Flourishing Ministers

Flourishing Communities
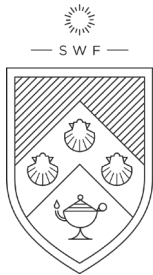
A resource from the
Susanna Wesley Foundation

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Flourishing Ministers - Flourishing Communities

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Contents

Flourishing Ministers
Flourishing Communities

A tree can only be as strong as the forest that surrounds it.[1]

Peter Wohlleben

Everyone wants to flourish in ministry and to belong to a flourishing community. Whether it's waking up feeling vibrant and energetic, experiencing the embrace of belonging and the empowerment of supportive friendships, or enthusiastically and productively engaging in a meaningful vocation, flourishing is the key to longevity in ministry.

However, it is also the case that ministry is hard work, and as concern around the stress and demands of ministry has grown, so has the pressure to provide well-being solutions through resources and training. Unfortunately, we find that *knowing* best practice is not the same as *doing* best practice, and the transition can be far harder than anticipated. Indeed, establishing flourishing behaviours for longevity in ministry is more like a steeplechase than a sprint and entails as much teamwork as individual effort.

When successful, ministers experience a multitude of personal, social and work-specific benefits.[2] These include increased self-esteem and spiritual growth, feeling meaningfully connected and engaged with others, and being productive in one's work.[3] However, insufficient resourcing can create the stressful experience of being overwhelmed and can result instead in

disengagement and burnout.

Burnout

Burnout is the result of sustained, overwhelming stress, and is often cited as one of the main contributing factors for leaving ministry.[4] It encapsulates the last act of the stress cycle and stems from chronic (long term) exposure to stress within the workplace.[5] Like flourishing, burnout consists of individual, relational and work-related dimensions.

The **individual** dimension of burnout shows up as exhaustion; in other words, as the personal, physiological symptoms of stress.[6] These symptoms include feeling extremely tired and drained, changes in sleep and appetite, difficulties with attention and memory, and frequent illnesses. When these individual symptoms reach a critical level, the pressure then begins to impact the **relational** dimension. This relational element is termed cynicism because the manifestation of chronic stress in relationships is a growing negative view of others incorporating irritation, conflict and withdrawal in relationships with both colleagues and church members. In parallel to these changes there develops a **work-related** perception of a lack of efficacy in one's ministry. This perception can include feelings of a lack of competence, achievement or productivity at work. For those in ministry, an absence of spiritual connection (sometimes called spiritual dryness or acedia) is also often experienced.[7]

Building knowledge

Successfully establishing a flourishing ministry not only entails understanding the explicit tasks and behaviours that nurture well-being. It also requires understanding the implicit psychological and relationship dynamics that are simultaneously at work. Without an understanding of the unconscious processes involved at both an individual and collective level, the best of flourishing intentions can be rapidly sabotaged.

Across all denominations there is a growing and diverse array of resources to address all three areas of flourishing. These include courses to enhance the per-

sonal dimension, exploring topics such as resilience and self-care; opportunities to access greater relationship support such as reflective practice peer groups;[8] and professional development training opportunities including supervision and coaching.[9]

Unfortunately, it is not straightforward to translate the provision of such resources into enhanced well-being. Research repeatedly finds a disconnect: ministers may know what they need to do to look after themselves, and indeed they are often able to offer coherent well-being advice to others, but they struggle to actually action it for themselves.[10] In other words, ministers can be provided with the self-care resources they request, but that does not necessarily translate into the ministers actually utilising them.[11]

While people in ministry have measurably higher levels of social connectedness than other professions, they continue to report experiencing intense "crowded loneliness".[12] In addition, they often demonstrate reluctance to trust senior staff with the difficulties they are facing before issues become critical.[13] The inability to create space for self-care, the intense experience of isolation and the lack of authentic relationships are key factors that can lead to a decision to leave ministry.

> The success of a minister's flourishing intentions is entwined with their family, church and denominational communities.

To understand this juxtaposition, it is necessary to place the minister within their context. The success of a minister's flourishing intentions is fundamentally entwined with their family, church and denominational communities. In this way, the flourishing of ministers has more in common than might be expected with the flourishing of trees in forests.

The hidden life of trees

In his book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben highlights the impact of recent scientific discoveries on our understanding of forests. There has been

a paradigm shift over the last twenty years from viewing forests as a collection of individual trees to seeing them as complex interconnected and reciprocal social systems. Trees do not thrive in isolation or demonstrate a competitive survival of the fittest. Instead, the well-being of every individual tree is co-created, reliant upon the interaction between itself and the other trees in its network.

The root network is fundamental to a forest's ecosystem: there is a continuous communication and sharing of resources through this underground system. The finely balanced regulatory process shares and distributes nutrients, chemical and hormones to ensure the needs of every tree are met, thereby maintaining the collective balance of the whole forest.

Just as the flourishing of trees is only understood by grasping their interaction with their ecosystem, so understanding flourishing in ministry entails both recognising that the individual exists within a social network and seeking to understand the interaction between them. This approach includes a considera-
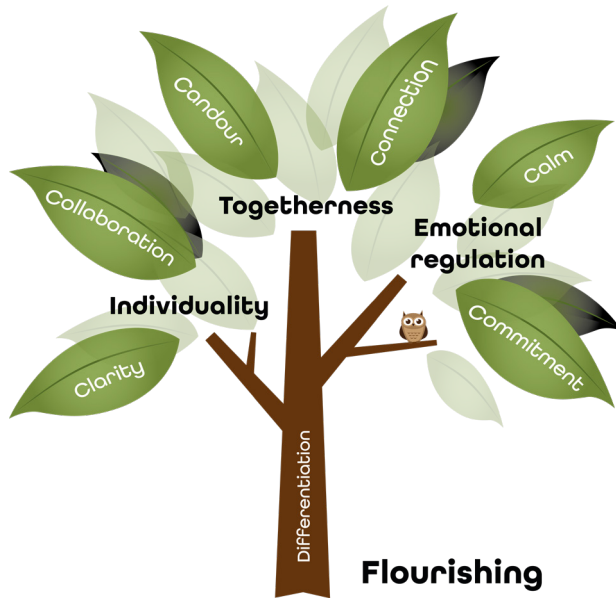
tion of how minister and church community co-create healthy environments together. It also entails exploring how a minister's personal psychological processes interact dynamically with their relational connections to influence well-being: personal and congregational well-being are fundamentally intertwined.

This resource

This resource draws on a variety of interdisciplinary insights to articulate the process for establishing flourishing in ministry. The metaphor and example of trees runs through it, and we draw on theories that emphasize this interconnectivity, particularly Bowen systems theory.[14] Through its six main chapters we explore the influence on well-being of the church's ecosystem; the tension between the life forces of individuality on the one hand and belonging together on the other; the ongoing influence of our relationship history; and responses to the 'atmospheric pressures' of stressful challenges and cultural change. We examine how we go about sharing 'nutrients' and 'pruning' where necessary.

Flourishing Communities

The resource breaks flourishing down into three fundamental principles of well-being – individuality, togetherness, and emotion regulation – which together encapsulate Murray Bowen's psychological concept of **differentiation**.[15] Each of these three elements is unpacked in two chapters. The first chapter of each pair (Clarity, Candour, Calm) focuses on the selfhood of the minister and one's individual level of differentiation.

Personal differentiation refers to the ability to hold a thoughtfully defined and distinct sense of self (individuality) while maintaining meaningful and authentic relationships with other people (togetherness) and keeping hold of those two abilities under increasing levels of pressure (emotional regulation).

The second chapter of each pair (Collaboration, Connection, Commitment) considers the dynamic of the minister in their congregational setting and the development of the church's **collective** level of differentiation. Collective differentiation captures how the three elements of differentiation are enacted at a group level.

A higher level of collective differentiation is expressed through a community that has a clear, corporately owned and enacted identity (individuality) where members can be honestly themselves, diversity is embraced (togetherness), difficult conversations are encouraged and creative solutions to challenging

Candour
Connection
Collaboration
Calm
Togetherness
Emotional regulation
Individuality
Clarity
Commitment
Differentiation
Flourishing

problems are discovered together (emotional regulation).

Developing the six elements through collaboration between minister and community helps to nurture an environment that not only enables the minister to thrive in their role but also enables the church community to benefit and flourish simultaneously.

Three principles of well-being

The first principle of well-being is **individuality**. This refers to the intrinsic experience all individuals and groups have of needing to be distinct from the other through having a unique identity, intrinsic value and beliefs, and specific preferences. Flourishing is not an end state but rather a proactive process consisting of daily decisions and deliberate actions. However, these are only effective if they are aligned with the minister's own values and meet their specific needs. With this in mind, the first chapter on **clarity** focuses

on the importance of the minister connecting to their individual needs.

Flourishing is also not just an individual process. Individual plans and purposes are outworked within a church community that has its own collective identity incorporating beliefs and expectations regarding ministerial well-being, some of which may well contrast with their minister's approach. The second chapter on **collaboration** examines how personal flourishing thus also depends on developing a cooperative relationship with the church community.

The second principle of well-being is **togetherness**, the inherent desire we all have to be connected, to belong, and to experience meaningful and reciprocal relationships with others. It is not sufficient just to be in contact with our individuality alone; we need to experience being accepted as an individual in relationship with others. In the third chapter on **candour**, this principle is worked out by exploring how fruitful discussions between minister and congregation regarding well-being depend upon the minister's capacity to articulate their specific needs honestly and clearly. Hearing those needs requires the congre-

gation to be able to engage with the real individual inhabiting the ministerial role. Therefore, the fourth chapter, on **connection**, explores the challenges and opportunities around developing this authentic level of engagement.

The third principle of well-being, **emotional regulation**, is probably the most under-emphasised element for successful flourishing in ministry, but is also possibly the most vital. Emotional regulation encapsulates how our reactivity in situations can thwart our well-being. The best-laid plans for establishing meaningful flourishing practices can be rapidly upended by our own instinctive emotional reactions and those of our church community.

The fifth chapter, on **calm**, illuminates how embedding flourishing practices requires the ability of the minister to engage with and settle the disquiet that emerges internally when long-established behavioural norms are altered. The sixth and final chapter, on **commitment**, considers how emotions are enacted by the church community as a whole. It unpacks how the minister can remain present, connected and committed to a church community who will be unsettled by, and hence reactive to, the process of change resulting from adaptations to ministerial patterns and practices.

Each chapter unpacks one key foundational practice with visual illustrations and case studies. The chapters identify explicitly how to engage with each flourishing practice through drawing on research and best practice from the fields of occupational and counselling psychology. Each chapter then explores the associated implicit challenges that can impede ministers and congregations in their attempt to establish positive flourishing practises. These psychological insights draw particularly on the framework of Bowen systems theory and coaching.

Practical reflective questions

Practical tools to help overcome the implicit challenges are presented at the end of each chapter. These tools consist of reflective questions that guide con-

versation, helping ministers and their congregations to apply the insights to their situations. These questions are organised under three headings: observe, evaluate and interrupt.[16]

Observe: Before you can change your behaviours, you have to know what they are. The act of observing is empowering and enlightening in and of itself since we, and the communities we inhabit, are often busy concentrating on acting out rather than thinking about what we are doing.

Evaluate: Evaluating your behaviour offers you the opportunity to think about whether this is who you want to be, what you want to be doing or what you want your community to look like. Here you can start to consider and articulate what best practice would look like and what foundational principles you would like to establish for yourself or your community.

Interrupt: Much of what you and your community have been doing will have been automatic and habitual. These questions invite you to interrupt your autopilot. You are encouraged to try something different, based on your observations and evaluations, and tolerate the temporary anxiety that arises when we experiment with something new.

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Notes

Flourishing needs

CLARITY

> *It appears that nutrient exchange and helping neighbours in times of need is the rule.*
>
> Peter Wohlleben[1]

Like all living things, trees need sustenance. They photosynthesise food using energy from sunlight, carbon, water and nutrients, but their ability to access the resources they need varies. Shorter beech trees hidden within the forest canopy lack sunlight, while those growing on barren soil lack water. However, within an undisturbed beech forest the rate of photosynthesis remains consistent across all trees. This consistency is enabled by a highway of communication under the soil: trees are aware of the elements they lack, and their specific requests are communicated to their social network via interconnected root systems and an extensive underground fungal network. Those who have these resources in abundance then share their excess with the trees who are in need.[2]

Like these beech trees, the first step necessary for establishing flourishing in ministry is to know which resources one needs but is lacking. There is now an array of resource options available to clergy via a network of relationships, organisations and professionals but there is no 'one size that fits all' because our flourishing needs are personal, unique and distinct. The positive, recuperative energy gained through

social interactions for the typical extrovert sits in stark contrast to the introvert who needs solitary time to recover from the exertions of work. Our needs also vary at different times: the arrival of children reduces opportunities for space and reflection thereby increasing the importance of spiritual retreats or the practical resource of babysitters. We find that flourishing through accessing the appropriate nutrients for the season requires us to have clarity about our needs. This process of identifying and owning one's own well-being requirements also increases the likelihood that the behaviours necessary to meet those self-chosen needs will last. This is because long-term change is rarely sustained through externally imposed directives. In fact, we're far more likely to sabotage our well-being by being stubborn and digging our heels in when someone else tells us what to do.

While routes to revitalisation are unique, flourish-

ing ministers are consistently found to invest in various combinations of four types of personal behaviour: self-care, relational care, spiritual care and boundary care.

Four key practices

Self-care practices are about nurturing our mental, emotional and physical health. They include regular, low-effort recovery practices such as having sufficient opportunities for rest, ensuring we get enough sleep and taking at least one weekly day off. These activities give us the opportunity to switch off both physically and psychologically from the exertion of ministry, allowing us to recuperate and regain energy.

We can gain insight from high-performance athletes on how to enhance resilience when working under pressure. For professional athletes, recovery is a foundational aspect of performance, not an optional luxury. Sustainable work patterns are those that allow

> Flourishing through accessing the appropriate nutrients for the season requires us to have clarity about our needs.

Flourishing Communities

Self-care

Relational care

Spiritual care

Boundary care

an ebb and flow in work rate, moving between high-intensity activity and low-intensity recovery.[3]

Positive psychology emphasises that self-care practices should also take us past neutral to thriving. Thus, self-care activities are not just about regaining the energy to recommence one's ministry the next day; they are also about engaging in active, enlivening recreational activities that invest positively in one's physical health and personal creativity beyond the

workplace. Such behaviours are highly idiosyncratic but might include developing a personal hobby, playing a sport, joining a book club, participating in ramblers' walking events, listening to and playing music, or investing time in healthy cooking.

Relational care is the second strand, and this element emphasises the importance for well-being of social support and the value of intentionally nourishing friendships and mutual relationships. Relationships can act as a buffer against the damaging impact of stress on our health by calming the negative experience of physiological arousal.[4] Specifically, it is the emotional meaning of the support – the fact that one feels cared for, valued and understood – that makes it particularly valuable.[5] Such support may stem from relationships connected to one's vocational role or from those which are entirely unconnected. Developing ministry-relevant social support might include seeking out another pastor who could act as mentor, or joining a clergy peer support group. Other forms

of relational care might include meeting a friend regularly for lunch, creating annual rituals such as a retreat with friends, or creating honest and accountable relationships with a close friend or partner.

Spiritual care encapsulates those individual (as opposed to collective) practices that develop and maintain a personal and vital connection to God. These practices nurture a sense of relatedness to God and foster a connection with one's sense of calling through engaging with spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation and worship. These spiritual resources have consistently been found to act as a protective factor reducing the risk of burnout in ministers, as well as positively enhancing engagement with work.[6] Studies suggest that these spiritual practices may enhance well-being through increasing an experience of collaboration with God. Such collaboration may include reaching out to God for strength, support and guidance when facing challenges or the increased meaningfulness and purpose attached to fulfilling a God-ordained vocation.

