

Study finds that self-compassion helps prevent clergy burnout

by [David Briggs](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue



(Photo by Jack Sharp/Unsplash)

Pastor, love thyself.

In a demanding profession where one study found nearly two in five clergy were experiencing significant levels of emotional exhaustion, a recent study found that having a gentle attitude of self-regard may help clergy have greater life satisfaction and be more likely to be inspired and enthusiastic—rather than upset and guilty—about their ministry.

Exploring self-regard in ministry among 200 United Methodist pastors in Indiana, researchers from Fuller Theological Seminary analyzed data collected for the

Flourishing in Ministry Project at the University of Notre Dame. The Fuller study measured several factors, from self-compassion and social support to clergy demands and burnout.

Self-compassion, the authors said, involves “a gentle attitude of self-kindness,” a recognition that suffering and fallibility are part of the human condition, and an accepting and nonjudgmental awareness of feelings and mental states.

Some of the key study findings include:

- Self-regard matters: self-compassion was significantly related to greater life satisfaction and pastors feeling inspired about their ministry. Pastors who scored higher on levels of self-criticism were more likely to feel anxious or guilty and consumed by feelings of inadequacy when they fail at something.
- Loved ones also make a difference: social support from family and friends was important in helping clergy feel better about themselves and their ministry and was negatively related to burnout.

The study authors noted several limitations, including the sample being limited to United Methodist pastors who were predominantly married, white males.

But the findings are consistent with other research on self-compassion. One review of more than a dozen studies found a robust association of increased self-compassion with lower levels of mental health symptoms. At the same time, lower levels of self-compassion were linked with higher levels of psychological disorders.

A 2012 study looking specifically at clergy self-compassion among 75 pastors found clergy who were higher in self-compassion experienced higher levels of satisfaction in ministry and lower levels of emotional exhaustion.

The Fuller researchers said their findings indicate some practical approaches that may help clergy practice greater self-compassion and manage unhealthy self-criticism.

“While little can be done directly to change the expectations congregations place on their pastors, pastors can be coached on how to cultivate supportive relationships, be more compassionate toward themselves, and challenge cognitive distortions associated with inappropriate self-criticism,” the researchers said.

Seminary students in particular can be counseled to be proactive in building supportive friendship networks prior to facing the demands of congregations and denominations.

Along with mental health support, the study authors also note there is an important theological dimension: some churches may need to cultivate a “more gracious” theology of ministry than one that emphasizes clergy self-denial and urges pastors to take up their crosses without regard for themselves.

“It is one thing to repent of our self-centered tendencies,” the researchers said, “and it is another to deny ourselves the grace we would readily extend to others.”

—Association of Religion Data Archives