

Pastoral Well-being: Findings from the Canadian Evangelical Churches Study

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There are a myriad of studies on clergy well-being. Many of these studies have been done by seminaries and applied researchers who seek ways to keep clergy healthy, but there are also many studies done by social scientists (mainly psychologists) who are often more focused on academic rigor than clergy care. Much of this work started when denominations became aware of clergy shortages – first among Catholic priests (Fichter 1968; Greeley 1972; Hoge et al. 1988, Hoge et al., 1995) and then among mainline Protestant denominations (Jud et al. 1970; Towler and Coxon 1979; Randall 2004) – since there was a growing need to retain ministers and attract new potential clergy. Fewer studies have focused on evangelical denominations, and one is hard-pressed to find published Canadian data for any of these groups¹. Nonetheless, all five of the denominational leaders we spoke to were concerned about clergy shortages in the future and were looking for innovative ways to keep pastors healthy, particularly young pastors, and to attract new gifted leaders.

The Canadian Evangelical Churches Study (CECS), comprised of phone interviews with roughly 475 randomly selected pastors from five major denominations (Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Convention Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, and Mennonite Brethren), was completed in the first quarter of 2009. The study was funded in its entirety by the Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism (CRCE)². In addition to the phone interviews, the study included 50 face-to-face interviews with pastors, and 100 phone interviews with youth/children's pastors. One part of the hour-long questionnaire was related to pastoral well-being. We asked questions about 1) job satisfaction, 2) whether the pastor performed tasks in areas of weakness or strength, and 3) perceived stress level. In addition, the pastors were asked a series of questions probing their perceptions of the overall vitality and effective functioning of the congregation they serve. These surveys give us a glimpse into the well-being of evangelical pastors in Canada.

Literature review

In spite of the fact that most studies on clergy well-being are from the United States and focus on mainline Protestants and Catholics, it is reasonable to assume at least some similarities across Christian traditions and the 49th parallel. Applied researchers, who usually interview clergy, find similar concerns across studies. One of the most commonly cited threats to pastoral well-being is too many time demands. Studies show that the vast majority of pastors spend more than 40 hours a week at work. The full-time paid pastors in our sample averaged 51.7 hours a week. Furthermore, since they are always on call, they find it difficult to balance work and family time (Lehr 2006). “Being a pastor is like being a dog at a whistlers’ convention,” quipped Michael Jinkins of the Alban Institute, who found 74% of its sample of Austin Seminary graduates raised the concern of time pressures (Jinkins 2002, 12). Several studies indicated that criticism and conflict are another major threat. This conflict is rarely over theological issues, even if there are a lot of disagreements in congregations. Instead, it is generally over interpersonal tensions, gossip, backstabbing, snide comments – all of which have a corrosive effect on a pastor’s

¹ The exception is Larson and Goltz (1993), which was sponsored by the EFC’s task force on the family. For more information, see Wiseman (1998a, 1998b).

² The primary researchers (Sam Reimer, Professor of Sociology, Crandall University; Michael Wilkinson, Associate Professor of Sociology, Trinity Western University; and Andrew Grenville, Chief Research Officer, Angus Reid Strategies) wish to acknowledge the generous support by the CRCE for this study.

enthusiasm for ministry. A third common issue is loneliness. Past studies reveal that many pastors long for a safe confidant that can relate to their personal struggles. As a result of the need to maintain professional boundaries (which limits how emotionally vulnerable a pastor can be with those under his/her pastoral care), and the concern that sharing problems with superiors or congregants will be perceived as “unspiritual” or incompetence, pastors tend to avoid conversations about personal well-being. A 2007 study by Duke University found that clergy were significantly more likely to “report excessive job demands, criticism, feelings of loneliness and isolation” than their congregants (Zylstra 2009, 17). A fourth threat is the headlong collision between an idealistic view of what ministry should be and the cold realism of human frailty and fickleness experienced by many young pastors. Pastors invest in congregants, only to find that congregants will not, in turn, invest back in the congregation.

Closely related to applied studies on pastoral well-being are the social scientific studies of clergy job satisfaction, stress, and burnout. Some studies have found that clergy evince high job satisfaction in comparison to other occupations (Goetz 1997; Dart 2008), and relatively low stress (Barna 1993). Nonetheless, clergy seem to be susceptible to burnout (Francis et al. 2008), just like social workers, teachers, nurses, and others in caring professions.