Ministers tend to reach for spiritual practices more than other well-being behaviours.[7] However, there are times when one's spirituality feels out of one's control and, without a balance of self-care activities, journeying through a dark night of the soul may actually increase the risk of burnout.[8]

Finally, **boundary care** articulates those practices that establish healthy transition points between ministry and one's personal and family life. Ministry life can often feel like the ultimate boundary-less profession: there can be little definition around when, where or how one's role is enacted, and relationships can be simultaneously professional, collegiate and personal. In addition, the very concept of establishing boundaries can feel like the antithesis of a whole-hearted, committed pastoral ministry.[9]

However, finding a way to establish healthy boundaries is vital for longevity in ministry. Boundary stress is repeatedly cited as the highest of ministerial pressures and the factor most likely to precipitate a crisis in ministry.[10] A highly permeable border between work and home life increases family conflict, putting mar-

riages, partnerships and families under high levels of strain.[11] The ideal, partially permeable boundaries between home and work are those that enable us to be fully present in the moment when enacting either our 'work' or our 'home' role, and incorporate a transition between the enactment of those distinct roles.

Developing boundaries such as these may include making practical decisions around working hours, the organisation of office workspace, and the use of email, phone or social media. Establishing psycho-logical boundaries is often equally as important as implementing practical boundaries: these might include using practices such as mindfulness as a 'seg-mentation' strategy to reduce the mental preoccupation with work concerns outside working hours.[12]
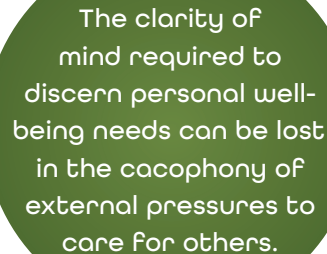
A vocation of service vs self-care

Clarity connects us with our core sense of self, who

we are in our inmost being, and develops the individuality dimension of differentiation. However, gaining clarity on one's well-being needs is often easier said than done as it relies on connection with one's unique identity, easily lost in the weighty expectations of ministry. The discernment of a vocational call starts with a rooted connection to God and a vitality of one's inner spiritual life. Stepping into ministry is a thoughtful decision based on connection with one's authentically called self, with its distinct passions and values. This resonates with St Irenaeus' claim that 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive'.

The challenge for ministers is that the outworking of ministry can be the antithesis of such an ongoing connection with one's internal compass and one's experience of being acceptable as one is: the clarity of mind required to discern personal well-being needs

> The clarity of mind required to discern personal well-being needs can be lost in the cacophony of external pressures to care for others.

can be lost in the cacophony of external pressures to care for others and to enact one's role.

The deeply personal and lifelong nature of the ministerial vocation readily leads to a merger of a minister's sense of self-identity with their role identity.[13] Duffy *et al.* articulate this as the challenge to distinguish between having and living a calling.[14] How does one keep in touch with one's authentic, continuously called self and with one's self-directed values, and not allow this identity to merge and fuse with the enactment of the role such that role identity takes over? When the two become conjoined, ministers find themselves orientating their motivational drive and energy towards work performance over and above other areas of their life. Self-worth will increasingly be judged through the lens of achievements and outcomes, and this external agenda will start to dominate the wisdom and integrity of their inner voice.

When role identity dominates, it can be very hard to prioritise well-being activities that are not explicitly lined up with ministry priorities. The pressure to orientate one's sense of self around one's vocation may be one of the reasons why ministers often express feeling most comfortable engaging in spiritual care behaviours rather than other types of self-care practices. Spirituality may feel more permitted, as opposed to other, more 'selfish', self-care activities. Unfortunately, ministers report that even their personal spirituality can be readily consumed by the competing priority to nurture their congregants' spirituality.[15]

The vocational call to ministry also emphasises a focus on others, which can result in a loss of connection with one's own well-being needs: the call to serve and care for others is even enshrined in the language of ordination services. The relational aspects of ministry, such as facilitating key rites of passage (weddings, baptisms, *etc.*), offering pastoral care, and community involvement are some of the key motivating factors for those seeking ordination, and continue to be the most satisfying and rewarding aspects of the work.

However, relationships can also act as demands, and common experiences such as unrealistic expectations, interpersonal conflict and personal criticism are some

of the most exhausting, demanding and relentless elements of the profession.[16] Without a vision of the activities and values of Jesus – who both attends to the needs of others, such as when he washed his disciples' feet, and attends to his own needs by withdrawing in solitude to pray and rest – any step to prioritise one's own needs may swiftly feel disloyal and selfish.

Early life patterns

Investing in one's own well-being can be even more challenging if a focus on other people's needs was encouraged during one's own childhood experiences. The experience of caring for a sick family member or emotionally supporting a parent during one's childhood can create an unconscious 'other-focus' relationship pattern where one's own needs are put to one side in favour of responding intuitively to the needs of others.

A focus on others is often present in the relationship styles of those in caring professions and at times we can see how early years experiences are enacted in our professional choices.[17] Such a way of being

becomes so natural that it can be hard to even imagine other ways of living or enacting ministry.

While being other-focused fosters enhanced empathy and compassion for others, it can become a restrictive burden and straitjacket when it comes to well-being and self-care. The other-focused experience of feeling vicariously cared for through meeting the needs of others can stand in stark contrast to the experience of direct care, where a child is able to express their physical or emotional needs explicitly and have those needs heard and met by their primary care giver.

Revd Elizabeth, who protected and stood up for her disabled sister throughout her childhood, found herself instinctively drawn to stand up for disadvantaged groups in her parish. She became so used to caring for others whose needs appeared so much more urgent and important than hers that it was incredibly difficult for her to get in contact with her own needs, even when she was at risk of being signed off work due to stress. She simply had no experience of doing so.

Her early-years family dynamic was one where she just fitted in to provide the care necessary for her sister. There was no energy left over within the family to think about or attend to Elizabeth's own needs. Over time she simply lost touch with herself.

This was not a problem while work pressures were low because Elizabeth gained self-esteem from caring for others and additional self-care was not particularly necessary. When work demands increased, however, she didn't know what to do to take care of herself. Not only that, but under pressure she experienced a growing compulsion to re-enact her early years relationship patterns.

Thus, at the very point when Elizabeth needed to look after herself, she unwittingly found herself investing more and more in campaigns and active action in the community, putting herself at even greater risk of burnout.

Partner relationships

Disregarding one's own well-being for what may feel like the greater good of others or the greater cause of ministry can ultimately leave other people picking up the pieces. Very often this role is played by a minister's partner (if they have one).[18]

The pressure to be 'role-focused' or 'other-focused' can be very intense in ministry and it can feel well-nigh impossible to articulate one's needs in the middle of such a cacophony. To escape the pressure, it can seem very attractive to delegate responsibility for self-care to somebody else. Cattich found that in this situation partners can find themselves positioned as 'enforcers' or 'managers' of well-being. (Cattich looked specifically at spouses.)[19] Frustrated by the congregational encroachment into family time, enforcer partners challenge their partners to resist excessive demands. Manager partners are more accepting of the demands of the role but take hold of the schedule to create space for couple and family time.

While, at a superficial level, involvement by the partner may create the same outcome as if the min-

ister had taken charge themselves, the reality is that this can foster growing resentment between church and family.[20]

Of course, this raises a question: who protects ministers who are single? My experience is that rather than the church taking up this protective function, such clergy often find themselves railroaded into accepting additional ministry duties because they do not have the 'excuse' of family life. This is a concerning situation because single clergy actually need more free time rather than less in order to build vital, sustaining relationships.

Summary

In this chapter we have explored the importance for flourishing of gaining clarity in understanding and expressing one's needs, focusing on the four practices of self-care, relational care, spiritual care and boundary care. We examined the tension between self-care and a vocation of service, the influence of early life patterns, and the impact of well-being practices on one's partner (where relevant).

Case study - Matt

Matt was passionate about pastoral ministry. Stepping into a new role in a local community church, he wanted to offer the kind of accessible care and attention that he had heard the last vicar failed to provide. The congregation was delighted with his efforts and Matt felt his self-esteem swell. Over time the pastoral requests piled up. He didn't want to let anyone down, so he started to commit to community events on his day off, allow his evening plans to be overtaken by hospital visits and squeeze his sermon preparation into quiet times.

Matt began feeling resentful of all the requests and annoyed that no church activity seemed to run without him. He was scared to offend people by saying no, so he gradually started to withdraw, dropping back in the hope that he would avoid invitations. He then began to hear complaints from various parishioners about his commitment to ministry. Feeling increasingly exhausted, with a constant, anxious pit in his stomach, he took his concerns to his pastoral supervisor.

In supervision, he recognised his part in creating the monster of congregational expectation. He came to see that serving others bolstered his own self-esteem. His mother had experienced depression during his childhood: while he had to suppress his own needs because she was not able to meet them, he had been made to feel important and valued when he cared for her. This longing to be recognised and praised by others prevented him from establishing realistic expectations and

Case study - Matt
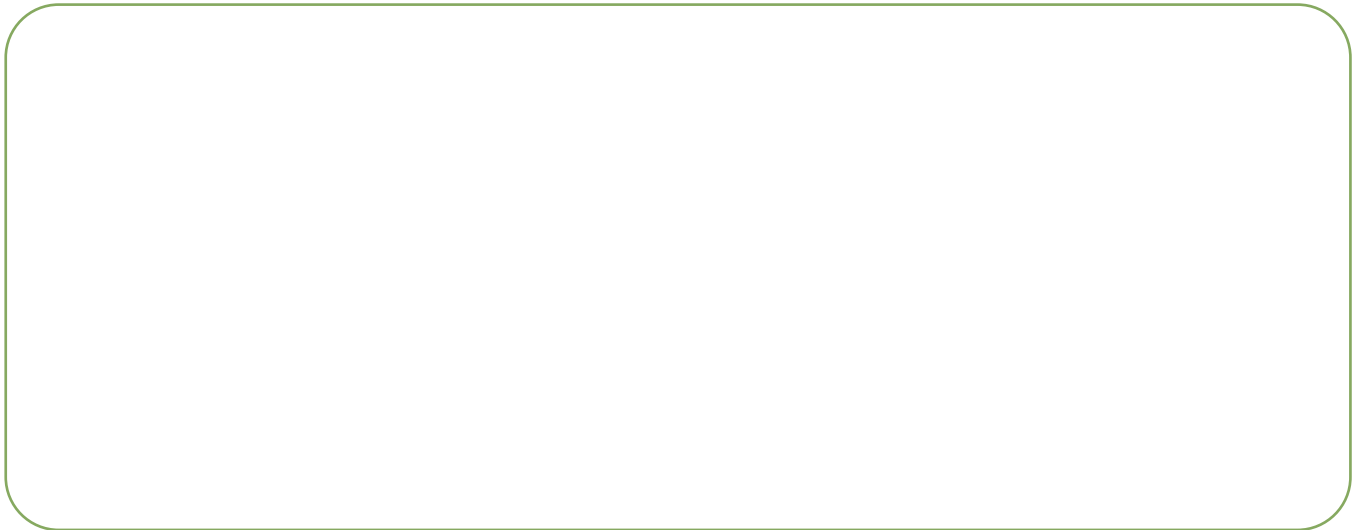
boundaries in ministry.

Gradually, he learnt to tolerate the pain of disappointing others and realised that grumbles about him not meeting every need weren't catastrophic. He created and protected pockets of time to invest in friends and hobbies outside the church. This decreased his anxiety, increased his self-esteem and confidence, and enabled him to think more clearly to make more strategic decisions about the role he played in church life.

Application - building clarity

Observe
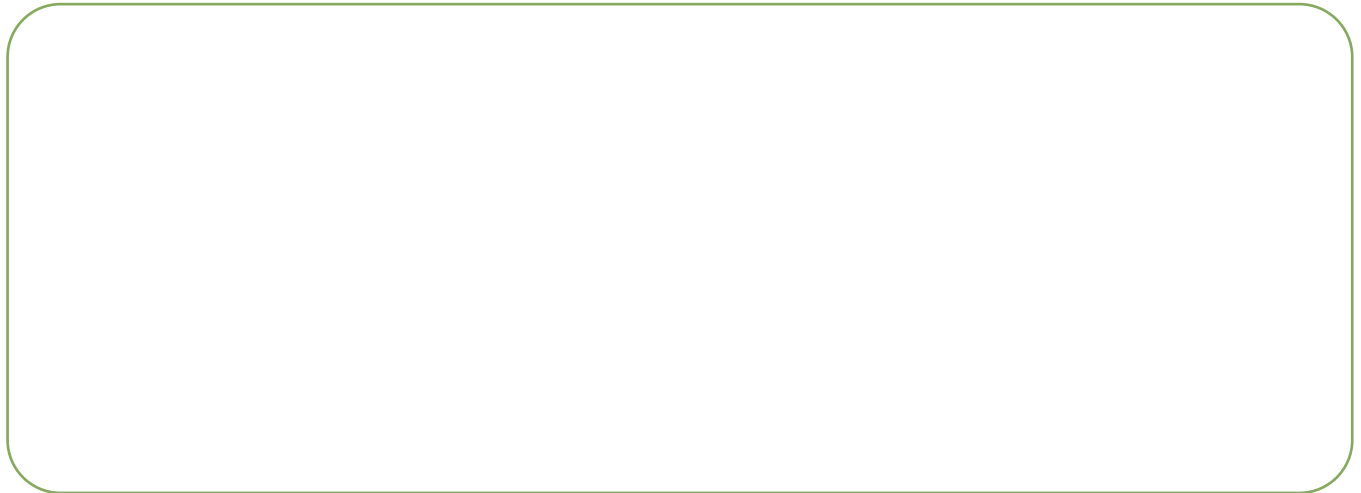
- What are your current well-being habits?
- How has ordination and ministry changed your investment in your well-being? How do your behaviours change as work or family pressures increase?
- How do you determine the activities that fill up your day?

Application - building clarity

Evaluate

- What impact does your current approach to self-care and well-being have on yourself, your family and friends, your church community?
- What beliefs about self-care have you brought into your adult life? What are the strengths and weaknesses of that approach?
- What is your biblical theology of self-care? How does that influence your choices?

Application - building clarity

Interrupt

- What is your greatest impediment to feeling energised in ministry?
- How can you start to take responsibility for addressing that challenge?
- What people or resources might help the process?
- How might you interrupt your automatic tendency to say yes to ministry demands or relationship demands?

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Notes

COLLABORATION

When trees grow together, nutrients and water can be optimally divided among them all so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be.

Peter Wohlleben [1]

Beech forests grow most productively when their trees are uncomfortably packed together. Years ago, foresters thinned out seedlings to create space and light thinking that this encouraged individual trees to grow without impediment, but research has identified that the beech community deliberately raises seedlings slowly under the dark, crowded mature forest canopy. The decades-long process is strategic; it creates healthier, more resilient trees capable of withstanding heavy storms and invasive pests. Ultimately, mature trees raised this way enable the whole ecosystem to flourish.

However, in their early years, these trees start off on the back foot. The dense upper story of mature trees towering above them permits only three per cent of available light through to the forest floor. This offers sufficient photosynthesis to prevent a beech seedling from dying, but not to do much more than that. It is certainly not sufficient to fuel a growth spurt or grow a thicker trunk.

