

# Clergy Work-Related Psychological Health: Listening to the Ministers of Word and Sacrament Within the United Reformed Church in England

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Published online: 31 October 2008  
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**Abstract** Drawing on the classic model of balanced affect proposed by Bradburn (*The structure of psychological well-being*, Aldine, Chicago, IL, 1969), this study conceptualised poor work-related psychological health in terms of high levels of negative affect in the absence of acceptable levels of positive affect. In order to illuminate self-perceptions of work-related psychological health among a well-defined group of clergy, a random sample of 58 ministers of word and sacrament serving within the west midlands synod of the United Reformed Church in England completed an open-ended questionnaire concerned with the following six guiding questions. Do you enjoy your work? How would you define stress? How would you define burnout? What stresses are there in your ministry? What do you do to keep healthy? What can the church do to enhance the work-related psychological health of ministers? Content analysis highlighted the main themes recurring through these open-ended responses. The conclusion is drawn that ministers of word and sacrament within the United Reformed Church in England are exposed to a number of recurrent recognisable sources of stress. Suggestions are advanced regarding the need for future more detailed research and for the development of more effective pastoral strategies.

**Keywords** Psychological health · Burnout · Clergy · Presbyterian · England

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Significant changes in the relationship between the major Christian denominations and society throughout England are reflected in a number of highly visible indicators of church life, including declining membership statistics, dwindling and ageing congregations, decaying and redundant churches and chapels, and erosion of vocations to full-time stipendiary ministry (see, e.g., Brierley 2005).

For a number of reasons such changes may carry deleterious consequences for the work-related psychological health of the reducing pool of full-time stipendiary clergy. Increasing attention has been given to this area of concern by studies in the United Kingdom like: *Clergy stress: The hidden conflicts in ministry* (Coate 1989), *Clergy under stress: A study of homosexual and heterosexual clergy* (Fletcher 1990), *Burnout: Stress in ministry* (Davey 1995), and *The cracked pot: The state of today's Anglican parish clergy* (Warren 2002). This literature stands alongside studies in Australia, like *Burnout in church leaders* (Kaldor and Bullpitt 2001), and in the United States of America by studies like *Ministry burnout* (Sanford 1982), *Between two worlds: Understanding and managing clergy stress* (Irvine 1997), and *Clergy burnout* (Lehr 2006).

One specific and productive quantitative research tradition concerned with the work-related psychological health of clergy in England has employed the classic model of balanced affect as proposed by Bradburn (1969). According to this model, poor work-related psychological health is conceptualised in terms of the presence of high levels of negative affect in the absence of acceptable levels of positive affect. One established operationalisation of this conceptualisation of work-related psychological health relevant to the caring professions more generally is provided by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson 1986). In this instrument negative affect is accessed by two measures (scale of emotional exhaustion and scale of depersonalisation), and positive affect is accessed by one measure (scale of personal accomplishment). During the 1990s and early 2000s several studies employed a modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, specially adapted for use with those engaged in pastoral ministry, among sizable samples of clergy in England. For example, Rutledge and Francis (2004) reported on a study among 1,071 Anglican clergy; Francis and Turton (2004a) reported a study among 1,278 Anglican clergy; Randall (2004, 2007) reported on a study among 340 Anglican clergy; Francis et al. (2004) reported on a study among 1,468 Roman Catholic parochial clergy; and Kay (2000) reported on a study among 930 Pentecostal pastors. Comparisons between the mean scale scores recorded by these different samples demonstrate, for example, that, compared with Anglican parish clergy, Roman Catholic parochial clergy recorded higher levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of depersonalisation. Roman Catholic parochial clergy also recorded higher levels of personal accomplishment. In this way higher levels of negative affect found among Roman Catholic priests seemed to be balanced by higher levels of positive affect.