Research indicates that factors influencing burnout can be divided into four main areas: personality factors, demographic factors, work environment, and period effects. Personality factors focus on personality traits and personal coping mechanisms. Some studies show that personality factors are the strongest predictors of burnout (Rutledge and Francis 2004; Hills et al. 2004; Francis et al. 2009). Demographic factors suggest that stress and burnout are more common among younger, less educated, and unmarried pastors (Francis et al. 2009). Work environment factors address both the unique nature of clergy tasks (common to all clergy) and those special factors attributed to the particular congregation they serve. Work environment factors common to most pastors include regularly dealing with major life transitions (such as funerals, conversions, family crises and personal traumas), repetitive tasks, coping with the daily operations of organizations (meetings, budgets, and financial pressures), and theological disagreements. Pastors tend to be highly dedicated and invested in their work, which can increase stress and burnout. Pastors perform “people work,” which is emotionally demanding. A pastor’s job performance is difficult to measure concretely, and thus good performance often goes unrecognized and uncelebrated. Congregations are voluntary organizations; thus pastors must work with the lay volunteers in the congregation regardless of lay ability or performance (they can’t be fired: only the pastor can). Lay volunteers may show lack of commitment by dropping tasks, “church hopping,” participating intermittently, causing dissension, and so on. Congregations often lack clear channels of communication, functional structures, and committees, and these dysfunctions inhibit positive change that the pastor is trying to implement.

Finally, period effects are related to evidence showing that pastoral burnout and turnover is increasing over time (Jenkins and Maslach 1994). This issue could be related to changes in the pastors themselves or in the people in the congregations, or both. If pastors have changed over time, it may be because they grew up in a time of relative plenty – unlike those pastors who experienced the Great Depression, for instance – and thus lack perseverance or a willingness to make do with very little. The growing tendency toward greater individualism, immediate gratification, and increased educational credentials (which tend to correlate with higher job expectations among

pastors) may also have an effect (Jenkins and Maslach 1994). Incoming pastors may have lower levels of psychological health or resilience than previous generations of pastors, possibly because the healthiest youth are seeking more prestigious occupations. On the other hand, it might not be the pastors who have changed but the people or the society around them. For example, Milner et al. (2006) argue that in a secularized society, clergy have less control and therefore less ability to do their jobs well because their position is no longer highly esteemed. Secularization also means that people privatize their religious views (they are “spiritual, not religious”) and are less committed to organizational forms of religion (they participate selectively and “shop around”). As a result, clergy work with uncommitted laity and have less influence in their lives. They have more tasks to cover, less pay, and less job security. Hence, Milner et al. speculate that clergy who have an “external orientation” (i.e., finding legitimacy and motivation through growing churches numerically, or through positive support from their congregants) experience lower job satisfaction than those clergy who have an “internal orientation” to ministry (i.e., based on a sense of professional competence, personal integrity, and spiritual connectedness to God).

Overview of Findings

Our survey did not explore all these possible explanations, but it did look at pastoral stress, job satisfaction, and pastoral tasks (whether the pastor works in areas of strength or weakness). Stress refers to environmental factors that are perceived as straining or exceeding the adaptive capacities of the individual and threatening his/her well-being. It should be distinguished from burnout, which is marked by emotional exhaustion (fatigue caused by extensive interaction with others), depersonalization (uncaring and cynical attitudes toward others), and lack of personal accomplishment (deterioration in perceived competence and personal satisfaction with achievements) (Maslach and Jackson 1981).

We asked pastors, “On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is no stress and 10 is extremely stressful, how stressful is your pastoral work right now?” The average was 5.86, although nearly a quarter of the pastors (23.8%) rated their stress at 8 or more, and another 20% rated it at 7.

In spite of these moderate to high levels of stress, pastors rated their job satisfaction fairly high. Job satisfaction is normally understood as the fit between personal needs/desires and the work performed (Jenkins and Maslach 1994). We asked respondents, “On the same 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is completely dissatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied, how would you rate your overall job satisfaction right now?” and then “how would you rate the following areas?”:

1. “Work load and work expectations.”
2. “Salary and benefits.”
3. “Support and encouragement from the congregation.”
4. “Time off each week.”
5. “Vacation time.”
6. “Study leaves or sabbaticals.”
7. “Relationships with the lay leaders.”



8. "Relationships with other church staff."
9. "Support from the denomination, including training, conferences, financial assistance, placement assistance, regional/national leadership, and pastoral counseling."

In keeping with the pastoral concerns raised in previous research, the list emphasizes time constraints and relationships. Table 1 gives the averages for each question and for overall job satisfaction. It also gives the percentage of respondents who gave a high job satisfaction rating for each item (8 out of 10 or higher).

