

Firewall: Health Essentials for Ministers and Their Families



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Abstract: Ministerial formation is an essential function of Christian education. Its goal is for ministers and their families to experience a lifetime of fruitful service. When formation does not take into account forces of deformation commonly experienced in ministry, the result is malformation that leads to failure under stress with devastating consequences. Statistics suggest that ministers are not adequately prepared to handle common stressors encountered in ministry environments. At least four common stressors in ministry should be addressed in curricular design for ministerial formation to build a “firewall” of protection for ministers and their families to ensure better long-term outcomes.

Introduction

One of the main goals of Christian education is to produce strong and vibrant disciples who live full, fruitful lives while fulfilling their God-given destiny. This is even more important when that education is focused on training Christian ministers. Ministerial formation should be designed to deliver a high-impact experience that imparts the critical knowledge, skills, and formation of being necessary to prepare men and women for years of effective service. When ministers and their ministries fail, it often becomes a public event that invites the scorn of the unbeliever and ripples through the church, creating wounds and discouragement. When these kinds of “crash and burn” events become common headlines and exhibit trends, we must ask why the same events appear to repeat themselves over and over again. More importantly, we must use the opportunity to develop more effective ways to form ministers who are better prepared for an often hostile ministry environment by adapting our Christian education curricula to better serve their needs.

Current statistics related to ministers’ personal health and the health of their families suggests that Christian education often falls short when it comes to preparing them for the rigors of long-term fruitful service in ministry. Non-formal training environments often neglect formation in their curricula in favor of skill-based training. Current trends suggest that many churches are hiring ministers with no formal training at all. Additional

on-the-job formation, in the form of ongoing professional development experiences for active ministers, is needed after formal education is done and is often neglected. These factors seem to be working against the wellness of ministers and their families who do not seem to be adequately prepared for the stressors commonly encountered in ministry environments.

I was ordained in 1983 and have served in both associate and lead pastoral roles in the local church. For the last 7 years, my ministry focus has been preparing Christian leaders for ministry as an Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Over the last 25 years I have seen an alarming pattern of crash and burn incidents for ministers and their families that have impacted me personally. Of the five most significant mentors in my life, three have fallen to moral failure and two of them are no longer in ministry. Of my closest friends in ministry, no less than seven have suffered divorce and family disintegration. Many of these individuals have had significant formal preparation for ministry. I began to wonder if my experience was the exception or the rule. I also began to wonder what stressors most contributed to these kinds of poor personal and ministry outcomes for these ministers and their families and what kinds of changes to the way we prepare ministers might better integrate a “firewall” of protection into their lives to produce better outcomes.

Understanding the Big Picture

What is the current state of the health of ministers and their families in the United States? Without an accurate picture of where we are currently, it is difficult to map a route toward future effectiveness in ministerial formation. There have been multiple studies with this kind of focus done in the last 20 years, but the work done by Dr. Richard J. Krejcir at the Francis Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development (FASICD) is particularly impressive. His work in this area began at the Fuller Institute as early as 1989 and continued as the project was transferred to FASICD in 1998. Some of the other studies that have been done are getting older, such as those done by Goetz (1992). Anne Jackson (2007) has criticized other research in this area for a lack of tight scientific design in their surveys, calling their data “info porn,” as is also highlighted in her book *Mad Church Disease* (2008). Krejcir (2007) seems to have excellent experimental design considerations in his studies on the health of ministers and their families compared to other studies done in recent times.

The Krejcir studies originate from two separate pastor’s conferences in Orange County, California, in 2005 and 2006 involving 1,050 pastors. Some of the results (2007) are arresting to say the least:

- 90% state that they are frequently worn out on a daily or weekly basis.
- 89% have considered leaving the ministry.
- 77% felt that they did not have a good marriage.
- 63% had been fired from a ministry position at least twice.
- 38% had been divorced or were in the process of getting a divorce.
- 30% admitted to having an ongoing affair or sexual encounter with a parishioner.
- 26% had regular devotions and felt adequately fed spiritually.
- 23% felt happy or content with who they are in Christ, at church, and at home.

Even if this data represents a narrow population at specific events, if this group is representative of the magnitude of the problems ministers are facing, this is alarming. Goetz (1992, p. 39) in an older study cites similarly alarming data from a sample of 200 pastors.

