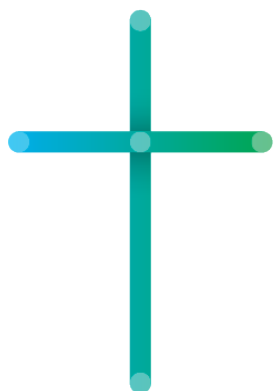




# The Stages of Ministry

Research Insights from  
the Flourishing in Ministry Project

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**FLOURISHING**  
IN MINISTRY

I remember the very first time I saw a live musical in a real theater. I was on a high school trip to New York City. Part of our itinerary was to see Carol Channing in *Hello Dolly*. I expected to be bored but instead I was enthralled. We had great seats, very close to the stage, and I was fascinated with the changing of the sets, the way microphones were hidden around the stage, and the way the actors looked from our close view. I could see how hard they were working, but Ms. Channing was so delightful and authentic that I found myself convinced that she was enjoying herself as much as I was. I caught glimpses of the backstage during set changes and I wondered who was back there and what was going on. While the front stage was where the actors performed, I could tell that the back stage was vitally important for supporting everything that happened on the front stage.

The metaphor of a theater is very useful for understanding many aspects of flourishing in ministry

and it is especially helpful for describing the the role of social support in wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> The front stage is where performance happens. The back stage is the place to support and nurture great front stage performances. And the off-stage is a place to step away from performance roles and engage other parts of life. I will use this metaphor to frame some of the important insights on social support that are emerging from our research. Let's begin with the metaphor of the front stage--the place where the action happens.

## **Great performances happen on the front stage**

Any time we enact an important role--pastor, parent, friend, professor--we have certain expectations about the things we should do and say. Other people also have expectations about what they think or hope we will say and do. More formally, researchers define a role as a set of connected behaviors, goals, obligations, rights,

norms, interaction styles, and time horizons that are associated with a particular position or function in a social group. We expect professors to do certain things and act in certain ways. These expectations are the social role.

There are, for example, certain responsibilities that most pastors must perform and pastors must perform these responsibilities well: preaching, teaching, and caring. These responsibilities are nearly universal parts of the pastoral role. There are also expectations about the way pastors should be. Pastors are not only expected to do certain things, they are also expected to have a certain demeanor, certain ways of interacting with people, perhaps even certain ways of speaking. Some of these expectations are proper and reasonable--they fit the role well. There are common characteristics of most excellent ministries, things most pastors should do to be effective. But other expectations can be inappropriate and unduly constrain pastors into an overly-

tight box of unreasonable demands.

In our research we find that the more authentic a person can be in their roles, the more stirring and proficient will be their performances. Their wellbeing will also be higher. Other researchers find very similar results. Think of authenticity as being able to express more of your true self in a role. Sometimes actors have to fake a lot--they must pretend to be the character. Acting is tough enough, but pretending can be more onerous because it requires even more focus, attention, and work. In addition pretending to be someone we are not creates stress and strong internal tensions. We cannot continue pretending without beginning to damage our wellbeing. But authentic front stage performances must fit or fill the social role--they are not full-on improvisations to do whatever feels good to the pastor. Our research shows that when pastors can be more authentic--when they have the skills to perform