This is where the cooperation of the community is key and the large 'mother tree' growing just feet away

comes into her own. Through her fungal root connections she facilitates the upbringing of her youngsters by passing on the sugar and other nutrients they cannot create or obtain for themselves.[2]

Ministers grow in a similarly crowded church forest, under the dense canopy of institutional and congregational mother trees. Individual ministers may have clarity on their well-being needs, but actualising those needs depends upon the recognition and reciprocal response of the surrounding network of church community. Burnout was originally articulated as an individual phenomenon. However, over time evidence has suggested that both burnout and flourishing emerge as an interaction between the individual and their surrounding system. The most effective well-being workplace interventions collaborate with employees to positively and proactively adjust the working environment as well as offering support at the individual level.[3]

Systemic factors

In their model of health for United Methodist clergy, Proeschold-Bell *et al.* (2011) separate the systemic factors that influence minister well-being into interpersonal, community, institutional and policy factors.[4]

The **interpersonal level** consists of relationships to key people and small social networks such as family and close friends. The **community level** consists of shared identities, experiences and resources in broader social networks. The **institutional level** highlights the impact of rules, regulations and ethos to promote or endanger health. Finally, the **policy level** consists of the policies, environments and structures that impact health. Cooperation for ministerial well-being relies on this range of factors working together with the individual towards a shared well-being goal.
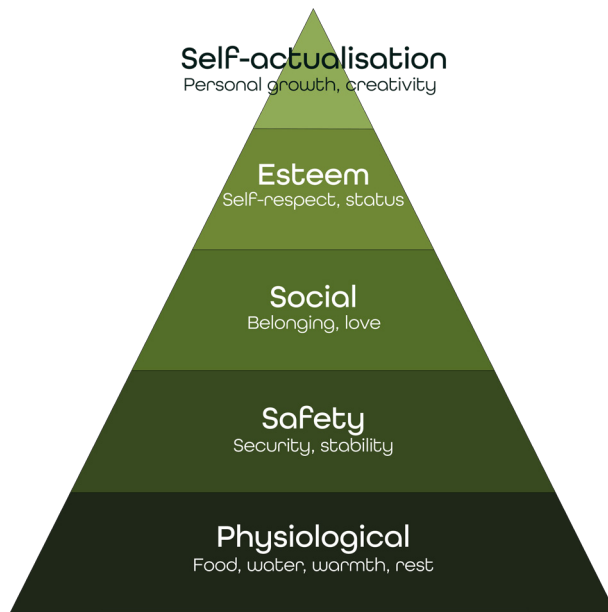
Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs clarifies how interpersonal, community, institutional and policy factors have a distinct impact on minister well-being, and

Flourishing Communities

offers a guiding framework for working cooperatively to foster flourishing. Maslow's triangle is a five-tier psychological model which articulates how human needs motivate attention and behaviour.[5]

While not a clear-cut, linear process, the fulfilment of needs moves roughly in order from the base to the top of the triangle. Physical and safety needs are located at the base of the triangle because these are primary needs necessary for survival. Above these come the psychological needs of belonging and esteem, and at the apex of the triangle is the final and fifth need, termed self-actualisation.

According to Maslow's theory, those whose lowest-level needs have not been met will make decisions based on meeting those basic physical concerns; once those needs are satisfactorily met then motivation shifts towards obtaining the next level of needs. Certainly, when sustenance or shelter are one's primary concern, there is little energy left to invest in psychological needs or self-fulfilment concerns, however valuable they may be.

Maslow's first basic need is **physiological**. This encapsulates our material and financial requirements for survival: food, shelter, warmth and rest. Within this tier, the key issues that impact ministerial well-being include appropriate and satisfactory housing provi-

Self-actualisation
Personal growth, creativity

Esteem
Self-respect, status

Social
Belonging, love

Safety
Security, stability

Physiological
Food, water, warmth, rest

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

sion and location. This is particularly pertinent for those in tied accommodation and those who move regularly due to an itinerant system of ministry. Other issues include the quality and functioning of the physical working environments of office and church building; the provision of financial renumeration, regarding both its sufficiency and its security; and the provision for recuperation, both in terms of days off and longer periods of holiday or leave.

The second tier within Maslow's hierarchy focuses on **safety** needs. This refers to the requirement for external, physical security and stability in one's life, and also the need for an internal experience of safety and freedom from fear. Within the church environment, such safety needs are enhanced through clarifying a minister's role and responsibility within their working life with a clear job description and contract, as well as explicit expectations around working hours and clarity around sick pay. Safety needs are enhanced when ministers have confidence in the institution's integrity,

compassion and support during key processes such as making appointments or enacting protocol and policies.

The type of approach adopted when addressing safeguarding issues or responding to personal or family illness can fundamentally impact a minister's experience of safety both at an external and internal level. If it is inappropriate, it can have an incredibly detrimental impact on mental health.

Maslow's third and fourth tiers describe our psychological needs for **social** belonging and esteem. Belonging encapsulates our social needs both through friendships and in community. Clergy experience significant challenges to well-being at this level including experiencing loneliness, social isolation, a lack of close friends and an absence of support. The demanding social requirements of ministry can leave little time or energy for building relationships outside church; these are of particular importance for single ministers who do not have ready emotional support from a partner.

In addition to this, the experience of competitiveness between local clergy and the confusing situation

of senior staff holding the dual role of manager and pastor can lead to reluctance to reach out for support until problems have reached crisis level.

Belonging is highly idiosyncratic and hence it is valuable to provide a variety of opportunities for quality, peer-to-peer interactions with other ministers alongside ensuring space for individuals to engage with their own relationship networks. These opportunities may be structured (*e.g.* training and development activities) or unstructured (*e.g.* social events). They may include face-to-face meet-ups (*e.g.* reflective practice groups) or virtual communication (*e.g.* WhatsApp groups or online huddles). Finally, they may be organised around role-specific communities (*e.g.* pioneers).

Organisational research highlights that support from senior staff can be more impactful than support from one's peers.[6] While developing such relationships may be more complex within the Church due to dual-role dynamics, the provision of supervision, mentors and a sense of connection with senior clergy

> Ministry can leave little time or energy for relationships outside church; these are of particular importance for single ministers.

is important.

Maslow's fourth motivational need, for **esteem**, comprises both the respect and recognition a person gets from others and their own sense of worth and competence. Churches and ministers may feel uncomfortable with the term esteem given its associations with prestige and status and how this may feel at odds with Jesus' model of servant leadership. However, Jesus' call to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12: 31) reminds us that esteem for oneself is entwined with esteem for others and both are at the heart of the gospel: our experience of our own esteem enables us to offer that meaningfully to others.

The emergence of events such as 'Thank Your Vicar Week' in October and International 'Buy a Priest a Pint' day on September 9th highlight the value and impact of simple, practical acts offering an expression of esteem. Focus Equip suggest a variety of ways to

appreciate one's local minister including praying for them, cooking a meal, offering to help rather than waiting to be asked, and writing a thank you note.[7] One vicar was bowled over when his Bishop sent Advent parcels to his children, thanking them for being so generous in sharing their father during the busy Christmas season.

At the apex of Maslow's triangle is the growth need for **self-actualisation**, which becomes active once the lower needs are sufficiently satisfied. Maslow defines this as when a person can do what they feel they are meant to do and be who they are meant to be.

In contrast to the previous levels, where motivation decreased as the basic or psychological need was met, the growth need of self-actualisation sees motivation to fulfil one's potential increase and become stronger over time. This stage was subsequently expanded to include meeting transcendent needs, where individuals are motivated by values beyond the personal self, including those of religious faith.[8]

Ministry offers a profound opportunity to engage meaningfully at this level, and reflective spaces such as spiritual direction, retreats and sabbaticals can create the time and space to connect with one's own vocational calling and purpose beyond the day-to-day pressures of church life.

Congregational collaboration

Collaboration with the overarching institutional and regional church groupings are key to developing holistic policies and establishing practical resources that address Maslow's distinct levels.

However, it is the collaboration with congregational support (whether through one church or a group of churches) that is one of the most vital factors for developing clergy flourishing.[9] The local congregational community provides the context where theory is put into practice. It is where a minister's personal and objective needs can be identified, and appropriate responses and resources can be established. Indeed, Lee and Iverson-Gilbert propose that clergy health cannot be understood without placing ministers within their congregational setting.[10] Where clergy are

poor at clarifying their needs or investing in personal self-care, a 'minister-sensitive' congregation or circuit – one that anticipates and deliberately resources their minister's needs – will protect such clergy from burn-out.[11]

In contrast, even the most resilient pastor will struggle to survive a toxic congregational context.[12] In such churches, members may oppose even small changes suggested by clergy, rapidly polarise issues along group lines, or use intimidation or abusive tactics to oppose clergy. Not only do such toxic churches negatively impact clergy mental health, but the traumatic experience is also carried with ministers to their next church family, impacting both the minister and subsequent congregations.[13]

The challenge for nurturing flourishing in ministry is that the explicit task of articulating policies and defining best practice does not actually determine a minister's experience of collaboration. Instead, the more powerful element of collaboration is the

implicit process; that is, how it is is enacted through the culture of the congregation. What actually happens within the community life of the church(es)? What are the unwritten shared beliefs, assumptions and informal rules that create the culture and status quo of church life? When the informal 'way we do things around here' does not reflect the explicit, formal policies or protocol then the former wins. It is what is actually done, not what is said is done, that really dictates the experience of congregational support and hence individual ministerial well-being.

> When the informal 'way we do things around here' does not reflect the explicit, formal policies or protocol then the former wins.

Togetherness

All groups, including congregations and circuits (groups of Methodist churches), exist because the dynamic force of **togetherness** – the desire to belong to something bigger than us – draws individ-
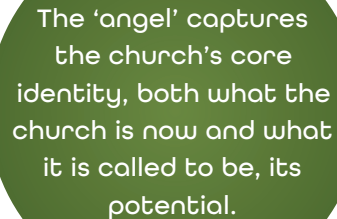
uals together and creates group cohesion and group culture. This is the strength of a church family, where individuals share a collective purpose and collaborative values. A positive experience of membership is shown through active participation in the life of a community that is creative and experimental.

In a church where there are high levels of collective differentiation, this positive force of togetherness exists alongside, and balances, the opposite force of individuality that we are exploring in these first two chapters. This balance is seen in the ability of a community to keep their doors open to those who hold different opinions and those who reflect diverse backgrounds. The community commits to finding a way through so that those views can be shared, discussed and considered, with everyone still knowing that they are welcomed and that they can belong.

However, it is also the case that this experience of togetherness can become a negative force that suppresses health and impedes well-being. The terms institutional racism and toxic culture have become familiar descriptions of some of the breakdowns of organisational functioning that can happen when the togetherness force dominates the force for individuality, creating a suppressive, homogenous atmostphere. We explore togetherness further in the chapters on candour and connection.

The 'angel' captures the church's core identity, both what the church is now and what it is called to be, its potential.

The angel of the church

The Church has never been exempt from such deterioration in functioning and Wink's analysis of John's letters to the churches in Asia, brought together in the book of Revelation, highlights how church culture can impact congregational functioning and well-being.[14] John addresses each letter to the 'angel of the church', which encapsulates our more recent concept of culture; it refers to how groups take on a corporate personality that

becomes greater than the sum of their members.

Thus, the angel of the church (whether one congregation or a group such as a circuit) is not something separate from the congregation(s) but rather represents it as a totality, a collective entity or Gestalt. The angel captures the church's core identity, both what the church is now (the good and bad alike) and what it is called to be, its potential. John writes to the angels of the seven churches to jolt them into the recognition that they are out of phase with the will of God, and to exhort them to encounter Christ again, in order to bring the churches back in line with their supreme vocation.

Wink proposes that **six forces** come together to create the personality or angel of every church. These forces include the style of the building, the economic and educational levels of the congregation, the leadership and power structures (formal and informal), the congregation's approach to conflict, their approach to worship (corporately and through personal spiritual growth) and finally the church's relationship to its community.

An outworking of this angelic force may be that a church that has maintained unity through homogeneity will find it difficult to welcome those who differ in lifestyle, education or social class. Alternatively, a church that has long expressed its devotion to God in the beauty and majesty of its traditional worship will unconsciously resist a new informal service where people attend in casual clothes carrying cups of coffee. Finally, a church culture that has been built on meeting the needs of its members will struggle to implement changes that put those self-interested needs aside to invest in the well-being of their minister.

In a church with a long history, the angel of the church will be well established with a homeostasis or steadiness about the personality that continues through generations. While the angel was originally created and formed by its members and the surrounding culture, it also operates in such a way that it recursively shapes, reinforces and holds the collective life of the congregation into its future. This is analogous to the way that the cells in a human body

are continually replaced without change to the body's form. Both church members and ministers become imbued into this collective essence, unconsciously adopting 'acceptable' patterns of behaviour and moving away from 'unacceptable' activities. In an attempt to create change, visible structures of the institution may be altered, staff members changed, or new programmes adopted but all too quickly, as predictable as the force of gravity, the pull of homeostasis draws practices back to the way they were before.

The angelic force will also implicitly direct the congregation's relationship to their minister in terms of how they are treated, as well as the pressures and expectations placed on them and their family. It will affect the allegiances they are invited into, relationships they are allowed to develop and where they fit in the informal power hierarchy. The church's angel also influences what changes to ministry patterns the church leadership is permitted to make, which strategic plans will be sabotaged and how such a challenge will express itself. Indeed, it influences how success is measured and who pays the price of perceived failure. These implicit processes are not offered in a church profile; however, such patterns are repetitive. Therefore, becoming familiar with how the church has treated previous clergy will offer valuable insight into how the church is likely to behave with future ministers.

Just as cultural forces shape individuals, so individuals are also unconsciously drawn towards particular churches or other workplaces due to an unconscious alignment with their angelic principles, even if those principles may ultimately bring stress and exhaustion. The depth of reflective work required to identify our unconscious patterns is difficult to attempt alone and therapy is one route to gaining this valuable insight. Therapy is often about enabling clients experiencing burnout and work-related stress to unpack the interaction between the challenges facing them in their work life and their personal history. Beginning to understand the factors that have influenced us in our past makes creating changes in our present significantly easier.

Flourishing Communities

Ultimately, a sense of meaningful cooperation between congregation and minister requires understanding and engaging with the church's angel so that the principles that are preached are also practiced.[15] It entails working together with the church leadership to recognise and explore the discrepancies between the culture of the church and the practices required to create an environment for flourishing.

This exploration of the culture of the church is not about dismantling the essential identity of the church but about teasing out which practices are rooted in time-bound habit and custom and could therefore be adjusted without undermining the church's fundamental angelic vision and calling. It means deliberately seeking to align what is said about healthy work practices with what is actually done. Without this process, ministers can find themselves expending excessive energy futilely attempting to improve their well-being. Missional theologian Woodward recognises that engaging with these unspoken, implicit emotional and cultural forces from within the congregation and church leadership is vital across the breadth of church life. Unseen culture is more important than strategy, vision or planning in determining a congregation's health, openness to change and missional conviction.[16]

Summary

In this chapter on collaboration we have explored how Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps delineate ways that a minister, their congregation(s), and other stakeholders can collaborate towards flourishing in different areas that support individuality, in balance with togetherness. Wink's analysis of the 'angel of the church' provides a way of thinking about the cultural identity of a congregation and how this, consciously and unconciously, influences the process of collaboration towards flourishing goals.

Case study - St Michael's Church

The rector of St Michael's Church has just handed in his notice having taken several months off work due to stress and burnout. The church wardens had also noticed a high staff turnover during his tenure. They are bemused about the rector's difficulties because St Michael's is a successful, affluent church with none of the problems facing other local churches. They invite a consultant to the church to help them employ a more capable vicar to stabilise the church.

Firstly, the consultant and church wardens begin to articulate the church's angel by drawing on the church's history. St Michael's is an imposing church building, built in a wealthy, highly educated area during the Victorian era by a self-made philanthropist with a strong Protestant work ethic. Nowadays, while the rector holds the formal power in the church, the informal power is held by several wealthy couples who work in high-pressure city jobs including banking and law. Church members are affluent but time poor and ministries are run by paid staff rather than volunteers.

The consultant invites the church wardens to draw on a systems perspective to consider the impact of these forces on staff well-being. They begin to consider how the city culture of billing for hours, payment by results and consumer lifestyle may be influencing the attitude to church staff. While the church fulfils its diocesan expectations around explicit policies covering working hours and well-being needs, the implicit culture is that staff prioritise church members and are flexible

Case study - St Michael's Church

and available whenever required. The church was imbued with this emphasis on self-sacrificial working right from its foundations, which may explain why it is such a powerful and unacknowledged force in spite of the negative impact on staff.

The church wardens begin to realise that it was not simply a failure of the rector that has led to high staff turnover; it was an interaction with the pressured expectations of their church culture of which they were also a part. In order to open up the church's thinking they decide to hold some congregational away days exploring the theology of work, creating space to discuss and explore the complexity of balancing a theology of works and that of grace. These away days inform further open conversations about what it means to flourish as a Christian and the role of the Church in embodying Jesus' approach to ministry. The church wardens decide to take steps to ensure church policies about staff working hours are put into practice, and they support staff practically in setting boundaries and clarifying expectations to church members. Over time, not only does this reduce staff turnout and increase morale, but congregation members also report making their own adjustments to enhance their work / life balance.

Application - building collaboration

Observe

- How does your church meet the needs of your ministers, other staff members and volunteers, as articulated through Maslow's model?
- Use Wink's six dimensions to think about the angel of your church. What collective assumptions and beliefs are held around factors relating to well-being and flourishing?
- How does your church's cultural approach to well-being impact its staff and congregation? It may be helpful to use the four self-care areas defined in the clarity chapter to frame your thinking.

