

COVENANT

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Ministerial Resilience: The Relationship Between Faith, Community, and Self-Care



In its simplest form, ministry is a response to God's call to assist others with love and humility, particularly in carrying the burdens of others. This vocation places clergy and vowed religious at higher risk for emotional exhaustion, burnout, and spiritual fatigue as they engage in their work. In this edition of *Covenant*, Esther Rapoport's perspective on community as a source of strength and resilience aligns with Carol Cavaliere's exploration of the causes and solutions to burnout. Together, these articles highlight the close relationship between ministerial self-care and community care. Therefore, it is essential to realize that strengthening the well-being and resilience of those in ministry requires a dual approach—one that addresses both the individual and the community.

Throughout history, sacred texts and philosophical reflections have described the human experience in the face of difficulty. The biblical example of the Babylonian exile of Israel is often seen as a clear instance of cultural and spiritual disruption due to forced relocation. The exiled Israelites, as described in Psalm 137, wept by the rivers of Babylon, longing for Zion (NRSV, 1989). In this time of crisis, the community drew strength from their shared devotion, rituals, and hopes for restoration. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God delivers a hopeful message in Jeremiah 29:11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (NRSV, 1989). This narrative resonates with the challenges faced by clergy, vowed religious, and the faithful today. In encountering similar struggles, they draw solace and strength from their faith communities.

Greek mythology also offers valuable insights into the human experience today. The myth of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity, symbolizes the frustration ministers may feel as they navigate the many aspects of their work, potentially leading to burnout. The French philosopher Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1955), suggests that, "To climb up to the heights is to raise one's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy in the midst of his despair." This form of powerful resilience arises from embracing the process of the struggle itself. Ministry involves taking responsibility while finding meaning in the process, rather than focusing solely on the outcome.

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In *The Enneads*, Plotinus, a philosopher from the Neoplatonic tradition, suggests that to attain divinity, the soul must cultivate inner harmony through contemplation and self-examination. He writes, "Turn away from the world and turn to yourself, examine yourself. But if you don't see the beauty within yourself, act like a sculptor who plans to create beauty: here he removes, there he smooths, from this section, he reduces the heaviness, and over there he makes it pure." (Plotinus, 1964-1988). This metaphor provides a meaningful starting point for ministers to develop their spiritual core amidst the chaos of the world.

In addition to these spiritual and philosophical perspectives, modern psychology offers valuable insights into the dynamics of ministerial work. According to psychologists, resilience is defined as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress..." (APA, 2020). In the context of ministry, both self-compassion and compassion for others are key protective factors against burnout. Supportive communities also play a crucial role by serving as sanctuaries for collective reflection, mutual care, and healing.

This exploration of spiritual, philosophical, and psychological perspectives reveals that no ministerial journey is meant to be walked in isolation. When we share the burden of supporting those who serve, we learn that no one suffers alone. At Southdown, our mission is to create a space for healing, renewal, and growth for clergy and vowed religious. We invite diocesan and religious institute leaders to continue supporting us in our mission. By enhancing our collaboration in innovative ways, we can better assist those who have devoted their lives to caring for others. Together, let us continue building sanctuaries of resilience where healing, faith, and well-being can flourish for the benefit of all the faithful.

Sincerely,

Francois Diouf, OSB, Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven...
but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
— Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*

Community Resilience and Self-Compassion in Ministry By Esther Rapoport, Psy.D.



In his poem about the aging hero Ulysses, Tennyson acknowledges that Ulysses has been worn out by his experiences (Tennyson, 2005). Nonetheless, in his old age, he sets sail again, preparing for a new adventure. What makes this possible is his strong will to persevere. But how is he able to keep “seeking and finding”

after all he has endured? Is it necessary to be a mythical hero to bounce back after significant stress or setbacks, or can ordinary people do the same?

Resilience, in psychology, refers to an individual’s or community’s ability to successfully overcome trauma or severe adversity. It involves continuing on a healthy developmental path and thriving in life despite exposure to traumatogenic factors that could lead to lasting psychopathology. Resilience can manifest as invincibility or as the ability to reorganize after a breakdown or temporary loss of functioning. Early researchers believed that only rare, exceptional individuals demonstrated resilience. However, the current understanding is that the capacity for resilience is a common human trait that most people possess (Masters, 2001). In the context of ministry, resilience holds particular significance for clergy and vowed religious, whose personal histories are often complex and who are regularly exposed to many forms of suffering and human fragility through their pastoral work.

