

FLOURISHING IN MINISTRY

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A vast body of research literature concurs to affirm that isolation is a serious threat to individuals' wellbeing. As we keep discovering in our interviews with clergy, they do not constitute an exception to this finding.

According to our study, three types of relationships are key to pastors' wellbeing.

1. The first includes those connections that help **support the minister as a person**. These relationships involve those we define as **significant others**. They may be our spouse, children, parents and family members, or personal friends. Given the demanding nature of pastoral work, these are also the first relationships to be sacrificed and compressed for lack of time. However, this is a serious mistake. Positive, strong relationships with significant others foster high levels of pastoral wellbeing, while weak or poor relationships can be very damaging to clergy's flourishing. This kind of connection help pastors recover their centeredness as individuals; they often involve those people who have journeyed with them for many years, and know them best. The emotional support, love, care and compassion these relationships provide can have a powerful impact. Among the possible explanations of their influence on pastors' wellbeing is that *'strong, positive relationships with significant others help us to be our truest and best selves. The most important function of significant others is that they provide holistic acceptance and care. We can be our fullest, most authentic selves with these people, and in so doing we feel fully accepted and loved because of, and perhaps in spite of, the many rich dimensions of our fullest self'* (Bloom, 2013).
2. The second type of relationship that has central importance in pastors' flourishing involves **peers**. In their ministry practice, pastors can be exposed to a variety of experiences, from the most joyful and life-giving to the saddest and most depleting. A recurrent insight emerging from our interviews with clergy concerns the need for safe relationships with **'similar others'**, people who occupy equivalent positions and can truly understand what a pastor may be thinking and feeling. The importance of these connections can hardly be overstated. They offer empathetic understanding in moments of need, and an external perspective to help clergy process good and bad experiences; they can also provide personal advice about how to solve problems or cope with difficulties. In short, they support positive change, sharing from their experiences and journeying together towards maturity. In this sense, they can be seen as providing **holistic support to ministers throughout their professional experience**.

3. The last group of relationships that play a key role in clergy's wellbeing involves those who **support and resource them in their effort to reach proficiency as professionals**. Becoming a pastor is a dynamic process: no theological seminary equips its candidates with the perfect toolkit for any ministry circumstance. On the contrary, an essential part of the learning that shapes pastors takes place in concrete ministry situations and contexts, through a slow and sometimes painful process. In our interviews, clergy often speak about **crucible experiences** from which they emerged either stronger and more mature, or discouraged and bitter.

*In many cases, the difference in the outcome is also connected to the **availability** of relationships that may provide insights on how to improve a pastor's performance in a range of crucial professional areas—be that sermon preparation and delivery, pastoral visitations, administration or board chairing, community outreach, and so on.*

