

Thriving, Surviving and Burnout in Church Leaders

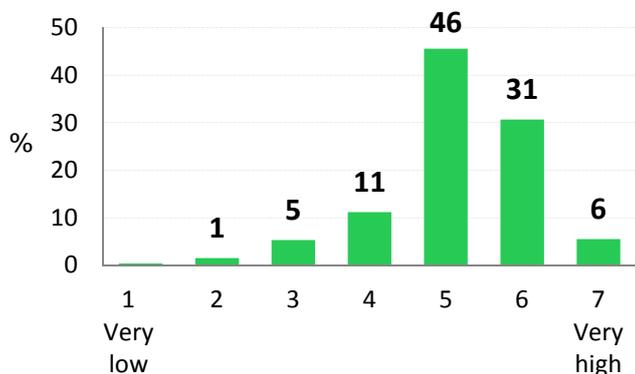
The Highs and Lows of Church Ministry

Those in Christian ministry can experience high levels of personal satisfaction in their work, and a great sense of effectiveness. It can be intensely rewarding, with a sense that their ministry is making a positive difference. In the 2011 National Church Life Survey Leader Survey the responses of over 2,000 senior church leaders showed that a vast majority rated their overall effectiveness highly.

Responses are shown in figure 1 to the following question, for senior church leaders in Australian churches:

"How would you rate your overall effectiveness in your present role here over the last few months?"

Figure 1: Personal rating of effectiveness

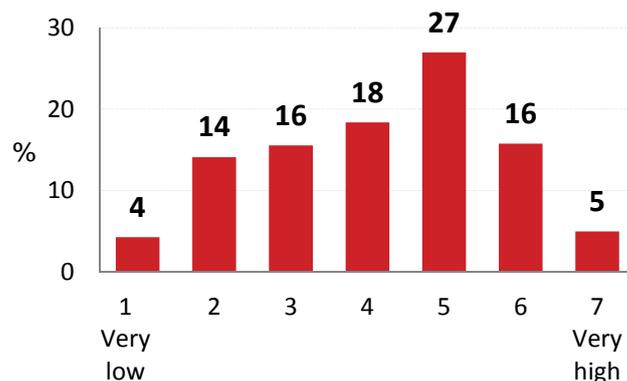


Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=2,272, weighted).

At the same time, church ministry can have significant challenges. Unlike in many vocations, a church leader's role and the expectations of those around them are often not clearly defined, they may have little or no control over the desired outcomes as expressed by those who employ them, and their personal life is continually under scrutiny as a model to others. Some of the challenges are met with a positive response, galvanising a leader to action, while others are a negative source of stress that the leader must deal with to continue effectively in ministry. Figure 2 shows the responses of senior leaders to the question:

"How stressed do you feel in your present role here over the last few months?"

Figure 2: Personal rating of stress



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=2,270, weighted).

Levels of stress are more evenly spread, but with the majority indicating levels up the higher end of this subjective scale. Rather than 'feeling stressed' or 'feeling effective', many church leaders are experiencing a high level of effectiveness and high stress *at the same time*.

Defining Thriving and Burnout

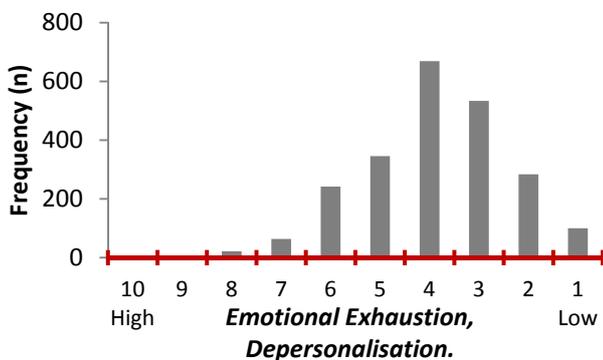
Stress can sometimes be constructive because of the response it elicits - people can rise to a challenge. However *chronic stress*, will eventually take a toll, and lead one towards burnout. The balance of the positives and negatives of ministry, combined with the personal vulnerabilities and strengths of the leader will determine

whether they are thriving, merely surviving, or burning out. While the causes and pathways towards or away from burnout are complex, there is widespread agreement that burnout itself is a



combination of 'emotional exhaustion' with typical distancing and coping behaviours (often referred to as 'depersonalisation'), and a low sense of personal achievement and work satisfaction. NCLS Research helped develop a pair of scales to examine these negative and positive phenomena in church leaders. The 'Scale for Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry' (SEEM) is eleven questions related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. The results for senior ministers across Australia are shown below in Figure 3, with low exhaustion to the right.