- 94% feel pressured to have an idealized family.
- 81% said they had insufficient time with their spouse.
- 70%+ admit to problems with income level and use of money.
- 53% were experiencing difficulties with raising children.
- 46% admitted to sexual problems.
- 28% considered ministry to be a hazard to their family life (54% said it was beneficial).

In a 2001 study done for *Pulpit and Pew* at Duke University and cited by Bob Wells (2002) encompassing 2,500 religious leaders, further evidence of stress in ministers' lives can be seen:

- 76% were overweight (compared to 61% of the general population).
- 10% were chronically depressed (about the same as the general population).
- 40% were depressed at times or worn out "some or most of the time."
- The average minister worked 60–70 hour weeks with little or no exercise.

When taken together, these statistics paint a stark picture of the state of the health of ministry professionals and their families. It is no wonder that a study by London and Wiseman (2003) concludes that 40% of the ministers who enter ministry today will not be in ministry 10 years from now (p. 26). Krejcir (2007) places that number even higher at 60–80%. Considering the tens of thousands of dollars and many hours invested to prepare one person for ministry, the costs of ministerial dropout are astronomical in both their

human and financial impact. These studies represent a window of opportunity to address the roots of the problems represented by these statistics and to reshape ministerial formation to address the need.

Formation and Deformation

If a literature search for the word *deformation* is done, you will most likely be directed to materials-testing sources that specialize in analyzing forces that “deform” materials and the way that the material fails under stress. I worked in the chemicals industry while I was an associate pastor in the 1980s and was responsible for the design and operation of specialty chemical apparatus that often contained hazardous liquids and gasses under extreme pressures and temperatures. The trick in designing these machines was to select the right materials in constructing the machines so they could withstand the expected forces of deformation (temperature, pressure, corrosiveness, etc.) and not fail (blow up, melt, collapse, etc.) with injury or loss of human life. I immediately noticed when I went into full-time ministry and higher education that people used the term “formation” but talked very little about deformation. It seems as though the formation processes of ministerial training often follow a standard model of formation developed long ago, without consideration of the different forces of deformation that are at work in the lives of students being trained today. If this was done in the chemicals industry, it could result in death and destruction, and even have criminal liability. I fear that by not taking into account deformative forces in designing ministerial formation, the same results are occurring daily in the lives of ministers and their families. We are focused on formation, often without considering what must be built into the “materials” in the formation process to allow them to withstand the most common deformative forces encountered in ministry. Leaving the ministry, constant fatigue and depression, moral failure, sexual indiscretion, divorce, and marriage problems are symptoms of the real problem. We have failed to understand the common forces of deformation that ministers and their families will encounter and adequately “form the materials” to withstand these stressors.

The Firewall Process

There is an enormous wealth of material available in the literature on ministerial formation but little published on ministerial deformation. We are indebted to Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr (1993) for one of the few sources that actually discusses ministerial formation from the perspective of deformation. Formation that does not take into account deformation may result in malformation. Many of the forces of deformation and their resulting

fallout in minister's lives discussed by Fehr and Hands directly overlap with the stressors identified in a 1985 study published by Hulme, Brekke, and Behrens as well as the symptoms described in the Wells (2002), Goetz (1992), and Krejcir (2007) studies. Malformation leads to a lack of material integrity that will inevitably lead to a material's failure at its weakest point when under stress. If our students are formed with strong biblical language skills, a strong background in church history, a solid systematic theology background, and excellent homiletics preparation, yet have little built into their lives during the formation process to help them withstand the deformative forces commonly encountered in ministry, all may be lost when they fail under pressure and are blown out of the ministry.

The term *firewall* has two common uses today. In architectural work, a firewall is a specific design built into a structure to allow it to hold up under the stresses of heat from a fire for a specific amount of time. Should a fire break out in that building, the structural walls are designed to have the integrity to withstand the heat from a fire for a specific amount of time, usually rated at 2 hours (a "2-hour firewall"), so that people can escape before the building collapses due to materials failure from the heat. This was evident in the design of the Twin Towers in New York City after the attack on September 11, 2001—the buildings stood for over one-and-a-half hours under tremendous stress, allowing many to escape before the buildings finally failed. In the computer world, a firewall is a specific program designed to "surround" the computer with a wall of encoded protection from outside attack by computer viruses, worms, and malicious access. Both are excellent metaphors for what can be done in Christian education to help ministers and their families survive the common stressors in ministry environments. Ministerial formation should be designed to take into account the key stressors found in ministry environments and build the precise knowledge, skills, and formation of being into those being trained to allow them to stand under stress without collapsing.

