

Your pastor isn't as unhealthy as you might think

The clergy are all right—at least, as all right as anyone else is.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



Have you heard that 71 percent of pastors are burned out? That 80 percent believe the profession has been harmful to their families? That pastors are leaving the field at the rate of 1,700 a month?

If so, don't believe it. Although those statistics have circulated widely and have often been used to tout a book about the psychological state of ministers or spark interest in a conference on ministry, they are almost certainly inaccurate. They aren't backed up by any reputable study.

Some of these alarming statistics were generated over a decade ago by church consultant Richard Krejcir on the basis of clergy conferences that he held in

California in 2005 and 2006 for Reformed and evangelical clergy. He surveyed participants in those two years and received results from some 1,050 pastors. In other words, he was working with a small, narrow, and self-selected group of pastors. That was the group in which 71 percent reported they were “constantly fighting depression.”

This portrait of ministry is so striking and has circulated so widely that it has come to shape many people’s sense of the state of clergy. When the Barna Group recently presented its own, very different data, it proclaimed that its findings were “contrary to conventional wisdom.”

Barna’s study, published in 2017 as *The State of Pastors*, is based on surveys of 320,000 church leaders across the spectrum of Protestantism. It found that pastors are considerably more likely than the general population to rate their mental and emotional health as “excellent” or “good.” Eighty-five percent of pastors rated their mental and emotional health this way, compared to 60 percent of the general population. About 30 percent of pastors surveyed by Barna said that they were at risk of experiencing burnout—which is still a far cry from Krejcir’s claim of 71 percent.

That profile of clergy lines up with the kind of data Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell has seen in her work with the Clergy Health Initiative funded by the Duke Endowment, another important source of reliable data on ministers. For ten years CHI has studied United Methodist clergy in North Carolina, using longitudinal surveys, focus groups, interviews, and biometric data to assess the physical and mental health of clergy.

CHI has investigated depression in clergy and found that about 9 to 11 percent of clergy deal with depression. That figure is about 4 percentage points higher than the general population, but nowhere near the level of distress that Krejcir’s figures suggest.

Researchers at CHI are still assessing whether there is something about the ministry that may attract people with a tendency toward depression or whether it’s the profession itself that leads to higher rates of depression. Both Barna and CHI indicate that pastors’ overall mental and emotional health is quite good.

Proeschold-Bell suggests that clergy’s relatively good mental health might reflect the fact many aspects of clergy work are conducive to positive emotions. For example, a study published by the American Psychological Association and

conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina showed that there are five activities that when pursued on a regular basis contribute to a positive outlook. Four of the five tend to be a regular part of a clergyperson's day: engaging in spiritual activity, learning, social interactions, and helping. (The fifth factor in a positive outlook is play, and Proeschold-Bell guesses clergy are no better at this than anyone else.)

On the issue of burnout, Proeschold-Bell and her team compared the burnout rate among ministers to that of people in other service occupations. They found that clergy were in the middle range: they experienced burnout at a rate similar to that of teachers and social workers but were coping better with stress than police or emergency workers.

Proeschold-Bell said she had frequently heard that clergy experience unusually high rates of social isolation, so she tried to track down some data. CHI's research found that 12 to 15 percent of clergy reported feeling very or extremely isolated. That was not as high a number as the researchers anticipated, and they suspect that it is lower than the general population. (There are no good studies on the topic.) It's possible that clergy are not socially isolated but nevertheless perceive themselves as being alone—a reflection perhaps of being in a position in which they are surrounded by people but held apart.

Proeschold-Bell says she realizes that the news that “the clergy are doing OK” doesn't make for a very compelling headline, even if it is true. The one thing she does worry about is obesity among clergy. “In North Carolina, the obesity rate for pastors is holding steady at 41 to 42 percent, and that is compared with 29 percent of all North Carolinians.” A national study of United Methodist clergy showed a similar rate.

Matt Bloom, the principal investigator at the Flourishing in Ministry Project at the University of Notre Dame, agrees that clergy are doing relatively well, but he thinks the social conditions for ministry are becoming more challenging. The Flourishing in Ministry Project, supported by the Lilly Endowment, is a third major effort to study the factors that make for clergy well-being. It has surveyed over 10,000 clergy and conducted in-depth interviews with more than 400 pastors from eight denominations.

“Being a pastor is much more difficult than it used to be,” said Bloom. “I think the ecosystem is not as conducive to flourishing: the demands are higher, the support systems are not as strong. As churches have seen their membership rolls drop, they have responded in ways that have sometimes been very detrimental to the well-being of clergy.”

It would help the situation, he says, if congregations thought more about the conditions in which they are asking clergy to thrive. “How many local churches think about the well-being of their clergy? How many churches are willing and able to think hard about what they are doing that is not conducive to well-being?” he asked.

