



# Supportive Relationships

## Personal Foundation 5 of Sustainable Leadership

### Introduction

This fact sheet examines the importance of a Christian leader's maintaining supportive relationships in their own life. Results from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) for church leaders who completed the Leader Survey show that those with strong supportive relationships are more likely to be thriving in ministry and not burning out.

NCLS Research has conducted extensive research into sustainable leadership - avoiding burnout and moving from surviving to thriving in ministry. Most church

leaders face many challenges in ministry and also experience many encouragements. Numerous factors need to be taken into account to understand why some leaders struggle while others manage

well. Some factors may be difficult or even impossible to change. Supportive relationships is one area where change can occur - where a leader can examine their own identity, priorities, practices, and relationships to consider what could be different and how positive results could flow.

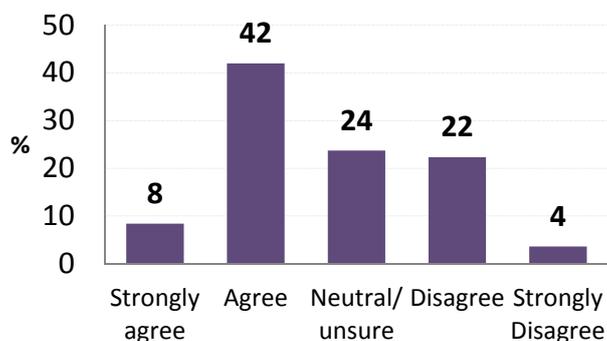
### Supportive relationships matter

Being able to make and keep friends can be a challenge for some in ministry roles. The support received from close friends and family can make a critical difference in how well demanding times in ministry are handled. Supportive relationships within the church are also important. When church leaders feel loved and supported by those within the church they are less likely to be burning out and more likely to be thriving. Personal well-being is enhanced through relationships with people who care, can provide support, can be honest truth-tellers and reference

points for both work and wider issues. Figures 1 and 2 show the responses of almost two thousand senior church leaders to two questions about their relationships.

*" I have a strong and growing circle of close friends from whom I get a great deal of support "*

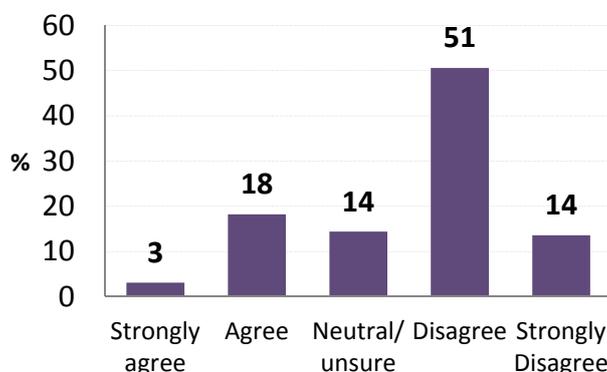
**Figure 1: Strong circle of close friends who give support**



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,875, weighted).

*" I find it hard to make and keep close friends "*

**Figure 2: Hard to make and keep close friends**



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,872, weighted).

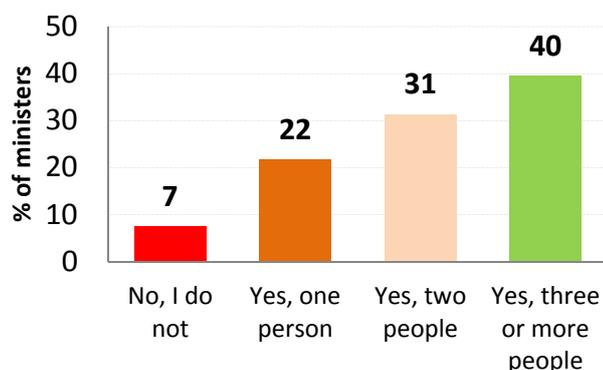
Half of senior ministers agree they have a strong and growing circle of friends, as shown in Figure 1, while

about one quarter (24%) are unsure and the remaining quarter disagree (26%). About one in five (21%) agree they find it hard to make and keep close friends. This raises the question: are the ministers without an adequate base of friends in a sustainable position, while they offer pastoral care and support to those in their churches?

Another question that appeared in the leader survey is identifying the proportion of ministers that may be in a relationally isolated position:

*" Among your family, colleagues and contacts, do you have someone with whom you are able to be completely honest, who encourages and supports you and is really concerned for you in your daily life and work? "*

**Figure 3: Number of people who support with complete honesty, encouragement, concern**



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,875, weighted).

These results show that among senior leaders in Australian churches, 7% indicate they do not have even one person with whom they can be completely honest and be supported and encouraged by. Another 22% indicate they have one such person. This highlights the isolated plight of over a quarter of those in senior ministry. There are no doubt many assistant clergy and lay leaders in a similar position.<sup>1</sup>

### Where do leaders find support?

Church leaders may sometimes have a support network provided by a caring church, but often it is up to them to find their own sources of support and encouragement. Leaders in the 2011 NCLS were asked:

<sup>1</sup> Most of the results produced in national fact sheets using leader data focuses on senior leaders. This is because weighting can be applied based on the estimated number of senior leaders (1 per church) and a representative national picture can be presented.

*" Who are the people most helpful and supportive to you in your leadership role? "*

**Table 1: Most helpful and supportive in role**

	%
Spouse	71%
Ministry colleague	71%
Person in congregation	51%
Friend	45%
Counsellor/spiritual director	28%
Denom leader or consultant	25%
Sibling	15%
Parent	14%
Other relative	11%
Other	5%
Church consultant apart from denom	5%

Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey D Senior Leaders ( n=473, weighted).

Note: respondents could choose up to 4 options.

As table 1 shows, the most common sources of personal support in their leadership role were their spouse or a colleague in ministry, chosen by 71% of senior leaders as one of their 4 choices for this question. Just over half of leaders (51%) indicated there was a person in their congregation while less than half (45%) indicated a friend. About a quarter indicated a professional support person such as a counsellor/spiritual director (28%) or a denominational leader (25%). While it's encouraging that so many indicated major support in their role by a ministry colleague, outside support from a professional is an area where more help could be made available.

While church leaders can seek out supportive relationships, it is not an area where they can be sure they will always find them. Churches would do well to support this need, both internally being supportive and providing the means for other external support.

### Data sources

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

### Citation

Sterland, S. (2014) Supportive Relationships: Personal Foundation 5, Factsheet 1.14006. Sydney: NCLS Research,.