Application - building collaboration

Evaluate

- How do you know how effective your church's approach is to supporting well-being within your staff team? How might you check whether your assumptions are accurate?
- Where is there a mismatch between your church's explicit messages about well-being and the implicit messages expressed through behaviours and assumptions?
- How do your personal messages around self-care interact with the views held by your church's angel? Are they a comfortable or uncomfortable fit? How does this impact you?

Application - building collaboration

Interrupt

- How might your church reflect theologically on Christian well-being? How might this be an opportunity to encourage diversity of thinking, and to consider the challenges as well as the opportunities?

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Notes

Flourishing needs

CANDOUR

Although many species of tree fight each other mercilessly above ground and even try to crowd out each other's root systems, the fungi that populate them seem to be intent on compromise.

Peter Wohlleben[1]

Within the mixed species forests of Central Europe, it is only the fungi who speak up for the value of diversity. Every species of tree present wants to dominate and own the space. They fight above ground to gain optimal access to sunlight and below ground to crowd out foreign root systems. For them, homogeneity is best. However, the fungi, whose underground, cottony web envelopes the entire forest root network, have other ideas. They recognise that diversity provides security for ancient forests; in a homogenous beech forest, a new pathogen could wipe out the entire forest ecosystem above and below ground. Nurturing a variety of distinct species within a forest offers greater protection for all, providing an environment to recover after attack. So fungi go against the pressure of the forest crowd; they encourage diversity, distributing resources between species and offering medical services to all.[2]

Establishing flourishing in ministry requires ministers to develop the candour of forest fungi. Candour brings into the presence of the group the minister's well-being needs, exploring how they can flourish together with, and within, the congregation or circuit. Even a minister-focused congregation that is intent

on supporting the health of their leadership cannot guess what support their clergy actually need. Therefore, ministers need to be able to articulate their distinct preferences and needs, which gain clarity through personal reflection. This articulation may include explaining what type of time away from work refreshes them best or what kind of working environment enables them to work most effectively and productively. Not only does this explicit communication offer the opportunity for a minister's needs to be accurately met, the process also impacts the whole community positively.

Psychological safety

Congregations can all too easily act like a dominant tree species where everyone appears to agree with each other but where contrary views are quietly, firmly

> Congregations can easily act like a dominant tree species where everyone agrees; contrary views are quietly, firmly suppressed.

side-lined and suppressed. A congregation's ability to allow an individual vicar to be innovative or unusual in the way they function in their role, while still allowing them to continue to be accepted within the church group, is the mark of a mature congregation. This ability to allow innovation also gives permission for the rest of the congregation to become more creative and take greater ownership of the part they play in the life of the church.

Psychological safety is a term from organisational psychology that defines this type of environment where individuals can speak candidly and still belong to the group.[3] It describes a positive relational climate which feels trustworthy, secure, predictable and clear in terms of behavioural consequences. Psychological safety allows individuals to be themselves, express their opinions, give and receive feedback, collaborate, take risks and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences for their self-image, status or career.[4] Google's Project Aristotle study recently found that psychological safety was the most powerful

predictor of team performance at Google.[5] It positively impacts engagement with work, group participation, creativity, commitment and satisfaction with one's work.[6]

Psychological safety also has profound benefits for the well-being of congregational life and church leadership.[7] Within congregations, a psychologically safe space is one where members feel free to share their opinions and be who they really are without fear of judgement. They also feel able to explore their faith and try new things without criticism. Such an environment has been found to enhance authentic interactions, encourage spiritual development and increase congregational participation.[8] This kind of safe space also increases vocational satisfaction and existential well-being within ministers. To this end, fostering a psychologically safe environment also increases vocational satisfaction and existential well-being in ministers. Such an atmosphere is particularly conducive to the candour required for ministers to explore and discuss their well-being needs. However, it is important to note that psychological safety is a dynamic, ever-shifting experience rather than a static situation. Psychological safety is an observational measure of the group's effectiveness at balancing the psychological seesaw of individuality and togetherness, where the force of individuality sits on one seat and the equal and opposite force of togetherness sits on the other.

We can understand the concept of psychological safety and this balancing act of individuality and togetherness by adding the metaphor of atmospheric pressure. The amount of pressure the team is under, along with their capacity to emotionally regulate that pressure, dramatically influence the felt sense of psychological safety and hence an individual's confidence in being candid.

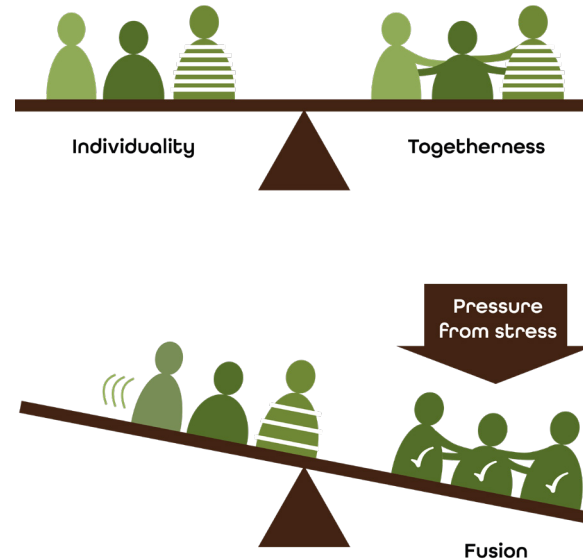

Individuality   Togetherness

Under low pressure, all groups, no matter what their level of collective functioning, find it easier to balance the seesaw. They can come together in a thoughtful and rational working alliance. When this happens, the individuality force of a group enables individuals to work together, each in their own way, beneficially and cooperatively, to solve problems affecting the whole group. Meanwhile, the collective togetherness force benefits the group by prompting its members to hear and respond sensitively to each others' individual needs, such as the candid well-being requests of team members.

However, when pressure rises within a group, the togetherness force intensifies and takes on negative features that can make individuality seem demanding and even threatening. The stressed and tense group loses its thoughtful ability to be creative, see strength in diversity and maintain an outward-looking vision. Instead, the seesaw tips towards fusion, the extreme and reactive version of togetherness. This creates the antithesis of the environment needed for candour.

Fusion

Fusion is a basic group survival instinct that seeks to bring everyone into agreement to temporarily 'bind' or contain the experience of collective tension

and obtain superficial calm. Under pressure, some individuals become dogmatic, pushy and dictatorial in order to bring people into line and create apparent agreement. Others veer in the other direction, becoming passive, unsure and accommodating to the others' desires. Although very different responses, both are predictable, reactive expressions of the unconscious group push for fusion, and both are qualities of a psychologically unsafe group.

Groups who operate at high levels of collective differentiation among their members (in other words where the forces of collective individuality, togetherness and emotional regulation are in balance and all well-developed) possess a greater capacity to rebalance the seesaw when the pressure rises, and hence to maintain psychological safety for a longer period. However, under sufficient pressure every group, family, team, church and institution ultimately closes rank and becomes fused.

Acute and chronic stressors in church settings

Changes in the pressure upon a group that prompt fusion stem from both acute stressors and chronic collective stress. Acute stressors are specific, issue-generated challenges where a discernible trigger prompts a spike of fusion stress reactions across the whole group; these return to a calm baseline once the stress is resolved. In writing about developing healthy congregations, Steinke refers to acute stressors within church life as distinct events.[9] These may include a new building programme, committee restructuring, a budget deficit or the departure or even sickness absence of a minister.[10]

In contrast, chronic stress is more subtle and pervasive. The existence of multiple acute stressors or ongoing pressures and challenges means that the group never experiences a return to baseline. Instead, the permanent stress response with its reactive fusion behaviours becomes normalised: fusion behaviours

become part and parcel of group life. We can see this in groups where decision-making resides in the hands of a few, key issues are ignored and not discussed, secrets flourish, or nothing ever gets done. Such relationship dynamics elicit tension and anxiety too, contribut-ing to the ongoing chronic anxiety of the system.
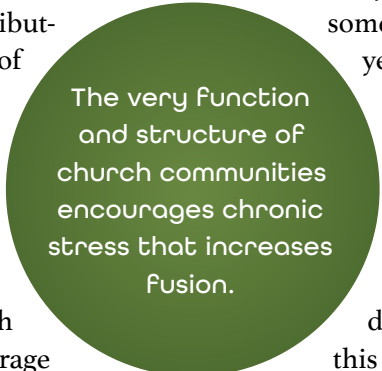
The challenge of developing can-dour within church settings is that the force of fusion is particularly intense here. While all organisations experi-ence an ebb and flow of acute pressure, the very function and structure of church communities and networks encourage chronic stress that increases fusion.[II]

Firstly, supporting individuals in crisis, facing life and death situations, and addressing matters of salvation, are all intense and stressful endeavours that naturally unbalance the individuality / togetherness seesaw.

Secondly, the dearth of formal structures within church life creates large grey areas not contained by clear protocol. This lack of clarity means that when tension emerges it can escalate rapidly; without clear processes to address and resolve issues, there is no way to calm the tension and restore balance.

Thirdly, the longevity of church communities – some of which have existed for hundreds of years – creates a natural tendency towards ossification in behaviour. Particular pat-terns of behaviour become part of the culture and 'angel' of the church (see the chapter on collaboration).

All these factors can lead to the togetherness force becoming the default position. When put together, this creates an environment where it is surprisingly difficult to keep connected to one's own well-being needs and can make it even harder to articulate them. The force of fusion pulls us along and unconsciously dictates how we think and act, what we say and how we say it. Individuals with higher levels of differentiation can withstand more intense fusion

> The very function and structure of church communities encourages chronic stress that increases fusion.

pressures, continuing calmly, clearly and without defensiveness to articulate their individual needs while simultaneously being confident enough to be open to and curious about differing views.

Fusion in the church

Within the church, fusion is often normalised as the vision of being one big, happy church family. Indeed, a fused church can often appear tight-knit and intimate because when one fits in with their expectations and doesn't put a foot out of line everyone is friendly and welcoming. However, the implication of the 'big, happy' vision is that a healthy church is one that is always in agreement and harmonious. While being of one mind is a state of affairs attributed to the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – it is not so accessible to mere mortals. The formation of the church is documented in the book of Acts and it only takes six chapters before the dreamy honeymoon period comes to an end with a very human argument about food distribution (Acts 6: 1).

As Christians, we continue to have different interpretations of theology, expressions of spirituality, preferences for worship and priorities for mission; in fact, we can have differences of opinion over almost anything. A healthy church is therefore one where it is safe enough to have honest discussions about real and important issues, to tolerate differences of opinion, and to continue to accept each other even when issues remain uncertain and there is no straightforward solution where everyone is a winner. The writer of Hebrews clearly recognises how difficult this is when he exhorts his readers to 'keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters' (Heb 13: 1, NLT). Relationship ruptures are to be expected, and forgiveness and reconciliation is as much an integral part of church family life as it is within family life.

> The reality is that a church that identifies itself as a big, happy family is generally a big, anxious, conflict-avoidant church family.

The reality is that a church that describes itself as a big, happy family is often a big, anxious, conflict-avoidant church family. Such a community cannot bear the tension produced by having the challenging conversations necessary to work through differences of opinion and address conflict. Instead, the church pushes unresolved issues underground and ignores them, whereupon they fester. Pastor Mark changes the day of the Wednesday church coffee morning so that he can attend it. No one makes any complaints but a few months later he discovers that the core group of members continues to meet on a Wednesday in a local coffee shop. Rev. Esme agrees with the Parochial Church Council that to create a more accessible worship space for family worship the altar rail should be removed. Everyone votes for the change but each Sunday she finds that someone has replaced it.

It can be tempting to focus on problem-solving the alternative coffee morning or reappearing altar rail, but this could be to miss the point. These behaviours
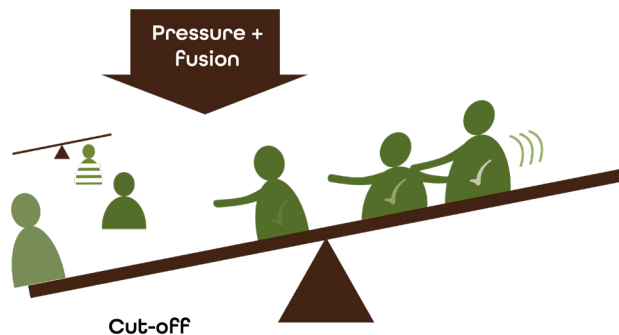
may well be symptoms of a wider anxiety held by the church as a whole. If so, a more fruitful approach would be to take a step back and invite conversations around overarching issues such as identity, loss and belonging, which often emerge when these kinds of changes to church ministries and worship practices occur.

Cut-off

While a highly fused, conflict-avoidant church can appear calm, such a stance is superficial, and the tension continues to bubble away under the surface.

The result is that intense aggression and conflict can emerge with force following apparently innocuous events. Relatively straightforward well-being requests such as booking in holidays or rearranging a church council meeting due to a clash with a training event can become highly controversial issues in the blink of an eye. Here, the problem is not the request in and of itself. The issue is that the minister has unknowingly ruptured the artificial calm and dormant anger has emerged. Such reactions can be so strong that they snowball, leading to splinter groups or families leaving the congregation.

This switch from fusion – the extremity of the togetherness force – to **cut-off** – the extremity of the opposite individuality force – is a repeated and predictable swing in a highly fused congregation. Unfortunately, where those in church leadership do not understand the pattern of these systemic forces, the impact can be devastating on both an individual's ministry and their well-being. Ministers may be blamed, scapegoated or even ousted for causing ruptures in church life that in reality they had little role in creating.

Ministers may also experience pain and vulnerability when a close ally and faithful supporter of their ministry suddenly and unexpectedly switches from fusion to cut-off and thereby becomes their chief prosecutor. The participants in my own recent research, which explored the impact of Bowen systems coaching on the well-being of Church of England vicars, reported that understanding these unconscious patterns of behaviour reduced ministers' experience of self-blame, guilt and anxiety in ministry.[12]

Minister's relationship history

The minister's own relationship history also impacts their capacity for candour and how they respond to their church's fusion behaviours: all families have their own specific fusion 'scripts': these are patterns of relationship interaction which are adopted within the family to manage and survive periods of acute or

chronic stress, including conflict. Some family members ratchet up the intensity of a challenging situation through focusing on others and stirring up blame and conflict. Others make complementary moves to accommodate or appease the disgruntled individual and smooth things over. Some people start to over-function, stepping in to problem-solve and resolve disputes that do not directly involve them, while others move in the other direction and begin to under-function, not enacting the responsibility of their role. Family members may draw uninvolved people into the issue by venting their frustrations to them or asking them to act as messenger. (This is termed triangling and is unpacked further in the chapter on connection.) Other individuals may react to pressure by withdrawing and distancing themselves, disappearing physically or emotionally.

Ministers will have favoured fusion scripts that stem from their childhood family interactions and these behaviours will be unconsiously acted out within their church family in times of stress. Whether the behaviour is accommodating, blaming, over-functioning or withdrawing, when a trigger behaviour occurs within the minister's congregational relationships, this habit will naturally reveal itself. When the automatic behaviour is to accommodate to others and avoid being candid, it will be even harder for ministers to clarify their well-being needs to a church or circuit who may disagree.

Tom once acted as an over-functioning mediator resolving disagreements between his parents in childhood. He now finds himself comfortable negotiating and calming disagreements between members of his church but struggles to speak up and define his own well-being needs when they are at odds with others. Lucy, who survived growing up in a blaming, financially pressured household by withdrawing to the bedroom to watch TV, experiences questioning from congregants about her well-being practices as accusatory, and she automatically distances and withdraws to cope.

While automatically recreating childhood patterns of behaviour within ministry feels natural and comfortable, it ultimately creates its own stress. The

interaction between minister and congregation(s) highlights the complex, dynamic nature of flourishing in ministry where we can simultaneously shape and be shaped by our interactions with others. Congregational fusion expectations may suppress a minister's ability to articulate their personal well-being needs but concurrently, clergy engagement with their congregation(s) shapes the group response. Lucy's protective act of distancing under pressure, for example, creates anxiety within the group: her withdrawal behaviour fosters doubt and uncertainty in the congregation, which then heightens the likelihood that the congregation will start adopting the intrusive questioning behaviours she is actively trying to avoid.