Key Forces of Deformation in Ministry

Individual ministry environments vary from place to place and will all have some unique stressors. There are still several key forces of deformation in ministry environments that seem to be common to most, if not all. In the early 1980s, William E. Hulme, Milo L. Brekke, and William C. Behrens were commissioned to do a study of ministers in the Lutheran church. Dr. Hulme, Professor of Pastoral Care at Lutheran Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul at the time, had a burden for the frustrations and perceived lack of fulfillment in the lives of local church pastors in his denomination. Dr. Brekke was enlisted because of his expertise in statistics, survey design, and interpretation of data. Dr. Behrens joined the research team and was tasked

with making specific recommendations for practical improvements based on their research findings that can be readily applied to Christian education and the formation of ministers. His study encompassed data gathered for 1,220 ministers, and the results were published (1985). While restricted to the Lutheran denominations and their ministers and done over 20 years ago, the study did an excellent job of distilling and naming some of the key forces of deformation at work in the lives of the ministers and their families that he studied (pp. 70–76). Dr. Brekke's expertise in survey design and statistics helped this study escape some of the problems with experimental design noted earlier. This work has been an inspiration for me to conduct ongoing research to distill and name forces of deformation that are at work in the lives of those I am helping to prepare for ministry.

The study by Hulme et al. (1985), my own personal experience in ministry over the last 26 years, as well my current research seem to confirm the presence of at least four key stressors that act as common deformative forces in the life of ministers and their families. These stressors include the following:

- **Boundary Stressors:** Forces that work against the ability of the minister and his or her family to maintain adequate personal space and freedom in the discharge of ministry responsibilities (insufficient differentiation)
- **Loneliness Stressors:** Forces that work to isolate the minister and his or her family and prevent them from fostering true intimacy in key relationships (insufficient intimacy)
- **Identity Stressors:** Insufficient skill, personal habits, or awareness of the need for ministers to understand themselves, their profession, and their limitations in order to produce a healthy and holistic concept of self, ministry, and family (incomplete formation)
- **Health Stressors:** Forces that directly work against the holistic health of ministers and their families, affecting their emotional, physical, and spiritual health (compromised wellness)

Many of these stressors are as old as ministry itself but seem to be amplified in our Western culture today, contributing to the fallout seen in the statistics presented earlier. The pace of society and the rapid infusion of change from new technology have created more intense boundary problems for ministers and their families. The Western family unit and community life, once a prominent part of the fabric of our culture, have deteriorated, removing another layer of support for those in ministry. The movement of the Western world into a post-Christian era has created a new kind of identity crisis for Christian ministers as they seek to sort out what it means to be a minister in today's world. Modern conveniences and sedentary lifestyles have created ideal conditions for many of the health stressors experienced in Western cul-

ture by ministers today. The convergence of these factors in Western culture, coupled with the statistics in the studies cited earlier, suggest that while these stressors are not new to ministry, their effects are being felt by ministers and their families more acutely today.

Many of the statistics used earlier to paint a picture of the current state of the health of ministers and their families can be directly identified with one or more of these four stressors—the statistics are the symptom and these key stressors are the cause. In order to address the problems apparent in these statistics, a solution should ideally address the sources of those problems, and a “firewall” should be integrated into the lives of the ministers we are training to help them cope with these key stressors. A closer look at these four key stressors can provide clues as to how to modify curricula for ministerial formation to build that firewall into those being prepared for ministry.

Boundary Stressors

Ministry is known for its relentlessly unforgiving schedule, which quickly consumes all time and energy if proper boundaries are not established. While this can be said for many professions, ministry has its unique boundary dynamics that often conspire together to dismantle a minister and his or her family over time. These boundary stressors seem to feed off of several unspoken assumptions that the congregation, church leadership, and often the minister, share:

- The minister must always be available (unrealistic time boundaries).
- The minister must always be accessible (inappropriate access boundaries).
- The minister and family must perfectly represent our ideals (unattainable image boundaries).

