"Mitigating Clergy Burnout: A Restorative Leadership Approach for Personal, Congregational, and Community Sustainability"

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SLAS 6013: Qualifying Seminar

PhD in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies

Fall 2023

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Abstract

In light of recent spikes in clergy burnout and rising attrition in the United States due to pandemic induced loneliness and job related stress, potentially viable interventions must be considered. While seeking out potential leadership models that can effectively mitigate clergy burnout factors, restorative leadership was considered. The guiding questions for the study included: 1) How might restorative leadership help clergy be more effective and sustainable in their role? 2) How might restorative leadership help foster healing among congregants? and 3) How might a restorative leadership approach among clergy foster support for the wider community? Pertinent literature was then systematically reviewed, out of which emerged four recurring themes: Equitability, radical inclusion, interconnectedness, and sustainability. Next, the four themes were respectively paired with four theoretical lenses (critical, relational cultural, social-cognitive, and care theories) and then analyzed from the points of view of the clergy member, their congregants, and the wider community. Offering evidence for fostering interconnectedness, mutuality, inclusivity, and sustainability for the leader and their stakeholders, the subsequent post-analysis discussion confirmed the potential efficacy of a restorative leadership approach for clergy members as a viable way to mitigate occupation burnout. Limitations of this paper consist of limited field studies on restorative leadership and none that looked at restorative leadership as an intervention, as well as there being no known studies of restorative leadership adopted by clergy specifically. Recommendations include: 1) Conduct a thorough mental and emotional health check for all current members of clergy; 2) Create a Restorative Leadership Program (RLP) specifically for clergy members; 3) Create an adaptability apparatus within the RLP; and 4) Conduct formal field research regarding restorative leadership and its effects on clergy, congregants, and the community, which will then provide hard data as to its efficacy, especially regarding burnout and overall sustainability.

Keywords: Restorative leadership, clergy burnout, sustainability, equitability, radical inclusion, interconnectedness, mutuality.

Clergy burnout in the United States has become a familiar reference in the past few years, especially at the height of the pandemic (Warren, 2022), right alongside *teacher* burnout and *healthcare* burnout, etc. (Abramson, 2022). Notwithstanding "The Great Resignation" throughout the pandemic period that seems to have affected all work sectors (Whitiker, 2022), clergy resignations' particular ominousness likely stems from the idea that those entrusted with safeguarding and leading some of the most sacred aspects of culture and faith have suddenly considered stepping down from those roles en masse. The effects of the pandemic on congregants has often been frustrating and isolating in and of itself (Warren, 2022), so when a clergy leader unexpectedly leaves their role in the midst of such a crisis, already present feelings of abandonment (Krupp, 2022) can become quickly exacerbated.

According to a 2022 Barna poll, 42% of full time US protestant ministers had considered quitting ("Pastors share," 2022). This was up 4% from late 2021 and up 13% from early 2021 ("38% of US Pastors," 2021). This trajectory is both notable and concerning. The 2022 survey identified the top three causes as job related stress (56%), loneliness (43%), and political polarization (38%). It also appears that similar pandemic induced reasons have precipitated an unusually large number of rabbis considering leaving the rabbinate (Elia-Shalev, 2022; Salkin, 2022). Catholic priests have also experienced an uptick in stress connected to burnout, though their reasons seem to deal comparatively less with the effects of the pandemic and more with specific fears surrounding their reputations in light of an ongoing added vigilance regarding sexual misconduct (McKeown, 2022).

Clergy members contemplating quitting is nothing new. Regardless of faith tradition or nationality, no one seems immune. Islamic leaders also experience general burnout (see

Küçüksüleymanoğlu's 2012 study), and US Muslim clergy have felt the enormous burden in caring for their communities during the pandemic as well (Griswold, 2020). Burnout has led many to consider leaving their profession, but for many members of clergy it has even potentially led to a questioning of their very "calling," if not their faith altogether. Prior to the pandemic, researchers had already explored the link between clergy burnout and a lack of personal "spirituality" (Golden et al., 2004) and then later during the pandemic, clergy burnout and its potential impact on congregants' spiritual health was considered (Yarbrough, 2022). So, religious leaders being pushed further to the brink of resignation in the midst of the pandemic might not be a complete surprise to some who accurately anticipated the potential link.

The impact of COVID-19 and increasing political divides have caused strains on all sectors, but one can only imagine the magnitude within houses of worship. Protestant pastors, like most clergy, struggled with being overwhelmed in a clearly chaotic environment ("Pastors' views," 2020); to some pastors it felt like they were having to build the plane while already flying it through the air (Johnston et al., 2022). Having to abruptly shutdown in-person services, including worship, prayer, communion, weddings, and even funerals was frustrating for both the clergy and those in their care (Warren, 2022; "Weddings, funerals," 2020). Coming up with ways to keep communities of faith together proved immensely taxing all around.