Bloom argues that it’s more useful to urge congregations to take up these questions than to demand that clergy do a better job of taking care of themselves. He finds that the widespread language of self-care in clergy circles ignores the larger environment in which ministry takes place. “What is left out is that there are ecosystems of well-being.”

“When you say ‘self-care’ you are putting most, if not all, of the burden on the pastor, on the individual, rather than saying, ‘We all bear responsibility for each other’s well-being.’ The reason that pastors may become less adaptable is sometimes because their well-being is diminished, sometimes it is because their identity is rigid, and sometimes it is because they are in a context that simply will not allow them to change.”

Proeschold-Bell has her own, slightly different problems with the language of self-care. She worries that it prompts pastors to retreat into narrowly defined notions of what self-care is and that as a result both pastor and church may suffer. And the notion that clergy are not thriving could become a self-fulfilling idea.

“If pastors talk about how they have seen research that pastors aren’t doing well, and they exchange this information with each other, that’s all time spent in a really negative way,” said Proeschold-Bell. If pastors constantly worry that they will become as burned out as they imagine their colleagues to be, they might retreat from risks and ventures that would ultimately be good for their communities, good for them personally, and good for the church as a whole.

“I would rather see clergy stay in a space of creativity and mission,” Proeschold-Bell said. “The mission of most denominations and clergy is to think big and incorporate more people. That has been the whole idea of Christianity: to know that there are

risks and dangers and to look beyond those dangers toward what is possible and to bring other people with you.”

Both Bloom and the Barna study, though using different approaches, find that women and people of color report having more mental and emotional health difficulties in ministry than white men do. Barna’s research shows that female pastors are almost twice as likely as their male counterparts to feel exhausted frequently (the figure is 20 percent for male pastors and 38 percent for female).

Bloom, who intends to study this issue more carefully, wonders if the underlying issue is how pastors relate to their context. “If you are a woman, perhaps the context says, ‘Sure you can change. Become more like a man.’ Sometimes the environment is constraining in a way that is not authentic to who you are, to your core values and beliefs, to your sense of call.”

And perhaps women and people of color do not have the same social and cultural mechanisms of support in ministry that white men do. For example, they may work at churches with smaller staffs or have their authority questioned more vigorously.

Bloom told of interviewing a young African American pastor who wondered what kinds of role models she could have. She came from a tradition of powerful male preachers, a tradition about which she had some reservations. This woman had to work hard, Bloom notes, to find another model that fit her own understanding of how to minister. This effort by no means suggested that she was in poor mental or emotional health. Rather, it indicated that the social structures to support women and people of color in their roles may not be as sturdy as those that exist for white men.

Barna reports that people are staying in ministry longer than they used to, and that the longer they stay the higher they rate their mental health. Among those in ministry for 30 or more years, 37 percent say they never or seldom feel exhausted, whereas among those in ministry for less than 15 years, only 13 percent make that claim. But Bloom’s research contradicts Barna on this point, suggesting that long-term ministry may not be great for clergy’s emotional and mental well-being. For Bloom, the health of veteran ministers is also related closely to factors in the environment. “It is harder and harder to have the kinds of support and good environments that help you develop that clear sense of who you are.”

The language of self-care ignores the environment in which ministry takes place.

The difference between the studies on this point may reflect a difference in how they define well-being. Barna asked pastors to assess their overall mental health and then asked about risks in three categories: spiritual risks, relationship risks, and burnout risks. Bloom and his team have developed a four-part model of clergy well-being that tries to identify issues of happiness (related to satisfaction with daily life, amount of stress, and work-life dynamics), resilience, authenticity or “self-integrity” (related to a strong sense of identity or a strong sense of call), and spiritual vitality.

Using information on these four dimensions, Bloom has concluded that clergy well-being diminishes rather than improves over time. The longer his subjects have been in ministry, the closer they are to burning out. In his next phase of research, he intends to look at this phenomenon more closely. What are the warning signs of burnout? What factors guard against it?

It is worth noting that Krejcir, the source of the widespread but misleading statistics, has recently released a study from 2016 that drastically revises his earlier numbers. The new report also acknowledges that it is limited to those identified as evangelical or Reformed. The more recent surveys involved a random and much broader sample, and the study’s numbers are now more in line with what other studies have shown. The statistic on depression is half what Krejcir previously reported—down to 35 percent—although it is still much higher than that of any of the other studies.

For Proeschold-Bell, the important lesson for churches and church members from these studies is to care about your pastor. Pastors are “just as human and at-risk as anybody,” she commented. But except for being seriously overweight, pastors “seem to be coping pretty well with a pretty demanding job.”

A version of this article, which was edited for clarification on May 1, appears in the print edition under the title “The pastors are all right.”