

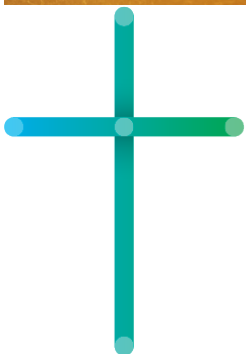
# Never Alone:

## Social Support and Flourishing in Ministry

Research Insights from  
the Flourishing in Ministry Project

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**FLOURISHING**  
IN MINISTRY

# A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

We are created as social beings. We need the support, care and love of others to survive and thrive. We learn this in the Bible. In Genesis God (2:18) commands “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” The Old and New Testaments are full of wise counsel about the importance of strong families, good friends, and loving kindness toward all. One of the central themes of Jesus’ ministry was the importance of loving each other. In fact, as I read it, the Bible is full of encouragement and admonitions about the importance of strong, positive social relationships.

Researchers agree. Studies conducted in more than forty countries around the world

have found that positive, caring, nurturing relationships are among the most important conditions for wellbeing. Other research confirms

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the negative effects of isolation. Professor John Cacioppo has studied the impact of loneliness—what happens when someone experiences an absence of positive relationships—and has found that it is “associated with personality disorders and psychoses , suicide,

impaired cognitive performance and cognitive decline over time, increased risk of Alzheimer’s Disease, diminished executive control, and increases in depressive symptoms.[1]” There are literally thousands of studies that show the many ways relationships are vitally important for our health and wellbeing.

Our research strongly concurs: social support is vital for flourishing in ministry. We find that four sources of social support are especially important: significant others (spouses, family, and friends), similar others (pastors, clergy and other ministers), members of the local church a pastor is serving, and denominational leaders. Each of these sources provides uniquely important forms of social support. All are necessary but no single one is sufficient.

There is much conversation among

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<sup>1</sup>Cacioppo, John T., and William Patrick. Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection. New York: Norton, 2009.

clergy, denominational leaders and seminary faculty about “clergy isolation.” Isolation is usually understood as a experience of being disconnected from others, most commonly explained as resulting from an absence of clergy friends. We find that this is, indeed, one important form of isolation, but there are others. One of the most common, and most pernicious, forms is isolation from the members of the congregation the pastor serves. Pastors are often admonished against having “friendships” with members of the church they serve. As I will describe, our research provides important caveats to this counsel.

## Significant Others

The term “significant others” is often misunderstood to mean only spouses or other romantic relationships. Researchers use the term for any person who currently or historically has had a significant impact on our wellbeing, especially our emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Notice in this definition



that even past relationships with significant others are considered to be of importance to current wellbeing. Both good and bad relationships have a long legacy with our wellbeing. Spouses, other family members and friends have a very significant impact on the wellbeing of clergy. This means that single pastors can and often do have significant others in their lives, people who play a central role in their wellbeing.

My first year as a thirty-something doctoral student was rough. I had left a job where I was a manager—I supervised people—to a role where I was clearly at the bottom rung of the work hierarchy. I spent many days photocopying research articles—a fair day's work, but I was having difficulty adjusting to the dramatic change in social status. To make matters worse, I felt completely lost in my graduate classes. I did not understand most of the terms, and trying to

understanding even one research article was an exercise in futility. I left campus many days feeling dejected, lost, and worried. But when I arrived at our small apartment, my boys (three and five years old at that time) ran to the door excited to see me. They showed me that I was loved just for being me, no matter how I performed. And Kim sustained me with her abiding love, caring for me and providing a place to talk through the day and disconnect from my work. I am certain I would have quit the doctoral program had it not been for their sustaining and rejuvenating love.

Significant others provide several vitally important forms of support. They provide emotional nurture and sustenance in the form of love, care and concern. They have a profound influence on our self-integrity. Significant others shape how we think about ourselves and our place in the world around us. This is especially true during early years in life, but significant others continue to shape our sense of

self throughout our lifetimes. They shape our values and beliefs, the life goals we strive toward, and our basic orientations toward the world around us. My family was a key source of strength during my doctoral programs, in part because they buoyed my sense of value and worth.

