

The Pastoral Mystique: A Feminist Ecclesiological Approach to Clergy Burnout

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“1 500 PASTORS LEAVE THE MINISTRY FOR GOOD each month due to burnout or contention in their churches.”¹ I first came across that statistic in J.R. Briggs’s *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure*, which I read to help me recover from my own burnout after seventeen years in parish ministry. During my last six years as a parish pastor, I found myself wondering what was wrong with me. After all, should I not find serving God and the church challenging, yes, but also profoundly fulfilling? Besides, my parishioners were lovely people and my workload was not particularly demanding, so why did I feel extinguished?

As I struggled to discern a diagnosis, treatment, and hopeful prognosis, I found myself making connections with Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in which she examines the ennui afflicting many housewives. Society had told women that being a homemaker was fulfilling, and if they did not think so, then the problem lay with them. Friedan argued that, no, the problem lay with a patriarchal society selling a one-size-fits-all understanding of womanhood that demanded getting married, having children, and focusing on domestic responsibilities. In other words, the problem lay not with the discontent women but with patriarchy. It occurred to me, that, in some ways, parish ministry has a similar issue. As we will see, there are several reasons why clergy burn out, but one is that patriarchy has contributed to a paradigm for parish ministry in the twenty-first century that significantly increases the likelihood of burnout.

I examine the usual strategies for addressing clergy burnout and show that, while they have merit, they neglect key church dynamics. A feminist approach to the issue, particularly one drawing from feminist ecclesiology, provides a corrective by attending to those neglected dynamics. I conclude by suggesting changes among clergy and congregations that can help to decrease burnout. But before exploring the

¹ J.R. Briggs, *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2014), 46.

value of a feminist ecclesiological approach to clergy burnout, I need to address some confusion about the matter.

HOW PERVASIVE IS CLERGY BURNOUT?

While clergy burnout is indeed a widespread and persistent problem, how widespread and persistent is debatable. An exploration of the claims regarding the level of severity of clergy burnout helps to provide a more nuanced understanding of this issue. Clergy burnout has received much attention in recent years. Particularly well known is Duke Divinity School's longitudinal study begun in 2008, the Clergy Health Initiative, which has identified many health issues among clergy and proposes that pastors need to improve self-care. This study, however, concluded that burnout is not particularly high among clergy.² By contrast, in 2010, Paul Vitello wrote "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work" for the *New York Times*, in which he suggests that clergy burnout is pervasive. He opens with this shocking paragraph:

The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.³

Vitello states that these issues span denominations. He goes on to say that, while there are no simple explanations as to why clergy are struggling to such a high degree, it is clear that pastors need to take more time off. Clergy often feel a great sense of obligation to the church and thus see time-off as selfish, but it is essential to their well-being. While Vitello does not write about burnout per se, he intimates it in his statement that "[m]any would change jobs if they could."⁴

Vitello and Robin Swift, the director of health programs for Duke's Clergy Health Initiative, were interviewed together on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* in 2010 for a piece entitled, "Clergy Members Suffer from Burnout, Poor Health."⁵ The essential message of the interview is that, across denominations and religions (Islam and Judaism are included, although the focus is on Christianity), parishioners

² Duke Clergy Health Initiative, "2014 Statewide Survey of United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina," divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/clergy-health-initiative/learning.

³ Paul Vitello, "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work," *New York Times*, August 2, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html.

⁴ Vitello, "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work."

⁵ Tony Cox, "Clergy Members Suffer from Burnout, Poor Health," *Talk of the Nation*, August 3, 2010, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128957149.

place too many demands on clergy, who, likewise, place too many demands on themselves. Again, clergy need to take more time-off, and parishioners need to support clergy doing so. The interview also suggests that loneliness is a significant issue for many clergy in that they cannot find much support and friendship from a congregation without there being a conflict of interest.⁶

Given that the above pieces were published in 2010, it is reasonable to consider whether some event at the time, such as the Great Recession, which began in 2008, was contributing to the burnout and poor health among clergy. In fact, Tony Cox, the moderator for the *Talk of the Nation* interview, raises that very issue, but Vitello responds by saying that the research on clergy burnout was actually begun before 2008. Therefore, while the economic crisis may have played some role in clergy burnout, there were clearly other issues at play. In fact, there was no evidence that any event at the time was adding to clergy burnout.

