

## PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

### Flourishing in Ministry: Wellbeing at Work in Helping Professions

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“Life is hard, and ministry is always harder.” These were the words shared by an experienced pastor, mentoring a group of young pastors just out of seminary. And yet despite the inherent difficulties of a pastoral role, this pastor, as most pastors, has been faithful to a sense of call to shepherd God’s people for many years, serving with joy and passion. So how do pastors and other caring professionals engage with their calling and sustain joy, health, and wellbeing over a career? How might insights from the emerging field of positive psychology be applied to those who are immersed in the suffering of others as helping professionals?

The *Wellbeing at Work* projects at the University of Notre Dame range from studying the wellbeing of rural health care providers, clergy, and their families, to teachers, and humanitarian workers. We are trying to understand the wellbeing of these real and amazing people. We believe that when work is good that it will produce real goodness of many kinds, including high levels of wellbeing among those who perform the work. Focused on the wellbeing of clergy and their families, the *Flourishing in Ministry* project examines what motivates pastors and priests to be engaged in ministry—and what disrupts them from experiencing wellbeing in their work. In our research, we attempt to explore how clergy—often working with lean resources—can give so much to others, and experience a sense of fulfillment and growth in

their daily work lives. The Flourishing in Ministry project explores three key questions: 1) What are the signature characteristics of wellbeing for clergy?; 2) What factors and conditions foster high levels of wellbeing, or impede/diminish it?; and 3) How does the wellbeing of clergy and their families change over a life span?. We invite you to consider the implications of the work of these two projects for the clergy and other Christian helping professionals whom you know and lovingly serve, as well as for your own journey as a caring professional.

### Defining Wellbeing

Over the past 30 years there have been hundreds of studies of wellbeing conducted around the world. This accumulation of knowledge has led to a number of important insights, chief among them being greater clarity around the concept of wellbeing. Most scientists would agree there are at least two important dimensions of wellbeing: *happiness*, the quality of our daily lives, and *flourishing*, the meaning and purpose we experience in our lives. To put it simply, we can think of happiness as capturing whether we are having a good day, and flourishing as capturing whether we are having a meaningful life. We are among the very few researchers who study both dimensions of wellbeing within the context of work. We find that both dimensions of wellbeing matter greatly for people’s work experiences. We also find that flourishing is particularly important for people who experience their work as a calling.

### Happiness

A large and growing body of research provides strong evidence that happiness—our everyday feelings and life evaluations—is one important dimension of wellbeing. When we have happier days, weeks and months, we tend to make better decisions, have increased creativity, and perform at our best. We are also healthier, more resilient in the face of adversity and are more capable of building and maintaining positive relationships with others. We use the term “everyday happiness” to capture the important point that it is the pattern of our feelings and life evaluations *over time* that captures this dimension of wellbeing.

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Our research suggests that pastoral work is uniquely complex, as pastors find themselves serving as “expert-generalists.” Role complexity and role ambiguity may erode the happiness of clergy, which is also true of other helping professions to some extent. For example, in a recent email exchange, a pastor of a large church in a suburban area described the unique challenges of a pastoral leadership role:

“I was looking forward to a relatively relaxed week. It was early Monday morning and I was getting ready for work. I had glanced at my calendar the night before and I had fewer meetings scheduled than I normally do. This seemed like a good week to catch up on my back log of emails, do some early preparation on my sermons and get some planning done. But my week turned out dramatically different than I anticipated: I had to counsel some parishioners who were dealing with PTSD, a relational break up, a job loss, and rape. I was confronted with an issue that required a consideration of restructuring our organizational design. I had to address an urgent issue with the county documents that concerned our property taxes. The thermostat was broken in the room where the ladies’ Bible study was meeting and there was no one else on grounds to handle it. The roof had problems and we had a major leak in the ladies bathroom that resulted from a clogged drainage pipe. I received concerns of the Christmas service not being community friendly enough. I had to talk with someone about altar call concerns and assimilation of new people. I had to write a board resolution regarding community relations. I was asked to participate in a meeting with some missionaries from South Korea. There was a problem with the breezeway lights and the handicapped signs were stolen. And, I had the privilege of helping someone grapple with the death of a family member. All of this happened by 2:30 Monday afternoon. My week had just begun.”