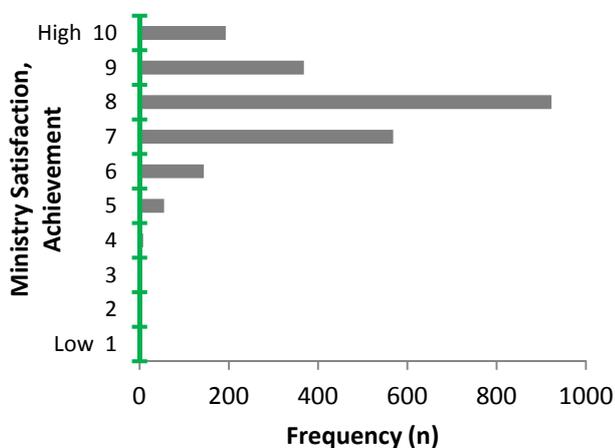
Figure 3: Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalisation (from SEEM Scale)



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=2,266, unweighted).

The 'Satisfaction in Ministry Scale' (SIMS) is eleven questions related to personal achievement and satisfaction in the role. Figure 4 shows the results for senior ministers in Australia on this scale, with high satisfaction towards the top.

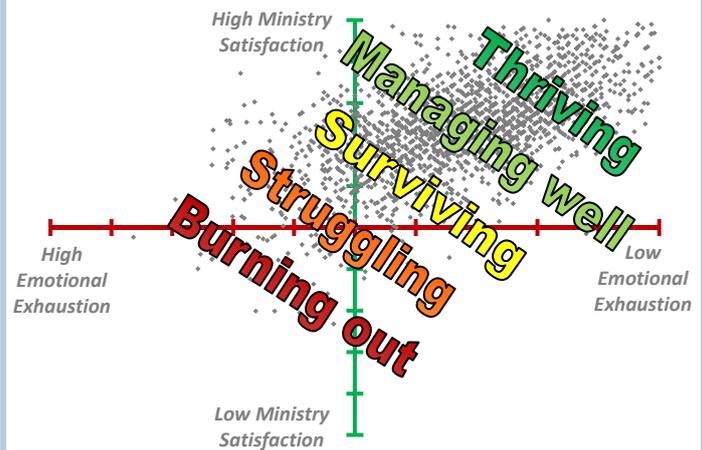
Figure 4: Ministry Satisfaction and Achievement (from SIMS scale)



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=2,266, unweighted).

To be *high on emotional exhaustion and low on satisfaction/achievement* is to be in danger of burnout. The converse (low exhaustion, high satisfaction/achievement) is to be *thriving* in the role. Figure 5 below shows both scales combined and where these outcomes are located.

Figure 5: Exhaustion/Depersonalisation combined with Satisfaction/Achievement



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=2,266, unweighted).

Examining where one is on the spectrum from burnout to thriving is an issue for all in church leadership - not just senior ministers. Most leaders in Australian churches are in the range of 'Managing well' to 'Thriving'. However, a large number are below this, with some in danger or in the process of burning out.

Moving beyond surviving to thriving

Denominational leaders ought to consider what the positions of all their church leaders might be, what the main sources of stress and encouragement are, and whether systemic or training issues could be playing a role in the vulnerability or strength of ministers in their movement. The NCLS Personal Foundations of Sustainable Leadership offer a framework for personal development and resilience of those in church leadership.

Data sources

Powell, R., (2011) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Leader Survey. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Citation

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