Table 1. Job satisfaction scores

Satisfaction with...	Average score	Percentage of respondents scoring 8 or above
Study leaves/sabbaticals	6.26	41.5%
Workload/expectations	7.45	57.3%
Support from denomination	7.46	59.2%
Time off each week	7.56	58.5%
Support from congregation	7.96	67.2%
Salary and benefits	7.98	69.2%
Relationship with lay leaders	8.22	77.0%
Vacation time	8.39	79.3%
Relationships with church staff	8.48	82.4%
Overall job satisfaction	7.90	67.8%

Besides study leaves and sabbaticals (which I suspect many pastors have never had in their current job), "workload and work expectations" has the lowest rating while "relationships with church staff" is rated the highest.³ However, there is little variation between the averages, and most items are rated fairly high. The overall job satisfaction is nearly 8 (7.9) for the evangelical pastors in this study.

Next, we asked pastors about the duties they performed at least monthly, followed by "I will now read through those duties you said you were involved in at least monthly. Please identify those areas that you consider strengths, areas of satisfaction and enjoyment, and those areas you consider weaknesses, areas that you find draining. If the area is neither a strength nor weakness, just say 'neither'." All the tasks in the survey are listed in table 2 below. In the second column of table 2, the percentage of pastors who said they were involved in that activity is given. The subsequent columns give the percentage of those pastors who considered that activity an area of strength and those that considered it an area of weakness (the remainder considered it neither a strength nor weakness).

³ For the "relationships with church staff" item, the sample is 312, as only those pastors who have other church staff responded. For the other items, the sample is 477.

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Table 2. Areas of strength/weakness for pastors

Tasks	Percentage of respondents who perform this task monthly or more frequently	Percentage of respondents who consider this task an area of strength	Percentage of respondents who consider this task an area of weakness
Visitation	97.5	58.3	19.4
Sermon preparation and preaching	93.7	94.5	0.8
Administration	93.5	39.2	34.8
Greeting/meeting newcomers	87.0	61.7	15.4
Developing vision/goals	86.4	61.2	12.1
Counseling	86.0	52.2	17.8
Leading small groups	60.0	73.8	4.9
Teaching adult Sunday school	49.1	81.2	3.0
Working with youth	42.1	51.7	12.4
Leading worship	41.5	66.2	8.1
Working with children	24.9	57.1	16.8

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of lead pastors are involved in visitation, preaching, administration, greeting/meeting newcomers, vision-casting, and counseling. Less common tasks may be covered by another pastor or volunteer, or may not be offered in the congregation. Administration is the most common area of weakness for just over a third of the pastors, and nearly all are involved in it. Visitation, counseling, working with children, and connecting with newcomers are considered areas of weakness by between 15% and 20% of the pastors. On the other hand, nearly all pastors consider preaching and teaching adults to be areas of strength.

Then we asked, “Roughly what percentage of your work time do you spend on areas of weakness?” and “Has your church hired staff or positioned volunteers to help with these areas of weakness?” Answers to the first question ranged from no time spent in areas of weakness (the default for all those who did not consider any of the tasks they did to be areas of weakness, (36.8% of the sample) to 70% of their time, with 10.5% as the average. The average time spent in areas of weakness is low (10%), but the range is considerable. Of those who said they did some task that was a weakness, 57% said that staff or volunteers helped in these areas of weakness. Those who did not have help in their areas of weakness (43%) had slightly lower job satisfaction.⁴ They also viewed their congregation more negatively, which we analyze further below.

Finally, in light of the fact that pastors often voice concerns about loneliness, we asked pastors, “Do you have close friends in your area with whom you share your personal or spiritual struggles?” The good news here is that 77.4% of the pastors said they did. Still, nearly a fifth said they did not, and those who did not had lower job satisfaction.⁵ There was no clear demographic difference between those who had a confidant and those who did not.

⁴ This difference is statistically significant, but substantively it is not very large. The mean is 7.58 for those who did not have help in their areas of weakness, compared with 7.98 for those who did have help ($p=0.009$).

⁵ There is a medium strong and statistically significant correlation between having a confidant and pastoral satisfaction ($r=0.184$).