We know this pastor well and can attest to his deep affect for his vocation, which is also true of most pastors. However, the scope of competencies called for in a pastoral role, and the effort required to switch among those competencies rapidly in any given day, is challenging indeed. Consequently, we are finding that giving thorough attention to the person-job fit of a given pastor for a given ministry leadership may greatly enhance wellbeing. Pastors and other helping professionals are well served to reflect on whether or not their knowledge, skills, abilities, personalities and values are a good fit for their role and ministry context. Also, configuring one’s role around strengths and passions as much as possible, a practice known as job crafting, can also be enormously helpful.

### **Flourishing**

Researchers are still searching for more precise ways of defining human flourishing, but there is strong consensus that it includes at least four elements: (1) an overarching system of beliefs, values and virtues that provides structure and guidance to life (meaning system), (2) a sense of contributing toward important purposes or goals in life (purpose in life), (3) an experience of being positively connected to others in mutually caring relationships (positive connectedness), and (4) a positive self-concept (identity) and a sense of being one’s true self, as well as striving to grow and improve as a person and achieving higher standards of virtue and excellence in one’s life (authenticity & personal virtue) (Baumeister, 1991; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Harter, 2002; Waterman & Schwartz, 2013).

**Positive professional identity.** One of the most important insights from our work is our finding that people with strong and positive professional identities have an internal source of strength that helps them maintain a sense of appropriate balance and stay connected to work in positive way. People who have a positive sense of self deal better with adversity and persevere in the face of challenges, and they are capable of caring for themselves. They know themselves well, so they know their own limits. They can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, seek help from others, and take time to replenish themselves when they need it. Maintaining wellbeing seems to begin with having a positive identity. Pastors especially experience identity demands and threats in the form of negative criticism, as well as overtly aggressive or

passive-aggressive behavior from parishioners that often subvert their leadership. Sustaining a positive pastoral identity through maintaining theological perspective, and receiving supportive and accurate feedback in safe places appear to be keys to the flourishing of clergy and other helping professionals.

**Work with a purpose.** Philosophers, theologians and now researchers believe that we have an innate need to do something with our lives that we think is important and useful. Purpose is particularly important at work. Given the hours we spend at work, we need to know we are using that time well. We need to feel that all of our hard work and effort are making a positive difference in the world. A sense of purpose is what provides that connection between our daily work and something in which we really believe. People who feel called to their work often speak about something bigger and more important beyond themselves that inspires and motivates them in their work. They are speaking about their deep sense of purpose—their work contributes to something they believe really matters. We need to know that our time on earth has mattered in some positive way (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

In our qualitative interviews, common among the stories we heard from physicians was their dedication to combining the power of science with human compassion to provide personalized care for their patients. Their purpose was to care for each patient as the unique person they are, bringing science and compassion together to advance healing. Teachers often expressed a commitment to helping children understand their personal value and potential through the transformative experience of education. Humanitarian workers often spoke of their passion for social justice and the sense of purpose they experienced from working to honor and uphold the dignity of people who have been marginalized, exploited, or victimized.

**Relationships at work.** We also need positive relationships in all of the spheres of life, including work. Often, people seem to assume that proper relationships at work should be confined to work roles. Our research suggests otherwise. We find that wellbeing at work requires friends and mentors rather than just business associates, with the workplace being a caring community of people who can support one another in the joys and sorrows of life experience.

Many professionals (clergy and psychotherapists as examples) can experience profound social isolation because of the unique nature of their roles. Cultivating key relationships where true, two-way intimacy occurs, through mentoring relationships, regular interaction with others in one's profession (a community of practice), and close personal friendships outside of one's work context are emerging as key practices for flourishing professionals. Our clinical experience also suggests that assertiveness and conflict resolution training are also often helpful to many clergy.