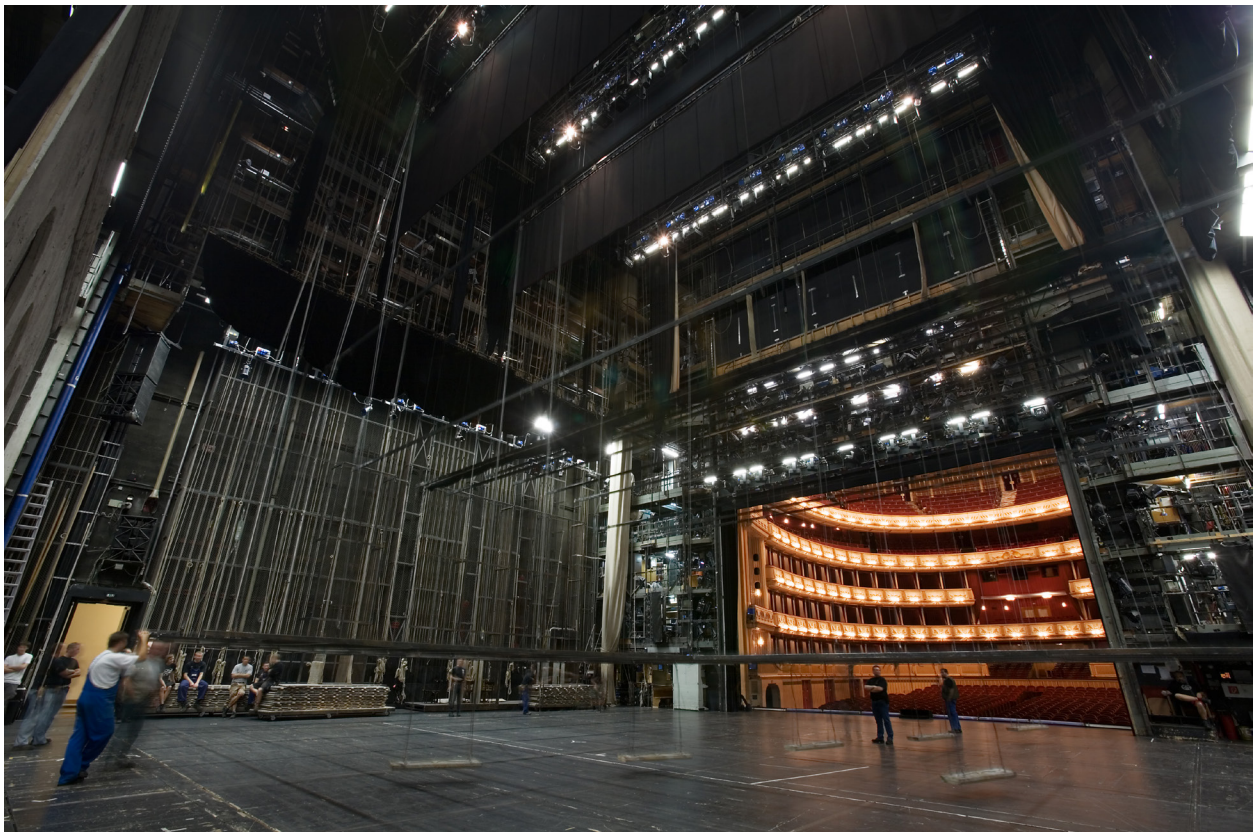


well in their current ministry role and when they have the latitude to appropriately express their unique call and personality in their ministry work--they are both more effective and much more likely to flourish.

## The vital importance of a good back stage

Sociologist Goffman described the back stage as the place in which actors can drop their front stage role, “forgo speaking in lines and

step out of character.” When an individual goes into a good back stage, they feel such a sense of relief and comfort. For example, they can take off any costumes; they can rest and relax. Actors are free to express things that cannot or should not appear on the front stage. A good back stage is completely separate from the front stage: other actors are present but the audience is not. Here, actors can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance or unsettling their audience. It is where actions, ideas, and facts



that should be suppressed on the front stage can be shared. In our research we find that great back stages are places in which three important supportive activities take place.

### The characteristics of a good back stage.

First, a good back stage provides a place to review and improve front stage performance. It is a place to unpack front stage performances, to review what went well and what did not go well and explore what lead to good or poor performances. It is a place to practice and sharpen skills for the front stage. It is a place to rehearse future performances and a place to improvise and generate new ideas for the front stage.

Second, a good back stage provides support and care for actors. It is a place of emotional sustenance where genuine expressions of caring and understanding are offered. Good performances are celebrated, bad performances are

commiserated with, and actors receive the nurture and support they need to sustain their wellbeing and to return again to the front stage. Here, each actor is shown that they truly matter to other people. Others act purposefully to help sustain each actor's sense of efficacy and self-worth. Actors are accepted within a network of caring others.

Third, a good back stage helps actors deal well with the inevitable stresses, challenges and failures they will experience on the front stage. Other people in the back stage help actors adopt effective strategies for coping with the normal stress that are part of the front stage. In the back stage a distressed actor can receive information and personal advice to help them resolve problems or adapt to challenges. Coping assistance is a stress buffer because-- when successful--it quite literally lessens situational demands and helps ameliorate an actor's emotional reactions to those demands.

## The right people for a good back stage.

Having the right people in a back stage is essential. Significant others such as family and friends can be helpful, but most important are similar others, people who have experienced the front stage and, ideally, people who have filled similar roles themselves. Similar others can provide uniquely important social support. First, while significant others can sympathize, similar others can empathize. Because of their previous experience on the front stage, similar others have an in-depth understanding of the many dimensions and nuances of the front stage. They can really imagine what a stressful or challenging situation is like. It is such a relief to be understood by someone else, to have someone who can truly commiserate with and validate our experiences. Similar others can grasp the full meaning and implications of the stressful situation that another actor faces. This capacity

for empathic understanding provides distressed actors with opportunities to ventilate their feelings and worries with less fear of criticism or sanction. Sometimes getting something “off your chest” is all a person needs to be able to perform well again on the front stage. Researcher Peggy Thoits refers to this as “ventilation and validation” and she notes that it can reduce experiences of stress and restores wellbeing.