Correlates and Predictors of Job Satisfaction

Tables 1 and 2 describe the data, but more informative are the correlates of job satisfaction, because they hint at the causes. To examine causes, I combined nine of the satisfaction items from table 1 to create a scale of job satisfaction.⁶ The correlations for this scale are very similar for the “overall job satisfaction” question in table 1. I tested the correlation between job satisfaction and many items on the survey, and found those in table 3 to be the important correlates. Satisfaction is not significantly correlated with gender (18 female respondents), congregation size, recent increases in attendance, whether the pastoral position is paid or not, length of time at the church, denomination, province, or educational level of pastor. Table 3 includes correlations for demographics, the measures discussed above, and some questions that tapped the pastor’s subjective evaluation of his/her congregation (“opinion of the congregation”). Pastors were asked to respond to 20 “opinion of the congregation” statements in the survey, all ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The 20 statements are:

1. “In general, this congregation is wary of change and innovation.”
2. “The vast majority of lay people are not aware of the goals and direction of this church.”
3. “Everyone enthusiastically participates in congregational singing.”
4. “The pastors and staff of this church often scramble to complete tasks that are dropped by the lay person responsible for them.”
5. “Newcomers find it hard to form friendships with people in this church.”
6. “The lay leaders are committed to this church and fully endorse its mission.”
7. “The participants in this church are pessimistic about its future.”
8. “I think we have problems with communication between the clergy, lay leaders, and the congregation.”
9. “Attendees frequently invite unconverted friends and family to this church.”
10. “The contributions of our youth and children are appreciated in this church.”
11. “I don’t think we are doing enough for our children and youth in this church.”
12. “In general, the congregation is satisfied with the quality of the programs provided for the adults in this church.”
13. “The congregation is committed to praying for this church’s ministry and programs.”
14. “People in our church are encouraged to ask questions and challenge ideas.”

⁶ All the job satisfaction items were included except “relationships with church staff”, which was left out to maintain sample size. One-third of the sampled pastors work in situations where they are the only staff. The 9-item scale ranges from 9 to 90 and has an alpha of 0.798 (which means the items are well-suited to be combined into one scale).



15. "The laity expect the pastors and other church staff to do most of the work in this church."
16. "This church is very committed to leadership development and formation."
17. "It is often difficult to fill voluntary positions in this church."
18. "Overall, I would consider this to be a very healthy church."
19. "I am worried about the long term future of this church."
20. "This church tends to burn out its leaders."

All 20 statements were also combined to make an "opinion of the congregation" scale, which is also correlated with job satisfaction in table 3. Some of the statements were recoded so that the higher the pastor's score, the more positive their view of the congregation. The final three statements (18–20) were the strongest correlates of job satisfaction, and are included separately in table 3. A question on congregation finances was also included, which asked, "How would you describe your congregation's financial health currently? Would you say it is excellent, good, tight but manageable, in some difficulty, or in serious difficulty?" This subjective financial item was also strongly correlated with the job satisfaction scale.

In order to interpret the numbers in table 3, note that correlations range from 1 to –1, with stronger correlations being further from zero. The asterisks (*) beside each correlation indicates roughly the degree to which the correlation is statistically significant, which means that we can be sure that the correlation is not simply due to sampling error. For more information on correlations or statistical significance, please refer to the appendix.

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Table 3. Correlations with job satisfaction scale

	Correlation with satisfaction scale
Age	0.163***
White	0.091*
French	-0.087
Pastor's stress level	-0.287***
Hours spent in pastoral work per week	-0.118*
Percentage of time spent in areas of weakness	-0.133**
Staff/volunteer help in areas of weakness (N=305)	0.139*
Has close friends to share personal struggles with	0.151***
Congregation's current financial health	0.268***
I consider this a very healthy church	0.336***
I am worried about future of church	-0.319***
Church tends to burn out its leaders	-0.364***
Opinion of the congregation scale	0.510***

Statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Regarding the pastor's characteristics, the positive and significant correlation with age indicates that those who are older are more satisfied (I discuss this more below). Pastors of European/North American descent (white) tend to be slightly more satisfied than ethnic minorities (N=48). Ethnic (non-white) minority pastors are significantly less satisfied with their vacation time, the only single-item difference that reaches statistical significance. We had only ten French-language interviews, but these pastors ranked their satisfaction lower overall, and they were particularly less satisfied with their salary/benefits, time off, and vacation time.⁷

Not surprising are the negative relationships with pastoral stress level, hours worked, and hours spent in areas of weakness. The "hours worked" correlation is almost identical (-0.115) if we include only those pastors who work fulltime (N=446). Equally unsurprising are the positive correlations between job satisfaction and relational support, such as having help in areas of weakness and having a confidant.

