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## **Burned Out but Barely Begun: A Qualitative Study on Newer Clergy and Communication Surrounding Emotional Labor and Personal Well-Being in South Mississippi**

Lauren Noll

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BURNED OUT BUT BARELY BEGUN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON NEWER  
CLERGY AND COMMUNICATION SURROUNDING EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND  
PERSONAL WELL-BEING IN SOUTH

by

Lauren Noll

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Communication  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides an overview of the concepts surrounding clergy burnout, organizational culture, and emotional labor theory. Furthermore, it explains the need for clearer understanding of clergy perceptions of their own personal experiences with burnout and their emotional wellbeing in relation to their organizational environment and careers as clergy members. The methodology of qualitative interviews sought to understand the narratives and experiences of clergy members from their own words and worldviews rather than from a statistical basis or analysis.

This research found answers to key questions involving communication about burnout in the context of organizational culture and emotional labor, including the connection between lack of organizational support for clergy members and clergy members' experiences with burnout, anecdotal evidence that there is little to know discussion about the subject of burnout or areas pertaining to emotional distress among clergy and those they serve, and that lack of boundaries and role clarification heavily contribute to feelings of burnout in clergy members.

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## DEDICATION

First, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Ragan, whom has been a constant source of encouragement, stress relief, and love since the very beginning. Through getting married in the beginning of graduate school, learning how to navigate not being with one another for the first year of our marriage most nights of the week due to work and night classes, to trying to finish a thesis during COVID-19, he has always believed that this was possible and that I would succeed, even when I did not believe in myself.

Next, I also dedicate this thesis to my mother who has always been my biggest cheerleader and always let me know that I could do whatever I wanted to do or be whomever I wanted to be. I am beyond grateful for a shoulder to cry on, Friday night dates, and a hand to hold through it all.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Since 1974, the United States has observed National Suicide Prevention Month in the month of September. Not only does this bring much needed awareness for Christians who are suffering from mental health issues, but it also provides an opportunity for the church and/or faith-based organizations to talk about an important topic that affects people more than we often realize or like to admit” (Wilson, 2019). In his last blog post on September 5th, 2019, Jarrid Wilson addressed the topic of “Christian Mental Health Statistics” to his following within the organization, Anthem of Hope. This blog post, which addressed the state of mental health among those who consider themselves as Christians and more so those who specifically fall under the title of clergy or pastors, was written a mere week before former pastor Jarrid Wilson, then 30 years old, made the decision to take his own life. According to BBC, Jarrid left behind two sons and his wife Juli, with whom he created Anthem of Hope, a non-profit dedicated to assisting those struggling with depression and mental illness (“California megachurch pastor kills himself,” 2019).

The reality of Jarrid Wilson’s suicide and battle with depression and mental illness is unfortunately not a new story. In her article on clergy burnout, Amy Simpson discussed recent studies from Duke University with evidence that pastors reported experiencing mental distress at double the rates as general public average (Simpson, 2014). Further, she addressed one of the main reasons for this discrepancy, which is pastors’ hesitancy to discuss these issues due to fear of being seen as unfaithful or incompetent. These thoughts and problems extend past the role of the lead pastors into the calling of most clergy members. Clergy job roles have historically been grouped into

six different categories: preacher, deliverer of rituals and sacraments, pastor, teacher, organizer, and administrator (Adams, Hough, Proeschold-Bell, Yao, & Kolkin, 2017). In these roles clergy members will frequently have to shift back and forth between these responsibilities many times in a single day. As they discussed in their article on the lessons that have been learned from ‘evangelical protestant’ clergy, Dr. Katheryn Rhoads Meek, et.al, shared that historically clergy have been looked at as what we would now label as therapists but without the training given today (Meek et al., 2003). This puts the clergy in an interesting and ‘demanding’ helping profession along with operating under the unrealistic expectations of “occupational and personal perfection” (Meek, 2003, p. 339). This aspect of the nature of the role of clergy is in itself justification for the study of their experience with burnout, especially in this rapidly changing culture and the increasing boundary-related stresses in their roles (Hill, Darling, & Raimondi, 2003). Clearly, this conversation should also be held in the communication realm of academia.

#### Rationale

Within the academic conversation on clergy burnout, one important aspect has not often been addressed, which is the organizational culture and conversations that surround these clergy members and their mental illness struggles. Although there has been extensive study on the connection between mental illness, emotional labor, and clergy burnout (Adams et al., 2017; Doolittle, 2007; Jacobson, Rothschild, Mirza, & Shapiro, 2013; Miner, Dowson, & Sterland, 2010), there has not been as much focus on the institutional culture clergy find themselves in that contributes to this on-going, common phenomenon. Multiple studies have related the issue of depression and mental illness of

clergy and those suffering from burnout to their own personal behaviors or personality differences (Doolittle, 2010).

In order to address this gap, this research sought to add to the understanding of the implications of communication within religious organizations among staff and congregation members on the mental health status and risk for burnout among clergy members. This research fits into the integrative approach for studying clergy burnout which suggests that there needs to be study into the interplay of self and system (Grosch & Olsen, 2000).

As a former youth minister, the connection to this topic is not lost on the researcher. The researcher has personally struggled with emotional labor, lack of perceived social support, my own issues with mental illness, and burnout itself. Further, I have spoken to many clergy members like myself who have struggled as well. This field of research is not only necessary to understand more about the realm of communication for academic purposes, but further, answers found can be applied in day to day lives to help many.

Unfortunately, Jarrid Wilson's story is not the first of pastors who have not only suffered from burnout from their careers, but that ultimately ended with them ending their lives. According to a research project done by Lifeway Research, 23% of pastors indicate they have personally struggled with mental illness of some kind. However, when addressing the topic of mental illness within the church and congregation itself, 49% of pastors rarely or never spoke to their churches on acute mental illness. In order to understand the breadth of this issue and make any headway on improvement in the field, therefore, we must first understand some key concepts of this academic conversation and

then how we can close this gap in relation to these discrepancies within a review of found literature.

## CHAPTER I – LITERATURE REVIEW

In comparison to other helping professions, research has shown lesser rates of burnout among clergy to those working as policemen or emergency responders but still higher ones than counsellors (Adams et al., 2017, p. 170). Though little research points to a clear explication of burnout, it does point us in the direction that clergy members and pastors need study in order to help explain the uptake in recent suicides and depression rates. In a study on religious leaders' own perceptions of their own emotional needs, Dr. Ngamaba attempted to clarify some of the elements of this complex conversation surrounding clergy burnout, emotional burdens, and mental illness among conversations. First and foremost, this study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to assess personal life experiences among clergy members through face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Frykholm, 2018). One important takeaway to note from this research is the relation between members' expectations of pastors and their emotional suffering. Further issues come from isolation and loneliness. Although there has been research on the satisfaction clergy gain from their roles in helping others, there is also discussion on the "distressing paradox that clergy frequently feel disconnected and alone" (p. 843). Other challenging aspects that clergy face include boundary violations, high expectations and time demands, frequent relocation, relatively low financial compensation. These stressors were identified in 1992, and are still issues facing clergy today (Sarason & Sarason, 2009)

In her article, "The pastors are all right," Frykholm addresses the fact that clergy burnout rates are not as high as once thought (Frykholm, 2018). However, despite this conclusion, there is still merit to understanding the struggles that pastors face and the

fact that Matt Bloom is quoted sharing in the article, “Being a pastor is much more difficult than it used to be.” Further, he discusses that part of the reason research may not show the whole picture is because of the definition of well-being and the elements of burnout.

### Elements of Clergy Burnout

The most established scale within the research on the phenomenon of burnout is the MBI, also known as the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Within this instrument, there are three specific elements to burnout which are: increased feelings of emotional exhaustion, development of depersonalization or negative attitudes of people they serve, and finally a reduced sense of personal accomplishment within their roles and more frequent negative self-evaluation (Randall, 2013). However, this scale does have its drawbacks as it is not frequently aligned as a best fit for studying those who work in clergy, especially due to some of the scale items referring to the relationship with ‘clients.’

Another important element that has been less acknowledged in the research on clergy burnout is the effect of organizational culture itself. According to Jacobson et. al, there have been several characteristics of organizations and congregations that are associated with burnout such as job and salary satisfaction (Jacobson et al., 2013, p. 458) and previous expectations placed by congregation members. In his dissertation on relationships between leadership practices and organizational climate in church ministry settings, Dr. Jason Berry shared several studies to connect the relationship between organizational culture and burnout among organizations such as schools, community service agencies, community colleges, and more (Berry, 2008). However, there has been little to no research connecting this aspect of organizational culture with burnout in

research among clergy members for further understanding of the complexity of mental states that is ministerial burnout. Further, there is a need to understand the interrelation of communication, organizational culture, and social support in relation to the burnout epidemic.