While sources such as the *New York Times* and National Public Radio report that clergy burnout is pervasive and while many a pastor and parishioner would nod in agreement with such reports, other research agrees with the Duke study: burnout is not as widespread among clergy as these pieces suggest. Christopher J. Adams, Holly Hough, Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Jia Yao, and Melanie Kolkin applied to clergy the widely used Maslach Burnout Inventory, which measures three aspects of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization,⁷ and personal accomplishment. The results of eighty-four studies show that clergy experience “moderate levels of burnout” compared to people in other helping professions and that clergy generally cope well with stress.⁸ Similarly, Stephen J. Rossetti and Colin J. Rhoades found that, while it “is commonly assumed that Catholic clergy experience high levels of burnout,” a study using the Maslach Burnout Inventory with 2,482 Catholic priests indicates that only 1.5-2.3% of clergy scored in the “high burnout range” and that, on the whole, “priests scored markedly lower on burnout than comparable lay professions.”⁹

What of the oft-mentioned claim that 1500 clergy leave the ministry each month either because of burnout or conflict with a congregation? The number pops up readily in online searches about clergy

⁶ Cox, “Clergy Members Suffer from Burnout, Poor Health.”

⁷ Depersonalization is the act of not seeing the people one is ministering to as human and just seeing them as entities to work for. Cynicism often results.

⁸ Christopher J. Adams, Holly Hough, Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Jia Yao, and Melanie Kolkin, “Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions,” *Pastoral Psychology* 66 (2017):147-175.

⁹ Stephen J. Rossetti and Colin J. Rhoades, “Burnout in Catholic Clergy: A Predictive Model Using Psychological and Spiritual Variables,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 4 (2013): 341.

burnout. Even if we put aside for a moment the ambiguity of the figure—what percentage of the 1500 are leaving because of burnout?—the number has a foggy origin. Lawrence W. Wilson claims that the figure comes from a statement by *Family News* by Dr. James Dobson from August, 1998: “We estimate that approximately 1,500 pastors leaves their assignments each month, due to moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within their local congregations.”¹⁰ Wilson notes: the number is an estimate, one that arose out of an informal survey of clergy and not from a statistically valid survey; Dobson does not say that clergy left the ministry but that they left their assignments; and the 1998 statement is long out-of-date.¹¹ Regarding this last point, an article by Dobson from 2007 makes the same claim with a footnote indicating that the figure is from a “compilation of surveys from Focus on the Family Pastors Gatherings,” with no date given.¹² In any case, there is good reason to be suspicious of the 1500-a-month statistic.

So then, why do some studies indicate a high level of burnout among clergy while others indicate that such claims are exaggerated? One reason is that people sometimes conflate poor self-care and high stress with burnout. The assumption is that the poor physical and mental health of many clergy is symptomatic of burnout, when, in reality, one could have significant health problems but not be burned out. Just because a pastor struggles with, for example, obesity and depression does not mean that the pastor is suffering from burnout. Laura K. Barnard and John F. Curry’s research makes a similar point regarding emotional exhaustion: “Despite high rates of emotional exhaustion, recent studies have also revealed rather high satisfaction in ministry.”¹³ A sample of “Catholic priests...reported high emotional exhaustion [but also] high personal satisfaction....Eighty-one percent would still go into parish ministry if they had the choice.”¹⁴ So while these clergy are reporting high levels of exhaustion, that exhaustion generally does not indicate burnout.

Indeed, this confusion about physical and emotional states and burnout suggests that part of the problem regarding clergy burnout is widespread misunderstanding of it. If the general population and even experts are mistakenly thinking that clergy burnout and poor self-care/emotional exhaustion are necessarily bound together, then the assumption may be that better self-care will result in reduced burnout.

