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Are clergy serving yoked congregations more vulnerable to burnout? A study among
clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA)

Leslie J Francis*

University of Warwick

Mandy Robbins

Glyndŵr University

Keith Wulff

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (emeritus)

Author note:

*Corresponding author:

Leslie J Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Institute of Education

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Pressures generated by increasing secularisation and decreasing vocations to ordained ministry are resulting across denominations in a growing number of clergy serving more than one congregation. This study assesses the hypothesis that clergy serving more than one congregation are more susceptible to burnout. Data were provided by a sample of 735 clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA) who completed the Francis Burnout Inventory together with the abbreviated Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised. Among these clergy 82% served one congregation, 13% served two congregations, and 5% served three or more congregations. After controlling for individual differences in age and personality, the data demonstrated that clergy serving yoked congregations experienced no statistically significant differences in susceptibility to burnout, either in terms of levels of emotional exhaustion, or in terms of levels of satisfaction in ministry, compared with colleagues serving just one congregation.

Keywords: clergy, burnout, stress, personality, Presbyterian, USA

Introduction

A growing scientific literature is concerned with mapping the correlates of professional burnout and work-related psychological health among the clergy, employing the Maslach Burnout Inventory developed by Maslach and Jackson (1986), the modified Maslach Burnout Inventory developed specifically for use among clergy by Rutledge and Francis (2004) or the Francis Burnout Inventory developed for use among clergy by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005). This literature has concentrated on three main issues.

The first issue concerns establishing the personality correlates of professional burnout or work-related psychological health. One group of studies, including Rutledge and Francis (2004), Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004), Francis and Turton (2004), and Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) employed the three dimensional model of personality proposed by Hans Eysenck and operationalisation by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barratt, 1985). These studies have consistently reported higher levels of burnout among those who record high scores on the neuroticism scale and low scores on the extraversion scale. A second group of studies, including Francis, Wulff, and Robbins (2008), Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, and Castle (2009), Robbins and Francis (2010), and Brewster, Francis, and Robbins (2011) employed the model of psychological type proposed by Jung (1971) and operationalised by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). A third group of studies, including Rodgeron & Piedmont (1998), Miner (2007), and Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, and De

Witte (2011), employed the big five factor model of personality as proposed by Costa and McCrae (1985) and operationalised in a variety of ways. These studies have consistently reported higher levels of burnout among introverts than among extraverts. Clearly personality emerges as an important factor in establishing predisposition for professional burnout and for poor work-related psychological health.

The second issue concerns establishing the intervention strategies capable of reducing the predisposition to burnout. Three focused studies have established the following findings. Francis and Turton (2004) found that the practice of reflective ministry engaging professional supervision strategies was associated with lower levels of burnout among Anglican clergy. Turton and Francis (2007) found that a positive attitude toward prayer was associated with lower levels of burnout among Anglican clergy. On the other hand, Francis, Turton, and Loudon (2007) found that companion animals within the presbytery did not reduce levels of burnout among Roman Catholic priests and that ownership of a dog was associated with higher levels of burnout. Clearly professional practices, personal beliefs and life-style choices may influence professional burnout and poor work-related psychological health.

The third issue concerns establishing the contextual factors associated with levels of professional burnout and work-related psychological health. In this connection Francis and Rutledge (2000) examined the theory that Anglican clergy serving in rural ministry may be under greater stress than their colleagues serving in other environments. Their data indicated that rural clergy had a lower sense of personal accomplishment, but that they suffered neither from higher levels of emotional exhaustion nor from higher levels of depersonalisation. Further research is needed that gives more attention to other contextual aspects of ministry.

Pressures generated by a range of factors, including increasing secularisation, decreasing vocations to ordained ministry, falling membership and growing financial stringency, are resulting across denominations in a growing number of clergy serving more than one congregation. Within The Presbyterian Church (USA) this phenomenon is described as clergy serving ‘yoked congregations’ and in the Church of England as clergy serving ‘multi-parish benefices’. While in principle yoked congregations and multi-parish benefices may not entail clergy working with a greater number of church members, there may be other implications for the ways in which ministry is perceived and experienced in this context. Yoked congregations and multi-parish benefices are likely to entail responsibilities for multiple buildings, for more committees, for a wider range of local politics and for more diversity in service provision. Analysing the experiences of clergy working in these contexts, Francis and Brewster (in press) identifies the potential stresses of ‘time-related over-extension’ as clergy try to serve multiple churches. Francis and Brewster’s analysis emerged from a study that explored the experiences of Church of England clergy serving at least three rural parishes. As yet, however, there is no empirical evidence to support Francis and Brewster’s contention that clergy serving yoked congregations or multi-parish benefices in fact record higher levels of burnout than clergy serving single congregations.

Since as yet there is no empirical evidence regarding the consequences of yoked congregations and multi-parish benefices for the work-related psychological health of the clergy involved, the present study sets out to address this issue. Following the analytic model previously employed by Francis and Rutledge (2000), Francis and Turton (2004), Turton and Francis (2007) and Francis, Turton, and Loudon (2007) multiple regression will be employed to take into account sex, age, and personality

before testing for the effect of yoked congregations on the measures of work-related psychological health.