A second, more recent operationalisation of the balanced affect conceptualisation of work-related psychological health is provided by the Francis Burnout Inventory (Francis et al. 2005). In this instrument negative affect is accessed by one measure (scale of emotional exhaustion in ministry) and positive affect is accessed by one measure (satisfaction in ministry scale). During the early 2000s several studies have employed the Francis Burnout Inventory among sizable samples in clergy in England. For example, Brewster (2007) reported on a study among 722 Anglican parish clergy; Burton (2008) reported on a study among 1,026 Methodist circuit ministers. In an international study, Francis et al. (2005) reported on a study among 3,903 clergy in Australia, 614 clergy in New Zealand, and 2,163 clergy in England. Comparison between the mean scale scores recorded in the three nations demonstrated that, compared with clergy in Australia and with clergy in New Zealand,

clergy in England recorded higher levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry and lower levels of satisfaction in ministry.

The quantitative research tradition employing the modified Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Francis Burnout Inventory among clergy in England has been employed to illuminate seven distinctive analytic perspectives. The first perspective concerns locating individual differences in work-related psychological health within the context of Eysenck's three-dimensional model of personality (Eysenck and Eysenck 1991). For example, Francis et al. (2004) demonstrated that Roman Catholic priests most susceptible to poor work-related psychological health were those who recorded high scores on the neuroticism scale and low scores on the extraversion scale. The second perspective concerns establishing the power of Jungian psychological type theory, as operationalised through the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (Myers and McCaulley 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey and Bates 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005), to predict individual differences in clergy work-related psychological health. For example, Francis et al. (2008) demonstrated that the orientations accounted for the greater variance in work-related psychological health. Compared with introverts, extraverts recorded higher scores in terms of satisfaction in ministry and lower scores in terms of emotional exhaustion in ministry. The perceiving process explained significant variance in satisfaction in ministry (with higher scores recorded by intuitives), but not in emotional exhaustion in ministry. The judging process explained significant variance both in satisfaction in ministry (with higher scores recorded by feelers) and in emotional exhaustion in ministry (with higher scores recorded by thinkers). The attitude toward the outer world explained significant variance in emotional exhaustion in ministry (with higher scores recorded by perceivers), but not in satisfaction in ministry.

The third perspective concerns testing the relationship between work-related psychological health and specific spheres or contexts of ministry. For example, Francis and Rutledge (2000) demonstrated that rural clergy have a lower sense of personal accomplishment than comparable clergy working in other types of parishes, but that they suffer neither from higher levels of emotional exhaustion nor from higher levels of depersonalisation. The fourth perspective concerns examining the effectiveness of specific professional strategies for enhancing work-related psychological health among the clergy. For example, Francis and Turton (2004b) demonstrated that clergy who practise reflective ministry by consulting with a professional supervisor record a significantly higher level of personal accomplishment, in comparison with colleagues who do not expect to engage in supervision. On the other hand, clergy who practise reflective ministry recorded no significant differences in levels of emotional exhaustion or in levels of depersonalisation, in comparison with colleagues who do not expect to engage in supervision.

The fifth perspective concerns examining the effectiveness of specific religious practices for enhancing work-related psychological health among the clergy. For example, Turton and Francis (2007) demonstrated that a positive attitude toward prayer was associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion, lower levels of depersonalisation, and higher levels of personal accomplishment. The sixth perspective concerns the effectiveness of specific social strategies for enhancing work-related psychological health among clergy. For example, Francis et al. (2007) tested the hypothesis that the presence of companion animals within the presbytery would be good for work-related psychological health of single Roman Catholic priests. The results demonstrated that, contrary to expectation, no psychological benefit accrued from owning a cat, while ownership of a dog was associated with statistically significant increases in two aspects of professional burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation). These findings were interpreted in light of the pressures

that may be experienced in Catholic parochial ministry today, whereby a dog in the presbytery may simply add an extra burden rather than function as a stress reliever.

The seventh perspective concerns clarifying the complex relationship between age and years in ministry in predicting individual differences in levels of burnout among clergy. For example, Randall (2007) demonstrated that it is chronological age and not years in ministry that is negatively correlated with scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation.

