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Reading the back page: Listening to clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA)

reflecting on professional burnout

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Abstract

Quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments, but often these comments are neither analyzed nor reported. The aim of the present study is to analyze the responses to the back page from a study concerned with work-related psychological health and professional burnout completed by clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). Of the 748 clergy who took part in the survey, 224 wrote (sometimes multiple) comments on the back page (30% participation rate). The 345 identified comments have been analyzed to reflect 16 themes, 13 concerned with aspects of ministry and 3 concerned with aspects of the survey itself. The ministry-related themes included reflections on stress and burnout, tensions with congregations, support from congregations, time off and study leave, and marriage-related issues. The conclusion is drawn that reading the back page generates useful information in three areas: giving additional insight into the theme explored by the quantitative survey, drawing attention to weaknesses in the survey instrument, and shaping future research.

Keywords: clergy studies, quantitative surveys, qualitative data, burnout, personality.

Introduction

Routinely quantitative surveys dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments on the theme explored by the survey or on the way in which the theme was explored in the survey. Rarely are these comments analyzed by the research team and included as a proper outcome of the study. The aim of the present study is to analyze the narrative responses added to the end of a survey conducted among clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). The survey included sections on: work-related psychological health, using the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005); psychological type, using the scales of introversion, extraversion, sensing, intuition, thinking, feeling, judging, and perceiving proposed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005); personality, using the scales of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism proposed by the abbreviated form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Francis, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992); and a range of questions concerned with a variety of aspects of ministry. The survey was completed by a sample of 748 clergy serving in a parish within The Presbyterian Church (USA). The analyses of these data reported by Francis, Wulff, and Robbins (2008) offer the following profile of these clergy.

In terms of psychological type, these clergy as a group preferred introversion (55%) over extraversion (45%), preferred intuition (56%) over sensing (44%), preferred feeling (70%) over thinking (30%), and preferred judging (73%) over perceiving (27%). According to psychological type theory, as discussed by Myers and McCaulley (1985), these preferences for introversion, intuition, feeling and judging help to build up a composite picture of the kind of clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA).

Clergy who prefer introversion are oriented toward their inner world; they are energized by their inner ideas and concepts. They may feel drained by events and people

around them. They prefer to reflect on a situation rather than act on it. They enjoy solitude, silence and contemplation, as they tend to focus their attention on what is happening in their inner lives. They may appear reserved and detached as they are difficult to get to know, and they may prefer to have a small circle of intimate friends rather than many acquaintances.

Clergy who prefer intuition focus on the possibilities of a situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They may feel that perception by the senses is not as valuable as information gained from indirect associations. They focus on the overall picture, rather than specific facts and data. They tend to follow their inspirations enthusiastically, but not always realistically. They can appear to be up in the air and may be seen as idealistic and impracticable. They may aspire to bring innovative change to established conventions.

Clergy who prefer feeling make judgements based on subjective values. They prize compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace. They may be more concerned to promote harmony than to adhere to abstract principles. They may be thought of as 'people persons', as they are able to take into account other people's feelings and values in decision-making and problem-solving, ensuring they try to reach a solution satisfactory to everyone. They may be thought of as 'warm hearted'. They may find it difficult to take tough decisions or to criticize others, even when it is necessary. They find it easy to empathize with other people and tend to be trusting and encouraging of others.

Clergy who prefer judging seek to order, to rationalize, and to structure their outer world, as they actively judge external stimuli. They have a planned orderly approach to life. They enjoy routine and established patterns. They prefer to follow schedules to reach an established goal and may make use of lists, rotas or diaries. They tend to be punctual, organized and tidy. They may find it difficult to deal with unexpected disruptions of their plans.