Method

Sample

In 2006 a survey was established with The Presbyterian Church (USA) to examine the comparative experiences of clergy serving yoked congregations. A total of 735 clergy (532 clergymen and 203 clergywomen) serving in parish ministry participated in the survey; 82% served one congregation, 13% served two congregations, and 5% served three or more congregations; 1% were in their twenties, 11% in their thirties, 24% in their forties, 40% in their fifties, 20% in their sixties, 2% were aged seventy or over, and 15 failed to disclose their age.

Measures

Work-related psychological health and burnout was assessed by the two scales proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005), an 11-item measure of positive affect (Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, SIMS) and an 11-item measure of negative affect (Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, SEEM). Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

Personality was assessed by the abbreviated Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Francis, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992) as further revised by Francis, Robbins, Loudon and Haley (2001). This instrument proposes three six-item measures of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, together with a six-item lie scale. Each item is assessed on a two-point scale: yes and no.

Results

Table 1 presents the psychometric properties of the five scales employed in the analyses. The psychoticism scale is not included in the analyses since previous studies have routinely shown only extraversion and neuroticism to be core to individual differences in measures of positive and negative affect. All five scales achieved *alpha* coefficients in excess of the threshold of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003) and demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability. The finding that women record higher neuroticism scores than men is consistent with the main body of previous research (Francis, 1993).

- Insert tables 1, 2 and 3 about here -

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix on which the two regression models in table 3 are based. From table 2 it is worth noting that the clergy with yoked congregations tend to be older and to be more introverted than their colleagues serving single congregations.

The main conclusion to emerge from the regression models is that, after taking into account age, sex, and personality, working with yoked congregations contributed no additional predictive power in respect either of the measure of positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) or of the measure of negative affect (emotional exhaustion in ministry).

Discussion and Conclusion

Working within a research tradition concerned with the measurement of professional burnout and work-related psychological health among clergy, the present study set out to assess whether clergy working in parish ministry within The Presbyterian Church (USA) with yoked congregations are more susceptible to professional burnout than their colleagues serving single congregations. The data

indicated that there is no significant difference in the work-related psychological health of clergy serving yoked congregations compared with clergy serving single congregations.

The model of work-related psychological health employed in this study has been based on Bradburn's (1969) classic model of balanced affect and construes poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout as high levels of negative affect in the absence of counterbalancing positive affect. Within the Francis Burnout Inventory negative affect has been operationalised in terms of emotional exhaustion in ministry, and positive affect has been operationalised in terms of satisfaction in ministry. In terms of this model the present study has demonstrated that ministry among yoked congregations is associated with neither greater nor lesser satisfaction in ministry and with neither greater nor lesser emotional exhaustion in ministry. Clergy working with yoked congregations are neither worse off nor better off than their colleagues working with single congregations, at least in terms of their work-related psychological health.

A significant limitation with the present study is that it has been conducted among just one denomination in one cultural context. The study has, however, established a model for research that is worth replicating elsewhere.

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Table 1:

Scale properties

Scale	<i>alpha</i>	male		female		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
		mean	mean	mean	SD		
SEEM	.82	27.41	7.90	28.79	7.94	2.1	.05
SIMS	.80	44.56	5.70	44.16	5.79	0.8	NS
Extraversion	.81	3.61	2.03	3.82	2.13	1.2	NS
Neuroticism	.69	1.50	1.57	2.02	1.66	4.0	.001
Lie scale	.72	2.75	1.90	2.58	1.86	1.1	NS

Table 2:

Correlation matrix

	SIMS	SEEM	Sex	Age	Ext	Neu	Lie
Yoked congregations	.03	-.05	-.01	.10**	-.13***	-.05	.05
Lie scale	.10**	-.12***	-.04	.07	.00	-.10**	
Neuroticism	-.33***	.53***	.15***	-.20***	-.12***		
Extraversion	.19***	-.13***	.05	-.04			
Age	.16***	-.21***	-.13***				
Sex	-.03	.08*					
SEEM	-.59***						

Table 3

Multiple regression

	r^2	Increase		β	t	$p <$	
	r^2	F	$p <$				
<i>Satisfaction in Ministry Scale</i>							
Sex	.001	.001	1.0	NS	.012	0.3	NS
Age	.025	.023	17.1	.001	.102	2.9	.01
Extraversion	.066	.041	31.7	.001	.169	4.8	.001
Neuroticism	.144	.078	64.8	.001	-.282	7.8	.001
Lie scale	.147	.003	2.8	NS	.058	1.7	NS
N congregations	.147	.000	0.4	NS	.023	0.7	NS
<i>Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry</i>							
Sex	.005	.005	3.9	.05	-.010	0.3	NS
Age	.044	.039	29.3	.001	-.106	3.2	.001
Extraversion	.065	.020	15.7	.001	-.079	2.5	.05
Neuroticism	.301	.236	241.3	.001	.497	15.3	.001
Lie scale	.305	.004	4.2	.05	-.064	2.0	.05
N congregations	.305	.000	0.3	NS	-.017	0.5	NS