

Ministers express stress, report high work satisfaction

Sundby: 'None immune from mental health concerns'

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Many would like to think a minister's life is easy — little stress, a loving congregation, and few demands save for Sunday sermons. In reality, though, that doesn't describe the life of many ministers.

Providing statistics from a variety of sources, Mark Sundby and Caroline Burke of Leaderwise, a regional counseling and consulting organization for church leaders, offered a snapshot from the 2014 annual health survey of the United Methodist Church that indicated 50 percent of clergy express stress "fairly often" or "very often" in their congregations.

But while about one-half of ministers report stress, several studies indicate about nine-in-10 ministers also report being satisfied in in their calling.

The data were included in a handout distributed by Sundby and Burke at the Synod of Lakes and Prairies' Leadership Summit held in late April at the Christ the King Retreat Center in Buffalo, Minnesota. The Summit drew more than 50 participants.

Sundby is the executive director of Leaderwise, where both he and Burke are staff psychologists. Leaderwise, based in the Twin Cities, can be found online at <http://www.leaderwise.org>.

Noting the discordant statistics of stress and job satisfaction, Sundby responded in an e-mail: "It is incongruous, which makes the stats so interesting. How can 90 percent be satisfied in their work and a third be wrestling with burnout at the same time? We discussed this as a group, and participants came up with a couple of possible explanations: 1) that clergy are

so used to presenting a positive image that they can't admit, even to themselves, when they're struggling, and 2) that the work is deeply satisfying and meaningful, even as they're exhausted and stressed by it."

This year's Leadership Summit, formerly known as the synod's COM/CPM Event for members of committees on ministry and the preparation for ministry, addressed the topic of ministry and mental health.

The studies Sundby and Burke highlighted indicated 40 percent of clergy reported severe financial stress and 30 percent acknowledged feeling "isolated and lonely." Another study noted that clergy reported 75 percent of their stress was related to unclear boundaries.

When asked why clergy seem to have a difficult time seeking help for mental health issues, Sundby responded, "There are likely several possible explanations. First, it may be social desirability and the wish to appear strong as the identified leader of the congregation. Second, there is the idea of 'take up your cross and follow me,' and that sometimes discipleship requires discomfort and suffering. The key question here, though, is why suffer when you could seek assistance?"

"As Christians," Sundby wrote, "we may be called to suffer from time to time, but not unnecessarily, in our opinion. Research shows that we're much more creative, clear thinking, persuasive, likeable, and compassionate when we're experiencing positive emotions."

The availability, or lack thereof, or even being unaware of mental health resources can prevent clergy from seeking help. "If they're in a rural area, for instance," Sundby wrote, "it may be difficult to ask a counselor or other healthcare provider for assistance if that person attends their church or even just knows them from the community. Regardless, we know several ministers who have done just that, and they've found their healthcare provider to be accepting, supportive and non-judgmental."

And then there are the issues faced by committees on ministry and the preparation for ministry. Sundby and Burke offered case studies for attendees

to review in small groups – among those an inquirer with a history of depression and anxiety, a minister who insulted someone in a bar, and a pregnant single pastor.

Sundby and Burke said the situations outlined in the case studies are not out of the ordinary, and when asked if presbytery committees had adequate time to adequately address such situation, Sundby noted, “It’s a reality that most committees do not have the time or resources to provide such care. Given this, it may be even more important to proactively address developing situations before they become crises.”

He added: “For instance, if people are noticing that a clergyperson seems to be struggling, that’s the time to make a referral to a counselor or ministry development center. Often committees wait too long before speaking to someone and making a referral. On a more formal level, committees may wish to investigate ways to become more involved with candidates and ministers as a matter of practice.”

Sundby identified a resource for working with inquirers and candidates that’s available on the Presbyterian Mission Agency website. Called the “Milwaukee Model” and prepared by the Milwaukee Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry, the model lays out a joint journey for inquirers and candidates, and committees on the preparation for ministry. The resource is available for free at <http://bit.ly/2GIt9cz>.

And regarding the specific concerns addressed in the case studies, Sundby and Burke, and several small groups, pointed out that much depends on the context of each situation. “When a situation arises,” Sundby noted, “the best way to understand context is to investigate and delve more deeply into it. This will require extra time and attention outside of the regularly scheduled [committee] meeting, such as through reaching out to the candidate or minister. If a mental health issue is suspected, a referral to a ministry development center can be helpful.”

He added: “At the ministry development center, the candidate or minister will typically engage in two days of conversation and review leadership,

personality and mental health inventories. This information can be helpful to a committee in determining next steps.”

Even after the good work of committees on the preparation for ministry there are times when mental health issues raise concerns about serving ministers. “For some, there’s a tendency to put on a brave face and push through difficult situations, as they cover up the need for help to others and even to themselves,” Sundby wrote.

“Eventually they hit a point where they must confront what’s going on by seeking help, taking a leave, or the like. For others, their circumstances become so taxing that even people with relatively sound mental health are triggered by the stress and develop a mental health concern,” he added.

It’s important to remember that not all mental health issues that could affect a minister will come from within the ministerial calling. “There are life challenges outside of ministry that can contribute to mental health issues, such as family stressors, which can spill over into a minister’s ability to cope and do their job.” Sundby wrote.

“The important thing to realize is that really none of us is immune from mental health concerns,” he added.