In terms of positive affect, these clergy as a group displayed high levels of satisfaction in ministry. More than four out of every five clergy said that: they feel that their pastoral ministry has a positive influence on people's lives (91%); they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their current ministry (86%); they gain a lot of person satisfaction from working with people in their current ministry (84%); they are really glad that they entered ministry (84%); they gain a lot of personal satisfaction from fulfilling their ministry functions (83%); they feel that their teaching ministry has a positive influence on people's faith (83%); and they feel that their ministry is really appreciated by people (81%). Although the other items in the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale recorded somewhat lower levels of endorsement, the levels remain quite high. Thus, 78% said that their ministry gives real sense and purpose to their lives; 74% said that they can easily understand how people feel about things; 72% said that they feel very positive about their ministry; and 68% said that they deal very effectively with the problems of the people in their current ministry.

In terms of negative affect, these clergy as a group displayed quite high levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry. Two-fifths of the clergy reported that they feel drained by fulfilling their ministry roles (39%), or that they find themselves frustrated in their attempts to accomplish tasks that are important to them (39%). One-third of the clergy reported that fatigue and irritation are part of their daily experience (33%). One-fifth of the clergy reported that they find themselves spending less and less time with those among whom they minister (21%), or that they have been discouraged by the lack of personal support for them (21%), or that they are less patient with those among whom they minister than they used to be (20%). Well over one in ten reported that they are feeling negative or cynical about the people with whom they work (17%), or that their humour has a cynical or biting tone (14%), or that they are becoming less flexible in their dealings with those among whom they minister (13%), or that they are invaded by sadness they cannot explain (13%).

Research question

It is against this context that it becomes interesting and instructive to review the comments added to the end of the questionnaire. Here is an exercise in taking seriously the issues and themes recorded by the clergy on the back page after they had been stimulated by and reflected on the questions posed earlier in the survey.

Method**Procedure**

This sample of 748 clergy serving within a parish in The Presbyterian Church (USA) was approached in 2006 for a study of clergy serving multipoint parishes or congregations. The sample includes solo pastors, heads of staff, associate pastors, co-pastors, and designated pastors.

Participants

Of the 748 clergy who participated in the project, 72% were male and 28% were female; 12% were under the age of forty, 24% were in their forties, 40% were in their fifties, 20% were in their sixties, 3% were aged seventy or over, and the remaining 2% failed to reveal their age; 83% were married, 16% were not married, and the remaining 1% failed to reveal their marital status.

Instrument

The back page of the questionnaire simply invited participants as follows: 'Please use the space below for any other comments'.

Analysis

Of the 748 clergy who participated in the survey, 224 accepted the invitation to add comments on the back page, some offering multiple comments across a range of issues. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze these comments. The term grounded theory refers to theorizing inductively from a body of data. This form of analysis is long established

and frequently selected when working with a textual database. The basic idea is to carefully examine a textual database and to discover themes and their interrelationships (Glasser & Srauss, 1967; Gibbs, 2009).

The clergy responses were transcribed and then read and re-read several times. Key ideas were highlighted and coded in order to identify recurrent themes. Each theme was given a descriptive term and ranked according to frequency. Close scrutiny of these themes revealed two broad categories. The larger category comprising 13 themes, focussed on ministry. The smaller category comprising 3 themes focussed on the nature of the questionnaire. These two categories and 16 themes are displayed in table 1, together with the number of comments identified with each theme.

- insert table 1 about here -

Results

Stress and burnout

The largest number of comments (52) concerned experiences of stress and burnout, which further illuminate the main topic of the survey. What these comments add to the study is both a sense of the honesty with which some clergy were willing to speak of their personal experience of stress and burnout and a sense of the pain and hurt that such experiences entail. One cleric spoke of past experience, writing, 'I suffered from pretty severe burnout about five years ago'; a second spoke of current experience, writing 'I am under psychiatric care and counselling care for depression'; another in a similar situation wrote, 'I recently entered therapy to help me better balance stress/anxiety with work'; while another was facing up to a growing realization of current experiences, writing, 'To be honest, lately I have felt a sense of burnout'. Other clergy did not speak directly of burnout or stress, but spoke very directly of experiencing some of the symptoms. One wrote, 'Sometimes things can be overwhelming with family and church demands', and another wrote, 'Sometimes I feel extremely anxious or

full of dread and defeated like I may be developing dementia'. Some clergy referred to hurt, pain and isolation that accompanied burnout: one put it like this, 'I feel not only burnt out, but forgotten and even betrayed by colleagues too busy to care'.