¹⁰ Lawrence W. Wilson, “Stop Saying 1700 Pastors Leave the Ministry Every Month,” *Lawrence W. Wilson Writes About Faith*, lawrencewilson.com/stop-saying-1700-pastors-leave-the-ministry-every-month/.

¹² James Dobson, “Pastors and Churches Are Struggling,” *Apostolic Information Service*, December 20, 2007, www.apostolic.edu/pastors-and-churches-are-struggling/.

¹³ Laura K. Barnard and John F. Curry, “The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion and Other Personality Dimensions,” *Pastoral Psychology* 61 (2012): 150.

¹⁴ Barnard and Curry, “The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion,” 150.

However, as we have seen in some of the research, there is not always a close correlation between poor self-care and burnout. Thus, reducing burnout is not as simple as encouraging clergy to engage in better self-care. While it has value, self-care fails to address the patriarchal nature of the church and how that nature contributes to burnout. Thus, we need a strategy for ameliorating clergy burnout that draws from feminist ecclesiology.

STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING CLERGY BURNOUT AND WHAT IS MISSING FROM THEM

Analysis of clergy burnout along with proposed treatments tend to highlight three issues: better self-care of the body, mind, and soul while working; taking more time off from work; and cultivating healthful relationships. All three of these, really, boil down to better self-care for clergy. Both Vitello and Swift contend that key to reducing burnout is training and encouraging clergy to improve self-care. Vitello avers that clergy need to take more time off, while Swift, representing the Duke study, proposes that clergy need to make an array of changes, including more time off and a more healthful lifestyle. Vitello and Swift also each indicate that the congregation plays an important role in supporting the clergy's self-care. Vitello writes that clergy often struggle with boundary issues and feelings of guilt about taking time off,¹⁵ while Swift underscores the importance of congregations supporting clergy in their efforts at self-care:

One is they can be the first to encourage their pastor to take a vacation. They can consider making non-urgent phone calls during business hours. And instead of finding fault, they can voice support every time they get a chance. They can create healthy food offerings when they gather together, have walking versus sitting meetings, share the workload, and realize that this is a calling for all people of faith, to honor their bodies and their health, and figure out how they can do that.¹⁶

Barnard and Curry found that, in a study of clergy's desire to please others, clergy's tendency toward guilt or shame, their ability to differentiate the self from the role, and their ability to show self-compassion, the latter (the ability to show self-compassion) was the quality most highly correlated with satisfaction and thus could be the most effective at reducing burnout.¹⁷

Along the same lines, Alexis D. Abernathy, Gillian D. Grannum, Carolyn L. Gordon, Rick Williamson, and Joseph M. Currier write of the Pastors Empowerment Program (PEP). Originally developed for

¹⁵ Vitello, "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work."

¹⁶ Tony Cox, "Clergy Members Suffer from Burnout."

¹⁷ Barnard and Curry, "The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion," 149.

clergy working in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina before being applied more broadly, PEP is a three-year continuing education program for clergy to help improve their abilities to take care of themselves. Through annual three-day retreats over the course of three years, PEP trains clergy on self-care (Year One), resilience (Year Two), and cultivating relationships (Year Three). The structure of the program consists of psycho-education, dyadic work and group discussion, spiritual practices, and meditation.¹⁸ The program highlights five objectives:

1. Increase healthy living by providing psycho-education and practical activities in order to address risk and increase self-care;
2. Decrease emotional exhaustion through psycho-education focusing on practical aspects of spiritual renewal and spiritual practices;
3. Increase marital/relational satisfaction through communication training and psycho-education regarding personal conflict cycles;
4. Increase trauma recovery by providing resilience skills training and identifying key factors that foster the ability to thrive in response to adversity; and
5. Increase social support for participants in their local areas such that they incorporate key aspects of the PEP curriculum in leadership and community contexts.¹⁹

While the authors cite a case study that shows the effectiveness of the program, it is unclear that it has been effective with a large sample of clergy. In any case, the focus of the program is squarely on helping pastors take better care of themselves, including by improving relationships.