Pastors are more than pastors with significant others—they are cared for as a whole person. Pastors who have strong marriages, caring families or deep friendships are much more likely to flourish because they have people who truly care for them. We find that strong, positive relationships with significant others lead to higher levels of all dimensions of wellbeing. In particular, significant others can help reduce the wear-and-tear and increase the joy of everyday life (i.e., boost everyday happiness) and foster higher levels of resilience among clergy. One of young female pastor we interviewed describe how nice it was to go home and “just be mom.” She could take off her collar, put on



her comfortable clothes and enjoy making a meal for her family. All of those things, and much more, were a daily respite this pastor could rely on.

Significant others are also the go-to people for emotional support and sustenance. They can be present in times of joys and sorrows—a caring person who commiserates and cares. They can celebrate good times and sympathize in difficult times. Significant others are also usually the providers of a variety of forms of “instrumental” or “tangible” support such as cooking meals, producing financial income, and sharing family care responsibilities. These kinds of tangible support are of central importance to our wellbeing. Significant others are a safe refuge during any dark days of life and ministry, especially when the pastor’s congregation and work colleagues

are a source of major stress. Pastors who have a warm and loving home to go to are much happier during their good days and much more resilient during their tougher days.

Other research studies have demonstrated the health benefits of significant others. The data from these studies shows that people with strong and positive significant other relationships are also much more likely to:

1. Engage in healthy behaviors and are less likely to engage in health-damaging behaviors such as poor eating habits,



smoking, or abusing alcohol or drugs.

2. Experience lower exposure to or impact by negative social events in life such as conflict or the forms of negative interpersonal interactions at work.
3. Experience lower stress and better capacity to cope with any stress they do experience. They are, for example, more likely to respond with positive coping methods.
4. Have more positive physiological responses to work-related stress including lower physical tension, better blood pressure response to strain, and lower cortisol (“stress hormone”) levels.
5. Get better rest and have more restorative sleep patterns.

## Similar Others

Similar others are people who fill

similar social roles or people who in other ways have had significant life experiences that are similar to our own. No one really knows the challenges of being an only child like another only child. No one knows what it is really like to be the parent of a newborn unless they have parented a newborn. And, no one knows what life as a pastor is really like unless they have been a pastor. The more similar another person is to us—similar in personality, life experiences, values and beliefs, life goals and aspirations—the better. For example, a young female clergy would benefit immensely from the wise guidance of a more experienced female clergy, especially if they have similar personal characteristics, ministry orientations, and life experiences. Many of the young women clergy we have interviewed spoke about the importance of being able to have conversations with other female pastors. They describe the conversations as ranging from what to wear to particular events and activities—e.g., full immersion baptisms held at a





river, prayer before Little League baseball games, dinner for a local community foundation—to sharing about the joys and challenges of being a woman in ministry. The shared experience was, itself, a boost for their wellbeing. As I will describe below, the advice and counsel they have received from more experienced female clergy is a deep reservoir of encouragement and wisdom.

Similar others are uniquely positioned to provide several very important kinds of social support. First, because they have walked in our shoes, they can

provide a special kind of emotional support: empathic understanding. They can truly *comiserate*. Similar others have personal, in-depth experience with similar events, so their care and comfort can reduce distress because they have

experienced the same kinds of thoughts and feelings. They can help sustain hope in dark times and boost a sense of competence and self-worth during times when pastors feel challenged, misunderstood or denigrated. Pastors can share their feelings—“ventilate” their experiences—with similar others without the fear of being sanctioned. Having “been there” in ministry themselves, similar others can understand expressions of distress and they can validate the normalcy of another pastor’s reactions. Rather than deny, criticize, or attempt to change

those responses, similar others understand what is upsetting, worrisome or threatening. Like all of us, pastors feel better simply because someone truly understands and validates their experiences. Research shows their sheer presence can dramatically reduce both the physiological reactions to stress and mental experiences of adversity.

