Reading the Back Page: Listening to Clergy Serving in the Presbyterian Church (USA) Reflecting on Professional Burnout

Jenny Rolph, Tania ap Siôn, Paul Rolph, Keith Wulff and Leslie J. Francis*

Abstract

Quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments, but often these comments are neither analyzed nor reported. The aim of the present study is to analyze the responses to the back page from a study concerned with work-related psychological health and professional burnout completed by clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). Of the 748 clergy who took part in the survey, 224 wrote (sometimes multiple) comments on the back page (30% participation rate). The 345 identified comments have been analyzed to reflect 16 themes, 13 concerned with aspects of ministry and 3 concerned with aspects of the survey itself. The ministry-related themes included reflections on stress and burnout, tensions with congregations, support from congregations, time off and study leave, and marriage-related issues. The conclusion is drawn that reading the back page generates useful information in three areas: giving additional insight into the theme explored by the quantitative survey, drawing attention to weaknesses in the survey instrument, and shaping future research.

Keywords

Clergy studies – Burnout – Personality – quantitative surveys – qualitative data

Quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments on the theme explored by the survey or on the

* Author Note: Jenny Rolph, Glyndŵr University; Tania ap Siôn, University of Warwick; Paul Rolph, Glyndŵr University; Keith Wulff, The Presbyterian Church (USA); Leslie J. Francis, University of Warwick. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leslie J. Francis, Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit, Centre for Education Studies, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom; Telephone +44 (0)24 7652 2539; Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638; Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk.
way in which the theme was explored in the survey. Rarely are these comments analyzed by the research team and included as a proper outcome of the study. The aim of the present study is to analyze the narrative responses added to the end of a survey conducted among clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). The survey included sections on: work-related psychological health, using the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005); psychological type, using the scales of introversion, extraversion, sensing, intuition, thinking, feeling, judging, and perceiving proposed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005); personality, using the scales of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism proposed by the abbreviated form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Francis, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992); and a range of questions concerned with a variety of aspects of ministry. The survey was completed by a sample of 748 clergy serving in a parish within The Presbyterian Church (USA). The analyses of these data reported by Francis, Wulff, and Robbins (2008) offer the following profile of these clergy.

In terms of psychological type, these clergy as a group preferred introversion (55%) over extraversion (45%), preferred intuition (56%) over sensing (44%), preferred feeling (70%) over thinking (30%), and preferred judging (73%) over perceiving (27%). According to psychological type theory, as discussed by Myers and McCaulley (1985), these preferences for introversion, intuition, feeling and judging help to build up a composite picture of the kind of clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA).

Clergy who prefer introversion are oriented toward their inner world; they are energized by their inner ideas and concepts. They may feel drained by events and people around them. They prefer to reflect on a situation rather than act on it. They enjoy solitude, silence and contemplation, as they tend to focus their attention on what is happening in their inner lives. They may appear reserved and detached as they are difficult to get to know, and they may prefer to have a small circle of intimate friends rather than many acquaintances.

Clergy who prefer intuition focus on the possibilities of a situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They may feel that perception by the senses is not as valuable as information gained from indirect associations. They focus on the overall picture, rather than specific facts and data. They tend to follow their inspirations enthusiastically, but not always realistically. They can appear to be up in the air and may be seen as idealistic and impracticable. They may aspire to bring innovative change to established conventions.