Secondly, similar others can provide valid feedback about front stage performance. They can provide expert critiques because they really know what kinds of performance are best and what is required to get those best performance. They can reinforce other actors’ strengths and provide real insights into opportunities for improvement. In most cases, the evaluations and appraisals of similar others are much more accurate than those of significant others or people from the audience. Similar others can provide personalized advice and

counsel, tailoring their support and help to a particular actor and to the role that actor is striving to fill.

Thirdly, similar others can provide what Professor Thoits calls active coping assistance to help other actors deal with stressors and crises. Because they are experienced experts, similar others are in a position to understand and make more accurate evaluations and appraisals of the situation. They can provide help that is closely tailored to the specific nuances of a particular problematic situation. And, their commiseration can dampen another actor's despair by lessening situational demands and negative feelings directly.

Lastly, wise and experienced similar others--we call them wise guides rather than mentors--can serve as role models to be learned from and emulated. Wise guides have their own repertoire of effective problem-solving strategies to share and their own experiences from which other actors might

learn. They can inspire hope and help other actors find again the meaning and purpose of their front stage. Wise guides can help other actors imagine a better future and a better self toward which they can aspire. They share their own experiences of the highs and lows of the front stage. By describing their own journey, wise guides provide a way for other actors to reflect on their own journey. They are mentors but also much more. Wise guides are friends and companions, caregivers and care receivers, fellow travelers on a journey through life.

## Truly getting off-stage

The off-stage is the place where actors are not involved in the performance in any way. In the off-stage, actors are not doing front stage things nor are they thinking about the front stage. In a good off-stage, actors are not concerned about performing and, in fact, they are not thinking about the theater. Here, people can engage parts of themselves that do not or can not





appear in the front stage. Actors can be something else than actors: they can be spouses, parents, athletes, hobby enthusiasts, and even couch potatoes. For pastors, the back stage is where they can be more than a pastor. In the off-stage, they can temporarily set aside pastor responsibilities and pastor ways of being. They can express authentic dimensions of themselves that are not part of their role as pastor. One key to a good off-stage is the opportunity to temporarily forget about the front stage. Pastors need time to be truly off the ministry clock. They need, for example, to know they

will not be called for an emergency-someone else will attend to immediate care needs. In the off-stage, someone else prays before a meal. The pastor is treated as a person with her own valid wants, needs and desires.

## Summary

In our research we find, unfortunately, that many pastors do not have a back stage. Solo pastors face particular challenges in finding a back stage. Sometimes denominational issues compromise pastors' back stage. It is hard, for example, to share



freely with someone who in the future might be your boss. Often, it is simply that pastors are not given the time for a back stage nor do they have opportunities to find other pastors with whom they have strong affinity. Prescribed back stages (e.g., mentor matching programs or geographically-oriented pastor “support” groups) often do not work because back stages require people we trust, people like us enough to understand our experiences and different enough to help understand those experiences and grow beyond them. We can say for certain, however, that a good back stage is one of the essential elements for life-long flourishing.

#### Endnotes

1 Sociologist Erving Goffman first proposed this metaphor in the 1950s. We found Goffman’s ideas to be a good starting point, but we have adapted the theater metaphor in various ways to represent key insights from our research on flourishing in ministry. Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1956.

## Our Research Program

The Flourishing in Ministry Program is a major, long-term program of research designed to understand and support the wellbeing of clergy and ministers. We study the lives and ministries of women and men spanning Christian religious traditions including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, and Historically Black. As part of our on-going research project we have gathered surveys from thousands of pastors and conducted life-narrative interviews with several hundred clergy. We are gathering daily life information from pastors to learn more about how ministry life unfolds day-by-day.

This series of reports provides information about current research insights and results. We will continue to publish and share more reports as we advance our research.

The Flourishing in Ministry team is located at the University of Notre Dame. Our research is supported by the generosity of the **Lilly Endowment, Inc.**

We invite and encourage pastors, judicatories, and denominations to join our project. Pastors can sign-up at our website and receive their own wellbeing profile. Judicatories and denominations can receive detailed information about the wellbeing of their member clergy.

Much more information is available at our website:

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