Tensions within congregations

The second largest number of comments (33) concerned tensions with congregations, since congregations were often seen to be a real source of stress. One cleric wrote that in his church 'there has been a long history of clergy bashing and dysfunction by a powerful few'. Another cleric felt that he had been forced out of office when 'a small group in the congregation used the divorce to harass me to the point that I resigned as a minister recently'. One cleric drew attention to the competing and conflicting expectations within the congregation, writing that 'there are too many different expectations by people and everyone wants it their way with no thought for the whole community'. Three other comments add depth and poignancy to the power of congregations to hurt their clergy: one wrote of the congregation that 'a few are difficult and far too many are apathetic'; one wrote, 'I feel more hassled than supported by local members'; and another wrote with some feeling that 'there are a few members that treat me like a dog'.

Support from congregation

While 33 of the clergy wrote about tensions with the congregation, another 22 wrote about the support that they receive from the congregation. Some of the clergy wanted to record their appreciation in inclusive ways for their church members in general, writing things like: 'I am blessed with a loving and forgiving congregation'; 'My congregation has been tremendously supportive'; and 'My congregations have been great'. Other pointed to specific characteristics, people or activities that stood out in their minds. For one cleric what stood out was that his 'congregation is liberated, open-hearted and peace-oriented'. One cleric wanted to 'Thank God for Elders and members of various churches in this city. They

are loving, supportive and caring'. Another cleric wanted to point to one specific family, writing, 'for the past year one family in one church has included my family in their Sunday lunch plans'.

Time off and study leave

Time off and study leave was referred to by 30 clergy, some in a positive way and some in a negative way. Some clergy spoke of how time off has been a positive benefit for their ministry. One had taken a three month sabbatical and found that it 'really helped a great deal'. One takes 'a monthly Sabbath day (spent at a local retreat centre)' and this 'has really helped my ministry'. Another wrote that 'I split time of vacation period every six months and try to take study leave annually; this helps me a lot more with tensions'. Other clergy have found it more difficult to take time off. One writes that 'as a solo pastor it is very hard to get away for vacations'. One regrets not having been able to take a sabbatical year because that 'would have improved my call dramatically'. Another struggles to 'guard my day off'.

Feeling blessed

A number (24) of the clergy took the opportunity of the back page to express their joy in ministry. These expressions took a variety of forms. They wrote things like: 'I am very happy in my current call'; 'I am having a great time'; 'I am blessed to be doing exactly what I wanted to do'. Other clergy wrote a little more fully about their current situation and experience: 'I have found an incredibly wonderful church and am ever so grateful'; 'I am very happy in this ministry and thankful that I can still carry on'; 'I have served the same church for 25 years, in several different roles and with several different heads of staff. I am blessed'.

Formal support

A number of clergy (24) spoke about their experience of support within the formal structures of the Church: 14 of these comments were positive and 10 were negative. In terms

of positive comments, one cleric wrote 'I have received care and concern from the chaplain at our hospital'. One wrote, 'I have been through some extremely difficult times and the COM was very helpful to me'. Another wrote that 'most of my support comes from the presbytery and other pastors'. A much fuller account of the positive experience of formal support was given by the cleric who wrote as follows:

I have been part of a covenant group of pastors for 25 years and have met weekly with a spiritual director. I am clinically depressed, admitted it, sought help and am on medication that helps wonderfully.