If this co-created interplay of behaviours – Lucy's withdrawal and the congregation's reciprocal pursuit – is not seen for what it is, a predictable and natural, unconscious attempt to rebalance the individuality/togetherness seesaw, then it starts to take on a life of its own. Either side's behaviour can become focused on as the problem and the target of further complaints. Lucy could be accused of being distant and remote, not available for pastoral care. Congregation members might be accused of bullying. The original issue – how Lucy might engage in collaborative and calm conversations with the congregation about her well-being practices – gets completely lost in the fray.

Summary

In this chapter we have examined the importance of candour for shifting the issue of flourishing in ministry from a clarity of awareness held individually by the minister to an engaged dialogue with the church community. After exploring the importance of an atmosphere of psychological safety to encourage candour, we introduced the psychological concept of fusion and how it can suppress psychological safety by unbalancing the individuality/togetherness forces. We also looked at how our capacity for candour is influenced by our relationship history and co-created relationship interactions.

Case study - John

John has just started as vicar at a small, intimate, fellowship church in the country. Filled with members who have long-standing friendships, he was drawn towards the church because of their tight commitment to each other. John has a young family with children at school; therefore, prior to his arrival, he decided to take Saturday as his day off. He would miss the weekly prayer meeting that the last vicar always attended but John was confident the parishioners would understand; many of them were grandparents themselves.

Over the ensuing months, John never had any direct complaints about his Saturday day off, but he heard grumblings and received negative comparisons to the previous beloved vicar. Key events always seemed to occur on Saturdays. John felt increasingly guilty and selfish about prioritising his needs and abandoning the community. His stress increased as he felt torn between his commitment to his family and his desire to be meaningfully present with the local community.

Wishing for some guidance over whether to change his day off, John started to attend counselling. As he explored the relationship dynamics within the church, he realised that he grew up in a family that behaved in a very similar way. Conflict was avoided at all costs, disagreements were never addressed directly, and controversial topics were studiously avoided. As the eldest son, his role was to smooth over misunderstandings and calm everyone down. Belonging meant being very flexible

Case study - John

and prioritising other people's needs. He realised he was relating to the older ladies in the church like he would his mother: he was frightened of the consequences of upsetting them.

This realisation gave him greater flexibility in his thinking. He recognised that he wasn't a child fearful of his mother's rebuke, but an adult, permitted to have his own needs and able to tolerate the tension of disagreement. He felt it was appropriate to hold to his original, thoughtfully established decision to have Saturday as his day off. He reminded himself of the clarity of his decision based on his understanding of fatherhood and marriage values that he was not willing to compromise.

Keeping relaxed and calm, he invited one-on-one conversations with anyone who was concerned with the issue. He presented his thinking, decisions and values to them kindly, did not shy away from explicitly articulating the differences between himself and them, and stayed warmly empathic about the difficulty of change. Over time, the congregation adjusted to the new reality and, when the next vicar arrived, they took it for granted that they would take Saturdays off.

Application - building candour

Observe

- What are the markers of psychological safety in your community? Which areas of church life are the most safe and which are unsafe?

- How is fusion expressed within your church community? If you are not sure, think about times of disagreement or stress; this is when behaviours and patterns emerge most strongly.

- How do you respond to your church's togetherness force?

Application - building candour

Evaluate

- What would be the signs within your church of an increase in psychological safety?
- Who are the people within the church you find it most difficult to be candid to? What makes it difficult and how does that impact your relationship with them?
- How did your family deal with disagreement and conflict when you were growing up? What role did you play? How are you playing that out in the life of the church?

Application - building candour

Interrupt

- How might you facilitate opportunities to enhance psychological safety in the church?
- What would it look like for you to do something different from your usual behaviours under pressure? If in doubt, try doing the opposite of what you usually do.

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Notes

CONNECTION

When you know that trees experience pain and have memories and that tree parents live together with their children, then you can no longer just chop them down and disrupt their lives with larger machines.

Peter Wohlleben[1]

In the final chapter of *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben exhorts us to consider changing our relationship to trees; he calls on us to extend to trees the same rights that we now habitually proffer to animals, to shift from treating trees as objects to considering them sentient living beings. While he recognises that this shift is quite a stretch, he argues that there is much to gain from working in collaboration with trees, aligning with their strengths rather than subduing them to fit into our practices. A forest management approach that permits natural patterns of growth and that leaves underground social interconnections unharmed facilitates the production of stronger, more disease-resistant trees. A forestry rhythm that harvests struggling trees rather than the healthiest trees gives mother trees longer lives, allowing them to do the job of providing nutrients and sugar to younger trees which would otherwise fall to foresters. Wohlleben emphasises that recognising trees as living entities will enhance our lives as well as the lives of trees.[2]

In a similar way, one of the most important things a congregation can offer to their clergy is to treat them like a real person rather than an object: the title, attire, living arrangements and church service proto-

col utilised within the Church implicitly invites such objectification. Such elements emphasise a pastoral relationship that is with the sanctified role of the minister rather than with a flesh-and-blood human. While this detached experience is not unique to the clerical profession, the immersive nature of ministry, and the sense of it being lifelong and open-all-hours, makes it harder for people to remember that there is an individual human being in the role.

In this chapter we explore the importance and nature of relational connection for togetherness. Developing relational connections for flourishing in ministry not only involves the availability of distinct types of supportive social relationships but also references the quality of those relationships. Churches with higher levels of collective differentiation nurture minister well-being because they create opportunities for real and authentic encounters.

Social relationships

The pivotal importance of connection for well-being cannot be over-emphasised. Not only is connection a core element of flourishing but the key factors that consistently emerge as influencing clergy well-being are also relational. These factors include the quality of relationships with members of one's congregation(s), with other pastors, with family and friends, with leadership, and with one's partner (where relevant).[3]

The social connection we need stems from one-to-one relationships and the positive experience of the group. Social relationships are valuable because they provide practical, problem-solving support, whether that be through guidance (such as feedback from senior staff and advice from one's peers), or practical help and support. For example, your neighbour might buy your shopping when you are ill.

Social relationships are also vital because they offer comfort, security, pleasure and a sense of identity. Key elements of relationships include having one's competence, skills and values explicitly recognised whether through affirmation, praise, or gifts; receiving

emotional support from close relationships so that you feel heard, understood and cared for; experiencing community support through belonging to a group with shared interests; and finally, having the reciprocal opportunity to show support and offer care to others.

The value of connection is rooted in our fundamental human need to engage authentically with others. **Authenticity** is the extent to which a person can express thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are consistent with their true or 'core' self.

What theologian Buber terms an *I-Thou* relationship articulates the type of open, vulnerable encounter that permits authenticity.[4] Such an engagement is characterised by the deliberate presence two people bring when they truly 'show up' for one another. At that moment, the individuality/togetherness forces are in balance; both individuals are able to be unique and separate while continuing to relate. There is mutual, honest recognition of the other in both their strengths and weaknesses and they are able to talk about what is really going on, holding the tension of remaining present in those difficult conversations.

In contrast, Buber's *I-It* relationship is one where the other person is experienced as an object to be influenced or used and the relationship acts as a means to an end. In this scenario, while *I-It* relationships can be coherent, ordered and even efficient, they are depersonalising; over time they feel increasingly alienating. A social connection may be practically provided but its intrinsic value is also dependent on the quality of relationship through which it is received, the *I-Thou* in contrast to the *I-It* encounter.

> Those who minister consistently report an absence of connection with others and a deep loneliness.

Loneliness

At the centre of the Christian faith is the invitation to be fully known, loved, forgiven and accepted. The

hope for this connection is captured in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: 'Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known' (1 Cor 13: 12 NIV).

At its heart, ministry is therefore a connected vocation. The priestly role embodies this invitation, and the desire for meaningful connection with others is what draws many to ministry. Those who are ordained continue to see pastoral care as one of the most satisfying and rewarding parts of their vocation.[5] Indeed, ministers are invited into an almost unique position within family life. They officiate at key life events and, if they remain in the same position, may relate to individuals and even several generations of families over many years.

In addition to offering support to others, ministers themselves have been found to have higher levels of received support than the general population; in other words, they are often able to discuss important personal matters with a greater number of people than the norm.[6]

However, this quantified level of social connectedness does not correlate with ministers' perceived experiences: instead, high numbers of those who minister (and their partners, where relevant) consistently report an absence of close connection with others and a deep **loneliness**.[7] Barnes terms this experience "crowded loneliness"; it refers to having near constant contact with people and yet experiencing intense isolation.[8] Such isolation can ultimately act as a strong motivator for leaving ministry.[9]

> High numbers of both clergy and their partners report significant loneliness and a lack of close friends.

Transference

The role of the minister (like any leadership role) lends itself to transference, a concept from psychology that can help explain the juxtaposition of crowded loneliness within ministry and the challenge to authentic connections that *I-It* interactions bring. **Transference** is the unconscious element of our
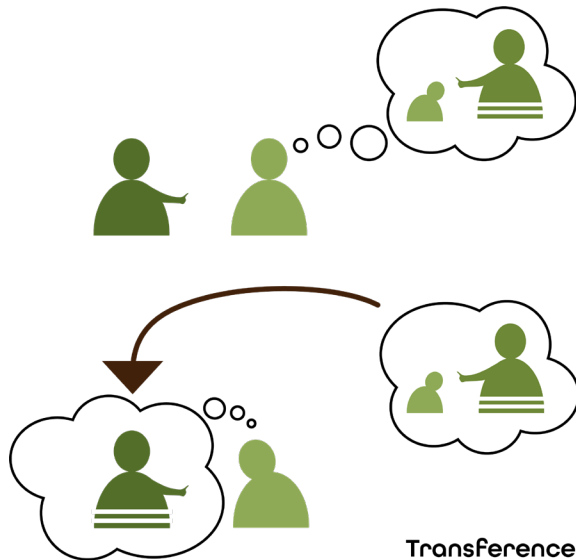
Transference

relationship interactions that is informed by reference to our experience of significant relationships in our early years. We transfer the feelings and attitudes we had towards past figures in our lives onto people in the present. Without realising it, we treat them as if they are a replication of the original individual.[10] A relationship then develops which reflects the dynamic of the early years' relationship. Like actors performing the script of a familiar play, the transference dynamic unconsciously defines and restricts the experience of both parties in the present moment. Our ability to act and react authentically is suppressed in favour of a patterned performance.

A congregation's relationship to their minister is often dominated by transference 'invitations' which reach out and implicitly pressurise ministers to conform to someone else's version of them. Transference can occur in any relationship but tends to occur more frequently and most intensely in relationships with authority figures, and particularly with ministers. Langmead explains that clergy are "high transference liabilities" not only because they are in positions of authority, but because they also symbolise loving parents.[11]

If Jake's parents were kind and loving, he will likely experience his minister, Sam, as kind and loving, whereas if Jake's parents were harsh and demanding,

he might experience Sam, who is actually firm yet loving, as harsh and demanding when she sets boundaries around her availability. Either script will translate into an array of non-verbal and verbal communication from Jake to Sam. In the latter case, Jake might reduce or avoid eye contact and favour indirect communication such as text or email, rather than direct conversations.

Without awareness of the role of transference in Jake's communication, Sam is likely to be reciprocally drawn into the interaction, responding as if Jake's treatment of her as harsh and demanding correlates with who Sam actually is. It is possible that Jake's behaviour will also provoke Sam's own countertransference, where Jake starts to represent Sam's own father who withdrew when angry and disappointed. This might prompt Sam to focus too much on Jake in an attempt to win him back, and thus diminish her presence in other pastoral care situations.

Over time, the scripted play becomes the engrained pattern of communication between them. Sam may even start acting in ways that feel uncomfortable and incoherent with her own sense of self and identity, but unless she gains insight into the unconscious dynamic being played out, she is likely to struggle to extricate herself from the inauthentic dynamic.

As adults, we are drawn to take up roles in our professional life that enable us to act out the scripted parts we adopted in our early years. For ministers this may mean that transference invitations extended to them by church members can feel recognisably comfortable. When the behaviour also connects with our sense of identity and who we are, then fulfilling such scripts can be particularly rewarding and bolster our self-esteem.[12] Indeed, our sense of the world can be so shaped by these childhood roles that it is hard to see another way to live, and it is likely that ministers will unwittingly act in ways that invite particular types of transference from others.

However, over time ministers, with their multitude of pastoral relationships, can find themselves swamped and exhausted by the pressure to fulfil other people's expectations. Accepting transference invitations and playing scripted roles can thus be a case of

short-term gain, long-term pain as ultimately these inauthentic interactions create stress and increase the risk of burnout.

In addition, the longer such transference enactments continue, the more fixed and ossified the scripted interactions become. This lack of flexibility is constricting and can result in a loss of connection with one's own true self. In order to tolerate this situation, ministers can find themselves distancing and retreating from others, physically or emotionally. This is recognised in burnout research as representing the enactment of the second element of burnout: **cynicism** (which follows exhaustion and occurs alongside a sense of inefficacy).[13]

A lack of understanding about the role of transference within ministry relationships can create situations of boundary violation causing irreparable harm to the minister, their family and the congregation. Olsen writes about the impact of transference on establishing healthy boundaries in ministry; he highlights how seductive the idealising transference script

can be.[14] Stemming from the admiration of parents as all-powerful caregivers, this transference script presents itself as admiration, praise and adoration of the minister.

If a minister is feeling vulnerable through work pressures, and experiencing less fanciful idealisation from their family (who are more likely to offer reminders of their fallibility), then the validation of an admiring and appreciative church member can flatter and bolster one's self-esteem, becoming dangerously seductive.

Olsen highlights the fact that the pressure to accept these patterned relationships is such that it can take significant self-awareness both to spot the invitation and to avoid automatically taking up the reciprocal part. Indeed, Olsen suggests that "half the work of ministry" is managing the transference.[15]

> If a minister is feeling vulnerable, then the validation of an admiring church member can become dangerously seductive.

Relationship triangles

When considering the quality of connection for well-being together, the impact of **relationship triangles** is as important as the influence of transference. Bowen extends the concept of the two-person transference relationship to explore how relational scripts play out in the interaction of three individuals, which he termed a **triangle**.[16]

Bowen observes that two-person relationships are inherently unstable. It doesn't take long before tension builds within the relationship and the automatic response is to reach out and include a third. The third person forms the apex of the triangle and stabilises the base-pair relationship. So predictable is this process that Bowen systems views triangles as the smallest stable building block of relationships. Indeed, all relationship connections can be understood and mapped as a series of interlocking triangles.

Jane has been running an Alpha course with Pete but he has made a couple of comments about faith that have made her uncomfortable. She decides to go and speak to her Pastor, Mike, about her concerns with Pete. In this scenario, Jane and Pete are the base-pair and Jane brings Mike in as the apex of the triangle.

Cobbin distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy triangles as she writes about leadership resilience in conflict.[17] A minister's ability to flourish through connection is significantly impacted by their capacity to create healthy triangles in pastoral relationships.

When Mike is brought into the relationship between Jane and Pete to form a triangle, he has the opportunity to form either a healthy or an unhealthy triangle. A healthy triangle is one where the apex stabilises the base pair without taking responsibility for them. Such triangles are constructive and positive, and do not pass on anxiety or responsibility to another. Creating a healthy triangle might look like Mike empowering Jane to take responsibility to resolve the rupture in her relationship with Pete. He might encourage her to speak directly to Pete, to be curious about his experience and to be authentic in her own response. By believing in her capacity to solve

Healthy triangle   Unhealthy triangle
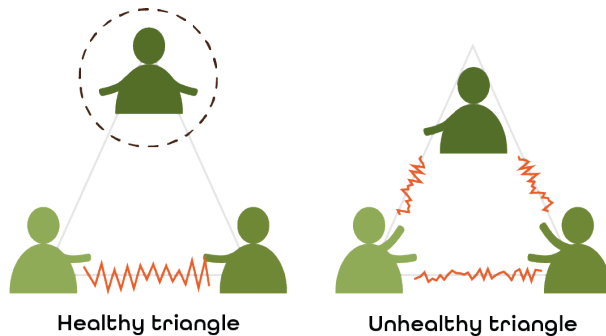
the problem and affirmative towards both parties, he is being helpful and supportive but not taking over.

