

Staying Fresh in Ministry: Reflections on Hupomoné

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Abstract

Pastoral burnout, blowup, and dropout is an alarming issue in contemporary ministry. The longitudinal study that the researcher is reporting on has covered twenty years of a journey exploring the dynamics of this issue. Assessment of student readiness for ministry is discussed along with potential responses from seminaries involved in preparing the next generation of pastoral leaders. The application for Doctor of Ministry programs is addressed in the conclusion.

Introduction to the Problem

The problem this longitudinal research project (1996-current ongoing research) initially focused on was the need for improvement in the spiritual nurture and support of senior pastors within their congregational settings. Senior pastors tend to climb alone in the journey of kingdom ministry. The initial event in 1996 for this research project was the researcher's DMin research project along with the loss of several ministry peers who had effective ministries. The researcher continued, since his graduation, to explore spiritual formation issues with pastors and seminary students. The scope of research on pastoral leadership was about to be expanded beyond the classic spiritual disciplines of spiritual formation as assessment of seminary students and graduates raised the issue of readiness for ministry.

Twenty years later in 2016, the researcher was charged by his seminary, where he serves as a faculty member, with the daunting task of developing an alternative assessment instrument of "ministry readiness" instead of the *Profiles of Ministry Survey* (PoM), which is published and coordinated by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) for utilization with seminary students.¹ The goal was to design and develop an assessment instrument that would measure the same general issues of ministry readiness as the PoM but to be more user friendly as an electronic file that could be sent to students, less expensive and time consuming to complete, easy to score, understand, and utilize the results that students, administrative staff, and faculty could readily access.

The original DMin research project provided a backdrop and procedure to undertake this assessment instrument design process.² The researcher had been on a quest for over twenty years to discover the core systemic issues behind the symptoms of pastoral burnout and dropout from ministry and the potential responses by seminaries to address these core issues with students while they are in the preparation phase of their journey, a vital issue for the 21st century church. There is abundant research and studies on the reasons pastors burnout. Thom S. Rainer states seven primary reasons that pastors burnout: (1) 24/7 mentality, (2) conflict, (3) expectations, (4) unwillingness to let go, (5) no friends, (6) not suited for some tasks, and (7) no life outside of the church. These seven contributing factors to pastoral burnout, blowup, and dropout are comprehensive, accurate, and prevalent in our contemporary culture.³ Identifying these contributing factors is helpful in describing, analyzing, and prescribing change

by addressing these precipitating factors in the life of a pastor.

The “backburner research interest in exploring the spiritual formation of pastors” had moved to the front burner with a sense of urgency for the seminary and its students. The researcher had formed an open, trusting relationship with Dr. Francis A. Lonsway, who had designed, developed, and directed the PoM assessment instrument, process, and procedures for ATS from 1992-2005. This relationship was formed during intense PoM assessment training encounters that were offered by ATS and were led by Lonsway for many years.⁴

Lonsway had identified key positive factors in the assessment of readiness for ministry: the capacity to (1) work cooperatively and nondefensively with people (Fidelity to Tasks and Persons), (2) keep commitments even under pressure (Personal Responsibility), (3) adapt well to new situations (Flexibility of Spirit), (4) demonstrate interest in and compassion for a parishioner in stress or illness (Involvement in Caring), (5) listen attentively and compassionately in a counseling context (Perceptive Counseling), and (6) understand and incorporate the importance of spouse and family in his or her own life (Mutual Family Commitment).⁵

Two primary vectors of research were emerging in the initial planning stages of the research process in developing an assessment instrument of student readiness for ministry: (1) spiritual formation of senior pastors being studied by the researcher, and (2) the PoM developed by Lonsway. However, the need for a third vector became apparent to provide convergence in designing and developing a new assessment instrument. The last ingredient in the “assessment recipe” that emerged out of research in student development to augment readiness for ministry was wellness.

Context of the Problem

Seeking to understand the nature of pastoral burnout provides a starting point to address the problem. Seminaries and the church do not want their pastoral leaders to experience this personal and professional crisis. In this report, the term “pastoral leaders” includes all Christian leaders. Burnout is a technical term that has been borrowed from aerospace engineering to describe the depletion of fuel in a specific rocket in flight.⁶ An interesting paradox is that the development of this term for rockets in 1940 coincided with the modern phenomenon of human burnout.

The context of the problem is the burnout of pastoral leaders who are overwhelmed by the distress (negative stressors of Christian ministry that usually involve conflict, and lack of: financial resources, planning, effective time management, boundaries, spiritual formation, spiritual, social and emotional support, friendships, healthy family relationships (whether single or married), recreation, physical exercise, sleep, and Sabbath) and eustress (positive stressors of unusual fame, power, authority, success, influence, effectiveness, unwarranted support and financial wealth). The combination of distress and eustress can leave pastoral leaders vulnerable to acquiesce to unhealthy coping behaviors that were usually developed earlier in life prior to ministry. The interesting dilemma is that theological education is a stressor that triggers coping mechanisms. Seminary students bring along with them their latent coping mechanisms, eustress, and distress that is increased by enrolling in seminary. Thus, seminaries can be ideal places of reengineering unhealthy coping mechanisms and developing healthy new life disciplines.