The anthropologist Melvin Konner suggests that the human species developed resilience for evolutionary reasons, particularly when early humans were exposed to the elements and had to fight for physical survival. However, no one could be resilient if left to fend for themselves in isolation. What helped make early humans resilient, Konner proposes, were the strong social bonds of empathy and aid within their societies (Konner, 2007).

Resilience is an expression of true strength. It requires flexibility, adaptability, and resourcefulness, distinguishing it from defensive behaviours that mimic strength, such as denial or avoidance. Individuals can work on fostering their personal resilience, but what is more sustainable over time is changing the culture of the community so that it can develop

resilience as a whole (Kirmayer, 2009). Communities characterized by a strong collective sense of efficacy, local control, and social cohesiveness have been found to be more likely to be resilient in the face of adversity (Kirmayer, 2009). Once a community develops resilience, it can help its members feel both accepted and secure.

The child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott distinguished between the “true self”, which individuals develop when raised in safe, secure environments and the “false self”, which tends to develop when one feels impinged upon or not accepted. The concept of the “true self” refers to a general sense of being alive, capable of spontaneity, and of genuine presence. In contrast, the “false self” refers to an inability to be authentic or spontaneous.

When individuals in a community feel loved and accepted despite their shortcomings, it lessens the need to invest energy in rigid and inflexible defensive “false self” structures. This allows them to channel their energy toward facing life’s challenges in creative and constructive ways. The compassionate, accepting attitude of one’s community can be internalized, translating into self-compassion. A self-compassionate person relates to themselves as a loving parent relates to a rowdy child: with a love that remains strong even when anger or disappointment are also present.

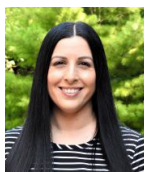
Returning to Ulysses: Although Homer’s *Odyssey* portrays him as a hero, he relies on the support of both gods and mortals to persevere and not lose his spirit. Ultimately, it is his loyal home community in Ithaca that helps him feel supported enough to seek home, reach it successfully, and remain open to new adventures. In the same way, a resilient religious community can help its members feel loved, accepted, and capable of overcoming life’s challenges. Just as Ulysses could not have endured his trials without the support of his community, clergy and vowed religious also need the emotional and spiritual support of their communities to continue their vital work. Their emotional resilience, nurtured through community care, enables them to persevere through the challenges they face—both personally and professionally—ensuring they remain effective and present in their ministries.

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Understanding Burnout: Causes and Solutions for Clergy and Vowed Religious

By Carol Cavaliere, MA, C.Psych. Assoc.



Burnout is an increasingly prevalent issue among clergy and vowed religious, who are faced with the challenge of providing spiritual guidance, overseeing complex ministries, and attending to the pastoral needs of their communities. Within these spaces, they are called to be compassionate, empathetic, and self-sacrificing in ways that can eventually lead to physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion.

Burnout is defined as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity” (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009, p. 206). It is often characterized by feelings of helplessness, a lack of motivation, and emotional numbness. Although burnout is common in high-stress occupations, the unique demands placed on clergy and vowed religious make them particularly vulnerable to its effects (Shaw et al., 2021).

Causes Of Burnout

1. Emotional Demands and Compassion Fatigue

Clergy and vowed religious are typically expected to be the emotional and spiritual caregivers for others, providing counselling and support in times of crisis, grief, or trauma. Studies have shown that this constant emotional labour places this group at high risk for developing what is known as “compassion fatigue”—a condition in which an individual becomes emotionally exhausted and detached from the suffering of others (Figley, 2002). Over time, continuous exposure to the pain of others, without adequate self-care, can deplete one’s emotional reserves, leading to burnout.