In contrast, unhealthy triangles are not constructive or positive. The third person may be positioned as ally, confidant, messenger or problem solver. Whatever explicit role they are handed, and however valuable, important or urgent it sounds, the fundamental implicit purpose of the invitation is to diffuse the anxiety within the base-pair relationship. Once the third person accepts the invitation to action rather than observation the pressure and tension is redirected to them and the tension between the original base pair is diffused.

If Pastor Mike had jumped in to resolve the issue between Jane and Pete – perhaps offering to speak to Pete on Jane's behalf or siding with her to commiserate over how awkward Pete is – he would have created an unhealthy triangle. While taking such a position may appear pastoral and compassionate, it does no favour to anyone in the triangle.

Not only does the unhealthy triangle create a disconnect and distance in Mike's relationship with Pete going forward (together with an unreal pseudo-closeness to Jane) but also, any interventions Mike attempts will be futile because ultimately only Pete and Jane can repair their relationship rupture. Jumping in to create an unhealthy triangle prevents people maturing in their ability to calm and contain their own emotions and take responsibility for addressing their own relationship issues.

Ministers who find themselves located at the apex of a multitude of pastoral triangles significantly intensify the stress of their role.[18] With the acceptance

of every triangled apex role comes the transfer of the stress originally located in the base-pair relationship. At this point it is easy for a minister's stress to become chronic because there is no way for them to successfully resolve the original issue: it is a brutal combination of responsibility and powerlessness.

For Mike, encumbered by a whole variety of pastoral concerns, either the stress will build up internally, weighing him down, or he will create his own base-pair in a second, interlocking triangle, and pass the anxiety on. For example, he might voice concerns about Pete's suitability for volunteering on the Alpha course to the church warden or ask the children's worker's spouse to pass a message on rather than speaking to him directly. Indeed, this might also ratchet up the anxiety as the church warden starts to reconsider all of Pete's roles in the church.

In my position as vicar's wife, I frequently found myself at the apex of this second triangle. As an extrovert, my husband liked to talk aloud to process the pastoral challenges he was facing. Not knowing anything about triangles, I would automatically react to this communication and create an unhealthy triangle. Rather than taking a step back, listening and trusting in his capacity to resolve the issue in his way and in his time, I would become entangled with the process. I would catch the anxiety, take sides and adopt my favourite anxiety-binding technique, starting to over-function by trying to problem-solve issues that weren't mine to solve. I noticed that while I would see my husband resolve and reconcile with the 'awkward parishioner', I would be left holding the stress of the relationship, often remaining distant from the individual and storing up resentment and bitterness long into the future.

Summary

In this chapter we have explored the importance of social connection for flourishing in ministry and the value of fostering Buber's I-Thou connections, whereby ministers are treated as real individuals with human needs. Concepts such as transference and triangles can help give language and shape to the challenges facing the development of these authentic connections as well as offering ministers insight into the relational stressors of ministry.

Case study - Ivy

Ivy joins a Church of England congregation as curate-in-training. It is her second career: Ivy has previously worked at a high level in management but left when she became disillusioned and burnt out. Joe, one of the church wardens, tells Ivy that he is delighted that she's arrived because the vicar, Tamara, is terrible with church administration and many of the systems have been neglected to the detriment of the church. Ivy is disappointed with the vicar but delighted to bring her expertise to the new post. Many issues appear relatively easy to fix and she gets stuck in, pleased to create positive change so quickly. Her impact is noticed and admired by members of the congregation, including Joe, and this makes Ivy feel positive and buoyant.

However, over time Ivy notices that more and more jobs seem to be coming her way and people automatically look to her to resolve problems. Ivy finds herself feeling weighed down, overwhelmed and increasingly irritated with her incumbent. She starts to resent Tamara and feels that she is not pulling her weight. Ivy lets off steam by complaining to the church warden, who has become a firm ally. The relationship between Ivy and her training incumbent starts to deteriorate and she begins to think about leaving.

Ivy's spiritual director offers her an outsider perspective on the breakdown in relationship with her training incumbent. He invites her to step away from the content of the irritation about

Case study - Ivy

administrative responsibilities to look at the process of relationship interactions. Ivy identifies that her relationship with Tamara had been mediated through Joe. Joe's personal issues with Tamara had caused him to 'triangle' Ivy into the relationship. Ivy had accepted unquestioningly his comments about Tamara and that negatively impacted how she perceived Tamara right from the start: she had never really got to know her directly. Ivy also realises that she had automatically accepted Joe's invitation into an idealising transference relationship. While being the problem-solving super-hero was familiar and comfortable, it was also her Achilles heel and the reason she got burnt out in her previous profession.

Ivy takes the opportunity to review her role and relationships at church. She refocuses on the original purpose of her curacy role: to support the vicar and learn practical skills for ministry. She consciously invests in building a direct, one-to-one, real and honest relationship with Tamara and develops a no-triangle covenant on staff, so conversations are always direct and in person. Ivy also starts to pop the bubble of idealisation that had built up with Joe, playfully commenting that her skills in administration do not automatically translate into her being a skilful vicar. Over time she notices an increase in her energy levels, her enjoyment of the role grows, and she feels more flexibility in developing her vocation.

Application - building connection

Observe

- What type of support in building connections does your church emphasise and what does it do less well? What about the wider denominational support structure?

- What scripts did you develop in your relationship with your family? How do they inform the relationships you build in your ministry now? How do these influence the energy and resilience you currently feel?

- How are triangles used within your church community? What role does gossip play in the life of the church? How are people talked about? What is the impact on you when you are drawn into triangles?

Application - building connection

Evaluate

- How well does the support you receive within your ministerial role and within your personal life fit with your preferred types of support?
- Which relationships allow you to be authentic? How much energy do you invest in those relationships in contrast to role-based ministry relationships which restrict your authenticity?
- How would you describe the quality of communication between you and church members and those who play a management role? How far away is this from your ideal? What would be a step towards your ideal?

Application - building connection

Interrupt

- When you find yourself reacting strongly and feeling uncomfortable, how might you take a step back, remember transference and get curious about why?
- How might you practice developing healthy triangles in your pastoral care relationships?
- What changes would you need to put into place to enable you to invest in building authentic relationships with individuals outside your church community?
- What protocols might enhance the quality of communication within the church?

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Notes

Flourishing needs **CALM**

A tree that makes its bark primarily out of defensive compounds is a tree that is constantly on the alert. [Such trees] rush through life, live beyond their means, and eventually wear themselves out.

Peter Wohlleben[1]

The silver birch is a pioneer tree. Growing up in wide, open spaces without any near neighbours for support, the birch has to be self-reliant. This capacity includes protecting itself from the elements. To this end, its silver white bark is filled with botulin, a defensive compound that reflects sunlight and shields the trunk from dangerous sunscald. While valuable, silver birches produce this defensive armouring at an impulsive and excessive, breakneck speed and adopting this state of reactive alert across its lifespan has a cost. The birch rushes through life, wildly overtaxing its resources and ultimately finds itself lacking the energy to ensure its longevity. Burnt out, its growth stalls and once the slower-growing but more strategic beeches and maples overtake it, the birch's death warrant is sealed.

Flourishing in ministry requires learning to embrace the calm, steady response of the beech tree rather than automatically adopting the reactivity of the silver birch when under pressure. Like the silver birch, we instinctively become reactive in stressful situations: we abandon our thoughtful, strategic and principle-focused thinking in favour of the rapid deployment of defensive activities that calm our immediate feelings

of anxiety and tension. When life is peaceful, it is relatively easy to keep to those clarity-based decisions and prioritise well-being activities that offer enduring benefits. However, as immediate challenges pile up, such behaviours can rapidly get shelved. Our survival instinct kicks in and we revert back to well-rehearsed crisis-management activities. Long-term flourishing therefore relies on nurturing a high-quality regulatory response to increasing levels of stress. In other words, it depends on developing the skills to create calm in spite of the pressures of external circumstance.

Areas of the brain

The connections between three key areas within the brain determine whether we can embrace calm or find ourselves rushing into reactivity under pressure. The three areas are the almond-shaped **amygdala**, tucked into the centre of the brain; the **prefrontal cortex**, which sits at the front of the brain just behind
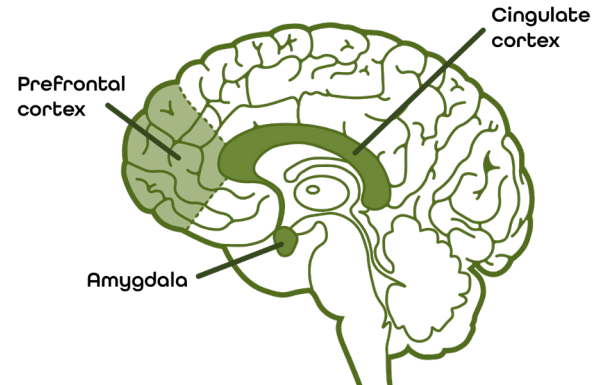
Sketch of the human brain

the forehead; and the arch-shaped **cingulate cortex** that lies in between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex.

The main purpose of the amygdala is to react fast to threat; trauma expert van der Kolk aptly calls it the brain's smoke alarm.[2] It is a swift-action threat-detection system whose role is rapidly to meet the body's energy demands so it can address all manner of threats, challenges and opportunities.

In contrast, van der Kolk terms the prefrontal cortex the watchtower. Cognitively orientated, it weighs

up the big picture to thoughtfully guide our decision-making and functioning. We use our prefrontal cortex to weigh up options and make rational choices. Finally, our cingulate cortex is our self-regulation centre. It acts as the interface between emotion, sensation and action, enabling us to process our feelings, regulate emotionally charged thoughts, work through conflicting emotions and calm emotional states.

Working together, these three brain areas enable us to respond rather than react to threat or challenge. They do this by forming a coherent response unit which detects and processes threat resulting in an appropriate response that balances thoughtfulness and emotion. During periods of relative calm, these three brain areas are already working together. When there is a prompting event, the connections running from the prefrontal cortex and the cingulate cortex can 'down-regulate' (calm) the automatic reactivity of the amygdala.

However, when we feel overwhelmed, faced with significant threat or heightened pressure, the reactive amygdala hijacks our decision-making process. It suppresses the functioning of the two cortical areas so they are not able to moderate the fear response. The result is the near instantaneous fight, flight or freeze reactions we recognise as our adrenaline-fuelled stress response.

The aggressive reactivity of the amygdala is an asset during acute stress when immediate reactions are required. When a stressful event triggers the amygdala, it releases a cascade of stress hormones that produce well-orchestrated physiological changes. The initial flood of adrenaline is followed by a surge of cortisol, providing the energy and motivation for immediate action: the heart starts to pound, breathing quickens and muscles tense.

The response is so fast that it occurs before the visual centres have even had a chance to fully process what is happening. This almost instantaneous response is ideal for crisis-generated and time-limited reactions to what is happening, such as the survival scenarios that ancient, cave-dwelling humans may have faced. In the modern day, it may mean jumping out of the path of an oncoming car or making a quick

decision in an emergency. Once the threat is over, these stress systems return to baseline levels.

During periods of long-term, chronic pressure, the amygdala still deploys the same rapid reaction mechanism, and the ensuing overproduction of hormones heightens the risk of developing symptoms of stress. The 'smoke alarm' amygdala is unable to distinguish between acute and chronic pressures, just as a smoke alarm will sound for both frequently burnt toast and a kitchen fire. The same intense arousal physiology occurs in both situations.

Chronic stress results from acute stressors – for example, the prolonged illness of a family member or relentless work pressures – continuing unabated or multiplying. Chronic stress can also be due to anticipatory anxiety, a pre-emptive reaction to what might happen – for example, the fear of the recurrence of an illness or the threat of redundancy – rather than what

is happening.

Under chronic stress, cortisol levels remain elevated producing the recognisable symptoms of stress and anxiety. Eventually the adrenal glands become fatigued and cortisol production drops to abnormally low levels resulting in the symptoms of burnout, fatigue and trauma.

When the amygdala is running the show, our reactions to issues are driven by a desire to eliminate the adrenaline-fuelled anxiety we are feeling, preventing us from engaging in any thoughtful attempt to address the root cause of the problem. In other words, any considered, solution-focused response to complex situations of chronic pressure gets side-tracked by our instinctive emotional reaction.

With the activity of the prefrontal cortex and cingulate cortex suppressed, the capacity to process our feelings mindfully and to problem-solve is lost. Instead, the desire to reduce and bind our tension and anxiety starts to compulsively drive our behaviours.

> When the amygdala is running the show, any thoughtful response gets side-tracked by our instinctive emotional reaction.

The window of tolerance

Well-developed connections between these brain areas increases what Siegel terms a **window of tolerance**. The window of tolerance encapsulates our optimal zone of arousal where we can manage and thrive in everyday life, sailing on a river of well-being, as it were.[3] The larger the window, the greater the intensity of stress that can be soothed, processed and responded to before the amygdala hijacks functioning.[4]

Within the window, we are in a place of internal calm: information can be processed and integrated as we experience the ebb and flow of life, its joys and challenges. We can regulate ourselves and respond to all that comes our way without getting thrown off-course. There is self-awareness of one's shifting emotional experiencing, a capacity to process this emotion and self-soothe as well as engage with these intuitive emotions in a way that offers beneficial insight. Alongside this, there is sufficient connection with the prefrontal cortex to harness the wisdom of cognitively driven rational thoughtfulness to guide decision-making. Deliberately working on expanding our window of tolerance enables us to maintain internal calm for longer during periods of pressure.

Bowen systems theory extends our understanding of stress management by proposing that the majority of chronic stress is rooted in relationship interactions. Instead of viewing anxiety as purely a personal experience stemming from an individual's interpretation of events, Bowen emphasises chronic anxiety as a collective experience and a consequence of various types of social interactions. Indeed, so fundamental is this experience that Bowen terms chronic anxiety the driving force of life and a natural product in the process of living.[5] For example, the fear of letting people down often lies behind the stressful experience of unremitting work pressures, and the experience of caring for a family member with a prolonged illness can affect our sense of self in relationship, so we begin to simply function as a caregiver to another, losing contact with our own need to receive care.

Emotional contagion, engaged calm

One of the most powerful routes by which relational interactions create, increase and pass on stress is through **emotional contagion**. We may like to think that some people are more emotional than others; however, in his study of the evolution of empathy, de Waal proposes that we all start life from a place of emotional contagion, where our emotional system intuitively matches the reactivity and state of the other's emotional system.[6] He proposes that the power of this contagion is that it 'syncs' people together – think, for example, of the emotional pull of a mother to her baby's cry – creating a formidable bond for survival.

However, as we grow up and are less functionally dependent upon others for our survival, the force of emotional contagion can result in a loss of distinct identity. Our emotions can become determined by the other; for example, an irritated partner might ruin our happy mood or a panicking family may pull us into the emotional turmoil. The fusion scripts discussed in the chapter on candour are the classic methods of passing on stress and anxiety to another; these include blame, conflict, and both over- and under-functioning together with the use of triangles (see the chapter on connection). All these instinctive reactions serve to contain, discharge or displace anxiety rather than address the threat that originally provoked it.[7]

Stress and anxiety rooted in relationship dynamics cannot be soothed simply by our capacity for internal calm; we also need to be able to go one step further and establish **engaged calm**. Engaged calm is the capacity to extend one's internal calm beyond oneself and into one's relationships. It refers to the ability to relate to others from a place of calm rather than as a route to expel personal anxiety. It involves remaining engaged while not accepting a 'contagion invitation' to catch someone else's anxiety from them.

I had a client who was a yoga teacher and mindfulness expert. She could reach high levels of internal calm and peace when alone but sought therapy because she didn't understand why her internal calm instantly evaporated when she rejoined her

overwrought family or tense work team. Through the process of therapy, she began to recognise just how sensitive she was to other people's emotions and how much they unconsciously dictated her own thoughts, feelings and behaviours and the way she related to others. Coaching to enhance her differentiation enabled her to create a partially permeable emotional second skin, helping her clarify where her responses began and others' ended, and taking responsibility for managing her own emotions and allowing others to process their own. Working on developing her capacity to create engaged calm significantly reduced her symptoms of anxiety and ended her panic attacks.