The apostle Paul addresses many of these character issues in the Pastoral Epistles and in confronting the issue of spiritual warfare.⁷ Spiritual warfare is a reality but not necessarily the only factor to be evaluated in addressing readiness for ministry. Attempting to do pastoral

ministry alone without meaningful spiritual, emotional, and social support becomes a dangerous formula that precipitates being overwhelmed.

Lonsway explored four potential negative behaviors in the PoM to assess these issues in young emerging ministry leaders: (1) self-serving behavior, (2) pursuit of personal advantage, (3) self-protecting behavior, and (4) intuitive domination of decision-making.⁸

Assessment of wellness, which incorporates all these complex factors discussed in this “Context” section, then emerges as a vital point of evaluation in the life of seminary students as they begin and complete their theological education, a mountain they too often attempt to climb alone in preparation for pastoral ministry alone.

Design and Development

Time has become the new cultural currency. If pastoral leaders take the time to be equipped to nurture their wholeness and support base, improvement in congregational support of pastoral leaders is possible. A symbiotic rather than dysfunctional relationship is formed around community or team as expressed in some mentoring and coaching programs. The biblical paradigm as expressed in Jesus’ discipleship multiplication model was working in teams within a missional community.⁹

The remaining ingredient in the assessment recipe is wellness as expressed in the research completed by the team of Jane E. Myers, Thomas J. Sweeney, and J. Melvin Witmer. They developed a “Wheel of Wellness” model that incorporated 17 tasks to provide a holistic framework for constructing a student wellness assessment instrument. The initial “Five Life Tasks” are: (1) spirituality, (2) self-direction: regulate, discipline, and self-direct, (3) work and leisure: fulfillment in serving and playing, (4) friendship: experience community and belonging, and (5) love: relationships that give and receive. The following 12 Subtasks expanded the initial Five Life Tasks to provide a broader perspective that was necessary to fill-in the missing components of developing stability and wholeness: (1) sense of worth: positive self-esteem, (2) sense of control: impact on decisions, (3) realistic beliefs: rational, accurate perspective of “things”, (4) emotional awareness and coping: experience and manage emotions, (5) problem solving and creativity: vital intellectual function to know, comprehend, and manifest unique personal wisdom, (6) sense of humor: facilitates wellness, (7) nutrition: healthy, quality diet, (8) exercise: “motion is lotion,” (9) self-care: taking responsibility for one’s wellness, (10) stress management: “detriangled” perspective, (11) gender identity: satisfaction with one’s gender role, and (12) cultural identity: value and appreciation of one’s ethnic membership.¹⁰

The researcher found that many universities utilize a wellness assessment profile that has some of the components listed in the Wheel of Wellness. Universities are also concerned about student wellness as it affects many areas of student development. A specific concern is suicide prevention and mental health checkups. Students complete a rather simple self-assessment checklist with a culminating question, “Would you like someone to contact you regarding your responses on this survey?” Checking this box triggers follow-up by the university student health system. On May 27, 2016, the researcher received permission from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls to adapt their “Personal Wellness Assessment” to develop an integrated assessment instrument to replace the PoM. The resultant assessment instrument, “*Teleios*”¹¹ Profile: Assessment of 10 Dimensions of Wholeness,¹² was field tested with students with minor modifications in the scoring grid and some minor verbiage edits to improve clarity in the questions.

Ten areas of assessment were identified that coincided with most of the categories from the “Personal Wellness Assessment”. Some modifications were necessary because of the differences between the study population and assessment criteria that were covered in the PoM and findings from the 1998 Pastoral Survey in the researcher’s dissertation. The ten areas of assessment are: (1) emotional, (2) environmental, (3) family, (4) financial, (5) intellectual, (6) ministry, (7) occupational, (8) physical, (9) social, and (10) spiritual. The self-scoring yields a pattern that emerges on the scoring grid. The wellness pattern that emerges identifies the areas of strength and growth so that students can identify the key growth issue that they select to focus on during their theological education experience. A check-up is made midway through the student’s program to evaluate progress in achieving their growth goals. Identifying the primary growth area is intended to augment the *hupomoné*¹³ in these pastoral leaders while they are in seminary.