### *Social Support*

According to research, lack of perceived social support is a key aspect of why clergy members report poorer mental health status. Social support, according to Lawley, et. al, (2019) can come in several different forms such as emotional, practical, or even problem-focused. In their review of social support, Sarason and Sarason (2009) also detailed that social support is a feeling of belongingness and also that social support research should not just focus on the receivers of the support, but also on the givers.

Interestingly enough, clergy members are two sides of the coin on this in that they are often looked to give support but also struggle to receive their own (Kinman 2011). As discussed earlier, the effect of isolation on social support has been coined as, “crowded loneliness” by Princeton Seminary president Craig Barnes (Lawley, Willett, Scollon, Lehman, 2019).

In their research on the association between perceived social support and burnout among clergy members, Eagle, et. al., (Eagle, Hybels, & Proeschold- Bell, 2019) found that the size of the congregation did have an effect on whether or not pastors or other clergy members felt they had support from their congregation. Further, they did find that higher reporting of perceived social support inversely correlated with depressive symptoms. Therefore, perceived social support is an important element in examining the mental health status of clergy and the effect their associations have on their behavior and

feelings. Within the study of social support, there has also been distinctions made among the types of social support that are determined based on problem-based versus emotion-focused support (Lawley et al., 2019). Emotional support is essential to study among clergy members, as most emotional demands of the role have been shown to contribute to unhappiness in the workplace and burnout (Kinman, McFall, Rodriguez, 2011). Further, emotional-focused support is that which is focused on the coping with negative ramifications caused by the stressor itself. This includes acts such as comforting, expressing affection and providing encouragement (Lawley et al., 2019). Before diving into this specific form of social support more, there is still a need for understanding of the issues that push clergy members to have needs for said support.

#### *Compassion Fatigue and Emotional Labor*

With clergy and burnout, there are several different dimensions including compassion fatigue, which is an interesting element due to the nature of the roles that clergy members play. As they noted in their study on the risk for burnout, “Due to their likelihood of being exposed to stress, human suffering, and other crises through parishioners they serve, clergy, similar to social workers, are at an increased risk for work-related stress and negative outcomes from trauma work, such as burnout and compassion fatigue” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Compassion fatigue has been found in several studies, but it was originally fully conceptualized by Figley (1995), who introduced the concept as a “cost to caring.” In other words, professionals who listen and respond to suffering may feel the similar feelings and stressors in their own lives.

Along with compassion fatigue, the emotional labor that clergy members face is yet another aspect of why we need further research and understanding into this complex

issue of burnout and risk for mental illness among them. Research has shown that much of the difficulty is that religious leaders are required to give support but are still affected by everyday life issues and emotions. Emotional labor is composed of both internal and external components. Externally, there is the component of emotional display rules and the necessity to mitigate their own emotional dissonance (Kinman, 2011). This emotional labor can also be extended to personal feelings of shortcomings, and some research has been done on this revolving around shame and guilt (Crosskey, Curry, and Leary, 2015). Further, as Kinman detailed, there are strong relationships between the emotional labor and psychological distress. This distress could possibly be explained by the shame and guilt that occur due to emotional dissonance. Crosskey et al. shared that ministers often experience shame because of their inability to please everyone and also due to the fact that there is often a lack of distinction between their role and their personal identities (p. 786). Their research further showed that if a pastor is able to differentiate themselves with their role, there is a less likelihood for burnout. Along with this differentiation, there are other important ways in which clergy members attempt to cope with distress, workplace dissatisfaction, and potential burnout that are relevant to the study due to their potentially being harmful.

### *Burnout*

Burnout has been defined in a few different ways throughout the literature. First, there is that of *job burnout* which has been defined as feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization and a smaller feeling of accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1996). Further, burnout on its own has been developed as a multidimensional process that begins with emotional exhaustion and then follows similar elements as elaborated on earlier but

are not necessarily determined by the job only. In this research, job burnout will be the main type of burnout the researcher is focused on due to the research participants mainly focusing on their experiences within their roles as clergy. However, first there are important ways that burnout has been used to study to explain the relevancy for this study.

Some specific groups that have been looked at within the field of burnout have been those that serve in the 'helping' or teaching professions. Some examples of these are teachers, nurses, and those that work in non-profit fields. In their study on nursing students and burnout, Iorga shared that burnout syndrome often has higher rates among those who work in the healthcare field due to the stressors of their curriculum their roles (Iorga, Muraru, & Ciuhodaru, 2017). Following that logic, those in the nursing profession have been one of the most studied populations within the burnout literature due to their high propensity for risk of burnout (Browning, Ryan, Thomas, Greenberg, & Rolniak, 2007; Henry, 2014; Hunsaker, Chen, Maughan, & Heaston, 2015; Lang, Pfister, & Siemens, 2010). Research has shown that they are at greater risk due to the nature of their work with long hours (Lang et al., 2010), high emotional demands (Henry, 2014), and communication issues that lead to problems with leadership and job satisfaction (Moreland & Apker, 2016). In their work on conflict and stress within the nursing roles, Moreland & Apker wrote that within organizational communication, nurses often experience several stressors based on communication. This is an important aspect to be extended within this research to other helping professions.

Another profession that has been frequently studied in regard to burnout is teaching. From an organizational standpoint, teachers have been studied because of their

high attrition rate and the rising need for teachers who are able to stay within their roles (Zhang & Zhu, 2008). As Chang (2009) described, the burnout epidemic in teachers has affected the workforce due to attrition as well as internally to those that are educated by teachers who no longer have the ability to care for their profession and work quality.

Most of the research done on burnout has used surveys, longitudinal data, and testing of models (Chang, 2009; Lang et al., 2010; Lee, 2019). However, in Burisch's longitudinal study on burnout, he shared the fact that in 1986, Schwab and Schuler suggested that we do not have much more knowledge on burnout despite more data (Burisch, 2002). This fact is a motivating factor for us as researchers to mind the gap and understand the communicative and organizational factors contributing to burnout.

#### *Linking Mental Illness & Burnout*

Mental illness and emotional strains such as depressive symptoms have proven to be closely related to the subject of burnout (Fowler, 2015). There is a plethora of information on the communication of mental illness and its usefulness in decreasing stigma surrounding the topic (Imai & Dailey, 2016; Romer & Bock, 2008). Following the surveying of what has been done currently in the communication field, the work that has been done in regard to the clergy and pastoral psychology will also be detailed.

In their study on disclosure of mental health counselling, Butler (2016) shared that although there have been several studies of the presence of stigma surrounding the issue of mental illness, there have not been as many studies surrounding those that do choose to disclose about their counselling habits. Butler interviewed 10 young students, aged 20-22, about their experiences surrounding their counselling utilization. These students named their mental illness as either anxiety or depression as the main reason

they sought treatment; further themes developed that the reasons for disclosure included those of instrumental and informational reasons as well as perceived necessity for relational maintenance. This research concluded that disclosures about these issues are needed in order to fully develop greater understanding (Butler, 2016, p. 169). Schiavo (2018) stated that communication professionals are greatly needed in order to help make progress in the field of mental health in our society. As they shared in their article, “Mental health is at the core of physical health and social well-being. Good mental health allows people to take care of themselves and each other...” (Schiavo, 2018, p. 4). The author continued that there is a need to “re-frame” the narrative and part of this starts with communication professionals.

In clergy members, the correlation of mental distress and burnout is one of special concern, not only for the sake of attrition rates but the health of clergy members along with the wellbeing as their congregations (Capps, 2014). Capps said that several clergy members will either struggle or have already struggled with mental illness themselves or they will inevitably counsel someone who does. In their article on pastors’ knowledge and perceptions of mental illness, Stanford and Philpott (2011) found that clergy members are often first approached for help with mental illness in those they serve (Stanford & Philpott, 2011). However, little recognition has been given to the fact that clergy members themselves are often struggling with their own mental illness and have few people to communicate about it to (Simpson, 2014). Most of the research that has been done surrounding this has been done in the field of psychology. However, as Salwen, et. al., share in their research on self-disclosure and pastors, pastors may resist the findings in psychology and not understand the illnesses they are facing. These authors

analyzed survey data to understand the relation between self-disclosure flexibility, spiritual well-being, and attitudes toward seeking help (Salwen, Underwood, Dy-Liacco, & Arveson, 2017). Although their results did not reveal what they hypothesized, the authors still advised that the implications of the need to maintain wellness for pastors is of highest importance. It is important to note also that most of these studies only look at pastors, but all clergy members face similar role changes and need to be studied as well (Hill et al., 2003; Jacobson et al., 2013). Another important element of this academic conversation is the role of emotional labor and how it fits into the discussion of mental illness and burnout respectively.