The last three items are the strongest correlates of job satisfaction that I could find in the survey. It appears that the pastor's view of his or her congregation's health has the greatest effect on the pastor's well-being. The financial well-being of the congregation and particularly the tendency of the congregation to burn out pastors suggest that the congregation's health is key the pastor's health. The strongest correlation with job satisfaction is clearly the

⁷ French-language Protestant churches tend to be small and their pastors poorly paid. A francophone evangelical church leader noted that many of their churches have between 20 and 40 members, and he knows of one full-time pastor making \$20,000 a year, and several others making around \$30,000.



20-question “opinion of the congregation” scale. On the positive side, this probably indicates that pastors care about their congregations. On the less positive side, unhealthy congregations are hard on pastoral well-being.

However, these measures are not free of bias. Although we would expect the health of the congregation and the health of the pastor to be related, the pastor’s subjective valuation of the congregation, like his/her job satisfaction, is in the eye of the beholder. Negative valuations of congregations (or of job satisfaction and stress levels) could indicate a less healthy congregation, or pastor, or both.

The most rigorous way to identify the causes of job satisfaction is a statistical test called multiple regression analysis. The test allows one to analyze the effect of several causes of job satisfaction simultaneously. The numbers in table 4 are not correlations, but they operate in a similar way, where the further the number is from 0, the stronger the effect. In other words, the larger the number in the table, the stronger is its effect on job satisfaction.⁸ Three regression models are presented in table 4. The first includes only demographic variables as predictors, the second adds other well-being questions, and the last adds the 20-item “opinion of the congregation” scale. Again, a brief explanation of regression analysis is given in the appendix.

Table 4. Predictors of job satisfaction, ordinary least squares regression

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	0.176***	0.149***	0.070
White	0.098*	0.094*	0.078*
French	−0.095*	−0.106*	−0.080*
Hours/week		−0.069	−0.101**
Stress level of pastor		−0.243***	−0.146***
Friends to share personal struggles with		0.145***	0.073
Percentage of time in areas of weakness		−0.108*	−0.070
Opinion of the congregation scale			0.441***

Statistical significance: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

In the first model, age is the strongest effect. The “white” race and “French” language factors are not as strong, possibly because of the low number of French-speaking and ethnic pastors in the sample. In the second model, the pastor’s age, stress level and whether or not he/she has a confidant are the most important predictors of job satisfaction. Interestingly, the number of hours the pastor works is not significant here. In the third model, the effect of the “opinion of the congregation” scale is three times stronger than the next strongest predictor in the model. Once we account for “opinion of the congregation,” the “hours per week” effect regains statistical significance, but the effect of age is weakened. This weakened effect of age is likely related to the fact that younger pastors are more negative about their churches. Younger pastors also have lower job satisfaction.⁹

⁸ For the statistically inclined, table 4 presents standardized beta coefficients. The adjusted R² is 0.04 for model 1, 0.142 for model 2, and 0.313 for model 3. For model 3, this means that the predictors account for about one-third (31.3%) of the variation in job satisfaction, which is quite good.

⁹ Age and opinion of the congregation are negatively correlated at −0.175*, and age and the job satisfaction scale are positively correlated at 0.163*** as shown in table 3.



The lower job satisfaction (and lower opinion of their congregation) of younger pastors is disconcerting for denominations who face a shortage of young leaders. Surely this would indicate that young pastors are more susceptible to burnout and leaving the ministry. The key question is why these correlations with age exist. Is this because of “pastor” factors such as idealistic expectations, or less emotional health, or newer visions of ministry that don’t mesh well with current congregation realities? Or is it related to “congregation” factors? Younger pastors may be more likely to find work in less healthy churches (because the older pastors don’t want those jobs) or less established churches (such as church plants) which negatively affect their job satisfaction.

Regression model 3 in table 4 suggests that the most important factor for job satisfaction is the congregation, and when the “congregation” factor is included in the regression, the effect of age is very weak. In other words, once we account for the congregation, young pastors and older pastors have nearly identical job satisfaction. However, recall that the “opinion of the congregation” is not an objective measure of congregational health. One would predict that pastors who are near burnout would have a less positive view of their congregation, even if the congregation was relatively healthy.

In table 5, the effect of age is illustrated, both with the 20-item “opinion of the congregation” (ranges from 20 to 100) scale and the job satisfaction scale (ranges from 9 to 90). For pastors aged 30 or younger, their opinion of the congregation is a full 14 points lower than the ≥ 51 age category. The real big jump is between the youngest category of pastors (only 8 pastors in this category, however) and everyone else, but each age category shows increasingly positive views of the congregation. The same pattern exists for job satisfaction, but the age differences are less extreme.