### **Resilience**

A growing body of research in the social and medical sciences, including our own, shows that in addition to *happiness* and *flourishing*, is a third element to wellbeing, a dimension we refer to as *resilience*. By "resilience," we mean a person's capacity to respond to the changing and sometimes challenging world around them.

**Dimensions of resilience.** There are three important resilience capacities: *self-awareness*, *self-reflectivity*, and *self-control*. *Self-awareness* is the capacity to step back from the flow of life to notice what we are feeling, thinking and doing. Self-awareness creates the potential to think about whether those thoughts, feelings and actions are good for ourselves and others. This is the capacity for *self-reflectivity*—the ability to examine and think about our thoughts, feelings and behaviors, especially in terms of whether or not they are appropriate, good, helpful, or otherwise positive for ourselves, other people, and the world around us. Through self-reflectivity we figure out why we responded as we did and determine why that response led to positive or negative outcomes. *Emotional intelligence*—the capacity to recognize and understand our emotions and the emotions of others—is one example of how self-awareness and self-reflectivity work together (Brackett, Rivers, Bertoli, & Salovey, 2016; Vaillant, 2000).

The third self-regulatory capacity is *self-control* or willpower (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; Duhigg, 2012). This is our capacity to change things in ourselves and the world around us. It also comprises our ability to set and achieve goals in life. Setting appropriate boundaries around work and then sticking to those boundaries is an example related to wellbeing at work. Helping professions require a great deal of self-regulation, by the very nature of their work. These capacities can become exhausted if professionals are not mindful of finding ways to replenish them. Our

research suggests that recovery experiences, including relaxation techniques, contemplative spiritual practices, and regularly practicing a restorative niche (or hobby) are key restorative practices. Research also indicates that people can grow in these self-regulatory capacities. For clergy in particular, formation of the person of the pastor is often the most neglected aspect of seminary training, so assistance from psychotherapists may be helpful in supporting this growth.

**Resilience and wellbeing.** We find that these resilience capacities help people sustain high wellbeing. High-resilience people are, for example, able to “just say no” to overworking. They notice when stress is building up and take action to reduce it. They have the capacity to figure out ways of rebuilding or maintaining their wellbeing that fit well into their life. For example, one high-resilience humanitarian worker told us that he takes time every morning to journal about his life. It is his way of maintaining a good perspective on his work, and it helps him deal more effectively with work challenges. A humanitarian worker takes a nap every day. He knows a nap will restore and re-energize him, so it is a priority except during emergencies. Several physicians write poetry together because it helps them work through difficult work issues and experience more joy in their practice of medicine. A number of Catholic and Protestant clergy use St. Ignatius’ prayer of examen at the end of each day. They told us that this daily practice of reflection nourishes their spirits and helps them become better people and better pastors.

### **Cycles of Wellbeing**

One of the important strengths of our projects is that we are exploring how these forms of wellbeing are linked. We have found that there are tight connections among these three dimensions of wellbeing. These connections form cycles of wellbeing (or ill-being). Our research evidence is showing that increases in one form of wellbeing tend to lead to increases in the other forms, generating positive or upward cycles of wellbeing. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true; decreases in one form of wellbeing can undermine the other forms. This is especially true if there is a sudden decrease in one form of wellbeing. If these downward cycles are not checked, we think they lead to burnout, physical exhaustion, and other forms of severe ill-being.

**Ill-being cycles.** We are finding evidence that people who are exposed to negative environments

over long periods of time begin to show declines in flourishing. They might, for example, begin to despair about the efficacy of their work. Because they experience everyday unhappiness, their sense of meaning may decline—“Is all of this sacrifice worth it?” This starts in subtle ways that are easy for people to overlook. Instead of addressing their wellbeing, people often redouble their efforts at work, which typically makes things worse. They tend to isolate themselves from others, hunkering down in hopes of weathering the difficult period. They often start caring less about themselves, neglecting their physical and mental health. At some point their wellbeing is so low they feel exhausted and on the brink of crashing. Even still, they might keep going until they are in the grasp of full-scale burnout.