Although the quantitative research tradition illustrated by studies employing the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Francis Burnout Inventory are clearly able to make significant contributions to knowledge regarding the personal and contextual correlates of individual differences in clergy work-related psychological health, there are questions that this methodology leave largely unaddressed. It is for this reason that qualitative studies are needed to complement the quantitative research tradition. The qualitative study reported by Warren (2002), for example, based on in-depth interviews was able to generate rich insights into the lived experiences of clergy in a manner inaccessible to quantitative surveys.

Against this background, the aim of the present paper was to design and to conduct a qualitative survey among a random sample of ministers of word and sacrament engaged in full-time ministry within the United Reformed Church in England.

The United Reformed Church came into existence in 1972 (Cornick 1998) as a consequence of agreements reached between the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. The Reformed Association of Churches of Christ joined the Union in 1981 and the Congregational Union of Scotland joined in 2000. Not all congregations associated with these denominations agreed to the Union, resulting, for example, in the continuing Federation of Congregational Churches. Within the United Reformed Church local churches are organised within geographical areas or Synods. Each Synod is within the responsibility of a Moderator who is appointed by the General Assembly. Currently there is one Synod for Wales, one Synod for Scotland and eleven Synods for England.

Reviewing the first two decades of the United Reformed Church, Cornick (1998) drew attention to significant changes in the statistical profile. Between 1972 and 1995 there was a reduction in membership of 49% from 200,000 to 102,000 and a reduction in ministers of 56% from 1,841 to 813. However, the reduction in the number of buildings over the same period was much less severe; here there was a reduction of 15% from 2,080 to 1,784. According to Brierley (2005) these trends continued to follow the same pattern over the next 5-year period. In 2000, membership had declined further to 92,787, 46% of the number recorded in 1972. In 2000 there were 750 ministers, 41% of the number recorded in 1972. In 2000 there were 1,753 churches, 84% of the number recorded in 1972.

Commenting on ways in which these statistics could be interpreted, Cornick (1998) suggested that:

Maintaining the front-line of mission with a falling ratio of members to churches has caused difficulties in providing ministry for all churches, and the denomination still struggles to find an appropriate pattern of ministry that is both responsive to its own needs yet also ecumenically responsible. (p. 187)

Here, from within the United Reformed Church, is a gentle hint that highly visible changes within the profile of the denomination may be contributing to the uncertainties and to the pressures experienced by local leaders. As yet, however, no published research has reported on the work-related psychological health of ministers of word and sacrament within the United Reformed Church in England.

## Method

### Procedure

Under the auspices of the Moderator all licensed ministers of word and sacrament serving within the west midlands synod of the United Reformed Church in England were sent a postal survey during 2006. Two reminders were sent and a stamped address envelope supplied for returns. Replies were anonymous and confidential. A total of 97 questionnaires were despatched and 58 were returned, making a response rate of 60%.

### Sample

Of the 58 respondents, 36 were male and 22 were female; three were in their thirties, 20 were in their forties, 19 were in their fifties, and 15 were in their sixties.

### Instrument

Reflecting the immediate concerns of the synod, the questionnaire was designed to generate a wide-ranging profile of the ministers. The present study draws on the open-ended questions designed to illustrate six key issues. The first key issue, drawing on the notion of balanced affect, highlighted the positive side of ministry: Do you enjoy your work? The second issue explored the ways in which the ministers conceptualised stress: How would you define stress? The third issue differentiated between stress and burnout in order to examine how the ministers conceptualised the second of these constructs: How would you define burnout? Having listened to the ways in which ministers employed these constructs, the fourth issue invited them to identify the triggers for stress within their own experiences of ministry: What stresses are there in your ministry? The fifth issue concerned wider life-style issues among the ministers: What do you do to keep healthy? The sixth issue turned attention to the ministers' perceptions of the role of the wider Church in promoting the work-related psychological health of ministers of word and sacrament: What can the church do?

### Analysis

The ministers' responses to the open-ended questions were interpreted in the light of grounded theory in order to discern and to identify recurrent themes. In the following presentation these recurrent themes will be defined and illustrated by brief extracts from the ministers' scripts.