While PEP emphasizes changes clergy can make, Cameron Lee and Kurt Frederickson's book *That Their Work Will Be a Joy: Understanding and Coping with the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*²⁰ addresses both clergy and congregations in that each chapter contains a section for clergy, another for congregations, and a third for seminarians. The authors describe parish ministry as profoundly stressful due to the high expectations people have of clergy and the long hours that pastors work. They devote a chapter to pastors and the congregation alike learning to take seriously resting on the Sabbath, something that few people in general do, let alone clergy. Another chapter highlights

¹⁸ Alexis D. Abernathy, Gillian D. Grannum, Carolyn L. Gordon, Rick Williamson, and Joseph M. Currier, "The Pastors Empowerment Program: A Resilience Education Intervention to Prevent Clergy Burnout," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3, no. 3 (2016): 179.

¹⁹ Abernathy, Grannum, Gordon, Williamson, and Currier, "The Pastors Empowerment Program," 181.

²⁰ Cameron Lee and Kurt Frederickson, *That Their Work Will Be a Joy: Understanding and Coping with the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012).

the importance of taking care of the body, while others focus on setting healthful limits, including boundaries, and cultivating beneficial relationships, especially with family.

Anne Dillenschneider, in “Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout,” argues that clergy burnout is rooted in a deeper issue than “poor boundaries, or the failure to engage in self-care, or the seemingly insatiable desires of congregations.”²¹ She contends that the real issue is that clergy are suffering from spiritual starvation because of the changing understanding of parish ministry. Dillenschneider writes that, in the 1920s, the *de facto* job description of clergy was transformed from that of caretaker of souls (which required them to care for their own souls, as well) to “pastoral directors” (H. Richard Niebuhr’s term) whose attention was on administration and running the church at least somewhat like a business. Seminaries prepare people to be this kind of leader and devote little if any attention to spirituality and spiritual formation.²² As a solution, she urges clergy to take time for spiritual care and maybe even to have a spiritual director to help them do so.²³

In all of the above strategies, there is considerable attention to helping clergy to improve self-care while working, encouraging clergy to take more time off, and exhorting clergy to cultivate supportive relationships. While these objectives are laudable, there are important overlooked dynamics that feminist ecclesiology highlights.

THE VALUE OF FEMINIST ECCLESIOLOGY FOR AMELIORATING CLERGY BURNOUT

Although there are other theologies that could help to shed light on this issue, I focus on feminist ecclesiology precisely because the church has been heavily, and generally negatively, influenced by patriarchy. From its male language for God to the focus on men in Scripture to the dominance of men in church leadership, patriarchy has long had a tight grip on the church. As Natalie K. Watson writes,

Ecclesiology more than any other theological locus is ridden with strong gendered imagery. Here one only has to think of the abuse that has been made of the idea of the male Christ, represented by a male priest, and the church as the bride of Christ, feminine and submissive as women ought to be. But the submissive feminine is either virgin or mother, ideally both, and not a sexual being as women are²⁴

²¹ Anne Dillenschneider, “Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout,” *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, huffpost.com/entry/soul-care-and-the-roots-of-clergy-burnout _b_680925.

²² Dillenschneider, “Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout.”

²³ Dillenschneider, “Soul Care and the Roots of Clergy Burnout.”

²⁴ Natalie K. Watson, “Reconsidering Ecclesiology: Feminist Perspectives,” *Theology and Sexuality* 14 (2001): 59-77, 62.

Thus, it is reasonable at least to explore the possibility that feminist ecclesiology, which generally challenges patriarchy, might be particularly insightful regarding the church's problems, including clergy burnout.