Western culture tends to value doing over being. Productivity is often used to gauge success. As Scazzero (2006) points out, ministry accomplishments and doing “lots of things” in ministry can easily be mistaken for spiritual growth and maturity (p. 31). This is only exacerbated by the fact that ministry tends to draw classic type-A personalities who are prone to action. This is in contrast to clear direction in the Scriptures that ministry and life itself must flow from the theology of Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:8–11). The irony in this theology is that effective work can only be accomplished by proper rest in God’s strength and power. If a minister does not learn to set proper time and access boundaries in place, it is not a giant leap to begin to think that “it’s all up to me” in ministry, which can quickly lead to chronic fatigue, depression, broken marriages, and children that stray from the faith, and directly violates the principle of Sabbath rest. If ministers are not prepared to identify and plan

for these boundary stressors, the common response is to create and feed an idealized image of themselves and their families or to try to live up to the idealized image forced upon them by the congregation. London and Wiseman (2003) call this the “Walk on Water Syndrome,” which gives the outer appearance of a life without normal limits, but often causes irreconcilable internal conflict for ministers and their families (p. 37). Statistics would argue that without proper boundaries, they are most likely to sink rather than walk on water.

The season of ministerial preparation is an ideal time to introduce, encourage, and model the kinds of rhythms in ministerial life that establish proper time and access boundaries. These rhythms include weekly Sabbath, monthly periods of reflection that are several days long and coincide once per quarter with an extended period of retreat. A yearly sabbatical of more than 10 days allows for sufficient decompression from stress and revitalization of vision and passion for ministry. This rhythm assumes that ministers and their families will not always be accessible, creating proper access boundaries. When taught as part of curricula and modeled as part of the ministerial formation process, this kind of rhythm also defines a boundary firewall—it indirectly dismantles the Walk on Water Syndrome because it tacitly admits that the minister is human and needs boundaries like the rest of us. This regular rhythm also serves to dismantle a co-dependent martyr-savior complex between the minister and the congregation where each sees the minister as the solution to every problem and need. Lessons in good time and access boundaries are not often taught or modeled by members of the congregation, the Board of Trustees, or one’s church denomination—the opposite is often true. If these rhythms are deliberately taught and modeled as *habitus* in the process of ministerial formation, they will counteract many of the boundary stressors encountered later in ministry.

Classes on spiritual formation that require journaling or portfolio work provide an ideal medium to encourage the development of habits that counteract boundary stressors in ministry. When these kinds of curricula involve focused instruction and direction in retreat settings, the impact can be multiplied. This kind of firewall, when integrated into the minister’s formation, would go a long way toward preventing ministers and their families from becoming one of the unfortunate statistics cited earlier.

Loneliness Stressors

Our English word *intimacy* comes from the Latin word *intus*, which can be translated “inside” or “best friend.” In our highly sexualized Western culture, intimacy is often erroneously equated exclusively with sexuality. Each person seems to have been programmed by design with a deep need to know others and to be known. With this in mind, it would seem that ministry

would provide the ideal conditions for intimacy in relationships, when in fact the nature of ministry seems to war against intimacy and often produces ministers that find themselves very alone in a crowd.

Ministry can be a very lonely place because professional distance is required to minister effectively. Ministers have a ready-made community provided for them when they accept a calling, with their position and role in that community already defined. The minister comes in contact with many people, but the depth of relationship lacks satisfying intimacy because of the need to be minister and friend. Complications begin when ministers interact with many people, but typically on a giving-only basis and with little deep, satisfying intimacy due to professional distance, which can create isolation and loneliness.

If this kind of loneliness is coupled with long hours, weariness, inadequate time with spouse or children, and contact with other needy, lonely people, it creates a flammable mixture waiting for the right circumstances to ignite. G. Lloyd Rediger (1990) specializes in the area of ministers and sexual brokenness. He calls the kinds of stressors and conditions that lead to this flammable mixture the “Star Factor” (pp. 15–21). As Rediger notes, ministerial roles carry with them a natural charisma bound up in a mystical connection with God, along with real or implied power to judge, reward, advise, or scandalize (p. 16). Because of this mystique, ministers connect from a distance with people they may have never even met, creating an artificial intimacy. If the minister gets caught up in the aura of the Star Factor, it can have a warping effect on both identity and boundaries, leading to the kinds of moral failure represented in the statistics presented earlier.