In terms of negative comments, some clergy voice disappointment with the presbytery and others with the denominational structures. Regarding the presbytery, one cleric wrote, 'I struggle with the lack of support from the presbytery', while another wrote, 'I have had lack of support and sometimes outright hostility from those in the presbytery'. Regarding the denomination, one cleric wrote, 'What saddens me is that I have had to go outside the denomination to get support', while another wrote, 'The PCUSA does not know how to take care of their pastors and their pastors' families'.

Marriage issues

Marriage issues received comments from 22 of the clergy: 11 positive and 11 negative. In terms of positive comments, several clergy pointed to their marriage as a real source of strength in their ministry. One applauded 'a very supportive wife' and another wrote, 'I am in a very happy marriage'. One clergyman found his marriage a source of support and explained that 'at the beginning of my ministry I decided to make marriage and family life a priority'. Also finding her marriage a source of support, one clergywoman explained that 'it helps that my husband is the co-pastor and we are in ministry together'. Another clergyman explained that marriage has not always been easy, but it has been worth

working at: 'My wife and I have had a number of difficulties, but have worked through them and enjoyed our children and grandchildren'.

In terms of negative comments, several clergy drew attention to the ongoing current difficulties in their marriages. One wrote that he was 'married but beginning divorce procedure'. Another wrote that she was 'currently going through marital separation'. Several clergy wrote about the role of ministry in leading to the breakdown of their marriage. One put it like this: 'The stress of ministry was a large factor that contributed to the ending of my last marriage'. Several clergy wrote about the consequences of divorces on their lives and ministry. One clergyman linked his 'traumatic divorce' to a period of debilitating 'depression'. One clergywoman wrote about the strains of caring for her children: 'I am a single mom with two children in college or about to go to college with no help from their father'.

Loneliness and isolation

Loneliness and isolation were issues raised by 16 of the clergy. These voices echoed in different ways the one common theme that the very office of minister and the very task of ministry can lead into a path of isolation. One cleric made this point starkly by writing, 'The ministry is hard, lonely, and relentless'. Another cleric wrote, 'I was surprised and overwhelmed by the isolation of the position'. Others wrote: 'There are many times I feel isolated in my ministry'; 'I experience a high level of loneliness'; 'I was very alone'.

Working conditions

Aspects of their working conditions were mentioned by 16 of the clergy, usually with reference to difficulties generated by relationships with other members of staff, by overwork, or by lack of resources. The kinds of problems caused by relationships with other members of staff are illustrated by the following comments. One cleric wrote that 'my biggest stress comes from another pastor on staff who is very critical and tries to sabotage my work', while

another wrote that, 'a change in the top senior minister has created the most stress of all'. Changes in the staff team also caused problems for the cleric who wrote, 'I am struggling with the transitions we have with staff turnover'. Matters were brought to a head for another cleric when 'the head of staff was asked to leave after a year of difficulties for church and staff'. The problems caused by overwork were voiced by the clergy who said, 'The job demands are impossible all day everyday', and 'My job should be done by a few people not one person'. Different aspects of the problems caused by lack of resources are illustrated by the following comments. One cleric complained about the lack of communication infrastructure, writing that it 'would be useful to have an up-to-date computer and internet connection'. Another cleric complained about the level of remuneration from his church, writing that 'I have part-time jobs to make ends meet'.

Informal support

The support received from colleagues, friends, family and congregation was mentioned by 15 of the clergy. Some of the clergy drew attention to the collegial support drawn from clergy groups. One wrote that 'it is becoming more and more important for clergy to have peer groups'; while another of the clergy observed that 'you need to be intentional about maintaining relationships with peers'. Some of the clergy valued highly the support drawn from outside the peer group. One wrote that 'I do have a small group of non-ordained friends who meet two times a month'; while another wrote, 'I have a prayer partner with whom I have been meeting for twenty years'. Other informal sources of support were voiced by the clergy who wrote: 'I am in a very supportive congregation'; 'I have great support from family and friends'; 'I have two close friends'.

