



Reducing Professional Stress and Burnout in the Professional Life of the Clergy in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church

Maija Zakrizevska-Belogrudova, Janis Cepuritis

RISEBA University of Applied Sciences

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ABSTRACT:

The clergy belong to a helping profession with an increased risk of professional stress and burnout. Their day-to-day duties involve a high threshold of social interaction, which affects the psycho-emotional state of the clergy. The aim of the research is to investigate professional stress and burnout among the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in order to develop proposals for reducing the risks of stress and burnout.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to investigate professional burnout. And the second survey was the Professional Stress Survey of Organizational Process Management. 80 respondents representing the clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia participated in the survey. The results of the research show that: The level of professional stress indicates a lack of collegial support. The level of burnout for the clergy is low, with a medium level in a separate subscale (depersonalization). Statistically significant relationships were identified between professional stress and burnout.

I. INTRODUCTION

The daily duties of the clergy as representatives of a helping profession require high levels of emotional and cognitive engagement. Risks of professional stress and burnout stem from an overload of emotional requirements that may result in emotional devastation, mental and physical exhaustion [1]. The daily professional routine of the clergy implies a wide spectrum of duties associated with a variety of psychoemotional factors. Within a single day, a pastor may conduct a funeral or wedding service, provide support in grief, and christen a child. The diversity of emotions and duties may expose the clergy to risks of professional stress and burnout that may manifest as physical exhaustion and mental devastation, self-doubt and doubts about personal calling, absences from work, a feeling of being a loser, a decline in the capacity for work, contemplation about changing the profession, or early abandonment of the job of a pastor [2].

In a year 2021 study, Barna Group, a leading cultural and religious process data analytics company in the USA, established that almost a half, or 42%, of the protestant pastors participating in the survey responded that they have seriously considered terminating their jobs as full-time pastors. At the same time, professional stress is mentioned as a leading factor that has negative impacts on the personal daily life and professional duties [3].

The emotional overload, the set of the personal traits and the job specifics expose the clergy to the risk of personal

burnout. Studies involving the use of The Maslach Burnout Inventory evidence that, in the clergy, this risk can be compared to the job of a psychological consultant or a teacher (due to the emotional intensity) and also a police or emergency medical care job (due to the stress-associated psychological anxiety) [4].

Such personnel, which is exposed to the risk of professional burnout, is oftentimes referred to as helpless helpers, thus giving a good description of the high degrees of burnout and stress risk in the helping profession [5]. Studies of the Swedish protestant church emphasise not only the role of the professional life in the process of burnout, but also that of psychological structure of the personality. For instance, the respondents appearing as high-degree of neurotically functioning and low extraversion personality types in the study are exposed to higher risks of burnout [6].

The aim is to study professional stress and burnout in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (LELC) in order to develop suggestions for mitigation of the risks of stress and burnout.

Research questions: 1. What is the professional stress in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church? What is the level of burnout in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church? Are there statistically significant correlations between the factors of professional stress and burnout?

The research of professional stress and burnout in the clergy in the context of Latvia is a little-investigated



phenomenon, therefore it is important to study it in order to reduce the risks of professional stress and burnout.

II PROFESSIONAL STRESS AND BURNOUT IN THE PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF THE CLERGY

The World Health Organisation has called stress “an epidemic of the 21st century” [7]. A Eurobarometer study in the EU member states reveals that particularly stress appears as the most frequent type of risk in the professional environment and is present in an average of 50% and 51% of people in Latvia and the EU respectively [8].

One of the most visible parts of the daily professional routine of the clergy is working with people or active social interaction. In other words, a pastor represents a helping profession [9], [4] and is therefore exposed to the psychosocial effects of the profession, i.e., stress, tension and even burnout [10], just like representative of other helping professions, such as teachers [11], [12].

The scientific literature list many factors that may cause professional stress in the clergy:

1) Effort–reward imbalance [4] High moral standards, altruistic devotion and mentally motivated action are expected from the clergy. The biblical theology does not always associate effort with reward, but they are associated with a sense of mission.