2. Workload and Role Ambiguity

The workload of clergy and vowed religious often extends far beyond what is publicly visible. Many manage administrative responsibilities, liturgical preparation, pastoral counselling, community events, and fundraising—all while maintaining their personal spiritual practices. In smaller communities, the workload can be even more intense, with clergy or vowed religious expected to switch between multiple “hats” more often. This constant juggling of roles, without clear boundaries or sufficient resources, leads to role ambiguity and a sense of being overwhelmed (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

3. Isolation and Lack of Support

In many faith communities, clergy and vowed religious maintain a position of authority, which can make it difficult to form close personal relationships while maintaining appropriate ministerial boundaries. This often contributes to a sense of isolation, which may then be exacerbated by the expectation of constant availability, leaving little time for self-care, relaxation, or social connection with others who understand the unique stresses of the role. Research has shown that social support is a key factor in preventing burnout, and its absence can leave clergy vulnerable to chronic stress (Jackson-Jordan, 2013).

4. Theological and Existential Struggles

Theological or existential dilemmas may also contribute to burnout among clergy and vowed religious, leading to a sense of internal conflict, disillusionment, and despair—especially if one feels a deep responsibility or obligation to inspire others despite their own struggles. A crisis of faith like this may erode one’s sense of purpose and exacerbate the emotional toll of their work.

5. Work-Life Imbalance and Personal Sacrifice

Many clergy and vowed religious feel compelled to prioritize the needs of their community over their own, often at the cost of their health and personal well-being. While self-sacrifice is often viewed as a virtue, it can also become a source of burnout when the individual neglects their own needs for rest, recreation, and personal growth. Studies have shown that clergy are more likely to experience burnout when they are unable to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Jackson-Jordan, 2013).

Preventing and Addressing Burnout

1. Self-Care and Boundaries

One of the most effective ways to prevent burnout is by emphasizing self-care and establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life. Clergy and vowed religious should be encouraged to set aside time for rest, recreation, and activities that nurture their well-being. Establishing boundaries regarding work hours and availability is essential to prevent overwork and emotional exhaustion. Clergy and vowed religious should be encouraged to delegate responsibilities when possible and seek support when needed.

2. Spiritual and Psychological Support

Spiritual leaders must care for their own spiritual and psychological health, as one cannot pour from an empty cup. Regular engagement in personal spiritual practices—such as prayer, meditation, or spiritual direction—may support clergy and vowed religious in remaining grounded in their vocation and reconnecting with a deeper sense of purpose. Access to psychological support may enable clergy and vowed religious to reduce feelings of isolation and provide tools to effectively manage stress.

3. Peer Support and Community Building

Developing strong peer support networks is crucial in preventing burnout. Clergy and vowed religious should be encouraged to participate in professional networks, retreats, and support groups where they can share experiences, offer mutual encouragement, and receive feedback from colleagues who understand the challenges of their role. These networks help combat the isolation that many clergy and vowed religious feel and provide a space for open conversations about mental health and well-being.

4. Training and Professional Development

Professional development programs that focus on building skills such as emotional intelligence, effective communication, leadership, and stress management can equip clergy and

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vowed religious with the tools needed to better manage their workload and maintain healthy relationships with others in both personal and professional contexts.

5. Redefining Success and Expectations

Unrealistic expectations of perfection can place undue pressure on clergy and vowed religious, ultimately contributing to burnout. Encouraging a more realistic and compassionate view of success—one that acknowledges human limitations and the importance of rest and recreation—can help reduce stress and foster a healthier ministerial environment (Barnard & Curry, 2012).

Burnout among clergy and vowed religious is a significant issue that requires attention from both the individuals affected and, ultimately, the religious institutions they serve. By addressing the psychological causes of burnout and implementing strategies for self-care, support, and professional development, clergy and vowed religious may become better equipped to manage the stresses of their roles and continue their vital work in a healthy and sustainable manner.

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Dr. Michael Sy, Ph.D., C.Psych., Reflects on His Retirement



As Michael begins his well-earned retirement on March 28 after 37 years of dedicated service, he reflects on his journey and the experiences that have shaped his career.

"Providing service and care to clergy and vowed religious has been, and remains, central to my life. This sacred work defines what is both professionally and spiritually meaningful to me. Over the years, our Church has faced both challenges and opportunities, and Southdown has responded with creativity and resilience. The kindness and attention we provide to our clients and leadership have been deeply appreciated. In return, I am grateful for the trust and support they have extended to us. It has been a true joy and privilege to be part of Southdown. I am very thankful and will miss you all. In retirement, I hope to continue listening and responding as best as I can."

We extend our sincere appreciation to Michael for his unwavering commitment and invaluable contributions to advancing the healing mission of Southdown, and we wish him the very best as he begins this exciting new phase of his life.



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