## Results

### Do you enjoy your work?

Responses to this straightforward question can be grouped into three main categories. For six out of every ten ministers (34) the answer was an unequivocal "yes." Their enthusiasm for their work was expressed simply and directly (Table 1).

Yes, definitely.

Love what I do.

**Table 1** Do you enjoy your work?

	Number
Yes	34
Yes, most of the time	16
Yes and no	8
No	0

For another three out of every ten ministers (16), the answer was clearly positive but qualified by the recognition that there were occasions when their work-related satisfaction was more precarious. For these ministers a more accurate and nuanced response was “yes, most of the time.”

Yes, in the main.

Yes, most of it most of the time.

Yes, but not always.

For a minority of the ministers (eight) enjoyment of their work was less consistent. They wanted to answer the direct question with a more nuanced “yes and no.” This more nuanced response is reflected in the following answers.

It all depends who I am working with.

Yes, when I have time to think about it—it’s a great privilege, with amazing times of joy and peace in the Lord, and that he works through me in spite of me! At times, not when I feel totally inadequate and overwhelmed and feel I’m letting the Lord down and everyone else.

What is really striking, however, is that none of the ministers offered a clearly negative response to the question concerning enjoyment of their work.

By way of summary, it is safe to conclude for this section of the survey that ministers of word and sacrament serving within the United Reformed Church in England display overall a high level of satisfaction in their ministry. In terms of the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health, ministers of word and sacrament within the United Reformed Church seem to enjoy a great deal of positive affect.

How would you define stress?

Confronted with the invitation to think about how they would define the notion of stress, the ministers applied three main strategies. Nearly half of the ministers (27) grounded their definitions in personal or experiential categories that placed themselves at the centre of the definition (Table 2).

That which put me under more pressure than I feel I can cope with.

Feeling that everything is getting on top of me.

Feeling that things get out of control and one can’t line up to one’s responsibilities any more.

**Table 2** Three ways of defining stress

	Number
Personal	27
Academic	24
Theological	7

Two-fifths of the ministers (24) grounded their definitions in a more objective and more academic context, distancing their definitions from their own personal experience and clearly drawing on ideas that had been formed in dialogue with a wider debate.

A constant or frequently recurring state of anxiety not proportionate to demand.

A mental or physical condition usually related to mental disorders and inability to function normally.

A biological response in the body triggered by emotional issues and hassles of life and work.

A minority of the ministers (seven) reflected on stress within theological categories, drawing on their personal understanding of the vocation to which they had been called and within which they had been ordained (Table 3).

A continuous pressure to be conformed to things that are not of Christ.

Being unable to shape a vision for the church.

Lacking inspiration and vision.

Looking behind the three strategies that helped to shape the ministers' understanding of stress, analysis of their responses also reveal three recurrent themes concerning the characterisation of stress. The most frequent characteristic of stress, voiced by 30 of the ministers, concerned the general feeling that there is just too much to do. This was expressed in a variety of ways.

Too much to do, too little time.

Being unable to cope with the workload.

Pressure of excess workload.

**Table 3** Three characteristics of stress

	Number
Pressure of too much to do	30
Feeling inadequate and out of control	15
Mismatch of expectations	8

The second main characteristic of stress, voiced by 15 of the ministers, concerned the feeling of being inadequate and out of control. This, too, was expressed in a variety of ways.

Feeling that things get out of control.

Feeling of inadequacy.

Feeling that everything is getting on top of you.

The third main characteristic of stress, voiced by a minority of the ministers (eight), concerned the perceived mismatch of expectations with which ministers need to deal. For some ministers, this was seen as the mismatch between their personal goal and vision and the outlook of their church members. For other ministers, this was seen as to do with the conflicting expectations between different groups of people within their church. This area was expressed in the following ways.

Conflicting desires and unreasonable expectations.

Being unable to share a vision of the church.