2) Lack of balance between professional and private life [13]. The working hours of full-time clergy are unlimited, and the schedule of days off does not correspond to the conventional organisation of a calendar week. It is often an approach that the job of a pastor has no end. Some studies show a risk of time overload by saying that the clergy work for up to 63 working hours a week [14]. If the pastor has a family, this requires additional effort to plan spending time together.

3) Professional expectations [15]. The clergy set high and sometimes unreachable standards for themselves (e.g., inability to establish the limits of engagement or responsibility, not seeking help in dealing with problems). These feelings are reinforced by peer expectations (e.g., the pastor is available on the phone any time, even during a holiday, if the pastor lives in a property owned by the congregation, they can be visited any time [4]. If the pastor has a family, then the expectations of the congregation are extended to the family members as well (e.g., children are expected to have exemplary behaviour or stereotyped concepts of dressing styles).

4) Content and emotional variability of the job obligations [16]. The job obligations are associated with theological and pastoral advisory conversations (interpersonal communication, maintaining the privacy of a confession (i.e., private confessions), tolerance of tension and a diversity of opinions. In America, for instance, support from the pastor in various life situations is sought in

40% of cases [17]. The present situation requires not only knowledge of theology from a pastor, but also administrative competence in the management of the congregation and volunteers, the approach of a skillful organiser, and, sometimes, practical engagement in the daily routine of the congregation.

5) Lack of work evaluation [14]. The clergy is autonomous in their daily activities. A side-effect of a flexible distribution of time is the circumstance that there is no unique tool for the evaluation of the performed job obligations. A reason that can be mentioned is that a large part of the job duties are with no visible or material outcome. Consequently, the clergy is often exposed to criticism.

6) Role overload. Various professional roles intersect in the daily routine of the clergy. The following roles can be mentioned: 1) preacher; 2) administrator of ritual life; 3) teacher, educator; 4) pastoral advisor; 5) manager of congregational life; 6) administrative manager. Based on their nature and purpose, the professional roles mentioned here are highly diverse. If any circumstances make to change the roles incommensurably swiftly, this may result in an unnecessary role overload [4].

The professional daily routine of a contemporary pastor implies much more than public preaching or the sacred activities. The entirety of all the duties can be divided into two parts – the ecclesiastical and the administrative part of the duties. Each of them implies the necessity for various skills and personal traits. To a certain extent, they are all social roles that require highly organised personality traits, ability to be a part of the local congregation context, perform the common tasks of a pastor and balance own private life [18]. Extended diversity of social roles and performance of administrative duties may cause stress. The effects of professional stress may become chronic and potentially lead to burnout. Burnout stems from unmanaged work stress, which is one of the direct psychoemotional risk factors in a working environment. It influences the person as an individual and the work quality of an employee, and also has impacts on the targets of the organisation [19]. The symptoms of burnout, such as physical exhaustion and mental devastation, self-doubt and doubts about personal calling, absences from work, a feeling of being a loser, a decline in the capacity for work, contemplation about changing the profession or early abandonment of the job of a pastor [2], can be observed in the clergy as well.

The above-mentioned stress and burnout factors are substantial and should be taken into account because they may cause long-lasting negative consequences associated with physical and psychoemotional health. The following changes in the professional life may be indicative of the effects such factors [20]:

1) A decline in the pastoral care

2) A decline in the sense of compassion, personal interest and support



3) A decline in the job satisfaction

4) A decline in the devotion to the performance of the job obligations

Alongside these factors, the qualitative and quantitative research studies reveal that the consequences of professional stress may manifest as mental disorders and also as deterioration of physical health [21]. Extended stress causes the individual to change their eating habits, occurrences of sleep and memory disorders, reduced amounts of physical activity, and higher risks for smoking, alcohol abuse or use of other addictive substances [8]. The clergy are oftentimes believed to be representatives of a profession whose type of job protects them against stress. However, there is a research opinion regarding the stress amongst the clergy that reduces the capacity for work substantially, affects the personality and pastoral efficiency [15]. Although believing and spirituality has positive benefits in the moments of a psychoemotional crisis of an individual [17], one must not forget that extended stress may result in negative impacts, and it is not for no purpose that professional stress is called “the kiss of death” [22]. Research studies also suggest that 80% of employees with the symptomatology of short-term stress regain their full capacity for work within a few months, whereas the recovery from clinical burnout may last for more than a year [23]. Therefore, self-care and personal psychohygiene are of high significance. It is important to emphasise that the lifestyle and daily habits may protect the clergy from harmful effects on the physical health. Regular physical exercise reduce risks for cardiovascular conditions, improve metabolism, and also mitigates the risks for anxiety or depression. It has been demonstrated that physical exercise reduces the probability of extended stress, and, at the same time, physical exercise is a substantial aspect in the facilitation of recovery from long-term stress [24].

Another factor that facilitates professional wellbeing is participation in supervisions or collegial groups [25], and another concomitant benefit is awareness practices [26]. Self-care is equally also an ethical duty of the clergy that combines emotional, physical, social and mental balance..

A. DESIGN

The study has a quantitative design. The aim is to study professional stress and burnout in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (LELC) in order to develop suggestions for mitigation of the risks of stress and burnout.

Research questions: 1. What is the professional stress in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church? What is the level of burnout in the clergy of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church? Are there statistically significant correlations between the factors of professional stress and burnout?

Two surveys were used to obtain data:

1) Adapted K. Maslacha burnout measurement model - a survey consisting of three subscales (22 statements): emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; reduction of personal achievements [28].

2) Professional Stress Survey of Organization Process Management with four subscales: Professional stress scale; role conflict; peer support; work-life balance [29]. The survey included a scale created by the authors on factors contributing to professional stress and burnout. The surveys used a likert scale.

B MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The set of above-mentioned surveys was combined in a single fight and electronically developed platform <https://docs.google.com/>. The survey took place from February 6 to February 25, 2023. The general population of the survey consists of 200 respondents who were sent electronic mail invitations with the survey access link. With the purpose of the survey, data use and privacy policy, respondents were introduced to the document in a written introduction before completing the survey. All received questionnaires have been used for the quantitative research. How respondents were informed about the right to know about the progress and results of the study by contacting the researchers during the study or after obtaining the study results.

IV FINDINGS

Summing up the value of the Cronbach's α coefficient of the subscales of the survey on Professional stress, which consists of 5 question sets with 27 questions, the obtained result is 0.75 ($0.75 > \alpha > 0.7$). From this it can be concluded that the coherence and reliability of the survey questions is sufficient and approached good. Summing up the value of Cronbach's α coefficient of Maslach's burnout measurement model - survey, which consists of 22 statements divided into 3 subscales, the obtained result is 0.89 ($0.89 > \alpha > 0.8$). It can be concluded that the coherence and reliability of the survey questions is good and approaching excellent.

In order to choose the methods of data processing and analysis most appropriate for the study, the authors of the paper performed a descriptive statistical analysis, thereby measuring the correspondence to the normal distribution. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z-test calculations were used for this purpose. Professional stress ($\text{sig}=0.0062$) and Personal achievement reduction ($\text{sig}=0.165$) subscales correspond to the normal distribution, taking into account that the significance $\text{sig} \geq 0.05$.

Role Conflict ($\text{sig}=0.000$), Work-Life Balance ($\text{sig}=0.000$), Colleague Support ($\text{sig}=0.008$), Factors Contributing to Occupational Stress ($\text{sig}=0.003$), Emotional Exhaustion ($\text{sig}=0.011$) and Depersonalization ($\text{sig} = 0.000$) does not follow a normal distribution given that significance $\text{sig} < 0.05$.