### Emotional Labor Theory

In her book, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild (2012) wrote about how she initially thought up the idea of emotional labor while observing a training at Delta Airlines in the early 1980s. Since that day, she has found over 559,000 mentions of emotional labor or work and that in fact, the reasoning for such is simple: “employees do emotional labor”. She further discussed the reason that this theory is essential to the framework of this research, in that, emotional labor is based on feeling rules. Furthermore, these cultural rules can be considered as highly developed by the organizational culture they are surrounded in. This theoretical framework will be the basis for much of the methodology as well as the coding of the answers that develop from the research. Emotional labor has been the focus of several different “caring roles” such as teaching, nurses, health care providers, social workers, counselors, due to their respective occupations’ emotional intensity (Adams, 2017). In most research, emotional labor is defined as “the requirement to regulate personal emotions and manage emotions

of others as part of the job role” as Hochschild detailed and is measured in connection with burnout, and is heavily prevalent in the job expectations of clergy members. Yet, there has been little to no research looking at both emotional labor as well as burnout in order to understand their connection within the clergy profession (Miranda and Godwin, 2017) and how they may contribute to the lack of well-being among clergy members.

In Adams research comparing these professions with those working as clergy, clergy members exhibit similar levels of burnout to those of social workers and teachers (p. 168, Adams). However, this research also concluded that unfortunately clergy have a higher level of burnout in reference to their own personal satisfaction rather than those of teachers or social workers. Clergy also suffer from higher levels of depersonalization in their domains than those of police officers or teachers. The researchers posited that this is because, “pastoral work is ambiguous in nature, given that the markers of success are not visible and tangible evidence of results is difficult to find” (p. 169).

Further, the authors conclude that clergy burnout may have dimensions not covered by Maslach model, and therefore may not accurately be able to depict all the areas of emotional labor and burnout that clergy members and other caring professions experience. Although the concept of burnout in relation to clergy is quite complex, the relation of emotional labor and organizational culture is of relevance, as well for understanding how pastors perceive the support they are given and how they communicate about their own mental states and health statuses. The theory also gives basis to a qualitative approach specifically when Hochschild stated, “Seeing is a matter of thinking about what we see. Based on habits of thinking about emotion, we then recognize emotion in ourselves and others in an intricate variety of ways” (p. 7)

Therefore we must understand clergy members' unique way of seeing before we can understand the emotional maintenance that occurs within the walls of the church. Schutz and Lee, introduced the idea of emotional labor in teachers by sharing a quote from a teacher, Mr. Guerro who stated, "... I never realized how difficult it is to be a teacher. And I think it's because of all those things, those emotions that you deal with.". (Schutz and Lee, 2014). On a similar note, in the previously referenced literature from Adams, the research summarized that, "the nature of the clergy role is such that interpersonal stressors can be quite high even in a small congregation". These elements of the culture surrounding clergy make them a unique but also difficult group to define in terms of burnout based on their different organizational makeup of the respective churches and faith campuses.

As discussed throughout the literature, the relevancy of burnout in our fields continues to grow in wake of its relation to mental illness, job satisfaction and turnover, and the overall health of those who work in any social support role (Chang, 2009; Fowler 2015; Lee, 2019). Further, research has shown connections between the subjects of burnout, compassion fatigue, emotional labor, and organizational culture (Addison, 2008; Berry, 2008; Forward, 1997; Hunsaker et al., 2015) Yet, these subjects have little analysis existing of a qualitative nature to give more clarity and understanding, due the nature of the he issue still not having a clear trajectory of improvement. Finally, clergy, although a profession that involves a great deal of emotional labor that may lead to burnout (Randall, 2013), has not been a well-researched group in. the field of communication. Due to this fact, within profession that relies greatly on communication and often does not perceive as much social support, this is an important group for study and

understanding (Berry, 2008). In wake of the recent uptake in pastor and clergy suicides and the often- stigmatized subject of mental illness among churches, this is also a matter of academic responsibility (Andersen, 2019) With this review of literature and minding the gaps, I developed the following research questions to guide my research.

First, as discussed, there is little to know research on the communication aspect of burnout and social support, especially within church communities. However, clergy members spend much of their time communicating and interacting within this communities, which led me to wonder how congregants and clergy members communicate about emotional needs and support within their respective roles, and therefore led to the development of RQ 1. RQ2 also relates to this in some sense that research does show that organizations do have effect on the emotional health of those within them, and therefore the culture itself must be understood from the perspective of those working within it, and thus the subsequent question emerged. Along the lines of discussion of issues that cause feelings of burnout, there was little to no research on what exactly causes those feelings within those working in clergy. There has also been speculation in the pastoral psychology community that the Maslach inventory may not be the appropriate instrument for measuring said burnout in the clergy profession. Therefore, the researcher believed that it would be beneficial to the academic conversation to understand what clergy members themselves believe are the largest contributors to their own struggle or feelings of burnout and resulted in RQ3. Finally, due to the nature of burnout and the uptake in mental illness struggles among clergy members in recent years, according to the literature review, the researcher further believed it is of upmost important to understand whether or not clergy members feel an ability to share if they are

struggling with serious issues such as those of mental illness, and therefore RQ4 was included. However, this question was also one that was highlighted as a possibility of being difficult to answer for those who had struggled with mental illness in the past.

### Research Questions

RQ1: What is the communicative nature of emotional support among clergy members and congregational members?

RQ2: How do clergy members feel the organizational culture of their church affects support of the emotional needs of clergy members?

RQ3: What struggles do clergy members face the most, in regard to their different roles that may lead to burnout?

RQ4: Are clergy members able to discuss their own mental illness struggles within the realm of the roles they are placed in?

## CHAPTER II – METHODOLOGY

In order to attempt to answer and explicate the research questions, the researcher determined that an exploratory qualitative research project was best to evaluate the perceptions from clergy members themselves. Although several studies had been done testing models, frameworks, survey material, and the like, personal experiences are essential for understanding clergy needs and how to further develop the literature and future interventions against clergy burnout. Therefore, the researcher conducted qualitative interviews in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of the experiences of clergy members. As Tracy described, qualitative research is helpful because not every scene is recordable but “fractured” and therefore each ethnographer will bring something new and different to the conversation (Tracy, 2013) and add heuristic value.

### The Research Setting

This study was conducted with clergy serving among the South Mississippi area within various types of religious organizations. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines clergy as those who “conduct religious worship and perform other spiritual functions associated with beliefs and practices of religious faith or denomination” and those who “provide spiritual and moral guidance and assistance to members.” According to Data USA, there was small growth in the occupation of clergy members from 2016 to 2017 of .659% and further that religious organizations are the primary employer of clergy members at 91.7%. Mississippi itself has often been referred to as being in the heart of the Bible Belt (Heatwole, 2007). This term was coined in the mid-1920’s and is defined as a general areas or places that are populated by those valuing strong literal interpretations of the Bible. Due to this relevancy of location and ideology, Mississippi is

an important source for the study of clergy members. Although there are not the highest number of concentrations of clergy members within the state of Mississippi, the ideology surrounding the states involved in the Bible Belt most likely have a large effect on the thought processes and difficulties that clergy members may face in this region.

Further, according to the Mississippi Department of Health, (County Health Profiles, 2018), the percentages of adults, aged 18 years and older, in Mississippi suffering from depressive episodes averaged 18.9%. Further, according to America's Health Rankings, Mississippi was ranked #46 in the United States reporting on percentage of adults who shared they did not have good mental health for 14 or more days within the last 30 days of being surveyed ("Explore Frequent Mental Distress in Mississippi | 2018 Annual Report," n.d.). Therefore, through these findings and the propensity for mental distress among those in the South, along with the interesting aspect of being within the 'Bible Belt', this location is relevant for supplying a sample of clergy to study.

### *Religious Organizations*

Although clergy members are typically thought of as working in churches, this study broadened its scope to include those who were working in other types of religious organizations as well. Clergy in this study worked at organizations including churches, non-denominational campus organizations and community based religious organizations. The criterion for location was not of particular focus during this study; however, there was an essential proponent that the organization be faith-based in values and consider its participants as those working in ministry

### *Research Participants*

Participants for this study were recruited through personal connection as well as those recommended by participants following participation. The guidelines for participants were those who had been working in ministry for a timeline of one to five years and were considered at least part-time or full-time staff. Each of the participants recruited met each of the requirements and were all full-time staff members in their respective organizations. No incentives were offered for participation for this study, however each participant was graciously thanked for their willingness to share. These participants were the heart of the study, as the researcher aimed to highlight their experiences and viewpoints throughout their time working in ministry.

Although clergy members can come from all across denominations and religions, this research focused on the Christian community due to their prevalence among South Mississippi. Further, it has been shown that there is more stigma associated with mental illness among Christian clergy which therefore can have an effect on clergy members' ability to discuss their own mental illness struggles and burnout experiences within this community (Visker, 2017).