An individual with a high level of differentiation is able to combine internal calm and engaged calm at times of tension and pressure. A differentiated response to an emotionally laden scenario is one where an individual has fostered internal calm by processing their felt emotions (connecting the amygdala to the cingulate cortex) and creating a thoughtful, measured

> An individual with a high level of differentiation is able to combine internal calm and engaged calm at times of tension and pressure.

and appropriate response (by activating their prefrontal cortex).

In addition, they have nurtured engaged calm by both showing empathy to the other and also steadily and explicitly articulating and acting on their own internally chosen decisions.

John's narrative about Jesus's response to Lazarus' illness reveals this differentiated combination of internal and engaged calm (John 11). When Jesus hears about the illness of Lazarus, whom he loved, he is able to maintain his internal calm to respond thoughtfully in deciding his course of action, which is to remain where he is for two days and teach on the resurrection. When Jesus finally reaches Lazarus' house, Lazarus has been in his grave for four days. Lazarus' sisters are distraught and Jesus is deeply affected. However, in this emotionally charged moment, he is still able to offer engaged calm: he stays

connected to Mary and Martha and does not defend his actions as their emotions surge towards him. Instead, he requests that the stone covering the tomb be rolled aside and lets his actions speak louder than his words as he raises Lazarus from the dead.

Sensitivity, empathy and ministry

Developing engaged calm is perhaps particularly challenging for people who are highly sensitive to other people's emotional states. Given the vocational call to a pastoral ministry, it is not surprising that ministers often have strong emotional antennae that not only connect acutely with others' emotions but often absorb those emotions too. The desire to soothe and bring relief to others can stem, in part, from ministers picking up their emotional distress so strongly that it is difficult to bear. Writing from

> It is not surprising that ministers not only connect acutely with others' emotions but often absorb those emotions too.
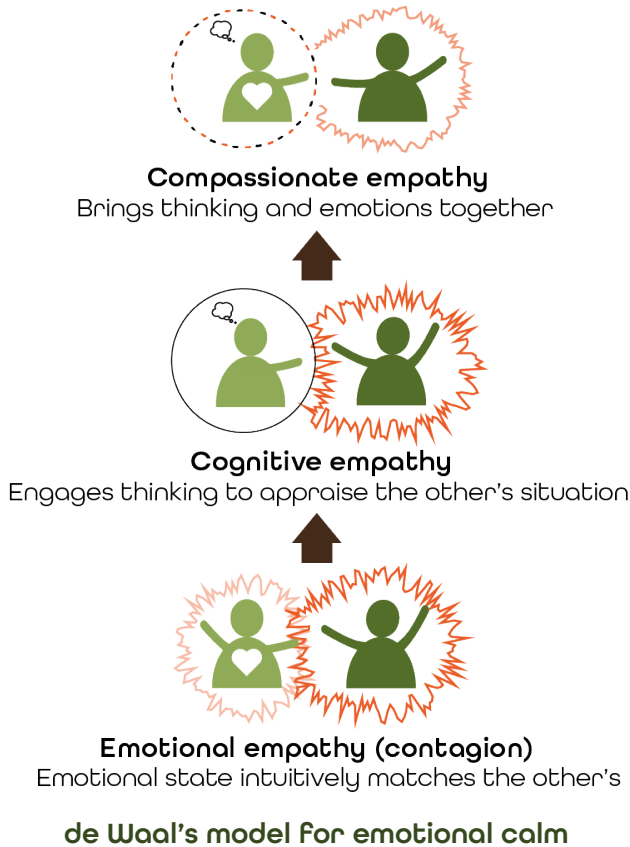
a Bowen systems perspective about nurturing healthy church ministry, Steinke highlights how a minister's heightened sensitivity to others often occurs alongside a high tolerance of their own emotional pain.[8] This tolerance can mean that other people's distress can be felt more deeply and responded to with more urgency than one's own suffering.

The challenge for well-being is that both disregarding one's own emotional response to a situation and catching and internalising the negative emotions of another creates stress. While empathy is vital in ministry, empathic conjoinment or contagion – where the listener catches and absorbs the emotions of the other – is emotionally exhausting and draining.

Through his three-stage model of empathy, de Waal articulates a route to offer engaged calm in pastoral situations without becoming embroiled in emotional contagion and finding oneself being left holding the pain.[9]

De Waal encourages a maturation journey from

Compassionate empathy
Brings thinking and emotions together

Cognitive empathy
Engages thinking to appraise the other's situation

Emotional empathy (contagion)
Emotional state intuitively matches the other's

de Waal's model for emotional calm

emotional empathy (also termed emotional contagion), through cognitive empathy to compassionate empathy (also termed empathic perspective-taking). The second stage of **cognitive empathy** engages one's thinking system to appraise the other's situation and understand their perspective. De Waal's third stage is **compassionate empathy** (or empathic perspective-taking); it brings the thinking and emotional systems together to develop engaged calm. At this stage one is able to both understand another's predicament and feel their distress but also recognise that such a state needs to be attributed to the other; it does not belong to oneself.

Pastoral care based on this kind of empathic perspective-taking responds to the real need of the other rather than reacting to the projection of one's own needs onto the other.[10] Individuals with this capacity for engaged calm can better tolerate the discomfort of giving people the space to process and self-soothe for themselves while also being able to offer attuned sup-

port as appropriate. This ability to combine mind and heart ultimately increases resilience and decreases stress.

Saying no

The irony in seeking to enhance flourishing in ministry is that making the changes required to support long-term well-being will itself produce stress. This is because all change is stressful to a degree: even positive change entails loss and results in a mix of ambivalent emotions. Writing about establishing boundaries for pastoral excellence, Olsen and Devor highlight this point, that saying yes to something new typically entails saying no to something else.[11] For example, saying yes to establishing a regular day off will require saying no to all ministry activities that fall on that day.

This capacity to say no can be particularly challenging when what we are saying no to is tied up with our self-esteem and sense of identity, rooted in what we achieve or what others think of us (see the chapter on clarity). If the doubt, guilt and concern raised by setting boundaries around a day off are left unrecognised and unprocessed by the cingulate cortex, they will be temporarily pacified through the unconscious acting out of the amygdala. Intent on calming our immediate internal adrenaline overflow we will start to sabotage ourselves by adopting short-term fixes to bind and handle the anxiety rather than holding to the long-term decisions that will meaningfully lower our stress and pressure. We might find ourselves attending to 'urgent' pastoral matters, finishing sermon preparations or arranging social activities with church members on our supposed sabbath.

Unprocessed emotional responses resulting from the attempt to make changes in one's patterns of ministry act as a primary stumbling block which stalls the best laid flourishing plans. This is why so many ministers know what they should do to nurture their well-being but don't actually do it.

Summary

In this chapter we have examined ways to enhance calm in ministry. Through a basic understanding of the way the brain works, we explored how our body (including our mind) reacts to stress and how relationship dynamics contribute to tension and pressure. We also examined how developing calm includes two facets: firstly being in touch with and processing one's own emotions and personal challenges; and secondly, creating a partially permeable boundary to other's emotions such that we remain empathically connected without becoming consumed by their emotions or shouldering their emotional needs.

Case study - Tom

Tom runs an inner-city church which runs a wide variety of outreach projects in the local community. He loves his ministry but the weight of the role has become exhausting and he has recently taken time off work with stress. Tom's GP emphasises the need to make some life-style changes to increase his health and fitness. Tom decides to join the gym; he used to be an avid member years ago. He buys all the kit but notices that on the days when he is due to attend the gym, he forgets to take his gym kit to work even though it sits right by the door. There is always so much to do that he just spends the time catching up on admin instead. When his partner asks about how the fitness work is going, Tom gets defensive and points out how much there is to do at church, that the staff are really stressed out and he doesn't want to leave them in the lurch.

At the next GP appointment, Tom is embarrassed that he has hardly gone to the gym at all. He recognises that his 'forgetting' of the gym kit is linked to feeling guilty about taking time away from family or church. He feels like he should be with one or the other, that it is not possible to carve out the space he needs for himself. Offered some counselling sessions, he gradually identifies that self-care was not encouraged in his family, indeed was seen as selfish. Taking time out for himself feels uncomfortable and laden with guilt. It feels easier to work himself into exhaustion than tolerate the discomfort of taking time out to look after himself. Counselling offers him the space to unpack

Case study - Tom

these emotions and consider other perspectives than the self-sacrificial approach he had unconsciously adopted.

Processing these emotions leaves Tom feeling calmer and less reactive. He is able to take a step back to think things through and recognises that attending the gym is really important for his personal health, family life and ability to serve his congregation effectively. Tom rethinks the time he goes to the gym so that it is in the morning before the busyness of the day kicks in. He communicates his thinking to his church wardens who support his decision. Together they begin to consider how to encourage well-being practices within the whole staff team. Tom finds it much easier to keep his commitment to the gym and stops mysteriously 'forgetting' his gym kit.

Application - building calm

Observe

- Where do you hold your internal stress? How does it feel in your mind and the rest of your body, in your movements and postures? As you grow your sensitivity, observe what positive and negative strategies you use to manage stress and anxiety.

- What makes you susceptible to emotional contagion from other relationships in your life?

- What types of practical and relational pressures make you shift from clarity-based, principled behaviour to anxiety-based reaction?

Application - building calm

Evaluate

- What would be different if you brought a more internal, engaged calm into ministry tasks and relationships?
- What would change if you concentrated more on managing your own feelings and less on attempting to manage other people's feelings?
- Reflecting on previous experiences of putting into practice self-care and well-being plans, what helped you to succeed and where did you struggle?

Application - building calm

Interrupt

- What one practice could you adopt that would offer you a space to reflect, process your emotions and consider thoughtful responses?
- How can you stay focused on yourself and your responsibility for improving your own well-being when feeling tempted to label other people or situations as the problem?
- How can you get better at tolerating the anxiety that will come from putting in place new self-care practices?

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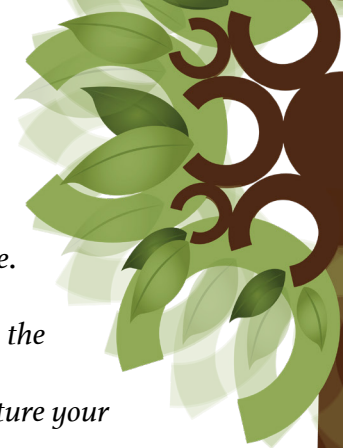
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Notes

Flourishing needs
COMMITMENT

The trees are "screaming" for help and activating their arsenal of chemical defences. You absorb all of this with every breath of forest air you take into your lungs.

Peter Wohlleben[1]

The language of trees is scent. In undisturbed, ancient, deciduous beech forests the message of scent conveys calm and, in its own way, contentment. The natural growth of trees suited to the local habitat has fostered a tightknit, committed ecosystem that creates a consistent local climate. The trees' interlocking root systems are indelibly established providing reliable sources of energy and nutrients for all. The forest's homeostatic stability allows trees to balance investment in growth and in defence. During times of climate change, no forest escapes environmental pressures but the ancient woodlands can keep their emotional cool; their ecosystem is robust and flexible enough to tolerate substantial change. Even under pressure the forest retains its long-term view of holistic health. Every member contributes to the whole; even dying trees pass on the carbon they no longer need to nurture neighbouring seedlings so that the forest as a whole may flourish.

In contrast, the forest air within reforestation conifer programmes tells a different story. Such trees planted by human hands have roots that are irreparably damaged; they are incapable of networking with each other and operate as if in isolation. Planted in

areas where they are not native, the trees are severely dehydrated and under stress: they experience substantial challenges and cannot create a stable ecosystem. With no long-term, integrated support structure above or below ground there can be no strategic approach to defence, and they become easy prey for bark beetles. When the trees find themselves under attack there is 'panic'. The focus is immediate reactivity to the pressures facing them and their 'language' becomes frantic and urgent. The alarm scents of terpenes and phenol chemical defence molecules flood the space as the trees fight for survival.[2]

At times, being church in the twenty-first century can feel like one has been transplanted into a non-native culture and environment. The rapid social and cultural change of the last fifty to seventy-five years has dramatically impacted the role and relevance of Church communities in our country. In many cases, the church was still reeling from the impact of this change and wondering how best to 'do' church in this new landscape when the supernova event of COVID-19 turned our habits and traditions upside down. Feeling uncomfortable and not suited to the novel societal conditions, the whole church community has been stressed, unclear how to connect and thrive, and feeling on the defensive. The pressures are such that being church can feel like a fight for survival, and in some cases it is. Collective emotional regulation is crucial.

Group reactivity, sabotage

Like individuals, groups are primed to become reactive; this is their life force but can also be what trips them up. In this community pressure cooker of tension, making changes to your ministry pattern in order to create space for flourishing behaviours can appear as disturbing as dropping an army of bark beetles into a coniferous forest: there is no more capacity to absorb additional stress. With all capacity to adapt lost, even apparently innocuous change can be experienced as an attack and elicit a whole-group congregational defensive reaction; namely, **sabotage**.

Flourishing Communities

This unthinking and reactive disruption stems from a collective amygdala hijack and its aim is simple: to get things back to the way they were, even if the way things were was pushing you to breaking point. The final element of flourishing in ministry is therefore to be committed to the process of understanding emotional regulation as a group.

This takes the thinking about personal calm from the previous chapter and applies it to the community as a body, looking at whole-system reactivity. To be committed is to learn to understand, predict, and survive the whole-system sabotage that comes with the territory of change. It entails understanding your church community's typical reactivity behaviours and neither getting side-tracked by them nor adding wood to the fire. It means understanding that eventually any anxious, defensive reactivity will calm down, a new normal will be established, and those new behaviours that initially produced 'screaming' will become subsumed and naturalised into the ecosystem.

> To be committed is to learn to understand, predict, and survive the whole-system sabotage that comes with the territory of change.

In his book *The Anxious Organisation*, Miller articulates how reactivity is an instinctive element within all organisations.[3] This capacity to be ready to respond to a threat is indeed a necessary force, for without it, a company will become unresponsive and soon wind up out of business. The value of a group response is seen clearly in the animal world: it only requires one wildebeest to save an entire herd from a cheetah attack. As soon as that one wildebeest spots the cheetah's camouflaged approach, the awareness of threat is experienced by the entire herd, who freeze and then run off, as if with one mind. The same instinctive group mind exists in human groups, but the challenge is that our threats are rarely as unidimensional as a cheetah attack, and running away seldom fixes our problems.

Instead, our group brain needs to establish calm like our individual brain. Just as our individual

response to tension and pressure requires the coherent effort of the three-area, integrated brain response unit to prevent the amygdala hijack, so groups need to keep their collective thinking and feeling systems connected to their communal amygdala in order to (if we use the animal metaphor) disempower the cheetah permanently.

Just like individuals, groups vary in terms of how much pressure they can tolerate before the amygdala hijacks functioning. Communities with higher levels of collective differentiation can maintain the integration of their corporate brain's response unit for longer. It is as if they have a larger collective window of tolerance, able to respond to even challenging events without getting thrown off course. For these communities, the 'collective amygdala' does not immediately appropriate church functioning; they can keep connected to their thinking system, facing problems directly and engaging in thoughtful and creative problem solving. Simultaneously in touch with their emotional system, they create safe spaces for the church to collectively process emotional responses as they arise. When, for example, the pastor announces a wish to take a period of sabbatical leave, there is enough engaged calm to consider the challenges for church life and proffer potential solutions alongside sufficient supportive space to articulate and process the natural disquiet, concern, and potential feelings of loss and abandonment.

Collective window of tolerance

The challenge facing church communities is that the background noise of chronic tension that resides within the relationship dynamics of churches shrinks the collective window of tolerance, reducing the group's capacity to engage creatively with difficulties. As unpacked in the chapter on candour, the very purpose and structure of churches creates a situation where the togetherness force is out of balance with the force of individuality, eliciting its negative aspects.

