resilience. For those who are preparing for ministry, a process that involves experiential learning, mentoring, leadership development, training on self-care and resilience, and setting realistic ministry expectations were considered to support resilience.

The fourth area of organizational practice that supports clergy resilience is early ministry support. Early ministry support through mentoring and peer cohorts helped new clergy to respond to the challenges of early ministry life, as did training and guidance in boundaries, assertiveness, and relational skills. Fifth, skill specific training and supports from the denomination for aspects such as finances, human resources, or technology tools, as well as accessibility, good communication, and clarity from denominations regarding work-related issues, is a support for clergy resilience. The development of specific skills to address the complex needs of ministry, including aspects of menntal health, suicide assessment, interpersonal skills, conflict management, leadership, and technology, further supports resilience. Finally, relational opportunities at denominational or inter-denominational events are valued as a means to connect with peers and develop relationships, as were structured mentoring or leadership programs.

What initiatives are desired to support resilience ?

New or expanded initiatives desired to support clergy resilience fall into the categories of wellness opportunities, organizational prioritization, and systemic collaboration. There is a desire for increased to wellness opportunities, including retreats, sabbaticals, professional counselling, and spiritual direction. Sabbaticals and retreats were desired to help combat workload and increase spiritual, emotional, and physical self-care. Professional counselling was desired to support healthy balance and boundaries to address expectations and workload while also engaging in emotional care. Spiritual direction was seen as a means to provide spiritual care and to strength spiritual resources and meaning. The desire for increased access to professional supports, like counselling and spiritual direction, seemed to answer one cleric's question, "who cares for the caregivers?"

Second, there was a need expressed for increased organizational prioritization of clergy well-being and resilience, including the setting of denominational wellness standards and financial support for wellness opportunities. The desire for wellness standards was a tenuous one. There was a desire to have accountability for wellness without denominations enforcing a rigid structure; instead,the desire was for flexible accountability for wellness standards. It seemed that setting some standards during pre-service training or early ministry may be more acceptable than imposing them on those further along in their ministry career. There may be some barriers denominations need to overcome when providing financial support for wellness opportunities to their clerics. Some denominations indicated that they provide financial support for wellness opportunities but that they have poor uptake. There seemed to be a gap between what clergy perceived as available and what denominational leaders saw as being utilized.

Finally, on the broadest systemic level, there was a need expressed for educational institutions, denominations, congregations, and clerics to collaborate to support clergy resilience. Christian clergy do not have one unifying body. More hierarchical traditions, such as the Catholic Church, seem to have more collaboration among all parts of the system. However, less structured denominations or traditions struggled to collaborate to support clergy resilience, as each part of the system operates somewhat independently.

Putting it all together: Clergy Resilience Model

The Clergy Resilience Model incorporates the unique areas of adversity and resources that affect clergy resilience and emphasizes the overarching influence of several spiritual factors, including theological meaning-making, calling to ministry, and partnership with God. The global meaning system guides clergy in how they evaluate experiences and respond to those that are adverse. Supportive resources are also evaluated by the global meaning system as to the support and buffering they offer.

The Clergy Resilience Model also reveals the ongoing nature of balance in resilience. As adversity and resources are in a dynamic relationship, there is a continuous balancing that occurs. Adversity and resources ebb and flow in a cleric's life, and ongoing evaluation of both of these can benefit clergy.
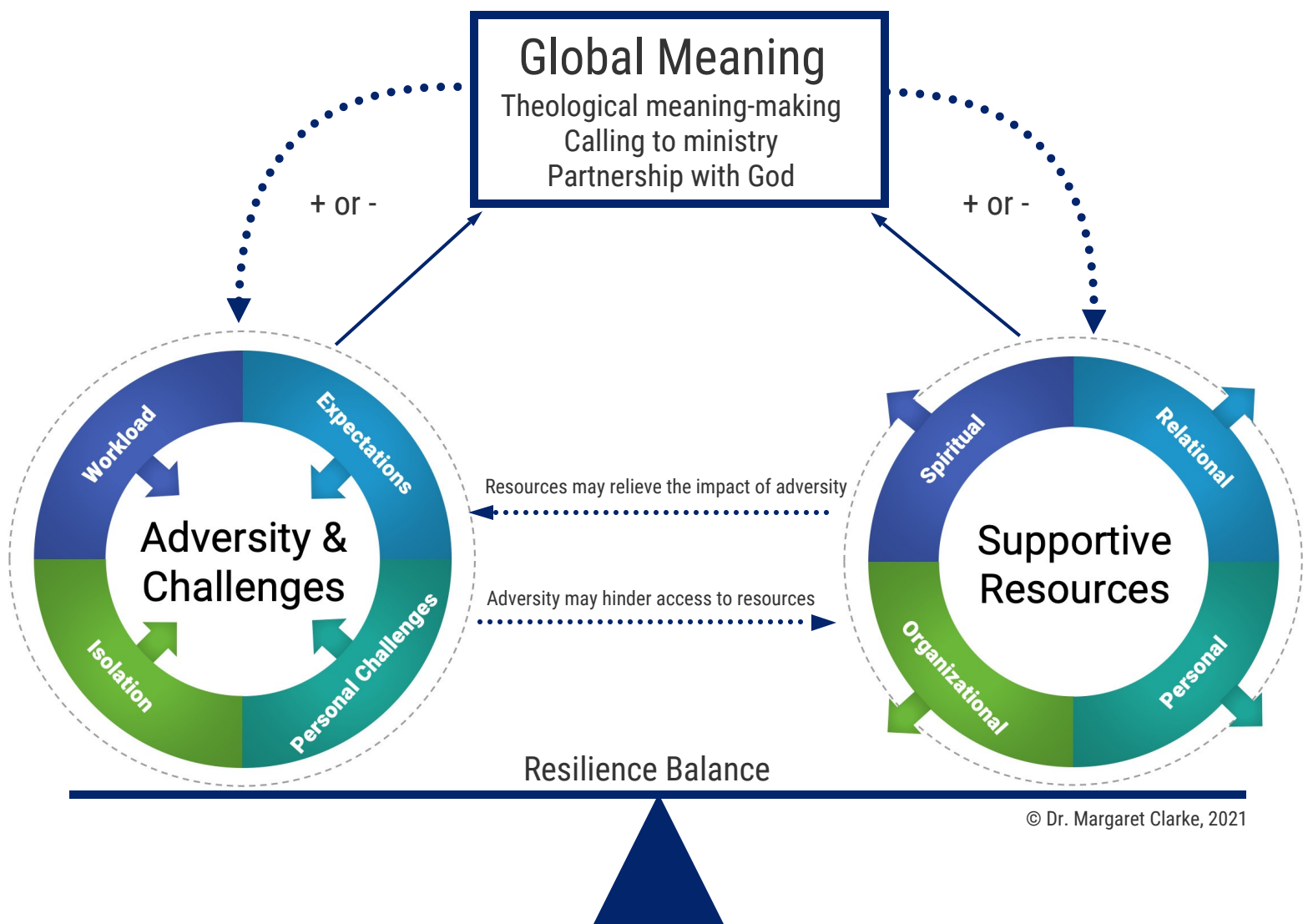
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Implications