More specifically, I apply what Anne M. Clifford would categorize as "reconstructionist" Christian feminist theology in my use of feminist ecclesiology. Clifford identifies three categories regarding Christian feminist theology: reformist, revolutionary, and reconstructionist. Reformist feminist theologians maintain that the Bible and the church²⁵ are fundamentally liberating for women and that the oppression of women has arisen from a patriarchal interpretation of the Bible and the church and not from the Bible and church themselves. Thus, a different hermeneutic will resolve the problem. By contrast, a revolutionary feminist theologian sees the Bible and the church as irredeemably patriarchal; thus, one should reject Christianity and pursue a different religion or spirituality. Reconstructionist feminist theology contends that, while the Bible and the church are indeed heavily patriarchal, they are still redeemable. There is a liberating and empowering core to Christianity for women that needs to be uplifted. The three theologians I focus on epitomize this reconstructionist feminist orientation.²⁶

Rosemary Radford Ruether explores feminist ecclesiology in *Women-Church*, the title of her book coming from the women-church movement begun in the early 1980s which concentrated on critiquing and renovating the church in light of feminism. Ruether argues that the patriarchal orientation of the church has produced a rigid hierarchy that enables clericalism to thrive. She writes, "Clericalism is built upon patriarchalism. The basic symbol and mode of the cleric's relationship to a layperson is that of an all-knowing father over a helpless child."²⁷ Indeed, feminism has long contended that a rigid adherence to hierarchy is a tool of patriarchy in that it helps to keep men in power. In sacramental life, clericalism disempowers the laity, for example, through the insistence that only clergy can preside over the Eucharist. In teaching and administration, too, Ruether contends, clergy maintain a tight hold on their power based in part on the assumption that the laity are not capable of serving in those capacities beyond token or marginal ways. Along these lines, drawing from Dillenschneider's observation that the role of pastor has changed over the past century from caretaker of souls to that of pastoral director, a leader of a business, I

²⁵ Clifford focuses on the Bible here, not the church, but I am adding the church because of my examination of ecclesiology. Her three categories certainly apply to ecclesiology and not just biblical studies.

²⁶ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 32-34.

²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (Philadelphia: Harper and Row, 1985), 76.

add that this dynamic of the pastor being the lone leader at the top has been exacerbated by this shift to a more business-type model of church. In any case, Ruether exhorts the church to expand significantly the opportunities that lay people have to participate as artists, teachers, care-givers, liturgists, and administrators. Rather than having a kind of “clerical caste,” the church would benefit greatly from “[a] ministry of function [...which] can allow the true plurality of the ministerial needs of the community to be defined and met.”²⁸

This anti-patriarchal movement away from clericalism toward greater empowerment of the laity could contribute profoundly to reducing clergy burnout by lifting some of the responsibility off the back of the pastor while also significantly enriching ministry by involving more people and their gifts. That is, this change would give the pastor greater opportunity for self-care, but it would also enrich the church by having more people involved to share their gifts, a change that could, among other things, profoundly enhance ministry for the pastor and thus reduce burnout. Of course, to make this shift would require clergy to relinquish some control and authority and would require the laity to internalize that all are ministers in the church, not just the ordained. Support for such a shift would have to arise throughout the church, from the laity to the clergy to other leaders, such as deacons and bishops.

In “Hot-House Ecclesiology: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church,” Letty Russell proposes that the church increase its identity as a hot-house, that is, a safe place for all people, especially women. The term “hot-house” refers not to the English understanding of a warm place for the growth of plants but to the Japanese understanding of a place of refuge. While she acknowledges that the church has a long history of at least aspiring to be a safe place, a place of sanctuary, Russell avers that the church often has failed to be that for women but instead has been a place of harassment and abuse, a place that teaches that women “were created second and ‘fell’ first and, therefore, deserve to be dominated and controlled....”²⁹ She contends that “feminist ecclesiology looks at the contradictions between the way biblical and church traditions speak about the church, and the way this is actually *experienced* by women in the church. It seeks to transform church traditions so that women can experience that tradition, and its practices, as welcoming.”³⁰ Drawing from the holiness of the church—she reminds the reader that the word “sanctuary” comes from the Latin word for “holy”—Russell declares that the church must be “hot with

²⁸ Ruether, *Women-Church*, 89.