In order for satisfying intimacy to occur, Hands and Fehr (1993) advocate three kinds of intimacy that must be developed by ministers to counteract the deformative forces of loneliness (p. 73):

- **Intimacy with Self:** A minister must acquire the skills and invest proper time in reflective self-examination to allow for an uncovering, discovering, and recovering process to occur for calling, gifting, personal strengths, and weaknesses.
- **Interpersonal Intimacy:** A minister must acquire the skills and emotional intelligence to establish deep, trusting, and accountable two-way relationships that model true biblical community.
- **Intimacy with God:** A minister must develop sufficient connection and relationship with God to feel affirmed, forgiven, appreciated, and cherished by Him, which is the foundation for satisfying intimacy with others and self.

Scazzero (2006) notes the contradiction many ministers face in an environment where love and care for oneself is often viewed as selfish or sinful, yet we

are commanded by Scripture to love others as we love ourselves (pp. 35, 59). In this kind of environment, ministers often turn to a “quick fix” for their intimacy needs through sexual indiscretion, pornography, or extramarital relationships. An April 12, 2004, article in *Newsweek* notes a growing problem with pornography among preachers (p. 52), while Christine Gardner (2001) in a *Christianity Today* story says that 35% of the ministers interviewed had visited pornographic web sites (p. 42). A similar study by the editors of *Leadership* (2001) suggests that 40% have viewed pornography on the Internet and 55% consider it a temptation (p. 89). More recently, Amy Frykholm (2007) addressed the growing problem of addictive behaviors, pastors, and pornography in a journal article in *The Christian Century*.

Pornography, sexual indiscretion, and extramarital relationships are symptoms of deeper problems. The problems often relate back to key stressors found in the ministerial environment and ministers with insufficient formation to withstand them. Where do ministers learn about healthy intimacy with self, others, and God? Where do ministers learn about their emotional health and how to be emotionally healthy in ministry? Beyond learning, where do ministers in training see healthy intimacy and emotional health modeled and have the opportunity to reflectively examine themselves, form deep friendships, and connect in a deep and meaningful way with others and God?

Once again, Christian education is an ideal place to foster and model intimacy in the three kinds of essential relationships needed to act as a firewall to prevent loneliness. Christian education has mastered many of the cognitive aspects of training, but many times neglects the area of formation of being. Proper formation of being requires curricula that facilitate time for personal reflection and the kinds of self-intimacy that place a minister in touch with personal strengths, weaknesses, gift-mix, and calling. Powerful relational skills can be built by facilitating the kinds of interpersonal contact and interaction that create opportunities for deep friendship among students and faculty. In these settings, prayer, spiritual disciplines, and relationship with God can be experienced in an applied manner with peers and instructors who can model and help to shape consistency in these practices. Scazzero (2006) also points out the need for training in personal emotional health and how to have an emotionally healthy church. Many times individuals in ministry have not been trained in what constitutes emotional health and emotionally healthy relationships. Without that training, they unintentionally produce an emotionally unhealthy church environment lacking in the kind of deep authentic relationships that produce effective ministry.

One new strategy for ministerial formation that seems to create healthy intimacy and model emotional health involves leadership coaching. Transformational coaching forms peer relationships between students and creates a

relational bridge to develop and reinforce healthy intimacy, accountability, relational skills, and self-discovery. As Joseph Umidi (2005) notes, it leverages an adult learning methodology in a relational context to develop the kinds of character and competence that lead to healthy intimacy and emotional maturity (p. 31). Personal transformation tends to be activated through intimacy in relationships. This kind of coaching experience can be combined with the more cognitive and skills-based aspects of the student's experience to teach and model proper habits of intimacy that can serve students well in their professional ministry life and add to their understanding of emotional health. When these essential kinds of relational skills are missing from the curricular design of ministerial formation, ministers, their families, and ultimately the church pay the price.

Identity Stressors

Ministerial identity has changed profoundly over the last several decades. Gwen Halaas, who was Projector Director of the Ministerial Health and Wellness program for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) captures these changes well as quoted in a *Pulpit and Pew* article by Bob Wells (2002):

Think back to the picture of pastors we had in mind when we were kids and the image today," says Halaas. "Pastors from 40 years ago probably had spouses who worked alongside them and supported them, and they lived next door to the church and maybe they walked home for lunch and dinner. Now it's a minister who gets up in the morning and goes all day, and if they get a chance to eat at all, it's fast food, and if they're not sitting in their office, they're in the car driving somewhere. (Hallas, cited in Wells, 2002, ¶ 25.)