Second, they can be wise guides, providing expert, personalized advice and counsel. Wise guidance is much less about telling another pastor what to do and much more about journeying together in ministry. Similar others are in an ideal position to provide wise guidance. They can help another pastor accurately appraise a problematic experience and act as an expert “sounding board” to help another pastor think through what is happening. They are often the best sources of good advice about how to handle ministry challenges. They are the best sources of positive help with striving to become more excellent

as a pastor. Similar others can also convey a deep sense of care and concern—they can “be there” in ways even significant others cannot because they know the experiences of life in ministry in a deeper and more personal way. Their encouragement is more meaningful because they have lived through similar situations and truly know what the future is likely to hold.

Third, similar others can help sustain or restore another pastor’s calling to ministry. They are very important for helping other pastors sustain a positive pastoral identity. Similar others can express true companionship and convey to another pastor that he or she belongs in ministry and is regarded as a worthy pastoral colleague. They can boost another pastor’s sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy in ministry, conveying a confidence that can help restore the pastor’s own self-confidence. And, for pastors who are struggling with their call, similar others are indispensable for supporting self-





integrity and when needed, identity re-building and restoration.

Lastly, similar others can be true role models, what we at the Flourishing in Ministry team call exemplars. Exemplars are other pastors held in high esteem because of their commitment to and excellence in ministry, but also because they are perceived as sharing similar personal traits, characteristics, and ministry values. Exemplars can be emulated because there is clear evidence about the efficacy of their ways of doing ministry and being a pastor. They can inspire hope by fostering a positive sense

of self in other pastors. Similar others are very positive and often very powerful sources of social comparison. They can help other pastors imagine their best-selves, envision a better, brighter future and ultimately thrive.

## Local parishes and congregations

One of the great open question my team and I have found within the community of pastors is the question of whether pastors should be friends with members of their congregation. In many ways the different answers to this question



always pivot on how friendship is defined and what it means to create appropriate “boundaries” with members of one’s local church. Most conversations around this question aspire to understand how pastors, as the spiritual leaders of local church communities, can properly fill their ministry role and also maintain their own wellbeing.

The evidence from our scientific research is conclusive: pastors who

report having better relationships with the congregation of the local church they serve have much higher wellbeing. Part of this effect stems from the simple but profound fact that caregivers also need to be care receivers. Clergy need to be cared for, especially during more challenging and difficult times. Congregational support is essential. In fact, of all the relationships we have studied, a pastor’s relationship with his or her local church is the one that has the greatest impact across dimensions of wellbeing. Our research strongly confirms that relationships with significant others and similar others are very important, to be sure. But our research also strongly confirms that relationships with members the local congregation matter at least as much, and sometimes more, than any other relationship we have studied. Other research confirms this finding. In a seminal article about relationships and work, three of the most experienced organizational



scholars summarized what we know from research:

To join a profession is to plunge into a community of people. Much more than the meeting rooms and offices where we work, our relationships with individuals and groups constitute the environment

They shape our expectations about what our [work] can be, or ought to be.

By “profession” these researchers mean any work role, but especially one that involves working very closely with others. The wellbeing of pastors, like the wellbeing of all



in which we live our professional lives. Such environments can be nurturant sources of learning, inspiration, and enjoyment, or they can be destructive sources of frustration and injury. They send us powerful messages about who we are and how we are valued.

other professionals, is impacted in profound ways by the relationships with the people they work most closely with. Members of a pastor’s local church are most certainly among those people with whom a pastor works most closely.

When we asked pastors to rate the quality of the relationship they have with the congregation of the church they served, we ask them questions like these. To what extent do members of the congregation you serve:

- Help you better understand yourself and gain insights about yourself
- Understand and know you; accept you for who you are
- Show concern for you and truly care about you
- Support you when you face challenges and difficulties
- Help you grow and develop

Pastors who report higher levels of support from their congregation on questions like these have much higher levels of wellbeing. The same is true for new pastors as it is for pastors with ten or twenty or thirty years of service. It is the same for

pastors regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity. It is true for pastors in Mainline, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic traditions. In other words, for all kinds of pastors, those who report stronger and better social support from their congregation on dimensions like those represented above also have much higher levels of everyday happiness, resilience, self-integrity, and thriving. Pastors who experience social support from their congregation are much more likely to flourish.