Table 5. Opinion of the congregation and job satisfaction for pastor age groups

Scale	Age Group			
	30 or less	31-40	41-50	51 and up
Opinion of the congregation	62.8	72.6	74.1	76.9
Satisfaction	63.1	67.8	67.7	71.0

The CECS data provide a unique opportunity to parse out the “pastor” from the “congregation” effects because we interviewed pastors and youth pastors in the same congregation. The average age for youth pastors is 34.4 years,¹⁰ 14.8 years younger than their lead pastors on average (49.2). There are 13 identically worded “opinion of the congregation” items in the two surveys, which were added together to form a scale that ranges from 13 to 65 (where 65 is the most positive view of the congregation; I call this scale “Opinion2”).¹¹ The average Opinion2 score for youth pastors is 47.25 and for their lead pastors, 50.01. The difference is statistically significant ($p=0.002$), which means that we can be sure that youth pastors are more negative about their congregations than are the lead pastors. Furthermore, the younger the youth pastor, the more negative he/she is about the congregation (age and

¹⁰ For the 100 youth pastor interviews, we asked first to interview a youth pastor or the pastor that had youth ministry as part of their larger job description, then a children’s pastor. So, the higher than expected age of the youth pastors is likely related to the fact that we had some associate pastors that had youth ministry as part of their larger portfolio.

¹¹ The 13 items are 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20 listed above. The scale (Opinion2) has an alpha of 0.831 for youth pastors and 0.816 for lead pastors.



Opinion2 correlation is -0.196^*).¹² Obviously, the difference in job satisfaction and opinion of the congregation are at least partly due to “pastor” effects, particularly the age of the pastor.¹³ However, the difference does not mean that “pastor” effects explain all the differences and “congregation” effects explain none. Rather, I suspect that both factors are important predictors. What we can say is that the correlation between lower congregation opinions and younger pastors is at least partly related to the pastor’s age.

Conclusions

The good news is that the Canadian evangelical pastors who participated in this study have high job satisfaction. Typically of those in caring professions, however, these pastors also find their jobs moderately stressful. This combination of moderate stress with high job satisfaction probably indicates that they are deeply committed to their work, which of course is good. Pastors who are older (and to some extent white and English-speaking), who spend less time in areas of weakness, who work fewer hours, who have a close confidant, and who perceive their congregation to be healthy also have less stress and higher levels of job satisfaction.

Most of these findings are fairly easy to interpret and provide denominational leaders with some food for thought. One might hope that they will result in actions that will strengthen pastor well-being. But how do we interpret the connection between age, job satisfaction, and opinion of the congregation?

One possibility is that the congregation is the problem. The pastor’s opinion of his/her congregation is the most powerful predictor on job satisfaction in this research. The congregation can be the problem if younger pastors get more dysfunctional churches than older pastors, whether because they are more idealistic (“I can fix this church”) or because they are less discerning (“I didn’t realize this church was so messed up when I came”), or because the healthiest churches already have pastors in place and the younger ones get whatever is available.

This research indicates that it’s not just the church, however, since young pastors have lower job satisfaction and are more critical of their congregation than the older lead pastor in the same congregation. Of course, this does not mean young pastors are the problem. They are more critical of their churches and maybe they are right to be so. Yet, how do we explain it? This may be an “aging” issue, such that younger pastors become less idealistic or more competent as they age. Or this could be a “period” issue, where young pastors today have less job satisfaction than pastors of previous generations, and they are not going to grow out of it.

Another possible explanation is related to “dropout” effects. Job satisfaction may be inflated because of the weaknesses of survey research, where those with low job satisfaction are more likely to have quit the pastorate, or not respond to the survey. There may be less job satisfaction on average among young pastors simply because

¹² Since the (normally) young youth pastor is evaluating the same church as the (normally) older lead pastors, their scores were positively correlated (0.446^{***}). However, the gap between youth and lead pastor Opinion2 scores for the same church is sometimes surprising, and the differences range from -15 (a negative score means the youth pastor rates the church healthier than the lead pastor) to $+23$ (positive means the senior pastor gives a more positive score), which indicates the subjective nature of this evaluation. There are 39 negative scores, and 56 positive scores (5 scores are identical). However, the gap between the lead pastor and youth pastor’s opinion scores is not correlated with the age gap. So, negative congregation evaluations from younger pastors do not seem to be due to difficulties of working with a much older lead pastor, but with the youthfulness of the youth pastors.