The togetherness force is stronger for several reasons: firstly, due to the emotionally intense nature of

engaging with matters of salvation and supporting individuals in crisis; secondly, due to the heavily informal nature of church structures and protocol together; thirdly, due to the patterned expectations within the community stemming from the longevity of the church's existence. Any situation where the individuality/togetherness seesaw is out of balance creates a situation of chronic anxiety. In such an emotionally charged atmosphere, it does not take much additional pressure for the community to reach the edge of their window of tolerance. The group moves from response to reaction, and symptoms of collective stress begin to emerge.[4]

Collective reactivity, binding anxiety

When a group tips into reactivity, the emphasis shifts from addressing the problem to subduing the symptoms of the problem, which emerge as a result of collective tension and pressure. So normal is this shift

> When a group tips into reactivity, the emphasis shifts from addressing the problem to subduing the symptom of the problem.

that Bowen theory states that the defining feature of a relationship system is its desire to bind anxiety and pass it on.[5] The behaviours adopted by the group discharge the adrenaline-fuelled energy of the reactive amygdala to bring temporary calm, but without the integration of the collective thinking and feeling systems the problem is not processed and addressed; the behaviours employed create a smokescreen of calm. Anxiety is temporarily reduced but because the original problem remains unresolved the tension always re-emerges elsewhere.

Sarah took over a church where the previous, much-loved pastor had been asked to step down due to financial misconduct. The church had quickly appointed a new pastor, assured Sarah that the books were all in order and that they were all ready to move on. Sarah constantly found herself the subject of intense scrutiny by the church trustees

who questioned, doubted and impeded her every move. It was Sarah's knowledge of systems behaviours that enabled her to hold on to the fact that the extreme interrogation was the symptomatic outworking of the unresolved pain and grief stemming from the loss of the previous pastor. Therefore, Sarah concentrated her efforts not on defending herself and challenging their behaviours, but rather on explicitly enabling the church to mourn their loss and process the pain of betrayal related to their previous pastor.

The challenge for ministers and congregations is to discern what is driving their community's behaviour: what is a symptom and what indicates a real problem which needs to be addressed? Thankfully groups adopt quite predictable anxiety-binding behaviours, and these can be observed at a congregational and institutional level, within families, organisations and even nations.

Group patterns for managing stress

The previous chapters have considered the key methods individuals use to manage stress: fusion, triangles, blame, conflict, over- and under-functioning and venting. Within groups all these behaviours come together. Individuals form a collection of multiple interlocking triangles enabling stress and anxiety to flow through the entire relationship system via the language of emotional contagion.

We are all creatures of habit and over time groups develop favourite and predictable patterns of managing group stress. These patterns include the establishment of roles whereby individuals are (unconsciously) tasked with performing certain anxiety-binding functions on behalf of the entire group. Such functional positions can include the role of complainer, problem-solver, scapegoat, protector and saviour. The group's need for such roles becomes clear over time. When the member who ruins all church meetings by stubbornly opposing change finally leaves, it may be only a matter of time before another

church member, perhaps even a previously benign individual, suddenly adopts this oppositional role. The group needs someone to vocalise their reluctance to face change and when one person leaves, another must be commissioned. A commitment to recognising the need within the system for someone to take up particular behaviours can reduce the attempt to solve problems by targeting blame at individuals, and invites a more thoughtful, systemic approach.

At the broadest level, communities trying to manage stress and anxiety may, as a whole group, orientate themselves round a collective, amygdala-calming, avoidant vision. In this situation, group members seem to lose their critical faculties and individual abilities, and the group as a whole becomes passionately focused on circumventing reality.

Three group modes

Three group modes – dependency, fight/flight and hope – are articulated by Bion. (He was exploring group dynamics in the UK at the same time Bowen was studying them in the USA.[6] His work now forms the bedrock of the Tavistock approach of systems psychodynamics.)[7]

A church dominated by what Bion terms **dependency** mode behaves as if the primary purpose of the community's existence is to provide for the satisfaction of the needs and wishes of its members. The minister is expected to make them feel good, protect and sustain them rather than facing them with the purpose of the church's existence, which emphasizes discipleship and outward-focused engagement through acts of service, compassion, mission and hospitality.

A group caught up in **fight/flight** mode acts as if there is an enemy who should either be attacked or fled from. The group worries about rumours of change or protests angrily without actually planning or taking

New ministers can unwittingly walk into an established, whole-group expectation that almost guarantees burnout.

any specific action.

A group enacting **hope** (which Bion originally called 'pairing') holds a collective belief that whatever the current challenges facing the church, a future event will solve them, perhaps the completion of a new building or the annual church away day. The group's focus on the future is a means of avoiding the difficulties of the present but, yet again, there is minimal action in working practically towards that future.

Saviour

The seductive draw of the functional position of saviour in church life means that new ministers can unwittingly walk right into a previously established, congregational, whole-group expectation that almost guarantees the outcome of burnout, rejection or both.
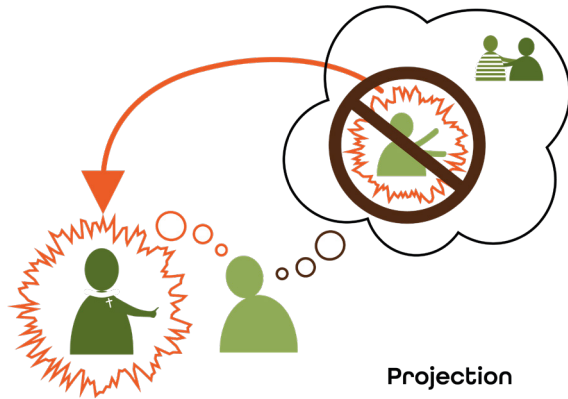
Ministers are invited to take up the position of saviour by a congregation (and a denominational hierarchy) in dependency mode. The passive group acts as if one individual can arrive and perform the necessary miracle to fix all the church's problems. This functional position has become more dominant in recent years as churches have found themselves facing increasingly challenging questions about how they need to change and shift in order to continue to be relevant to society. These are questions where answers are not clear, opinion is divided, the future not guaranteed and the implications for change bring personal and collective pain, vulnerability and loss.[8] Facing these questions head on is incredibly challenging; it is hardly surprising, therefore, that congregations reach the edge of their window of tolerance and turn away from reality.

The invitation into the role of saviour can be a particularly attractive invitation for ministers if their early years experiences encouraged them to over-function and solve the family's problems: it can hook into the issues around identity explored in the chapter on clarity. This lure of idealisation can also be seen in the search for the perfect resource that will resolve all outreach challenges and fill the church with new members.

Projection

themselves located at the ultimate apex of the multitude of interlocking triangles within the church reactivity system. Anxiety is then funnelled towards them as they occupy the position of greatest responsibility and often also that of greatest vulnerability. This places ministers at a heightened risk of projection, which is another anxiety-binding mechanism.

Projection

In fact, the saviour-dependency combination is a highly effective smokescreen because it looks as if the group is addressing the problem of congregational survival, when in fact they are merely steering round it. Delegating change to a saviour is always doomed to failure as no one individual can ever resolve a church's difficulties. If the minister doesn't burn out and leave through attempting the impossible, the congregation is likely to become disillusioned at the slow progress, dismiss them and seek the next, new saviour.

Within the church, lead ministers also find

When an individual is avoiding the real source of tension in their life and cannot face their own emotions, desires or character traits, they unconsciously project them onto someone else. For example when Sian (who prides herself on her compassion and grace) discovers her husband Matthieu is having an affair, she cannot permit her feelings of fury and rage to surface and instead projects those feelings onto her vicar. Now seeing her vicar as furious and full of rage, she focuses on him and accuses him of bullying, aggression and

abuse while avoiding the real challenge facing her within her marriage.

Friedman offers an extensive list of issues that emerge when individuals are projecting their anxiety onto the minister.[9] The list includes complaints about personal preferences including self-care and well-being practices (vacations, spending, friends, hobbies, grooming, attire, home, politics); preaching (preparation, delivery, content); family members (actions of partner and children); personal qualities (warmth, enthusiasm, listening ability, accessibility); congregational administration, availability (for pastoral duties, fund-raising, choir); theological attitudes (prayers chosen, texts selected, music chosen) and the list goes on and on.

Friedman seeks to emphasise that none of these issues can be made to go away permanently by accommodating, trying harder to please or changing one's

behaviours to fit people's expectations. These nit-picking complaints are simply natural manifestations of the flow of anxiety around the system and will dissipate on their own if the minister can keep hold of their engaged calm. This process of dissipation is aided by becoming familiar with those trigger comments that automatically elicit an emotional reaction in us, learning to smile at nit-picking comments that we don't need to take on and working to refrain from adding fuel to the fire by reacting in defensive ways.

> Nit-picking is simply a manifestation of the flow of anxiety around the system and will dissipate on its own if the minister can keep calm.

The focus on the minister as the cause of congregational or individual troubles is common. If the church leadership accepts such a perception of reality, rather than considering that such projections may be a symptom of deeper disquiet, it can lead to intense, excessive focus on, and criticism of, the minister.

One minister I know had a daughter who became seriously ill. Understandably, he had to withdraw from his typical pattern of pastoral ministry to care

for her and focus on his family. Unfortunately, there was a lack of understanding about the impact of his withdrawal on the congregation. While his absence was explicitly supported by the community there was no recognition of the unsettling of the group homeostasis that this change produced, nor was there the opportunity to process the conflicting emotions of loss and abandonment resulting from his absence.

The collective anxiety of the congregation grew unabated and the dominant driving force of church life became the desire to bind this overwhelming tension. Ultimately it became enacted and personified through one particular splinter group who rose up and began complaining about the ministerial competence of the vicar. With no understanding of dynamic systems thinking in the leadership team, the complaint around aptitude was treated as the problem rather than the symptom of an unsettled congregation missing their pastor. The issue escalated and the minister was eventually forced out of his post.

This chapter has focused on unpacking the amygdala-led congregational behaviours which can direct pressure and tension onto ministers. Ironically, making changes to one's ministry practices in order to enhance well-being can in itself create acute stress that pushes a congregation beyond their window of tolerance into acting out. The overarching unconscious aim of the group's reactive behaviours is to get rid of the collective uncomfortable feelings of tension and pressure. The simplest way to do this when faced with the anxiety of change is to return the system back to the familiar, to what it was before.

Just as ministers can sabotage themselves when they are ambivalent about making changes to their well-being practices, so congregations can also be highly creative at sabotaging their minister's new activities. There may be urgent requests for help on one's newly instituted day off or doubts voiced over one's commitment to one's vocation and community. Such sabotage accompanies all change; it is part and parcel of the process. It must be survived in order to consolidate the change process.

Without a commitment to understanding the role

of sabotage as an unconscious activity in response to heightened group tension, congregations get confused and ministers get stuck trying to fulfil the impossible task of attempting to keep everyone happy. Predicting the potential for sabotage in advance allows ministers to prepare themselves; it makes it easier to remain empathic with others and to keep hold of the big picture rather than getting lost in the minutiae. Simultaneously preparing a supportive leadership team in case of congregational sabotage ensures the minister is not alone in the storm and makes a favourable outcome more likely. A calm minister and leadership team also creates a positive gain cycle for the whole congregation. Their collective calm is contagious and fosters a chain reaction that can soothe the reactive church brain just as predictably as the way a reactive leadership team can create a jittery congregation.[10]

Summary

This chapter has explored the commitment required to outlast the collective reactivity of a church community. The role of the group brain with its homeostatic patterns of collective sabotage, projection and anxiety-binding group dynamics, particularly during times of stress and change, were discussed alongside examining the functional positions that ministers and other members of a congregation are drawn to enact (saviour, scapegoat, complainer, etc).

Case study - Deborah

Deborah is a new Methodist minister stationed to a circuit (that is, assigned to a group of churches). She has been tasked with mobilising the circuit around the calling of the Methodist Church to respond to the gospel through worship, caring, service and evangelism. The church of which she has pastoral charge has an ageing congregation and diminishing finances. She arrives with lots of ideas and enthusiasm and starts a number of new initiatives. The congregation are outwardly supportive; however, they don't engage actively. The burden of responsibility falls heavily onto Deborah and gradually the groups splutter and fade away. Deborah notices that she is feeling increasingly anxious and experiences several panic attacks. She is worried that she is going to be asked to leave the church because she hasn't come up with the solutions they were seeking, but she doesn't want to go because she has relocated her family for the position.

Deborah seeks to identify other new expressions of church to bolster the mandate but instead her supervisor helps her take a step back to highlight how the congregation are acting in dependency mode. Deborah recognises that she had accepted the invitation and jumped into a super-hero role, trying to wave her magic wand to fix the church rather than acknowledging the challenges and facing the limitations of the church and herself.

In consultation with her superintendent, she begins to have conversations within the church

Case study - Deborah

about their fear of church closure, their anxiety about how to reach such a diverse community and their longing that a new minister could miraculously transform the church.

Initially, there is little interest and her superintendent receives complaints about Deborah's approach. However, she has spent time preparing for such resistance and sabotage. She ensures that she invests in herself and her well-being practices in order to keep calm and stay connected to the congregation, inviting people to think about how they could contribute to the church's life. A few months later, several grandparents volunteer to start a carers and toddlers group and connection with the local community gradually expands organically. Deborah realizes that she no longer feels that she is carrying a heavy burden alone but feels more connected to church members and starts to enjoy her position.

Application - building commitment

Observe

- What are the key stressors in your church's life? How are these issues being engaged with?
- What functional positions can you identify within the church (*e.g.* complainer, problem-solver, scapegoat, protector, saviour, *etc.*)? What functional position do you hold?
- Looking at the history of the church, at times of particular pressure, what patterns of group behaviours occur? These will offer insight for predicting future patterns of sabotage.
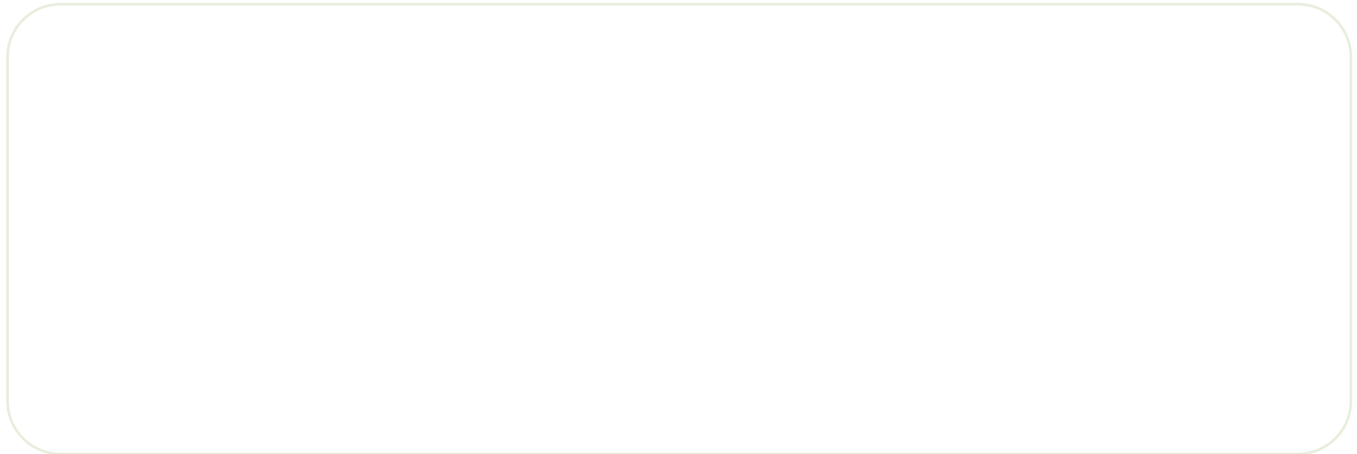
Application - building commitment

Evaluate

- Where have you engaged with reactive behaviours as the issue rather than identifying them as a symptom of an anxious community? What impact has this had on your well-being?
- How might viewing your stress as a symptom of your position in a pressured relationship system (your church, your family) alter how you approach your flourishing needs?
- If you began to view congregational nit-picking as a natural and predictable hallmark of church life, how might that change your reaction to it?

Application - building commitment

Interrupt

- In order to survive any sabotage, who else involved in your church leadership needs to engage with the ideas in this booklet in order to support you through the change process necessary for establishing positive flourishing practices?
- What steps could you take to start to normalise anxiety in your church community, to identify and name it for what it is?
- How might you invest in developing your church's response system?

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Notes

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