Taking into account the above-mentioned K-S test calculation, both parametric (Pearson's correlation coefficient) and non-parametric (Spearman's correlation coefficient) correlation analysis will be used in further data processing.

Figure 1 shows a measurement that reflects the average level of professional stress in scores ($n = 80$). It can be concluded from this that the highest average level of professional stress is in the subscale Colleague support (8.51 points).

Fig. 1. Average measurement of professional stress in points ($n=80$)

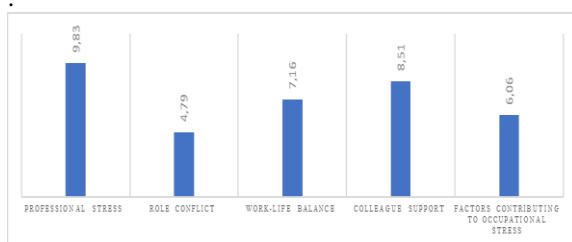


Table 1 summarizes indicators of professional burnout. 38% of respondents have a high level in the subscale Personal achievement reduction, 16% of respondents have a high level in the subscale Depersonalization and 13% of respondents have a high level in the subscale Emotional exhaustion.

Table. 1. Percentage expression of Maslach burnout survey data ($n=80$)

Subscales	Burnout level		
	low	medium	high
Depersonalization	65%	23%	13%
Emotional exhaustion	61%	23%	16%
Personal achievement reduction	36%	26%	38%

In the following text, the most significant correlations performed will be described. Evaluating Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) calculations between variables in the Professional stress scale subscale ($\text{sig}=0.062c$), both negative and positive statistically significant correlations can be observed (see Table 2).

Table 2

Calculation of Pearson's correlation coefficient between variables for the Professional stress Scale subscale

$n=80$	Factors contributing to	Depersonalization
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Professional stress scale		professional stress	
	r	0.48**	0.27*
	sig	0.000	0.017

Analyzing the correlations, the authors conclude:

- between the subscale Factors contributing to professional stress and the subscale Professional stress scale, a positive, moderately close, statistically significant correlation can be found ($r = 0.48$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that when the factors that contribute to professional stress increase, Professional stress increases, and vice versa, when Professional stress increases, the factors that contribute to professional stress will increase.
- a positive, weak statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Depersonalization and the subscale Professional stress scale ($r = 0.27$, $\text{sig} < 0.05$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted – as depersonalization increases (non-involved view of the professional environment, callous attitude towards persons involved in professional life), Professional stress increases, and conversely, as Professional stress increases, depersonalization increases.

Evaluating Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) calculations between variables in the Role conflict subscale ($\text{sig}=0.001c$), two statistically significant correlations can be found (see tab. 3).

3. table

Calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient for the Role Conflict subscale

$n=80$	Professional stress	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization
Work-life balance	r	-0.40**	-0.42**
			-0.35**

Analyzing the correlations, the authors of the paper conclude that the subscale Work-life balance has a statistically significant correlation with all three subscales of the Maslach burnout survey:

- a negative, moderately close, statistically significant correlation was found between the Work-private life balance subscale and the Professional stress scale subscale ($r = -0.40$, $\text{sig} < 0.001$). The correlation of the subscales can be explained by the fact that when Professional stress increases, work-life balance decreases, and conversely, when work-life balance increases, Professional stress decreases.
- a negative, moderately close, statistically significant correlation was found between the Work-private life balance subscale and the Emotional exhaustion subscale ($r = -0.42$, $\text{sig} < 0.001$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted as follows - as emotional exhaustion increases, work-life balance decreases, and conversely, as



work-life balance increases, emotional exhaustion decreases.

- a negative, moderately close, statistically significant correlation was found between the Work-private life balance subscale and the Depersonalization subscale ($r = 0.35$, $\text{sig} < 0.001$). The correlation of the subscales is interpreted that as depersonalization increases, work-life balance decreases, and conversely, as work-life balance increases, depersonalization decreases.