¹³ Ancillary analysis shows that youth pastors are no more negative about their churches than lead pastors of the same age. In other words, it’s an age effect, not a youth-pastor-versus-senior-pastor effect.



those who would have become dissatisfied older pastors have already left the ministry, and thus they are no longer in the sample (Francis et al. 2008).

Finally, it is possible that neither the congregation nor the pastor is the problem. A healthy congregation and healthy pastor may not work out simply because of a poor fit between them (disagreement over vision, theology, etc.). One study found that pastoral job satisfaction suffers when the pastor is more theologically liberal than the congregation, but not when the pastor is more conservative (Mueller and McDuff 2004). Furthermore, young pastor dissatisfaction can be caused by a misfit between pastor and the denominational leadership, because they disagree theologically or in purpose, or because the pastor senses a lack of support from the denomination (Rugenstein 2005). Possibly there exists a gap between young pastors and typically older congregational lay leadership or denominational leadership.

Whatever the cause of the dissatisfaction of younger pastors, the issue for denominations is still the same. How do we retain our young pastors particularly, and all our pastors generally? One obvious application is to provide support in areas of weakness. Many pastors would benefit from administrative help such as volunteer secretaries or bookkeepers. Many others need a confidant. This confidant should be neutral and safe, someone with ministry experience, and not someone in their congregation and not a denominational leader. Local pastoral associations may be able to provide this needed support. Some denominational leaders spoke of mentoring programs for younger pastors, where young pastors either serve under an experienced pastor or receive support from an older pastor in another congregation. This would seem to ameliorate many “congregation” and “pastor” issues.

This research suggests that one of the best ways to predict pastor dissatisfaction, and possibly future pastoral burnout, is to ask pastors their opinion of their congregation. More research would be needed to test the ability of the “opinion of the congregation” scale to predict future burnout. Nonetheless, the close link between pastoral and congregational well-being suggests that denominational leaders may want to focus considerable efforts on creating healthy church lay leadership – leaders that understand care for pastors. Church boards and other leaders should have reasonable workload expectations for their pastors, coupled with expectations of adequate time off, and should be trained so that they can actually help with the pastoral work. Lay leaders need to understand appropriate pastoral pay scales and benefits. They need to understand that a single pastor cannot be expected to be gifted in all areas of church ministry, and areas of weakness need to be openly discussed and other resources found.

Finally, this research points to the need to support small churches, particularly in areas where there are proportionally few evangelicals. This need was particularly stark among the French-speaking evangelical churches, but many rural and northern congregations would suffer from a similar lack of resources and relational support. Pastors of such churches often receive less support because there are few, if any, evangelical pastors in the area, and denominational staff (area ministers and the like) make fewer trips to these faraway congregations. Large churches (or groups of churches, such as a provincial or regional group) could be paired with small churches (or groups of churches) to provide support. Denominations may consider supporting existing churches in areas where evangelical congregations are sparse instead of attempting to plant new churches in that area. These are only a few ideas, and much more nuanced applications should come from those who regularly work with churches and pastors. 🌱



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Appendix. A Quick Statistical Tutorial

In this paper, I present three statistical techniques that may or may not be familiar to the average reader, including correlation, statistical significance, and regression analysis. This brief primer is inadequate for proper understanding, but will get you through the “Pastoral Well-being” paper, and hopefully help with the interpretation of future statistical tables.

A. Correlation

A correlation is simply a measure of the strength of the relationship between two variables. A correlation can range from -1 to 1 . A positive correlation (between 0 and $+1$) indicates that as one variable goes up, the other goes up as well (they move in the same direction). For example, education and income are positively correlated – as your years of education increases, normally your income goes up as well. A negative correlation (between -1 and 0) means that as one variable goes up, the other goes down (they move in opposite directions). For example, we saw in table 3 that stress levels and job satisfaction are negatively correlated (-0.287) – as stress goes up, job satisfaction goes down. Or, as stress goes down, job satisfaction goes up.