Students are challenged to develop *hupomoné* as a core value in addressing their personal growth issues. For example, the student struggling with financial management is encouraged to improve their stewardship patterns and to reflect on the reasons for the financial struggles as it relates to time management, flexibility of spirit, self-protection and promotion, resistance to change, and *hupomoné*. Patient endurance may empower the student to defray expenditures and focus on increasing income instead of overusing credit cards. Students develop growth plans with a mentor or coach to address one significant area of personal and ministry growth during their theological education program. The assumption is that new healthy habits developed in seminary will continue for a lifetime and encourage addressing new growth areas in the future. Students have indicated that time management, financial management, and physical health are the common areas of personal growth. Ministry growth is frequently identified as improving conflict management with ministry partners to improve kingdom teamwork and reduce stress. The riddle of *hupomoné* will provide a focus point for ongoing longitudinal assessment of seminary graduates who have completed the *Teleios* Profile.

Conclusion

The application of *hupomoné* with Doctor of Ministry (DMin) students requires including a student assessment process in the early phase of the program so that a reality check can be administered midway through the program. The resilience of DMin students is stretched as they juggle the role of pastoral leadership, doctoral student, and personal life. Too often DMin students are already “maxed out” and have added another major role to their frenetic life. Student development is a positive perspective to empower DMin students in achieving their goals.

Claudio and Pamela Consuegra provide insights on the early warning signs of cumulative stress that could serve as a practical assessment checklist for DMin candidates as they enter a doctoral program: (1) Early Warning Signs (boredom, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and poor concentration), (2) Mild Signs (memory problems & Increased illness), (3) Extended Signs (relationship problems, alcohol or drug use, performance changes, and fear of leaving home), and (4) Severe Signs (relationship changes, health changes, personality changes, and Becoming Housebound).¹⁴ DMin Directors could implement a coaching approach to ask the doctoral candidates how they plan to address these early signs of cumulative stress in their life and ministry.

The implementation of student assessment in a DMin program would include the requirement for a coach or mentor to meet with them on a monthly basis to review progress and encourage *hupomoné*. Lonsway’s maxims are constant reminders that include resetting the time

currency from *chronos* to *kairos*.¹⁵ The *Teleios* Profile addresses issues of wellness that could be addressed in formational courses or program orientations. The correlation of diminished areas of wellness and specific stress symptoms would provide interesting data for further research.

The church has diseases and needs healthy, well “Doctors of Ministry” to address these issues of the soul. Assessment has provided vital data for the researcher to address wellness issues with pastoral leaders and students. DMin students are in transition, which is the reason they are coming back to seminary for more. . . . What are we going to give them? Transformation is required to reengineer their lives and ministries in order to finish well—*hupomoné*!

¹*Profiles of Ministry Survey* (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2005).

²M. John Nissley, “Spiritual Nurture of Senior Pastors through Congregational Support Systems” (DMin diss. Bethel Theological Seminary, 2000).

³Thom S. Rainer, “7 Reasons Pastors Burnout,” *The Christian Post*, September 28, 2013, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/7-reasons-pastors-burn-out.html>.

⁴Dr. Francis A. Lonsway deserves significant kudos for his training and encouragement he imparted to the researcher and others who desired to connect with his vision of the art of assessing student readiness for ministry. The researcher was active in PoM assessment administration from 2000-08. It was during these years of personal interaction and training with Dr. Lonsway that the researcher sought to gain insights on the nuances of assessment measurement and analysis with this intriguing student assessment authority.

⁵Francis A. Lonsway, *Profile of Ministry: A Thirty-Year Study* (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2007), 4.

⁶“Burnout,” Merriam-Webster online, accessed January 13, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/burnout>.

⁷Ephesians 6:10-18 [NRSV].

⁸Lonsway, 5.

⁹Acts 2:41-47 [NRSV].

¹⁰Jane E. Meyers, Thomas J. Sweeney, and J. Melvin Witmer, “The Wheel of Wellness Counseling for Wellness: A Holistic Model for Treatment Planning,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 78 (Summer 2000); 251-266.

¹¹*Teleios* is a core value in the courses taught by the researcher. The meaning, “whole, mature, complete, lacking nothing,” is explained as the goal of character/leadership/disciple development in James 1:2-4 and Ephesians 4:13.

¹²M. John Nissley, “*Teleios* Profile: Assessment of 10 Dimensions of Wholeness” (Findlay, OH: Winebrenner Theological Seminary, 2016).

¹³*Hupomoné* articulates the essence of resilience that is necessary to address life and ministry challenges. Resilience is the capacity to bounce back or return from being stretched like a rubber band. The patient endurance, perseverance, sustaining, and steadfastness of disciples is clarified in Romans 15:4, Hebrews 12:1, and James 1:3.

¹⁴Claudio and Pamela Consuegra, “My Bucket is Running Empty: Cumulative Stress in Ministry,” *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors* 90, no. 7 (July 2018): 13.

¹⁵These terms view time in different perspectives. *Kairos* views time from an opportune or right time, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/kairos.html>. *Chronos* views time in specific periods either long or short, we measure time in specific units. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/chronos.html>, accessed January 14, 2019.

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