### Data-Collection Methods

The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews conducted with each individual clergy member, for a total of ten interviews. Originally, the researcher intended for the interviews to be conducted in person. However, due to the extenuating circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the researcher switched to online interview method, via the Zoom platform.

Following the initial IRB approval, participants for this study were contacted to schedule interviews. However, only one of these interviews was able to take place before social distancing procedures were enforced. Then, after the amendment was approved, participants were again contacted to arrange for virtual meetings. Each of these meetings lasted forty-five to sixty minutes and took place over Zoom and each participant granted consent for the interview and recording via the online consent form. The researcher conducted each interview on the basis and hope that these conversations would give a well-rounded, honest depiction of the experiences of newer clergy.

These interviews were conducted by the primary researcher using a pre-developed, semi-structured interview guide. This guide included the following questions: In your own words, how would you describe burnout? From that understanding, what has been your experience with burnout or stress in your time in ministry? How has your church/organization approached dealing with burnout or stress? What would you say are the hardest parts of working in ministry? How have others helped you in your role? Are there ways you wish they would have helped? These interviews were video and audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety. The researcher also kept a field journal, as suggested by Tracy (2013), to keep track of immediate observations and key statements that stood out during the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

After each of the individual interviews had been conducted and transcribed in their entirety, the initial analysis was conducted. The primary author, along with a secondary research assistant, went through an initial round of coding or primary coding. Within this initial round of coding, the researcher employed In Vivo coding (Saldana,

2016). As Saldana details, this form of coding, also known as literal coding, is appropriate for any type of coding but especially for beginning researchers. Further, the benefit of In Vivo coding in this situation is that it allowed the words of the research participants to shape the study and encouraged their voices to be heard throughout the research. This type of coding was essential for a study focused on the experiences and direct thoughts of the participants. After the first round of initial coding, the researcher proceeded with a second-round of coding utilizing Axial coding to identify the central elements and their relation to one another in order to develop themes.

Table 1 *Axial and In-Vivo Coding Themes*

Axial Coding	In-Vivo Coding	Example	Final Themes with Sub-Themes
Role of One's Calling	"Called" into ministry, following the "calling"		Part of <i>Healthy Coping Behaviors</i>
Unhealthy Expectations	Expectation of "perfection"; Expected to "never make a mistake"	"I think just the expectation that you're never going to do anything wrong, say anything wrong, do anything bad." "... it's just always a part of being a leader in faith that you're going to be held to a higher standard, but sometimes that standard turns into perfection, and that's just not going to be something we are able to uphold".	Unhealthy Expectations and Unclear Role
Unclear Role and Boundaries	No clear job expectations; Always must be available	"I came in knowing that it was going to be a difficult position so I sort of braced myself for that, and tried to separate personal time, family time and work life from one another, which is difficult in ministry because you have your phone on you all the time and students can reach out..."  "The biggest issue was coming in without a job description or without a contract at all."	Unhealthy Expectations and Unclear Role
Communication Surrounding Burnout	Burnout is expected; Lack of or no conversation about burnout; "Welcome to Ministry"	"At [Former Church], I felt like I constantly had to have it all together... I wouldn't share a ton with leaders because I didn't feel it was appropriate or necessary"	
Finding Community and Support	Spouses, family and friends very important; Need groups outside of the church; Community is the most important to battling against burnout;  Struggle with finding community within the church	".. but here I am more open. I have several people who I have to talk to... And have a safe place to ask questions"	
Coping	Coping Mechanisms	"Cry, I cried a lot. Food. Alcohol"  "In seminary, when I felt burnt out, I got really angry and would lash out with my emotions, and I also stopped finding pleasure in spending time with friends."	Coping Mechanisms <i>Healthy Coping Behaviors</i> <i>Unhealthy Coping Behaviors</i>

These themes that were developed after in-vivo coding will be discussed later, but those that were originally identified were: role of one's calling, unhealthy expectations, unclear role and boundaries, communication surrounding burnout, finding community and support, and coping. As the researchers continued to code, they found that the first theme of calling was not as essential to the conversation and could be better incorporated into others, and thus became incorporated into the final theme of coping.

#### Ethical Considerations

Due to the primary researchers' personal involvement among clergy in South MS, the researcher did not include any clergy members they had personally worked with in close proximity. This decision was to allow for non-biased, ethical responses, so participants could therefore answer more openly and honestly. Further, all participants were voluntary in order to not affect responses or push respondents to discuss anything they may be uncomfortable with. Participants were not be informed of the questions before the interview to ensure answers authentic in nature, however, they were prefaced beforehand on the nature of the questions and subject material. The researcher's hope is that these ethical considerations and precautions helped to preserve the nature of authentic responses.

## CHAPTER III – RESULTS

The following sections will detail the findings of the in-depth interviews with the participants and will include samples of the In Vivo codes developed from their own words. Please see the Table 1.A. above for a breakdown of the axial codes that were then developed into these final coding themes for the project.

### Theme One – Unhealthy Expectations for Clergy

One of the most predominant themes found throughout each participant's interview was the idea that often, there were "unhealthy expectations" put on clergy members from the moment of an interview to even when clergy are transitioning or stepping away. This was communicated by several different participants but one instance that stood out was from a commissioned clergy member, Collin (names were changed for confidentiality), who shared about his experience transitioning into his current position and his feelings on these expectations placed on him,

So as I graduated from seminary, they told me kind of last minute that the person that was the youth minister, was transitioning to trying young adult ministry on campus, and so they asked me if I would like to step in full time and take over for youth ministry. I love the church I work at so it was a no brainer for me... It was not as easy of a transition as I anticipated... There is a lot of assumed knowledge for new clergy.

Collin expanded on this idea by sharing that people assumed because of a database they used, he would have all the contact information he would need. However, this was not always the case, and therefore often made him feel "burdensome" as the new person

when he had to continually ask and reach out for such information. He continued in our conversation about his experiences surrounding burnout as he shared that the unhealthy expectations can also stem from oneself, from a desire to help. He stated, “I want to do all of the good I can, and that means I have to sacrifice all of myself to do it.” Throughout this interview, he also referenced several key points from the book, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*. In his thoughts on the unhealthy expectations, Collin shared the example the book articulates,

“When you’re building a house, you hire an architect and then you hire a general contractor to go over the architect’s plans and make sure you have all of the materials are here and all the right people are hired, and then you have the contracted workers who come in to actually perform the jobs like an electrician, a plumber, everything and when people hire a youth minister, and I’m sure this pertains to all other pastors as well, they expect you to do the work of all three. They want you to make the vision, make all the pieces of the vision, and then be one of the players making the vision happen. I think that contributes to burnout because 1) There are very few people on planet Earth who have all three gifts and 2) When those are the expectations put upon you, and these are the people that you love and you see the good that comes out of it when it is done well, you want to give yourself and make it all happen. A lot of people don’t realize how harmful that is.”

Participant Martha shared that when she joined her congregation, there were several social expectations and rules to follow that were laid out to her, as she shared,

Going from secular work to ministry work was really strange... At this

church, when you take this position, in this town, you become an overnight celebrity. The hardest part of taking on my new role was knowing that everyone was watching me. I went from a place of being relatively unknown to being in a place of leadership, where all of these kids were looking at me... The transition was lonely moving into a ministerial role.

She continues in this conversation to discuss the transition she faced as she tried to find her way of community and friendships. She discussed the issue of having to step in big shoes and that she was expected to instantly be as experienced and natural in the role as the former student minister. However, this initial transition was not the only unhealthy expectations and burdens she faced, and she continued sharing,

With the congregation, they know me and they know who I am, but in a situation that happened a while back, I was told to keep my personal life private. I am not allowed to drink in public, as a recommendation from the church as a youth pastor. Those are things that I really struggled with when I first got here. I am me, but I have to be really, really cautious with my role as a leader in this church. It's one of the most affluent churches in Mississippi, and the overnight celebrity thing is no joke... It's like 'Oh my gosh everyone's watching' and the pressure of that was extremely hard at first.

### *Expectation of Perfection*

Unfortunately, these types of expectations and ideas of “all eyes on you” is not new or unheard of in clergy. Along with the fear of failing or being judged socially, participants also highlighted the expectations surrounding handling emotions and expected “perfection” among its members. Another first-year clergy member, Tiffany, shared her experience transitioning into the congregation she worked at and the expectations initially put on her. First and foremost, she detailed the issues each of their staff members struggled with since their lead pastor had been struggling with burnout themselves and therefore would not do anything for her, and thus the rest of the staff took much criticism from the congregation. This led to her own experiences with expectation of what many clergy have detailed as the expectation of “perfection” or to be the “best,”

In our church, there’s an age bracket of early 50’s, late 40’s who have very high expectations, and if they aren’t met, they will let you know. And it’s not necessarily that people know Jesus, but it’s that we look the best and we do the best stuff and our social media is the best. That definitely caused some burnout, and I almost threw in the towel in the fall, because I was like – this is not Jesus.