These cycles are complex and we are still trying to understand how they work. For example, in most of the stories we heard about “crashing,” people said they were surprised when it happened: they had thought they could hang on a bit longer. Apparently they did not notice or simply overlooked the downward trend in their wellbeing. At some point that downward trend seems to have suddenly swamped their wellbeing, capsizing them like a ship during a storm. This means people may not be aware of the tipping point in their wellbeing, the very point at which they could take action to avoid the crash.

**Wellbeing cycles.** There is also good news in the cycles. Small changes seem to accumulate over time, creating lasting improvements in wellbeing. Take, for example, the large and growing body of research on mindfulness practices (Dane & Brummel, 2013; Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014; Lutz, Jha, Dunne, & Saron, 2015). Studies show that even five minutes of mindfulness practice can lead to significant and positive changes in physical health, stress response, and resilience. Much of our current research is devoted to studying these cycles of wellbeing because of the promise they hold for understanding how to rebuild and sustain wellbeing. Our findings suggest that caring professionals and organizations can intentionally help clergy and others to enter into a positive spiral of wellbeing, in order to engage in sustainable, effective ministry that flows from an experience of the abundant life that Jesus has promised to those who believe.

### **Wellbeing in a Calling**

Even though ministry-related work can be deeply meaningful, it is not always fun, enjoyable,



happy work. Indeed, it can be demanding, stressful, exhausting work. Those involved in helping professions often confront the worst kinds of evil as they work to help victims of violence, natural disaster, and economic destitution. They may work in difficult and under-resourced settings. They may work in dangerous contexts where they are subject to violence and disasters themselves. In addition, the work itself is hard, complex, and seems to be never-ending. They act on faith that, somehow, good will come from all of their efforts. So work days often unfold one after another without reward, rest or respite. Doing this kind of work well often requires denying one's own needs as one strives to serve others. This necessary self-denial—what we call positive sacrifice—is part of the experience of thriving, in part because it confirms that we are giving our best to something profoundly important. Our research suggests, however, that pastors and other caring professionals can tip from positive sacrifice into “negative sacrifice” (experiences which erode wellbeing) without realizing they have made this transition. Negative sacrifice looks and feels like its positive cousin, but is, in fact, a condition in which a person is experiencing too much fatigue, too much stress, and too many resource expenditures. We think that over time, negative sacrifice can lead to a host of problems, most notably burnout.

Here is a key to understanding wellbeing for people with a calling: They identify very strongly with their work. Researchers have found that a sense of calling is “grounded in a perceived connection between personal passions and endowments and particular domains of work for which those passions and endowments seem particularly well-suited” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 37). As Bellah and his colleagues noted, for those with a calling, work becomes inseparable from themselves and an integral part of their lives (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007). Phrases like “my life's work” are often used by people with a calling. At its best, a calling is fulfilling because you can be your fullest and best self in your work. In many ways, the essence of a calling is the deep joy of giving your very best time and talent to something you care about deeply. Those with a calling can and often do experience the fullness of flourishing. These individuals enter their profession to pursue meaning and purpose, and they work tirelessly and sacrifice greatly in those pursuits. Flourishing keeps them going, sustains them through difficult times, and motivates their continued commitment to their work. They

will tell you about the privilege of helping others, the glorious experiences of making a positive difference, and how much more they receive from their work than they ever give to it. We were created to flourish, and to participate with the joy that Scripture affirms exists within the very nature of God. It is our deepest hope that fostering higher levels of wellbeing will help pastors and other Christian helping professionals be more joyful, healthier, innovative, higher performing, adaptable and resilient ministry leaders, to the glory of Christ's redemptive work in the world.

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