The role of the minister is one of constant tensions that must be kept in balance by facing one's limitations in gifting, calling, and frail humanity. There are several constant stressors that ministers face that war against a healthy self-identity and a realistic professional identity for the minister and his or her family:

- **Divinely Called but Human:** The minister experiences a divine calling and anointing to minister, yet must reconcile this with the weaknesses and imperfections that are evident in his or her life and family (human identity)—e.g., Hulme et al. (1985, p. 94).
- **Jack of all Trades:** The nature of ministry demands that ministers function in roles that are unbelievably diverse, for which there was

little if any training and for which they often feel unprepared (professional identity)—e.g., Spaite (1999, p. 29).

- *Life in the Fishbowl*: The public nature of the ministry by definition creates a “fishbowl” effect that places the ministers and their families on public display, which itself creates a dynamic that attempts to define identity (public identity)—e.g., Ramey (2000, p. 29).

Hulme et al. (1985) do an excellent job of defining the tension that exists between divine calling and a minister’s humanity. Central to managing this tension is the need for a deep knowledge of self and calling in order to center identity formation. If a minister has a malformed conception of self, it can result in adopting a false identity and persona based on public or professional expectations. This in turn creates new identity stressors as the minister attempts to live up to that persona. John A. Sanford (1982) cites the need to build and live up to an external ministry persona as one of the major causes of ministerial burnout and failure because the image becomes a metric that is impossible to achieve (pp. 72–77).

The professional identity of ministers also has undergone profound change in the last several decades. With the advent of the self-help and therapy culture created in the United States over the last 25 years, pastors are now often expected to be marriage, career, and mental health counselors. As churches have grown, ministers are also expected to be experts in finance, administration, and strategic planning, often managing complex organizations with multiple staff, large building complexes, and a myriad of programs. As Scazzero (2006) notes, in the midst of this kind of stress, it is easy to adopt a mentality that “I am what I do” (pp. 76, 77). Many find themselves wondering what these things have to do with their original concept of shepherding sheep. Spaite (1999) has some excellent suggestions on how ministers can cope with the stress that the expectation of their professional role inevitably creates by training ministers in the rhythms of proper Sabbath and for the ability to establish priorities for the minister’s role (pp. 59–82).

When life is lived in the public eye, it creates its own set of stressors related to identity. As Ramey (2000) notes, when people constantly watch what we do and say and how we respond, it is easy to allow their reaction and expectations to shape who we are, in order to gain their approval. The stress of needing to please God and the people who ultimately pay ministers’ salaries can be tremendous, especially since ministry by definition requires that a minister lead the people toward difficult change and growth. Add to that the egocentric nature of many people who come to church to feel better rather than be transformed, as noted by Sanford (1982), and you have another essential ingredient for burnout (pp. 60–71). If those in the public are allowed the opportunity to define the identity of the ministers and their families, the

result can be a superhuman image that creates a benchmark for life and ministry that is impossible to obtain. As Scazzero (2006) observes, it becomes easy for a minister to adopt an identity on the assumption that “I am what others think” (pp. 75–77). Many simply give up or are removed by force from their position, making room for the next victim. This cycle of identity malformation is behind many who simply leave the ministry or who cycle through different congregations over their careers. It can be highly destructive to the minister’s spouse and children who often resent or rebel against a plastic identity created for them by others.

Integrating opportunities for deep theological reflection into ministerial training curricula allows students an opportunity to examine their own human and professional identities in the process of ministerial formation. A leadership development paradigm, such as the Leadership Emergence Theory developed by J. Robert Clinton (1989), can be used to help students understand the different phases of their ministerial development over the course of a lifetime and resist the plastic identity forced upon them and their family in the practice of ministry. Understanding how God has sovereignly shaped their identity and destiny through such reflective exercises in training settings can foster the kinds of identity formation that act as a firewall against the key identity stressors the student will encounter later in ministry.