She continued on to share about how this expectation to compete with other churches and the desire to be the best led to some feelings of burnout and discouragement in herself, because she did not believe it reflected Jesus. She also shared how part of this has come also in history with the fact that pastors are expected to do too much to please the different types of communities within the church. Further, she continues on about the

harmful expectations again that aligned with this desire for clergy members to be perfect was one of the hardest parts of working in ministry as she details,

I think just the expectation that you're never going to do anything wrong, say anything wrong, do anything bad. That's something universal, that's not just my congregation that puts this on me. I think all people in ministry everywhere deal with this in some capacity. But you know you slip up and somebody says "Oh yeah and she's a youth minister"... it's just always a part of being a leader in faith is that you're going to be held to a higher standard, but sometimes the higher standard turns into perfection, and that's just not going to be something we are able to uphold.

As she concluded her insight on this topic, she shared this of what she wished people would know,

I think that people just forget that people in ministry are humans. Not everyone is trying their hardest, but about 75% of them are, and especially people who are new, I mean they're trying... You have to give people time to grow... It's so interesting that the church is a place where it's so difficult to find grace. If I wasn't a believer, and I saw how my pastor and other staff members were treated by some people, I would be like, 'yeah church ain't for me'.

## Theme Two – Unclear Role and Lack of Boundaries

Along with this expectation of perfection, there are also other issues clergy members face, especially in their first few years in ministry. As Collin stated in his interview, “One of the hardest parts of working in ministry is that no one hands you a comprehensive job description when you walk in and no one sets boundaries for you.” This leads in to our next prevalent theme of the lack of clear role description. When transitioning into his new position straight out of undergraduate education, Christian shared that his first concerns were that he didn’t know how to minister or how to “do” ministry. Christian described this issue:

Here at my current church, the average person would be burned out.

Fortunately, I came in knowing it was going to be a difficult position so I sort of braced myself for that, and tried to separate personal time, family time, and work life from one another, which is difficult in ministry because you have your phone on you all the time and students can reach out... The biggest issue was coming in without a job description or without a contract at all; Not having that allows for more to get piled on.

Christian, in fact, faced this issue within the first two weeks of his role, with having to inform families of painful news happening in the congregation, as well as having a full new ministry added onto the issue that youth pastors are not given distinct clear guidelines for what is expected of them and they are encouraged to do it all.

### *Lack of Boundaries*

As Christian detailed, those who work in clergy always have their phones on them and can be contacted almost constantly. Therefore, this can lead to little to no boundaries

between personal life and work life. Collin articulated this as one of the key struggles of ministry when he stated,

Creating and maintaining a schedule is hard. This particular work culture has a lot of good things about it, but one of the things is that people respond to text and email 24/7, and so that expectation is pressed onto everyone else. So if I say, 'I'm taking this Friday off', people hear 'okay you're taking this Friday off, but you're going to be available by text or email.'

Another of the participants with the most experience working in ministry, Laura, shared her own struggle with these lack of boundary lines over the years in her interview:

Something I struggle with of the balance of wanting to do my job well, like specific parts of job well such as teaching or hosting events and love people well, but I never want that to become a thing where I put the pressure on myself and the weight on me rather than the Holy Spirit and allowing Him to do what He wants to do and believing that since He's called me, He's also equipped me.... And another thing is that is not assuming that my personal time with the Lord can be put on the back burner because I'm in ministry and I'm reading the Bible already.

She continues that this process of drawing boundaries and making sure her personal time is set aside was extremely difficult but also very important. In a similar mindset, Carly, a newly graduated Seminary student, shared her experiences regarding burnout and the issue surrounding creating boundaries for oneself stating,

Burnout is super common. In ministry, not having clearly defined boundaries can lead to burnout... I feel like burnout is so common that is often ignored by the church and by the denomination because I think it's expected... Being overworked and not taking time to Sabbath is the number one cause, and not saying no enough and if you say yes to the "wrong" things, just saying yes to all of the opportunities in ministry that are thrown at you, especially if they are not what you are gifted to do.

This thought of feeling as if one has to do all was extremely prevalent throughout each participant's answers. Carly further articulated the idea of taking a Sabbath, that is one of the most suggested and needed coping mechanisms. As Collin continued his thoughts on burnout, he shared that it is one of the most dangerous things church congregations can do was along the lines of lacking clear boundaries when expecting a youth minister or pastor to do all things, because this leads them to "coping in unhealthy ways." This idea of unhealthy and healthy coping behaviors was both a central theme in the literature and within these interviews.

### Theme Three – Coping and Working Through It

#### *Healthy Coping Behaviors*

Collin articulated his experience through how he coped with burnout and fatigue in his position, sharing that there were several ways he found himself coping, both in healthy and unhealthy ways. First, physical activity was central to coping with the everyday stresses of ministry. He continued on that he would verbally process through what he went through, and that ministry should not be someone's "life". He suggested

that keyways of coping are to find community and groups that one can be honest with and share and then he expanded into a discussion of his own residency group.

Some other healthy coping behaviors as given by participants were those such as creating art, making sure to schedule in personal time, making sure to get outside, and again communicating to those that would not air out grievances or necessarily gossip about it. Unfortunately, however, there were still several times that participants detailed the unhealthy side of coping that they found themselves partaking in, whether due to anxiety, burnout, or just feeling overwhelmed.

Carolyne, full-time ministry intern, shared the following as her coping mechanisms in an extremely hard year, “Cry, I cried a lot for no reason. Food. Alcohol.”. She continued her thoughts that she continually felt as if she needed to be fixed and “compulsively repenting of things that maybe I didn’t need to be repenting of.” This idea of having harshness towards oneself was also a recurring occurrence among clergy members. A former seminary student, Carly, describes her feelings of burnout and how she reacted to those, “In seminary, when I felt burnt out, I got really angry and would lash out with my emotions, and I also stopped finding pleasure in spending time with friends. I stopped reading scripture, stopped praying, stopped going to Chapel.

These are not uncommon forms of coping, along with those of shutting down, as Collin shared in his interview or simply watching a lot of TV and “numbing out with Netflix” as Laura contributed. Each of these different coping behaviors offered a different insight into the look of how burnout affected those in ministry. Further, as Martha articulated to me in her interview, her primary focus was to “pull back” from ministry, not

necessarily pull away, but she felt the desire to pull away emotionally and be with those who didn't place expectations on her to be anything else but herself.

Several participants also mentioned that communication was important for coping and getting through due to multiple of them feeling the need to verbally process through their emotions. However, as Laura stated, sharing had to be among "safe spaces":

At [Former Church]. I felt like I constantly had to have it together... I wouldn't share a ton with leaders because I didn't feel like it was appropriate or necessary, but here I am more open. I have several people who I have to talk to.. and have a space place to ask questions.

Multiple other participants also shared that having "safe" people, was key. When asked to elaborate on this idea of safety, it was knowing "that they weren't going to go share it all around to the 'Karen's' of the world." In other words, protection and privacy and the ability to simply share what was on one's heart without fear was key. This desire for communication and being able to share leads into one of the final themes, which was the actual communication that surrounds burnout.

#### Theme Four – Communication Surrounding Burnout

##### *Welcome to Ministry*

When initially asked, 'How does your church or organization approach burnout or stress?' Tiffany responded with a simple yet highly reflective point of, "They don't." Although not put as bluntly as Tiffany shared, several other clergy members shared similar thoughts and attitudes. Collin detailed his thoughts on communicating about burnout, voicing that, "As a new clergy, if I bring up stuff like that at the church, it's

usually met with “Welcome to ministry,” like very dismissive as if, “Oh you were so naïve before and you thought it was going to be all rainbows didn’t you.”

This idea that this is to be expected and not something to be communicated was further reiterated by Christian who shared his thoughts that no one wanted to hear about these issues because they were all having the same problems as well as fear that it isn’t fitting:

With staff, I’m having to be diplomatic and hold my tongue more often than not to maintain my position. With youth, I think it is limited on opening up and don’t tell 100% of the story unless you have to because I mean, we’re all broken, and I had a dark season in college... and it isn’t beneficial for them to know my deepest and darkest secrets. With adults, it was walking on eggshells until trust was built up, and once it was built up, now I can share more openly. The better you get to know people, the more you can open up.

He continued in response to who he has spoken to about burnout, “It’s been in limited capacity, at the church, and more openly with church, spouse and friends. They were received with sympathy from family and friends, and with empathy from other youth workers.”