At the same time a number of the ministers (eight) recognised that stress should not be seen entirely in negative terms. Alongside the debilitating characteristics of stress, these ministers recognised the positive faces of stress as well. This perspective was expressed in a variety of ways.

I realise that a certain level of stress is necessary.

I think some stress can be helpful.

Can be good and keep you highly active when you have things to do.

Is essential for normal health functioning in any role or activity.

How would you define burnout?

Although in a colloquial usage the two constructs of ‘stress’ and ‘burnout’ may seem to share much in common, in the professional and scientific literature these two constructs are sharply distinguished. The present data demonstrate that the two constructs are also quite well differentiated in the minds of ministers. Although some ministers spoke about the positive aspects of stress, burnout was discussed entirely in negative terms. Close scrutiny of the ministers’ definitions of burnout identified five main recurrent themes. We have conceptualised these themes as the five marks of burnout (Table 4).

**Table 4** Five marks of burnout

	Number
Inability to function or carry on	25
Physical, emotional, spiritual shut down	11
Exhaustion	11
Response to continuous excessive pressure	10
Depression and clinical anxiety	5



The first and most frequently identified mark of burnout, described by 25 of the ministers, was expressed as the inability to function or to carry on. This aspect was voiced in the following ways.

When a person is unable to function at all.

All fall down, can't act coherently, think clearly, no energy.

You can't function anymore; even the smallest task is stressful.

The second mark of burnout, described by 11 of the ministers, was expressed in terms of physical, emotional or spiritual shut down. This aspect was voiced in the following ways.

Drained of physical, spiritual, emotional reserves.

My tank is completely empty with no signs of ways of filling it.

When mind and body shut down.

Reaching end of personal resources.

The third mark of burnout, also described by 11 of the ministers, was expressed as exhaustion experienced in a range of intensities. This aspect was voiced in the following ways.

Being exhausted and worn out.

Total exhaustion.

Continual exhaustion.

The fourth mark of burnout, described by 10 of the ministers, was expressed in terms of the human response to continuous, excessive pressure. This aspect was voiced in the following ways.

Unremedied stress.

Prolonged periods of stress.

You come to a point after a period of sustained pressure and you cannot continue.

The fifth mark of burnout, described by a smaller number of ministers (five), highlighted some of the more debilitating and clinically significant components of burnout best described as depression and prolonged or clinical anxiety. This aspect was voiced in the following ways.

Feelings of depression and anxiety.

Sustained anxiety.

(Exhaustion coupled with depression).

Permanent anxiety.

What stresses are there in your ministry?

Having examined the ways in which the ministers understood the constructs of stress and burnout, the survey invited them to identify the stresses of which they were aware in their

own sphere of ministry. While some ministers opted to highlight one primary area of stress, others listed several key areas of stress. Analysis of their responses identified 12 main themes or triggers of stress (Table 5).

The most frequently cited triggers of stress, noted by nearly two-thirds of the ministers (37), concerned the amount of work and the number of roles encountered in their day-to-day experience. Individual ministers expressed their experience in the following ways.

Too much work to do in too little time.

Juggling so many different activities and responsibilities.

The quantity of work with so many deadlines.

The second most frequently cited trigger of stress, noted by nearly half of the ministers (25), concerned unrealistic expectations. Unrealistic expectations were attributed to a range of sources: to what the ministers expected of themselves; to what others expected of the ministers; and to the conflicting expectations of different groups of people. This trigger of stress was expressed in the following ways.

The main problem for me is the level of expectation people have of what can be achieved. These are often too high or unrealistic.

Conflicting expectations of various bodies and people.

Expectations of others and myself lead to not saying no.

A further three triggers of stress were cited by more than a quarter of the ministers. More than one in four of the ministers (17) cited dealing with conflict and with difficult people as a trigger for stress. They expressed their experiences of conflict and of difficult people in the following ways.

Dealing with certain difficult people.

Coping with conflict within the church and my failure to resolve it.

Constant problems with a small group of people.

Bullying from some members.