²⁹ Letty M. Russell, “Hot-House Ecclesiology: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 1 (2001): 49.

³⁰ Russell, “Hot-House Ecclesiology,” 49.

the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Four clues to hot-house ecclesiology, then, are: the Spirit is poured out on women, good news is preached by women, hospitality is offered to women, and justice is shared by women.³² Her point is not to exclude men but to offer a corrective to the history of the church excluding women’s voices and not being a truly safe place for them.

This highlighting of the church as a place of safety for all offers an important contribution to addressing clergy burnout. Part of the church being a safe place for all is the church being a safe place for pastors themselves. Because of the expectations heavy upon their shoulders, clergy often are reluctant to be open and vulnerable in expressing their failings and feelings of sadness, anxiety, and doubt. The pastor is expected to be the congregation’s perpetual cheerleader, an identity that arises, again, from a hierarchical notion of church that places clergy above parishioners and thus in a kind of fatherly role demanding strength, confidence, and a suppression of vulnerability. Further, in general, patriarchy has kept alive the absurd notion that being honest about doubt, failings, and emotions such as sadness is a sign of weakness, especially for men. However, if we take seriously Russell’s emphasis on the church as a safe place for all then we should strive to make it a safe place for clergy to express their full humanity by being more emotionally open and honest in a way reminiscent of Henri Nouwen’s wounded-healer. Granted, there would need to be considerable discussion about adhering to proper boundaries. Indeed, a constructive step toward making the congregation safe for clergy would be to have the church engage in conversation about those boundaries and how to revise them so that they would reduce clergy burnout.

Regarding a reluctance to admit failure, J.R. Briggs’s *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure* considers that a pervasive sense of failure is prominent in contributing to clergy burnout. Clergy are expected to be successful by having growing attendance, robust finances, and energizing programs that make a profound difference in the congregation and the community (again, Dillenschneider’s critique of the recent role-shift for clergy comes to mind). When clergy serve congregations where those objectives are not met, it is easy for pastors to feel like failures and thus be more likely to burn out. Indeed, given the rising tide of secularism in the United States, along with increased (sometimes warranted) mistrust of organized religion, many clergy are without a doubt going to fail in these terms (I experienced this issue myself as I saw the weekly attendance at my congregation decline despite my best efforts). Briggs’s contention is that clergy need permission to acknowledge failure without shame and to receive

³¹ Russell, “Hot-House Ecclesiology,” 52.

³² Russell, “Hot-House Ecclesiology,” 52.

more support from the congregation and the larger church when those failures arise.

The third ecclesiologist is Natalie K. Watson, who is also squarely in the reconstructionist tradition in that she endeavors to “show that feminist ecclesiology does not have to accept being forced into making a choice between either inventing something new or maintaining a critical perspective, but that both are part of the same task.”³³ She sees the women-church movement (which Ruether engages in her book) as a crucial starting point for rethinking the idea of women as church, that is, as integral to the church instead of as peripheral, the position that patriarchy has long relegated them to. Watson points out that, while women have always been active in the church, often in greater numbers than men, male theologians have pushed aside women’s theology. Further, the church needs to consider seriously that humans, including women, are sexual beings and that human sexuality is consequential for theology and thus cannot be ignored. Feminist ecclesiology must rise above the patriarchal hegemony in the church to see women’s theologies, stories and sexualities as central to the church, not as peripheral or supplemental. Women also must see themselves as embodying Christ. At the same time, this move should not result in placing women in a position of superiority over men, thus replacing one form of oppression with another. Finally, Watson suggests a framework for feminist ecclesiology rather than deeming only one way of doing feminist ecclesiology as correct.