Unfortunately, some of these conversations have not taken place much at all, for a few different reasons articulated by clergy participants. For example, Laura shared that in those conversations the term burnout was never really mentioned to her, because there was more of a mentality that you simply had a job to do and you had to “grind it out” in order to get your work accomplished. In one instance, she shared that she asked about

what to do and was simply referred to a book on the subject rather than having a conversation. Seminary graduate Carly also shared that she had been a part of congregations that didn't discuss burnout because they did not see it as an issue, but rather simply a reality of the vocation. She also said that fear is a common cause of simply not communicating, as she shared a negative experience she went through when having to cover up her own feelings,

I had an experience with a boss, who.. so I have an anxiety disorder, and when the doctor first put me on my anxiety medication, I told [my boss], 'Yeah they gave me this, I'm really excited, I think it's really going to help', and he kind of questioned my ability to do my job then, and that at the time I kind of brushed it off, but looking back, I can realize how damaging that was for our relationship and so looking back now, I have more trust issues than I did in the moment.

She continued that fortunately for her, most people in her seminary were not judgmental and that in fact most people in ministry are on some type of anxiety medication, from what she has seen. Several other participants also expressed their respective battles with anxiety specifically and with fear. Carly continued that many people will not communicate about these feelings of anxiety or burnout due to fear of loss of reputation and harsh criticism. This criticism was similar to what Tiffany detailed experiencing,

I would get calls saying things like, 'Who do you think you are doing things like that?'.. Just very combative language and very angry tone,

pessimistic; that group [of people criticizing] are the number one source of burnout at [our church]. The last person who left shared, 'You know they're why I left'.

Thankfully, however, there has been a shift in some organizations to attempting to discuss and combat burnout and the lack of communication surrounding mental health and disappointment. Martha shared that her staff in fact is completely honest with one another and feels the ability to express when she needs to take time for herself. However, she also continues that if she did not advocate for her own health, it would not necessarily be encouraged. She concluded these thoughts by sharing that one essential need is for more recognition and support from congregation members, especially for youth workers, who, as Christian shared, are very often "under-appreciated, underpaid and undervalued."

As communication is the heart of this paper, there are also groups and outlets that thankfully these leaders have found in order to combat their own personal experiences with burnout. Each person shared that they often turned to their spouses, friends, and family members, especially their parents, for support and guidance when they felt they could. Spouses and significant others were the most cited of those who would reach out followed by friends/other youth workers. Tiffany detailed how those conversations would go sharing,

I am such a verbal processor, so my poor mom, her phone was ringing off the hook. I talked to my family a lot. My boyfriend and

I, we struggled a lot in the beginning because he would sort of play

Devil's Advocate, saying like "Have you thought about how [Karen]

might be feeling?”, like what about this, and I would be like.. this is about me, and it would make me so angry... It was so founded in truth, and it was a great way to put myself in someone else’s shoes, but it made me so mad... Eventually, I had to learn I had to figure these people out and what they were feeling because otherwise I was just going to sit in my anger, and who was that going to help. So I had a few people who gave me a few different things, like I had my safe place in my mom, and I had my challenger in my boyfriend, and then had a combination those two in other youth pastors and others who have walked where I’m walking.

However, they also shared that one necessary thing that each clergy member must do is to find a group outside of their congregation. As I shared earlier, Collin iterated that he is a huge encourager that people’s ministry shouldn’t be their whole life. Therefore, the last and final theme that reoccurred throughout these interviews was the idea of seeking out community and support systems throughout their walk throughout ministry.

#### Theme Five – Finding Community and Supports

For newer clergy, especially those entering into an organization where they know few to no other people, the journey can be described as extremely isolating and lonely at first. Tiffany, who came in after her predecessor left to the dismay of the congregation, shares how she felt coming into her new community at her current workplace:

When I got here, the person that I was replacing had two weeks of overlap with me, which is a weird thing. There were a lot of going

away parties, and goodbye parties, that she planned for herself...

There was nothing to say [Tiffany's] here!... Those two weeks were a weird, weird time in my life.....

She continued on about her experience finding community and the struggle that was her marital status among church members,

So none of the other staff are single... So that made me a bit of an anomaly.

Lot of men did not know how to talk to me. There was a lot of - when

I

got here there was a lot of [jokes] like, "Oh well I better keep my husband

away from you"... It was weird because most of my congregation is not young adults.. and so I did not make friendships quickly.

Even when received well into a congregation, however, there are still several issues that may contribute to clergy members struggling to find community. Laura shares about her first internship post-college in a ministry setting,

For the first time ever I started to struggle with anxiety.. I didn't feel I had a lot of people to talk to. I had one other lady who is also in ministry and is also single and she's like 48, and I would go to her and like weep and she would be the one who would speak encouragement and life into me and look at me and say, "This is not all on you," and tell me you know, you need to come to my house this weekend or just rest... But I remember

several times not wanting to cling to the Lord and instead would numb out on Netflix..

She continued about her search for community and support during this time and how it contributed to feelings of burnout,

Specifically, at [my first church], I didn't have great community and support. Even when I started to get friends who got it and were in ministry, there almost came this thing where I couldn't find a balance in telling them everything versus of you know where's the line of 'I need to talk about this in a healthy way' or 'I'm just trying to talk crap' to make myself feel better.. Even in the midst of that though, I had a small group that were my closest friends and that was super helpful for me and people telling me, 'You know you got this'

This desire for support and encouragement was a reoccurring thought throughout each clergy member's experience and also the importance of having a group outside of the church itself. Martha described that she found help both among other pastors who 'got it' but also among her seminary group where she could 'lay everything out' especially because they lived in completely other states, so there was no fear of information getting spread or out to others. However, Martha also shared the important insight that although the support from her groups was helpful and important, she also wished that the congregation would have been more supportive and shown appreciation during this time--Especially due to what she describes as the "emotional cost" of ministry,

The emotional element, the emotional cost, toll of it. I think that spiritually I am in the best place I've ever been.. I have been deeply transformed just by the responsibility I have. But the emotional responsibility and the constant outreach you have to have with people, you know I mean I reach out and reach out and reach out, and there's radio silence. I constantly reach out and hear nothing back from people and that feels very one sided.. The constant feeling of pouring out your time, your heart, your everything.. that's very difficult.

Martha continued, in tears, to share a story of a student she ministered to who had been sexually assaulted by an authority figure and the heaviness of the responsibility she felt. She shared about how the emotional toll and being the one who helps to respond to this situation. On the other side of this, Martha shares, "It's also so rewarding to see them heal." However, as she continues, there is so much unnoticed love and work that she and other ministers put in that people don't see and don't recognize. This desire for recognition and support was echoed across multiple clergy members as they sought out community in their respective roles.

### Summary

In summary, the five major themes that emerged from interviews were the unhealthy expectations placed on clergy members, unclear role and lack of boundaries, coping behaviors utilized by clergy members, communication surrounding the topic of burnout, and finally the idea of finding community and support. Each of these themes

encompassed the broader ideas and research interests of organizational communication and culture, burnout, stigma, emotional labor, and social support. Each clergy member brought to the table different yet similar stories of trying to find a balance of seeking support while maintaining appropriate distance, issues pertaining to organizational and structural issues such as having clearly defined job expectations and fighting against little to no boundary controls. Further, each participant detailed their struggles to cope with these issues when faced with them, whether that came from a healthy spiritual coping of taking a Sabbath day or falling into unhealthy behaviors of lashing out in anger and ‘numbing’ with Netflix or other mindless behaviors.

One of the most crucial elements described was the lack of communication about burnout itself. As several ministers reiterated, there was little or no discussion on the dangers of burnout, and some believed that it was treated as just the nature of the job role and you had to simply get through it. Some tried to find community and other groups in order to assist with this, however, even this served as an issue as most of these participants work among younger adults, which they themselves are, making it difficult to find “safe” places to share and be themselves. Adding on the social expectations that many of them face, their roles could be extremely isolating and lonely most of the time.

However, some did report that they found support in some places, whether among their own spouses or others outside of their organizations. Participants shared that finding this support was essential to aiding in their battle against burnout. Further, one participant, Tiffany, found support among her fellow staff that were of similar ages and who were facing similar battles. Although they were in a different life stage (both are

married), they still understand the issues Tiffany was facing within their organization, and therefore they could support one another.

This is not without its own struggles as well though. As shared in the results section, Laura discussed that there is a fine balance between sharing enough to find support and making sure that one is maintaining appropriate boundaries. This represents the emotional labor and opposition that clergy members face daily, of maintaining their own face at work while still attempting to find the emotional support needed. The emotional labor clergy members face when seeking support is only further extended by the fact that as many participants shared, burnout has become widely accepted and expected within this vocational role. Many participants shared they received little to no support from their elder or more experienced clergy members in reference to their own experiences of burnout because of this organizational expectation that it was simply a part of ministerial life.

Overall, these findings and results are an extremely fascinating and in-depth look at what data sets and numbers have attempted to explain about burnout among ‘caring professions’ and especially among those in clergy. Further, this need for a shift in organizational response to the experience of burnout and greater need of social support has been revealed through the research as two of the most essential elements to combat burnout and better the emotional well-being of clergy members. The following discussion will aid in developing these points and how this study connects back to previous research in the field and what can be done moving forward.