**Table 5** Twelve triggers of stress

	Number
Amount of work/number of roles	37
Unrealistic expectations	25
Dealing with conflict and difficult people	17
Administration and finance	17
Pastoral demands	15
Worries about the future of the church	11
Lack of volunteers	9
Multiple churches	8
Managing change	8
Work/life balance	7
Loneliness and isolation	5
Theological concerns	4

More than one in four of the ministers (17) cited administration and finance as a trigger for stress. They expressed their experiences of excessive paperwork and experiences of money-related worries in the following ways.

Too much or unnecessary paperwork.

Under resourcing of office equipment and administrative support.

Dealing with paper and correspondence.

No secretarial/administrative help.

Payment of expense.

Worry about cost of maintenance of ministry and buildings.

More than one in four of the ministers (15) cited pastoral demands as a trigger for stress. For some the demands for pastoral care seemed never ending, and for some the drain on their pastoral ministry was exacerbated by what they saw as the phenomenon of ageing congregations. The following quotations provide a flavour of the ministers' concerns.

Working with ageing congregations who are less willing and able to take responsibility for church life.

Listening to people's pastoral concerns.

Dealing with people's pastoral needs.

Having to minister to an ageing church.

Incessant pastoral work.

The remaining seven triggers of stress were cited by smaller numbers of ministers. A total of 11 ministers referred to an underlying worry or anxiety about the future of the church. In this regard, some ministers spoke about the uncertain future for the churches in general in contemporary society, while other ministers spoke more specifically about their perception of the uncertain future for the United Reformed Church. Here are examples of what they said.

Coping for many years with a sense that the church is declining and losing influence.

General uncertainties about the future of the URC.

Having to minister in ageing, declining church with less people to fill jobs.

Feeling that the URC has lost its way.

A total of nine ministers referred to the difficulties generated by the lack of volunteers or the lack of people willing to take leadership roles or to accept responsibilities within the local church. Lack of volunteers was seen to be detrimental both to the maintenance of the local church and to the effective ministry and mission of the local church. Here are examples of what they said.

Increasing difficulty finding people to take leadership roles in church.

Lack of willingness by some members of congregations to take responsibility either for practical church matters or, more importantly, to see the need for them, themselves, to be committed and involved in spreading the gospel.

The problems arising from having responsibility for more than one church or from having to provide cover for the work that used to be done by more than one minister were identified as a trigger for stress by eight ministers. These problems were expressed in the following ways.

Having to cover the work of two ministers.

Being minister of three churches with some responsibility for another four.

More than one church was not just seen as adding to the workload but also ideological problems.

Having to minister in two congregations with a different ethos, expectations and theological views.

The problems arising from managing change were also identified by eight ministers as a trigger for stress. This point was made in the following ways.

Managing transition and change.

Coping with new ways of doing things in a growing church.

The problems arising from managing a balance between the demands of ministry and life away from work were identified as a trigger for stress by seven of the ministers. This area included the tensions that arise between ministry and the demands made by family, by children and by a proper concern for self. These issues were expressed in the following ways.

Juggling demands of home and work.

Being a father as well as a minister.

Balancing home and work.

Loneliness and isolation were voiced by five of the ministers as a trigger for their personal experience of stress. These ministers drew attention to the difficulties experienced by ministers in forming close friendships and rewarding personal relationships within the geographical locations in which they are employed in their professional capacity. They made the following kind of points.

Feeling alone.

Isolation—difficult to build friendship networks, especially if do not have children.

The final trigger of stress, identified by just a handful of ministers (four) focused on theological issues. For some this involved problems with their own faith. For some this involved disparities between their personal way of believing and the perceived beliefs of their congregations. For some this involved the difficulty of witnessing to the Christian faith in a secular society. In their own words the ministers expressed these issues as follows.

The congregation reflects the whole theological spectrum. As a liberal theologian I have to keep quiet, not to offend.

Not being able to move them on to a living relationship with Jesus.

Undermining of Christian faith by secular society.

Concerns about the doctrinal basis of the faith.