Analyzing the calculations of Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) between the variables in the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress ($\text{sig}=0.003c$), both positive and negative, statistically significant correlations can be observed (see tab. 5).

5. table

Calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient for the subscale Factors contributing to occupational stress

$n=80$		Professional stress	Colleague support	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Reduction of personal achievements
Factors contributing to occupational stress	r	0.54**	-0.32**	0.37**	0.33**	-0.23**
	sig	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.003	0.038

Analyzing the correlations, the authors conclude:

- a positive, moderately close, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress and Emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.54$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that when Professional stress increases, the factors that contribute to occupational stress increase, and conversely, when the factors that contribute to occupational stress increase, Professional stress increases.
- a negative, weak, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress and the subscale Colleague support ($r = -0.32$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that when the support of colleagues increases, the factors that contribute to occupational stress decrease, and conversely, when the factors that contribute to occupational stress increase, the support of colleagues decreases.
- a positive, weak, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress and Emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.37$, $\text{sig} < 0.00$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that as emotional exhaustion increases, factors contributing to occupational stress increase, and conversely, as factors contributing to occupational stress increase, emotional exhaustion increases.
- a positive, weak, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress and the subscale Depersonalization ($r = 0.33$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that as depersonalization increases, factors

contributing to occupational stress increase, and conversely, as factors contributing to occupational stress increase, depersonalization increases.

- a negative, weak, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Factors contributing to Professional stress and the subscale Reduction of personal achievements ($r = -0.23$, $\text{sig} > 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales can be interpreted that as the reduction of personal achievements increases, the factors contributing to Professional stress decrease, and conversely, as the factors contributing to the reduction of Professional stress increase, the reduction of personal achievements decreases.

Analyzing Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) calculations between variables in the subscale Emotional exhaustion ($\text{sig}=0.011c$), both positive and negative statistically significant correlations can be observed (see tab. 6).

6. table

Calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient for the Emotional Exhaustion subscale

$n=80$		Professional stress	Colleague support	Depersonalization
Emotional exhaustion	r	0.53**	-0.31**	0.71**
	sig	0.000	0.006	0.000

Analyzing the correlations, the authors conclude:

- a positive, moderately close, statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale Emotional exhaustion and the subscale Professional stress scale ($r = 0.53$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales is interpreted that when job stress increases, emotional exhaustion increases, and conversely, when emotional exhaustion increases, job stress increases.
- a negative, weak, statistically significant correlation was found between the Emotional Exhaustion subscale and the Colleague support subscale ($r = -0.31$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales is interpreted that when the support of colleagues increases, the emotional exhaustion decreases, and vice versa, when the emotional exhaustion increases, the support of colleagues decreases.
- between the Emotional exhaustion subscale and the Depersonalization subscale, a positive, close, statistically significant correlation was found ($r = 0.71$, $\text{sig} < 0.01$). The correlation of the subscales is interpreted that as the initial depersonalization increases, the emotional exhaustion increases, and conversely, as the emotional exhaustion increases, the depersonalization increases.

CONCLUSION

Out of the five subscales of the survey, only one (Colleague support) shows an above average level of Professional stress, while in the other subscales the measurement of Professional stress is below average. In the subscale



Colleague support, the average level of Professional stress scores is 56.7% of the total number of respondents.

From the results of the survey, it can be concluded that 38% of the respondents have a high burnout value in the Personal Achievement Reduction subscale, while 16% of the respondents have a high burnout value in the Depersonalization subscale, and 13% of the respondents have a high burnout value in the Emotional Exhaustion subscale.

Summing up all the results obtained from the correlations, it can be concluded that there are statistically significant correlations between the Professional stress and burnout factors for Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church spiritual staff.

Taking into account that the research participants represent the helping profession with a distinctly specific nature, the results of the research allow to gain a deeper understanding of the daily professional influence of the clerical staff on the clergy's personality.

In the further studies, it is worth paying attention to the possibilities of professional support of the clergy in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church.````

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