## CHAPTER IV – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although each of the ministers in this study shared that they have never deeply considered leaving ministry yet, statistics show that 48% of ministers believe the demands of ministry are more than they can handle, 84% share they feel they're on call 24 hours a day, and 1% of all pastors will leave the ministry in the first five years. However, despite a low percent of those leaving, there is an obvious issue among those who are staying – especially in regard to burnout and mental health. The present study, grounded upon emotional labor theory, seeks to explain and assist in the research surrounding those in caring professions during their common struggle with burnout and to add to the academic resource, a qualitative depiction of the reality of several clergy members' first five years experiences in ministry. This study draws on information gathered from ten in-depth interviews with current clergy members who have been working in ministry for 1-5 years. The following analysis highlights how the theories of emotional labor, organizational culture, burnout, and social support influence the communication of clergy as well as their coping behaviors.

In terms of this research, the five central themes of the study of unhealthy expectations, unclear role expectations and boundaries, coping behaviors, communication about burnout, and community and support, reveal the interconnectedness of emotional labor, organization culture, burnout and social support within the clergy profession. Further, these themes reveal answers to the research questions posited at the beginning of the study that add to the cultural conversation surrounding burnout.

### *Nature of Emotional Support*

The results from the in-depth interviews revealed to the author that the communicative nature surrounding emotional support and burnout is minimally occurring and not as beneficial as needed for clergy to feel supported. As detailed in the results section, when Martha discussed her need and desire to be recognized for what she does in her position, there is a lack of encouragement and recognition from the congregations and those surrounding the clergy members. Further, there is a large amount of burden placed on the immediately family and friends of clergy members to fill the role of the emotional needs of clergy members for them to feel supported. This, alone, can put a strain on the closeness and relationships among clergy and their congregation they serve.

In a similar regard, there is also little discussion in general on the ideas of burnout and how to cope or deal with said emotions. In her interview, Laura discussed how in her first place of employment, she had never heard of burnout and had never been taught about what may or may not happen surrounding feelings she may deal with. Each clergy member had at least one story of times where they have felt “burnout” and were concerned with how they handled. There is little to no encouragement in most places to discuss these feelings, and most of the time are encouraged to be handled outside of the workplace. As Christian shared, it was simply an expectation of the job, and therefore it shouldn’t be discussed, as everyone else was dealing with it as well. Further, clergy members also simply felt discouraged from discussing said issues, whether for fear that it was inappropriate, as shared by Laura, because of the fear of not having it all together or crossing boundary lines developed within the organizational culture.

### *Organizational Culture and Emotional Needs of Clergy*

Among similar lines, the organizational cultures of each of these institutions clearly had an impact on the emotional needs and well-being of the clergy members interviewed. For example, Martha shared how there were several times she was encouraged to keep her personal life private and not share anything, including where or if she was going out of town for fear of how the congregation would react. Tiffany shared her experience of having trouble with meeting people and feeling supported and encouraged by those in her congregation, due to several issues such as their competitive natures as well as her own age and gender. Despite the individual nature of these organizations, there were recurrent themes throughout. One distinct aspect was the demand of “perfection” for clergy members, and as the Tiffany shared, this is not simply in her organization but rather, she believes a universal thing.

She went on to share that, “I think that people just forget that people in ministry are humans. Not everyone is trying their hardest, but about 75% of them are, and especially people who are new, I mean they’re really trying... You have to give people time to grow. It's so interesting that the church is a place where it's so difficult to find grace”. This commentary significantly gives a reflection of how clergy members, especially younger ones, feel about the organizational culture around them. This isn't simply a problem for non-believers, but for the health of the organization itself. As stated in the literature review, in research from Crosskey, ministers often experience most of their shame due to their lack of ability to please those they serve. However, as articulated by Tiffany, if this expectation is mostly that of “perfection”, then the clergy members will

never be able to satisfy those they serve, and therefore will almost always be caught in an unending circle of shame.

However, there were also some of those interviewed who shared their colleagues were quite supportive and easy to talk to. They encouraged one another to reach out in order to handle burnout and discuss personal matters so that they may support one another. There are varying levels of organizational support for those in clergy, and this may be an interesting element of study for future research. One encouragement that this research posits is that there is a lower level of experience of burnout or struggles with those that have found support. Research discussed in the literature review found that the perceived social support is linked to higher or lower levels of depressive symptoms (Eagle, Hybels & Proeschold-Bell, 2019), and this does seem to line up with the results from this study. Those participants that felt more supported, even if it wasn't necessarily in their immediate congregation or circle, reported fewer personal experiences with burnout than those who perceived lack of support. Though, there are still several areas in which clergy members have unique struggles.

### *Struggles that Clergy Face*

This research revealed that there are several areas of life that clergy members face that some members of other clergy members may not experience. One of the main issues that was revealed in the data several times was that clergy are faced with unhealthy expectations within their roles but also with an unhealthy lack of clear boundaries. As Tiffany detailed, she often felt that she was always being watched and that there was no room for error or mistakes. This reveals the nature of the burden that is placed on clergy members to look, act, and present themselves in only a certain way and is further

explicated by how clergy members are not encouraged to share if they are going out of town or what they do outside of their job roles.

In the results section, Martha was quoted on how she was encouraged by her staff to not post anything on social media if she was taking a weekend or even a day off. She also shared that she was encouraged not to drink in public or partake in anything that could be construed negatively in the public eye. As Collin shared, if he took a day off, there was still the expectation that he would have his phone on him and be available should he be needed. Unfortunately, this is all too common theme that the organizational culture of ministry does not encourage breaks and that it is simply a job where you are always on call. This expectation is one that should be analyzed from an organizational standpoint further to understand the nature of it and how changes could be implemented to allow for appropriate boundaries for the health of the clergy members but also for the people they serve. As Collin detailed, clergy members face the difficulty of making sure they put time in their own schedule in order to stay in touch with their faith and keep Sabbath. Although one would think this would be a given due to their roles, clergy members often found themselves turning to other coping mechanism to get through the day instead and this can be detrimental to their own mental health and therefore negatively affect those around them.

These unhealthy coping mechanisms also ended up being a major struggle that the clergy faced. Several confessed to dealing with their struggles through alcohol or food dependency, rather than spending time in faith and taking rest. Some buried themselves in their work. Others did share that they have found healthy coping such as exercise and spending time outside of the clergy. However, most of our participants shared they

struggle with addictions and unhealthy coping frequently. Boundary-keeping behaviors could be a simple solution to these behaviors, but further understanding and communication is key for these boundaries to be implemented and kept. As many of our participants shared, there were many times they were encouraged to take a Sabbath day or rest but then were not allowed the ability or freedom to truly do so.

### *Mental Illness in Clergy*

Due to the many of the issues previously discussed, most participants share they have struggled with anxiety or depression within their career. Many stated that it is not a permanent state for them, but they did especially struggle at one point or another. Each participant was very open about their struggles with mental health. For example, Carlyne shared that she dealt with depression very strongly for almost an entire year. She discussed that during this time, she was encouraged by her peers that it was a “spiritual” problem and that she had undisclosed sin in her life rather than something she may be dealing with medically. When she finally sought help, she was somewhat judged by some people around her, but she was thankful to have found a way to healthily address her issue , and now feels more ease with discussing it among her staff and fell coworkers.

This reaction from her peers, however, gives a small glimpse as to what some clergy members face when dealing with their own mental illness struggles or concerns. They do not always feel comfortable sharing or are not encouraged to share about these issues for fear of what others may think or how they may react. This can be detrimental to the health of a clergy member and lead to those unhealthy coping behaviors as detailed above. Further, it can lead to more fear or discouragement from sharing about burnout,

emotional exhaustion, and more, due to the nature of the response of those around them or, as discussed prior, the expectation to always have it “together”.

#### Future Recommendations

In summary, the research shows us that the areas of burnout, emotional labor and social support cannot be boiled down to a simple number or results from an inventory. The life and experiences of those working in clergy are complex and full of difficult expectations and for some, void of support or have little of it. From this study, the research finds that the Maslach scale is too limited to fully illuminate the different aspects of burnout facing current clergy member, particularly new clergy members. From the themes developed and found, this research suggests that a quantitative study of finding best fit of these themes into the Maslach burnout inventory as well as the emotional labor inventories, in order to develop a better scale would be beneficial. Future researchers should take these experiences into consideration when developing a new scale or inventory in order to effectively measure levels of burnout among those working in clergy members.