## What do you do to keep healthy?

Maintaining an appropriate balance between negative affect and positive affect is part of what counts as a healthy lifestyle and may well be related to the wider issue of how ministers perceive the responsibility for keeping themselves healthy. When pressed to give an account of what they do to keep healthy the responses of the ministers fell into three broad categories concerned with healthy living, ensuring the proper provision of time off, and due regard for prayer, reflection and spiritual practice (Table 6).

Two out of every five ministers (22) said that they tried to adopt a healthy lifestyle in their attempt to keep healthy. The notion of a healthy lifestyle included diet, exercise and rest. Here are the kind of things ministers said.

Looking after physical self.

Try to have a balanced diet and drink water.

Swim, gym, walk.

Eat well, exercise well, rest well.

Almost the same number of ministers (21) said that they tried to take time off away from work in their attempt to keep healthy. For some this notion of time off was best expressed as the regular pattern of taking a day off each week. For others, the emphasis was on taking a short break or on taking proper holidays. The importance of time off was expressed in the following ways.

Taking a day off a week.

Quality time off as holidays, I make sure I have time off to be refreshed.

Going away for a holiday or for a short break—it helps enormously to get away for a couple of days.

A smaller, but nonetheless significant, number of ministers (15) said that they gave due regard to prayer, reflection and spiritual practices in their attempt to keep healthy. For some this involved taking spontaneous breaks from routine to be aware of the presence of God. For some this involved keeping a structured and disciplined pattern of prayer, meditation or quiet times. For some this involved setting aside significant periods of time for a disciplined spiritual life. These different perspectives are reflected in the following quotes.

Allocating time for personal reflection, study and prayer.

About 1 hour of prayer and reflection every morning before work.

Stop the activity, sit down with God.

**Table 6** Three ways of keeping healthy

	Number
Healthy living	22
Time off/holidays	21
Prayer and reflection	15

## What can the church do?

Having examined the ministers' perceptions of their work-related psychological health, the final issue explored in the present study focused on their perceptions of what the Church can do to promote the work-related psychological health of ministers. The majority of ministers generally agreed that there were positive steps that the Church could take, but overall their suggestions were modest and unambitious. Their suggestions covered five strategic areas (Table 7).

The two most important frequently cited ways in which the ministers considered that the Church could help promote the work-related psychological health of ministers were these: ensuring that ministers have time off and holidays (noted by 24 ministers); and helping to establish reasonable expectations for what can be expected of ministers (also noted by 24 ministers). In one important way these two strategic areas both refer to modifying the demands that are placed on ministers by their churches. The impression given is that ministers of word and sacrament are imploring the Church to help them place boundaries around the claims made on them by their churches. The first of these two issues, ensuring ministers have their time off and holidays, was voiced in the following ways.

Make sure people have proper time off.

The URC could be looking at ministers having 6 weeks or even 7 weeks annual holiday and 2 days off a week. Holidays for me are most refreshing and if I thought I'd have 2 days off, I might manage one.

The second of these two issues, establishing reasonable expectations of ministers and reasonable expectations of what ministers can do, was voiced as follows.

It can remember that I exist, an ordinary bog standard minister.

Easing the expectations of a minister.

Be realistic about expectations.

The two next most frequently cited ways in which the minister considered that the Church could help promote the work-related psychological health of ministers were these: the availability of formal support mechanisms (noted by 19 ministers) and the promotion of informal support mechanisms from church members, family and friends (noted by 17 ministers). In one important way these two strategic areas both refer to the recognition that ministers need, deserve and benefit from support mechanisms. Both areas recognise the proper human frailty and vulnerability of those called to authorised ministry within the

**Table 7** Five strategic areas

	Number
Ensuring ministers have their time off and holidays	24
Establishing reasonable expectations of ministers	24
Availability of formal support	19
Informal support from church members, family and friends	17
Bringing clergy stress to the attention of church	5

Church. The first of these issues, the availability of formal support systems, was voiced in the following ways.

Support through a Ministerial Counselling Service.

I've always found it helpful to take advantage of training opportunities because I find them energising.

Regular work consultancy services to ministers.