In addition to positive/negative direction, a correlation will tell you the strength of the relationship. Correlations that are close to 0 (zero) are weak correlations, and a correlation becomes stronger the closer it gets to either 1 or -1 . For example, the correlation between high school grades and college grades is a strong and positive correlation, whereas a correlation between kindergarten grades and college grades is a much weaker correlation. Some variables are unrelated and would have a correlation of 0 (shoe size and college grades, for example), and two variables that are perfectly correlated would have a correlation of 1 or -1 (height in centimeters and height in inches would have a correlation of 1). What is considered a “weak” or “strong” correlation is a matter of opinion, but in the social sciences, I would say a correlation of around 0.3 or -0.3 would be strong correlation, and a correlation above 0.5 or below -0.5 would be very strong. Social scientists rarely find correlations near 1 or -1 unless they make an error!

B. Statistical Significance

There are two basic kinds of statistics – descriptive statistics “describe” the data (means, variances, percentages, etc), and inferential statistics, where we infer something about the population (e.g., all Canadians) based on the sample (e.g., 1000 randomly selected Canadians). The problem is that a sample is not always perfectly representative of the population of people we are interested in. We call this lack of representativeness “sampling error.” However, good samples, those that are sufficiently large, have good response rates and that select respondents in a representative way (e.g., a random sample), produce statistics that are quite close to the real population numbers. For example, when we say that a correlation is statistically significant, it means that we can be sure that the correlation exists in the real population, and that it is not due simply to sampling error.

In addition, statistical significance can tell us how sure we are that a finding from the sample can be inferred to the population. This is related to the number of asterisks (*) beside the number (as in tables 3 and 4 above). Note the



line at the bottom of table 3, which indicates that one asterisk refers to 0.05 chance of error (* $p < 0.05$). This means that there is a 0.05 (5%) chance that this correlation is due to sampling error, or to say the same thing positively, we can be 95% sure that this correlation exists in the real population. Two (** $p < 0.01$) or three (***) $p < 0.001$) asterisks mean the chance of error is even more remote (1% or 0.1% chance of error, respectively). In simple terms, statistically significant findings can be inferred to the population with confidence.

C. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis (officially called ordinary least squares or OLS regression since there are other types of regression analysis) is common because it is a powerful way to test for a causal relationship between variables. Regression analysis is harder to understand, but basically it allows one to test the effect of several causal variables (independent variables) on a variable of interest (dependent variable). In table 4 above, I present “betas” (standardized “b” coefficients) because they are fairly easy to interpret. However, let me present the typical b coefficients along with the betas (in parentheses) for table 4a below so I can explain both. I have simplified the table to include model 1 only, and have added the R², another common feature of regression tables.

Table 4a. Predictors of job satisfaction, ordinary least squares regression

	Model 1
Age	0.194*** (0.176***)
White	3.259* (0.098*)
French	-6.651* (-0.095)*
R ²	0.040

Statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In this regression model, I wanted to see if the age, race (white) and language (French) of a pastor affected their job satisfaction. What we find is that age has a powerful effect. The b coefficient for age (0.194***) should be interpreted in this way: every time a person’s age goes up one year, their job satisfaction increases by 0.194 on the job satisfaction scale, on average. In other words, if the average 30-year-old pastor has a job satisfaction of 40.00 on the job satisfaction scale, a 31-year-old pastor will average 40.194. Similarly, white pastors, on average, have a job satisfaction that is 3.259 higher on the job satisfaction scale than non-white (ethnic minority) pastors, just as French-speaking pastors average 6.651 lower on the job satisfaction scale (e.g., 33.349 for francophone pastors if anglophone pastors hypothetically average 40.00 on the job satisfaction scale).

However, the betas (in parentheses) tell us that effect of age is roughly 2 times as powerful as the effect of race or



However, the betas (in parentheses) tell us that effect of age is roughly 2 times as powerful as the effect of race or French/English language. If the white and French b coefficients are much bigger, why is that the case? It happens because age has a lot more variation (pastors ages vary from 27 to 74, whereas the French/English and white/non-white have only 2 options each). So, the cumulative effect of age (with all the different ages) has a greater impact on job satisfaction than the others, even if one year doesn't make a big difference (0.194). Note also that the magnitude of the b coefficients and betas are affected by the other variables in the model, as we saw in Table 4.

The R2 number at the bottom of the table (0.040) is a measure of the amount of variation in job satisfaction that is explained by the predictors in the model (age, white, and French). In this case, these three variables only explain about 4% of the total variance in job satisfaction. As we add predictors, more of the variation is explained. For example, in model 3 of table 4 above, the R2 is 0.313, indicating that 31.3% of the variance in job satisfaction is explained. Model 1 is fairly weak, since we have not explained much of what causes job satisfaction for pastors. Model 3, however, is quite robust, since accounting for nearly one-third of the variation in job satisfaction is fairly good in the social sciences.