Illness

Illness and health were matters of concern were raised by 9 of the clergy. A particularly poignant comment was made by the clergywoman who wrote, 'I have coronary

artery disease, am diabetic and am a cancer survivor. My husband is also a cardiac patient'. Another clergywoman wrote, 'In the past twelve months I was diagnosed with breast cancer; I had 2 surgeries, chemo and radiation'. A clergyman wrote to say that 'I have just returned from a three-month medical leave'. Such comments draw attention to the personal struggles being dealt with by those whose ministry is shaped to accompany the struggles of others.

Future uncertainties

Some of the clergy were struggling with what they saw to be the uncertain future for the local church or for the denomination that they serve. Comments in this area were made by seven of the clergy. Concern for the local church was voiced by two clerics in the following ways: 'I am sometimes almost overwhelmed by anxiety about my particular church', and 'My congregation is an aging one and my community faces decline'. Concern for the denomination was voiced in general terms by the cleric who wrote, 'I am anxious about the denomination as a whole'. A more specific point was made by the following cleric who wrote as follows:

The most depressing aspect of my ministry are the idiotic social and political stands taken by the national level at GA and OGA. They totally undermine my efforts to identify Presbyterianism with the Gospel among my members and prospective members.

Healthy living

Attention was drawn to strategies for healthy living by four of the clergy. These clergy wrote the following kind of things. One wrote, 'I exercise at a gym three times a week', while another wrote, 'I have always tried to take care of my physical, emotional, and spiritual needs'.

Positive comments on the questionnaire

Some clergy took the trouble to affirm the survey and to offer positive comments about the questionnaire. Of the 17 clerics who offered positive comments, some simply wrote ‘thank you’, or ‘thanks for asking’, or ‘thanks for including me in your survey’. Other clerics offered more thoughtful or more reflective comments on the experience of participating in the project. One wrote, ‘Thank you for these few moments to reflect’; one wrote, ‘This questionnaire has been helpful’; and another wrote, ‘This was a good survey. I enjoyed completing it’.

Negative comments on the questionnaire

Not all participants, however, felt positive about the questionnaire. All told 44 negative comments were made. The criticism included the topic (burnout), the range of issues explored, the way in which the questions were phrased, the personal nature of the enquiry, the length of the survey, and the very purpose of gathering data on such topics. Criticism of researching the very topic of burnout was voiced by the cleric who wrote, ‘If I were burned out I would not respond to a survey like this one’. Criticism of the range of contextual and personal factors explored was voiced by the cleric who wrote, ‘Some of these questions seem to have little to do with burnout. Could it be there is another notion behind the questionnaire?’ Criticism of the way in which some of the questions were asked was voiced by the cleric who wrote, ‘Words like ever, never and always are much harder to answer because it may have been five years ago and it isn’t now. They don’t allow for exceptions’. Criticism of the personal nature of the enquiry was voiced by the cleric who wrote, ‘This inventory is too personal. I am tempted to not return it’. Criticism of the length of the survey was voiced by the cleric who wrote, ‘A six-page survey is unrealistic. You are being presumptuous to think it will be completed in timely fashion’. Finally, criticism of the very purpose of gathering data on such topics was made by the cleric who said that asking ‘questions without practical support is meaningless’.

Personality-related comments

The inclusion of the two personality measures in the survey attracted no negative comments about the Church's use of personality theory, but it did attract some positive comments from clergy who were familiar with personality theory and had applied some of the concepts in their ministry. Drawing on the language of psychological type theory, one cleric wrote, 'I am by nature a Lone Ranger type (INTJ)', while another wrote, 'I am an INFP'. One cleric described himself as 'an introverted poet pastor', while another wrote, 'I am an introvert by nature who enjoys others in ministry'. One cleric reflected in greater length on his self-awareness and understanding of his personality.