Health Stressors

Dr. Gwen Halaas (2004) notes that in 1980, a longitudinal study of 28,000 Protestant ministers that began in the 1950s showed that in every diagnostic category ministers lived longer than the average male, including those from other professions. A 1999 report of death certificates for ministers who died between 1982 and 1992 showed that ministers were in the top 10 occupations to die from heart disease (pp. 3, 4). In recent times, the high stress life and death issues that ministers face, coupled with complex leadership and relational problems, mixed with long hours and a sedentary lifestyle, have created a ticking health time bomb for ministers that can go off at anytime.

This is the theme of a book by Dr. Daniel Spaitte (1999), a medical doctor who has examined the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of ministry and pastoral burnout. The philosophical underpinnings of the assumptions that can lead to pastoral burnout are often related to a blatantly Gnostic concept of our humanity (p. 116). The Gnostics drew a false distinction between the human body and spirit, treating the body as evil and the spirit as good. This concept disintegrates human beings into parts, rather than viewing them holistically. These Gnostic assumptions have crept into our Christian mindset for self-care, often emphasizing the care of the spirit while

diminishing the need to care for the body or soul as though they were somehow disconnected from a person's spiritual welfare, or worse, somehow sinful.

The logical end of this kind of reasoning can be a neglect of physical well-being in favor of spiritual pursuits. With this mindset, bodily neglect actually can become a virtue. The Western medical model only compounds the problem. In the West, health is viewed as "the absence of disease." This kind of reactive model waits for something to "break" and then prescribes a cure to attempt to "fix it." Most people would not adopt this kind of model for their car, believing preventive maintenance and proactive care to be a better way to preserve their investment. The reactive Western model of health works well with a Gnostic philosophy because it justifies concentration on spiritual things when the human body is not "broken." A reactive mentality and lack of preventive maintenance eventually takes its toll by the lack of exercise and poor eating and sleeping habits common to ministers in their high stress profession.

In addition to the physical stressors just mentioned, there are several emotional stressors common to ministry as Robert H. Ramey (2000), a retired Presbyterian minister who taught at Columbia Theological Seminary observes (pp. 23–35):

- "I Never Finish" Syndrome: It is impossible to underestimate the psychological and emotional stress generated in a work environment where it is impossible to bring things to completion or resolution. Sanford (1982) notes the repetitive nature of tasks in ministry and the often esoteric and non-tangible results are key causes of ministerial burnout (pp. 17–21).
- "Nibble to Death by Ducks" Syndrome: Stress is a cumulative thing, and in ministry, there are an abundance of small stressful things that cumulatively exert a powerful and often deadly amount of stress on ministers and their families.
- "Please People or Please God" Syndrome: The minister and his or her family are constantly exposed to the stress of having to choose between pleasing the people responsible for their livelihood or pleasing God.

The stressors mentioned above are common to the emotional rhythm of life for a person in the congregation as well as those in ministry. The thing that amplifies the stress for ministers is that their work is the ministry. Those in the congregation come to church and can experience release from these kinds of stressors in weekly worship services. For ministers, these stressors are often compounded by weekly sermon deadlines, high expectations for the worship

service, and the need to be at their peak of performance. Too often this creates a new set of spiritual stressors that warp a minister's spiritual life—competing demands dictate that personal devotional time gives way to sermon preparation and the Bible becomes nothing more than a source text for the next sermon.

Scazzero (2006) quotes Iraneus who said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive" (p. 27). He also quotes Robert Barron who asserts, "At the heart of the original sin is the refusal to accept God's rhythm for us" (p. 156). When ministers abandon normal rhythms of physical life and willingly embrace impossible schedules that prohibit physical exercise, proper sleep, and enforce poor dietary habits, they set themselves up for personal, relational, and professional disaster. Christian education curricula should include opportunities to teach ministers the basics of physical, emotional, and spiritual health and wellness if we are to help them avoid disaster in ministry.

Building a Firewall into Ministerial Formation

Many of the key stressors that will be encountered by ministers and their families in the practice of the ministry are defined and predictable. If Christian education adopts a proactive posture toward ministerial formation that anticipates and deliberately integrates firewall strategies into its curricula, the "material" it forms will have a much greater chance of withstanding the stressors encountered in the practice of ministry instead of failing under stress. Many of these firewall strategies relate back to a more holistic strategy of wellness currently being adopted by Western medicine in trying to prevent diseases rather than simply react to them. When the physical, emotional, social, vocational, and spiritual wellness of ministers in training and their families are central to their formation, they win, the church wins, and Christian education has done its job.

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