Regular appraisal.

The second of these issues, the promotion of informal support mechanisms from church members, family and friends, was voiced as follows.

Good working relationships in the church and responsibilities shared.

Individual support of colleagues and church members.

Individuals help with prayers and encouragement and taking on some tasks.

They are very supportive and there for me.

Very supportive and understanding elders.

The fifth strategic area was expressed by just five of the ministers, but the comments in this area were clearly stimulated by the challenges and opportunities offered by completing the survey itself. Overall the ministers seemed to welcome the idea that this survey was being undertaken by their Church and hoped that the Church would take the findings of the survey seriously. Building on this foundation the suggestion was that the Church could help by bringing the issue of clergy stress more prominently to the attention of the Church at local and at national levels. The ministers' comments on this strategic area provide a fitting close to the findings from the survey.

Church members need to be more aware of the pressures on ministers.

The most important issue is the understanding that church communities have of ministry and mission and what it involves.

## Conclusion

Set against a background of theory that conceptualises work-related psychological health in terms of balanced affect, the present study has listened to the voices of 58 ministers of word and sacrament within the west midlands synod of the United Reformed Church in England. This is the first published study to have focused on the work-related psychological health of this group of clergy since the formation of the denomination in 1972. Four main conclusions can be drawn from this exploratory study.

The first conclusion is that the psychological model of balanced affect is appropriate and useful to interpret the experiences of ministers of word and sacrament serving within the United Reformed Church. Here are a group of dedicated men and women who are aware of suffering from high levels of negative affect and who yet succeed in deriving high levels of satisfaction from their ministry. A responsible Church should not, however, allow the high level of positive affect acknowledged by the ministers to mask the deleterious effects of

high levels of negative affect. The problems of high levels of negative affect, poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout among ministers of word and sacrament within the United Reformed Church are too serious to be ignored.

The second conclusion is that, although there are clearly many areas in common between the experiences of ministers serving in the United Reformed Church and clergy serving in other denominations in England, there may be some areas of stress that are being highlighted in distinctive ways by ministers of word and sacrament serving in the United Reformed Church. These areas included the pressures generated by serving in a denomination which has experienced significant decline both in membership and in ordained ministers, but which has not reduced its number of churches in comparable ways. Ministers are serving multiple churches characterised by dwindling and ageing congregations. There is a feeling of uncertainty in the air regarding the long-term sustainability of the United Reformed Church and such uncertainty is bad for the morale of ministers.

The third conclusion is that, overall, the ministers of word and sacrament have low expectations regarding the ability of the United Reformed Church to support their needs and to protect their work-related psychological health. Such low expectations may or may not be an accurate reflection of the real state of things, but it is nonetheless a worrying reflection on how the denomination itself addresses the psychological health needs of its ministers. The structures of the United Reformed Church will need to work to seek opportunities to address this issue.

The fourth conclusion is that, overall, the ministers of word and sacrament welcomed the present survey, and saw it as a positive sign that the wider Church was concerned about and committed to addressing the issues of clergy stress, professional burnout and poor work-related psychological health among ministers. Awareness of these issues, the ministers argued, needs to be urgently raised throughout the Church as a whole.

The present study is limited in a number of ways. The findings are restricted to a study of just 58 ministers and to just one synod of the United Reformed Church. As a qualitative survey, this study has provided a rich description of the broad issues under investigation, but it cannot claim the same authoritative status as the large surveys, discussed in the introduction to this paper, conducted in recent years among Roman Catholic priest, Anglican clergy and Methodist circuit ministers. The need now is to extend this quantitative research to all ministers of word and sacrament serving in the United Reformed Church. The advantages of such a study would include enhancing scientific knowledge about the health of ministers, and shaping evidence-based strategies capable of enhancing the health of ministers (and consequently enhancing the effectiveness of their work of ministry and mission). Moreover, it seems from the evidence provided from the present survey that the very exercise itself would help to enhance the confidence of ministers that the wider Church cares about their situation and is committed to addressing the problems that they are experiencing.

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