My personality tends not to get too excited nor too depressed; this has helped me to deal with difficulties and conflicts as well as with disappointments and lack of success in terms of growth.

Conclusion

Quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments on the theme explored by the survey or on the way in which the theme was explored in the survey. The aim of the present study was to examine and to analyze the comments registered on the back page of a survey designed for clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA) on the theme of burnout. The quantitative survey was completed by 748 clergy, of whom 224 offered comments on the back page, which represents nearly one in three of the participants (30%). These 224 clergy offered 345 identified comments that have been analyzed to reflect 16 distinct themes. In turn these 16 themes have been organized within two categories. The first and larger category concerned comments on ministry and embraced the following 13 themes: stress and burnout, tensions with congregations, support from congregations, time off and study leave, feeling blessed, formal support, marriage issues, loneliness and isolation, working conditions, informal support,

illness, future uncertainties, and health living. The second and smaller category concerned comments on the questionnaire study itself and embraced the following three themes: negative comments on the questionnaire, positive comments on the questionnaire, and personality-related comments. Four conclusions emerge from these analyses and data.

The first conclusion is that the clergy themselves took seriously the invitation and the opportunity offered by the back page of the quantitative survey. Nearly a third of the clergy (30%) who participated in the survey took additional time to respond to the back page invitation. Moreover, a number of those who responded to the invitation recorded more than one main point: 224 clergy generated 345 distinct comments taken into account in the analyses. Such investment in the survey by the participants needs to be taken seriously by the researchers.

The second conclusion is that the comments afforded rich additional insights into the theme of the survey. Moreover, the systematic analysis of these comments provided an organizational framework within which the burnout-related concerns and insights of the clergy could be located and interpreted. The 13 themes identified by this analysis suggest that for the clergy themselves the following issues are salient for informed reflection on the causes and on the amelioration of burnout. The congregations are core to discourse about burnout: some congregations take on an oppressive character and push their clergy over the edge into burnout, while other congregations take on a benevolent character and offer their pastors life-long support. Clergy identify the core factors of formal support and informal support both to safeguard against burnout and offer rehabilitation. Formal support comes from the denomination, from the presbytery and from external professional agencies. Informal support rests in the hands of friends, peers, and family. In their discussion of burnout clergy recognize the need to look at the work context (the tasks to be done, the resources available and the working relationships), at the dangers of loneliness and isolation,

at the impact of uncertainty about the future of the local church and about the policy of the denomination, and at the specific opportunities and challenges posed by the intersection of the demands of the job and the responsibilities of family life. Clergy are sensitive to the impact of physical illness and to the advantages of healthy living on the exercise of ministry.

The third conclusion is that the comments afforded important insights into how the clergy perceived the survey. They gave attention to the content, wording and length of the survey. The comments make it clear that some clergy see surveys as a burden, but others see surveys as an opportunity for reflection and are pleased that their Church is interested in listening to them. Moreover, comments on this particular survey affirmed the interest of some clergy in applying psychological type theory to their own self-awareness and to their practice of ministry.

The fourth conclusion is that systematic attention given to the comments on the back page may be of proper benefit in shaping future quantitative studies both in terms of identifying content and in terms of shaping and structuring survey items.

The present study has set out to take the back page seriously from one quantitative survey, specifically concerned with researching burnout among clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). It is now worth replicating this enquiry in respect of quantitative surveys designed to explore different topics or employed among different groups of clergy.

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Table 1:

Themes identified from the back page

	N
<i>Comments on ministry</i>	
Stress and burnout	55
Tensions with congregations	33
Support from congregations	22
Time off and study leave	30
Feeling blessed	24
Formal support	24
Marriage issues	22
Loneliness and isolation	16
Working conditions	16
Informal support	15
Illness	9
Future uncertainties	7
Healthy living	4
<i>Comments on questionnaire</i>	
Negative comments	44
Positive comments	17
Personality-related comments	7