When conducting prior research to the subject of burnout and emotional labor, the Maslach Burnout Inventory heavily informed the researchers understanding of previous burnout research in academics, even though this research was qualitative and exploratory in nature. Some of the elements of the Maslach scale that were beneficial were that of emotional exhaustion. As detailed in the MBI, “A key aspect of the burnout syndrome is increased feelings of emotional exhaustion; as emotional resources are depleted, workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level” (Maslach,

Jackson, and Leiter, 1996, p. 192). This understanding matches up very closely with each of the participants' own personal understandings of burnout and their experiences.

However, one burnout element of the Maslach scale, depersonalization, is not as widely held among participants of the current study. As Maslach details, depersonalization leads to negative feelings towards one's "clients". First, this wording of client does not fit best in the role of those working in caring professions, as they are not necessarily serving or viewing their congregation members as clients. In fact, most of the feelings discussed, would probably be concern of the opposite, that they feared others looked at them through depersonalization, rather than the other way around. This, therefore, is not best-fit scale element for analyzing burnout percentages among those who work in clergy. The final element of reduced personal accomplishment also can be present among those who work in clergy, but again, in terms of one's work with "clients", may not be evaluated in the best fit for this job role. Further, there is little to no communication elements on the MBI. However, previous research has discussed how perceived social support and communication can help mitigate these feelings of burnout. The researcher therefore posits that a more developed scale would include a subsection of the respondents' feelings of social support in order to see how it mitigates the results of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments.

### *Organizational Changes*

Along with change in evaluation of burnout, clergy members and their board of directors or organizational overheads should work to encourage their organizations to have more open minds and communicate freely with one another to support each other in issues of mental illness, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. As found in the

results section and then developed in the discussion, the experiences of those interviewed show that clergy members perceived little to no support among those in their congregation or feel the scrutiny outweighs the support they do receive. Most are discouraged from discussing their own personal feelings, issues, and lives, and instead are encouraged to handle those things outside of their professional realm. This can be detrimental, especially in a career that already lacks clear boundaries between the walls of professional life and home life. Further, future research could be done on the nature of the communication that does occur currently surrounding burnout, especially among congregations and the clergy members, as well as elder, more experienced clergy and those that fall under them in the hierarchy. The differences in viewpoints and communication could be significant based on age, experience, and hierarchical status. This is signified by the fact that in this research, most of the clergy interviewed were in lower, less prestigious or powerful roles within the religious organizations they served.

On that note, those in a church supporting clergy should have clear role expectations set for those entering their roles as well as clear boundaries for clergy members. The research encourages congregations to offer support and encouragement to those working in clergy, rather than more burdens, criticism, and expectations. As Tiffany shared, this work ironically is often a place where the expectation is perfection when there should be one of grace; this would be a wonderful reminder and jumping off point for future research as well, as to understand why there is such a gap in understanding and empathy towards those that work in clergy among other caring professions. In the wake of the pandemic, this would also be an interesting viewpoint to

discover during the times when clergy members have been harshly criticized within their roles for either choosing to follow or not follow CDC recommendations.

The researcher posits a training for each church or board of faith-based organizations at least once a year that trains on signs of burnout, mental illness, and other similar struggles in order to support their clergy members and encourage healthy boundaries and behaviors. Clergy members should also find or be given a designated support group, outside of their congregations, in order to discuss concerns or issues that they are worried about sharing with congregations. This recommendation was developed from the discussion from most clergy on the fact that one of their most helpful coping mechanisms was having people outside of their congregation in order to discuss with and find understanding amongst. As a previous clergy member, the researcher can share that having those who personally understand your position and what you are going through is an invaluable asset to aiding against burnout. However, this study also warns us that the understanding must first come from within those the clergy serve for the most social support to be felt and allow for a positive organizational culture and work environment.

#### Limitations and Implications

As the researcher concludes this project, there are a few significant areas of limitations that must be addressed. First, this sample was one of a smaller nature as well as very specific. Due to the specificity of the clergy members being in their first five years, most participants were of a younger age range and life experience. This may have contributed to greater feelings of burnout or lack of better coping mechanisms simply for their lack of job experience. Further, this does not allow this study to be used for the

generalizable population of all clergy members. Further, due to the constraints and difficulty of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted via

Zoom, and this may have led to some lack of consistency in response as well as the researcher not being able to notice subtle, but notable field notes on body language and change in appearance when discussing certain subjects. Finally, these findings and conclusions are based in the researcher's interpretation of the data and their meanings within the axial themes given. Therefore, despite the researcher's best efforts, there may be some statements that were not represented or categorized in the way they were intended by the participants.

As these conversations were quite personal in nature and could possibly be difficult to answer at times, the major constraint to the research itself was the location of the meetings having to take place online. The researcher would suggest in the future, if possible, for future studies take place one-on-one off campus, in order to get a sense of the person's body language and to be able to break down the barriers that a screen gives. Further, the researcher also suggests possibly using the study in focus groups, as the clergy shared they are often able to share and understand their feelings more often when discussing with those outside of their congregation who understand the nature of their work.

Finally, religion plays a large part of the conversation in this, and yet there were only a few times that it was mentioned specifically in this study. Further investigate the effect that burnout, emotional labor, and social support, have on the religious aspect and toll on clergy members would be a wonderful addition to understanding the complexity of a clergy members' struggles.

One final limitation of this study is that the researcher does in fact have previous experience in this field as well. Despite an attempt to remain objective and unbiased within the project, the researcher also agrees that in all research there is some nature of bias, but especially in a qualitative study as this. However, the researcher also posits that not all of this is a limitation, as this perspective offers a unique understanding and viewpoint in which developed the themes and codes throughout the project. This must be noted for future research, though, in case future results vary or are different from the researchers' own interpretations

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research gives us a small glimpse of the experiences of the first years of young clergy members and the burdens placed on them. These clergy members give us a unique look into what burnout, emotional labor, and social support look like when analyzed under the lens of the clergy profession and reveal much work to be done. However, I am thankful to report that each of these clergy professionals, as of now, have still not left the profession and are encouraged to keep fighting against burnout.

By understanding the nature of the issues clergy members face, the perceived lack of social support and where it is lacking most, and the unclear role expectations and boundaries, future researchers can further develop scales and instruments to assist in having a clearer look at the state of burnout and emotional labor among clergy. Further, from that research, communication can be improved and developed among clergy and those they serve in order to develop a healthier clergy and congregation. Among these

goals, this also can shed light on the similar caring professions that clergy tend to mirror in struggles, such as counselors and educators and social workers. This research is not only beneficial to those within a faith-based organization, but to those who work in any “caring” field.

Social support and communication were revealed to be two essential elements of mitigating burnout and distress among clergy members. While this research does add to the academic conversation, there is also a more important undertone of aiding in decreasing the amount of mental illness struggles and loss of lives due to the issues many clergy members face. Jarrid Wilson’s story is unfortunately not the only one of its kind. Many pastors leave the profession, or worse, leave this world, due to the unhealthy expectations, emotional labor, and fear of discussing their own mental struggles with those around them due to typical responses. This research should be used to create healthier and more accepting religious communities for current and future clergy members and those they serve, alike.

## APPENDIX A – SCRIPTED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

1. Could you begin by telling me about your initial decision to enter into a clergy position?
2. What was your experience when you first entered your job role as clergy?
3. In your own words, describe your understanding of burnout?
4. From that understanding, what has been your experience with burnout and/or mental distress in your time in ministry?
5. What do you believe contributes to the feelings you have described or those that you know may have experienced?
6. Have you ever considered leaving the ministry, or if you have, why did you choose to leave?
7. What coping behaviors have you used to help your experience with burnout in the past?
8. What would you say are the hardest parts of working as a clergy member? Can you elaborate on those?
9. How have others helped you in this role? Are there other ways you wish people would have helped?
10. Have you ever struggled with a mental illness of any degree? Was it diagnosed or undiagnosed?
11. Are there any other comments or insights you would like to give regarding burnout and clergy?

## APPENDIX B – IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of  
Research Integrity



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### NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-13

PROJECT TITLE: Burned Out But Barely Begun

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: School of COMM

RESEARCHER(S): Lauren Noll, John Meyer

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: February 14, 2020

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

## APPENDIX C – IRB AMMENDMENT APPROVAL LETTER

Office of  
Research Integrity



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### Modification Institutional Review Board Approval

The University of Southern Mississippi's Office of Research Integrity has received the notice of your modification for your submission Burned Out But Barely Begun (IRB #: IRB-20-13).

Your modification has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- FACE-TO-FACE DATA COLLECTION WILL NOT COMMENCE UNTIL USM'S IRB MODIFIES THE DIRECTIVE TO HALT NON-ESSENTIAL (NO DIRECT BENEFIT TO PARTICIPANTS) RESEARCH.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-13

PROJECT TITLE: Burned Out But Barely Begun

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: School of COMM

RESEARCHER(S): Lauren Noll ,John Meyer

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: April 20, 2020

*Donald Sacco*

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