Our interpretation of these research insights leads us to conclude that members of the local church can be both significant others and, in some cases, somewhat like similar others. As significant others they can show love, care, concern and compassion. In fact, pastors who do not experience at least a minimal level of respect, care, concern, and compassion from at least some members of the congregation face severe challenges to their wellbeing. As inherently social beings, most

of us cannot flourish unless we experience the minimum social support requirements: respect, care, concern and compassion from those people with whom we interact on a regular basis. Let me emphasize this point: most pastors will not flourish unless they experience these minimum requirements for flourishing.

## Denominational leaders

There is a very large and growing body of research on leadership, including the impact of leaders on the wellbeing of their followers. This research shows that two characteristics of leaders and leadership are consistently related to high follower performance and high follower wellbeing. The first is authentic leadership which is a pattern of ethical leader behavior that fosters an open, transparent, and caring environment. Authentic leaders are self-aware and humble. Because of this, they seek out and rely in followers' inputs. The second is referred to as transformational leadership. It comprises conveying

to followers that they are cared for by the leaders and then inspiring followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organization. Denominational leaders can play similar roles in religious organizations. We find that pastors who report experiencing authentic and transformational leadership from denominational leaders are more likely to flourish.

We distinguish between close and distant leaders. A close leader is a pastor's immediate supervisor, the person next in line in the organizational hierarchy. This is often the leader of the pastor's district, synod, state or region. Distant leaders hold the most senior or "highest" positions in the denomination: members of the council of bishops, general board and executive council are examples. These leadership positions vary considerably by polity, but even in denominations with so-called congregation-based polity, there are clergy who serve



the role of leaders. Often in this contexts large-church pastors play a role very similar to that of a closer or distant leader.

Close leaders can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of clergy, for better and for worse. At their best, closer leaders can be similar others—brothers and sisters in ministry who can offer care, support and wise guidance. Sometimes, however, they are

seen as performance monitors. Their role may be structured in such a way that the close leader is truly a supervisor rather than a friend in ministry. When, however, close leaders are able to be friend, wise guide or exemplar, they can be significantly beneficial to pastors. And, such close leaders are important resources for sustaining wellbeing.

Distant leaders serve as living embodiments of the values and beliefs of the religious tradition. The ways they act, the decisions they make and the manner in which they interact with other pastors are all signs of what truly matters in the denomination. Therefore, distant leaders who exemplify the true values and best traditions of the religious tradition can be inspiring to other pastors. However, when they are viewed as serving other interests than those of the denomination, they can undermine the morale of other pastors. We hear many stories of the profoundly positive experience pastors have when they meet



an admired distant leader. Such meetings can inspire pastors and reinvigorate their call. We have also heard stories of senior leaders who seem preoccupied with “the numbers” or with advancing their own career. These distant leaders create negative ripple effects of dissatisfaction and discord.

Leadership matters for wellbeing. Our research and the larger body of scholarship consistently show the best leaders are those who focus first on the wellbeing of their followers and second on “performance.” As denominations experience significant declines in membership, we hope the leaders of those organizations can continue to be the authentic, transformational leaders their denominations, and their pastors, need.

## Concluding thoughts

We all live in an ecosystem of wellbeing. Our wellbeing is connected in deep and profound

ways to the wellbeing of others including our families, colleagues, neighbors and congregations. Pastors and denominational leaders often speak about the importance of “self-care.” Each of us certainly does have important responsibilities to ensure we are healthy and flourishing. But we are also responsible for each other. The term “self-care” does not draw attention to the ways we impact each other’s wellness and wellbeing. We need both “self-care” and “other-care” because we all live in ecosystems of wellbeing. For pastors, these ecosystems including significant others, similar others, members of their church, and denominational leaders. Pastors may have other important sources of social support, but the Flourishing in Ministry research has conclusive evidence that each of these four kinds of social support are essential for the flourishing of pastors.

## 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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