For clergy

Individual clerics play a central, but not exclusive role in their resilience. It can be beneficial for clerics to engage in ongoing self-evaluate regarding the levels of adversity they are experiencing, which resources are present in their life, and how they are experiencing the balance between the two. Knowledge of the types of adversity that clergy experience may have a normalizing effect and offer encouragement to an individual cleric that they are not unique or deficient if they are experiencing such things. The clergy resilience model reminds clergy of the balancing effect of supportive resources that can act as a counterbalance to the effects of the adversity.

For congregations

Congregations play a role in clergy resilience, both in a helpful and unhelpful ways. Congregations can increase the adversity faced by clerics through unrealistic expectations, disrespect, unwarranted criticism, complaining, resistance to change, selfishness, and controlling or uncooperative behaviour. However, congregations can contribute to clergy resilience by considering their relational interactions with their clerics and working to reduce criticism and increase encouragement and care. Congregations that are eager to grow, welcoming, joyful, appreciative, respectful, harmonious, and accepting are a support to clergy resilience.

For denominations

Denominations play a crucial role in screening and confirming ministry calling through a careful process. Denominations also play a critical role in supportive organizational practices, such organizing peer gatherings, providing skill-specific training, and affirmation of calling to ministry. Denominational financial support for services, such as professional counselling, can make this supportive resource available when it might not be financially accessible to an individual. Early ministry is a unique time when greater guidance and more structured accountability is valued by clergy. Denominations have an essential role in setting wellness standards for their clergy, ideally based on flexible accountability that includes expectation for clergy engagement with supportive resources, but not prescribing what resources will work best for any given cleric. Denominations also have a role in helping congregations address unrealistic expectations they have of their clergy, thereby reducing adversity.

For educational institutions

Educational institutions have a unique role in clergy resilience due to their influence in the pre-service training of clergy. The Clergy Resilience Model can be an educational model used by schools to provide students with training in the adversity and challenges they will face in ministry. Alongside this, the model can also be used to educate students on supportive resources and educational institutions may want to require that students engage with a selection of supportive resources as a way to help them develop their resilience.

Collaboration

Collaboration between denominations and educational institutions is important to support clergy resilience. First, affirming a clear call to ministry is beneficial before and during training. Collaboration is also essential to determine the training needs of modern clergy and evaluate if, how, when, and by whom these are being addressed. Educational institutions are also uniquely equipped to support denominations in providing ongoing skill-specific training and lifelong learning to their clerics.

About Dr. Margaret Clarke

Margaret is a professor and the Department Head of graduate counselling programs at Briercrest Seminary. She is a Registered Marriage and Family Therapist, Approved Supervisor, and Supervisor Mentor with the Canadian Association of Marriage Family Therapy. She has a private counselling practice, *Evoke Counselling Services,* where one of her joys is working with clergy and their families. Margaret has been married for 30 years to Tim, and they have been in vocational ministry for over 25 years, which has afforded her personal insights into the experiences of clergy, in addition to her therapeutic and research knowledge.

Full Dissertation

harvest.usask.ca/bitstream/handle/10388/13496/ CLARKE-DISSERTATION-2021.pdf? sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Additional resources

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