Watson’s emphasis on women’s bodies and sexualities can help to reduce clergy burnout through celebrating and valuing the body more than the church does. While the church would agree that the body is part of creation and needs proper care, long haunting Christianity has been the notion that the body, especially sexuality, is inferior to the soul and is even tainted, fallen, dirty. (I will never forget the time, when I was teaching catechism to junior high children, that one of my students declared that sex was a sin.) It is little wonder that clergy think that neglecting their bodies is acceptable for the sake of saving souls. Indeed, the church has a sometimes gruesome history of idealizing mortification of the flesh, as well as regarding the body, especially the female body, as something in need of purification. Feminism has striven to correct this thinking by celebrating the body, especially women’s bodies (which are often criticized and brutalized), as a glorious part of God’s creation. Indeed, God took on a body through the incarnation and thus ate, drank, felt emotions, and experienced pain along with the rest of us. Sacramental theology, also, elevates the body, such as through the Roman Catholic teaching of the real, bodily presence of Christ in bread and wine, physical items that parishioners

³³ Watson, “Reconsidering Ecclesiology,” 60.

take into their bodies. A consistently more positive message about the body could at least nudge clergy toward better self-care.

Watson's call for women's stories and perspectives to be central to the church, not peripheral or token, also can reduce clergy burnout through inviting women to have more prominent roles of leadership. While there are women clergy in some Protestant denominations, overwhelmingly clergy throughout Christianity are male. In the process, the church mutes the voices of women, but amplifying those voices could help to relieve some of the proclamatory burden of the male clergy while also providing the clergy with spiritual nourishment. Along these lines, I propose a reengagement with the rich tradition of women mystics, from Saint Hildegard of Bingen, to Julian of Norwich, to Saint Teresa of Avila. Even Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, generally not regarded a mystic, has surprising mystical elements in her teaching and writing that would be instructive and inspiring for clergy and laity alike. Of course, again, to make this move would require clergy to be willing to surrender some authority, and clergy and laity alike to rethink church.

CONCLUDING PROPOSAL FOR REDUCING CLERGY BURNOUT

Our exploration of feminist ecclesiology has produced the following suggestions for reducing clergy burnout:

1. Movement away from hierarchy, including clericalism, toward a model of ministry that empowers the congregation, especially women leadership;
2. Movement toward making the church a safe place for laity, but also for clergy by liberating them to be open about their emotions, doubts, and failings; and
3. Movement toward a more positive view of the body and thus the teaching that care for the body is not something clergy should ignore or minimize.

To make these changes will be challenging. Congregations are notoriously resistant to change, and patriarchy does not surrender its power easily. The following two steps may help toward these improvements.

First, clergy need more instruction along these lines when they are undergoing training, such as in seminary. Seminary curricula tend to be heavy on philosophy, theology, biblical studies, church history, and homiletics and light on burnout and how to prevent it beyond maybe a token unit within a larger class. Instead, seminarians should receive substantive education on some of the ideas from feminist ecclesiology that we have explored here. Perhaps addressing burnout could be one of the objectives of a seminary curriculum and thus could be a secondary but recurring theme woven into existing coursework.

Second, congregations need more instruction along these lines, as well. Deep, sustained reading, videos, discussion and workshops could empower congregations with ideas from feminist ecclesiology that would help to reduce clergy burnout while also simply making for a healthier, more faithful church in general. Congregational instruction could begin with a Bible study or with a retreat for the congregation's governing body (such as a council or vestry) and spread from there. These efforts would be done in partnership with the pastor with the understanding that the pastor, at various points, would need to step aside and trust the Holy Spirit to work through the congregation.

In conclusion, while much research on clergy burnout focuses on improving self-care, little has been written on addressing some of the undergirding dynamics that make clergy self-care resistant. Feminist ecclesiology offers both insight into the structures that fuel this resistance as well as strategies that can reduce clergy burnout, not only by helping clergy to improve self-care, but also by making the congregation a richer, more vibrant place for clergy and congregation alike. Whether 1500 burn out a month or 500 or 50, my hope is that we can reduce the number to zero, the holy fire ever bright. **M**

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