Scope of Inquiry

It is in moments of crisis that leaders are needed most, and clergy are unequivocally leaned on for critical spiritual guidance. So, when such leaders are inaccessible or absent altogether, our society suffers as a whole. Therefore, it is incumbent upon clergy members to find more effective ways to maintain self-care and be able to step into their leadership roles effectively in truly sustainable ways (Yarbrough, 2022). This mandate requires a sensitive

framework that fully appreciates the multiple facets of its intersecting stakeholders: The clergy leaders, their congregants, and the wider community. In the analysis portion of this paper, the multi-dimensional nature of the stakeholders will be further explored through carefully crafted theoretical lenses, to include critical theory, relational cultural theory, social-cognitive theory, and care theory.

While previous studies have recognized the clergy occupation as being at risk for burnout (Foss, 2002) and recommend strategies to possibly prevent it, like emotional support strategies (Yarbrough, 2022) and the use of on-call/back-up clergy (Adams et al., 2016), the layered aspects within the struggle brought on by pandemic-era burnout beckons a closer look at the intersectionality of the stakeholders themselves and a more all around leader-catalyzed healing approach. Therefore, this particular inquiry seeks to understand what a restorative approach might entail for mitigating clergy burnout; since a restorative leadership model ultimately offers a potential intervention for clergy exhaustion, it will be the focus of a more systematic review of the literature, exploring its evolution over time and its potential efficacy for clergy retention. However, before reviewing the literature apropos to the history of restorative practices and subsequent models of leadership, certain terms should be clearly defined.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this paper, specific terms must be defined within the context they are used. Note the following terminology and their working definitions:

Clergy: A religious leader who performs specific duties in care of those who follow their faith-based tradition. Clergy or members of clergy most often are referred to as occupying the role of pastor, preacher, bishop, minister, priest, monk, rabbi, shaykh, mullah, or imam. Their

functions can include but are not limited to preaching, teaching, performing sacred rituals and sacraments, organizing, and administrating (Blizzard, 1956; Milstein et al., 2005).

Congregant: A member of a religious group ("Congregant vs churchgoer," 2023) who follows a specific religious order or teaching under the spiritual care of a congregational leader, whether it be a priest, bishop, minister, pastor, rabbi, shaykh, or imam.

Community: A diverse group of people living in relatively close proximity to one another who share a common purpose and perspectives while engaging in joint action together (MacQueen et al., 2001).

Statement of Problem

When clergy members' internal struggle begins to manifest in their external work, congregants suffer and so does the community at large. Because the suffering experienced by a member of clergy is often not in isolation but instead extends outward, especially affecting people under their direct spiritual care, there is a deep need to rectify it and to do so quickly. This is compounded with the significant shifts within the ministerial landscape as a result of the recent pandemic, and further complicated by the increasing political polarization felt throughout the United States, which has shown no indication of waning anytime soon.

Members of clergy may not always burn out at a higher rate than all similarly grouped professions, but they do tend to burn out quicker than some, for example quicker than therapists or counselors (Adams et al., 2016). In an earlier study that looked at clergy roles compared to other service-oriented professions like teachers and healthcare workers, clergy members experienced higher degrees of stress when it came to role ambiguity, work overload, boundary violations, emotional isolation, and exhausting administrative duties, among others (Foss, 2002). The demands on religious leaders are unique and have been made more difficult during the

unique events of COVID-19 combined with its heightened politicization throughout the country. Such uniqueness requires an equally unique ideological framework to sustain clergy in their ministerial roles, a framework that takes into account the restorative nature of the work itself: Self-restorative as well as other-restorative.

Central Questions

There is a notable trend towards restorative practices in various service-oriented sectors already (e.g., for healthcare see Foster [2015] and for education see O'Neil Golson [2018]), which naturally begs the question of where else might such approaches be particularly helpful, especially for religious leaders within the US where restorative practice may potentially breathe new life into clergy leadership contexts. Since religious institutions and congregations are not excluded from the effects of divisiveness caused by the wide array of polarizing social issues within our country nor the lingering effects of the pandemic (Sweas, 2022), such can easily prompt deeper restorative-approach questions germane to clerical leadership itself, like:

1. How might restorative leadership help clergy be more effective and sustainable in their role?

2. How might restorative leadership help foster healing among congregants?

3. How might a restorative leadership approach among clergy foster support for the wider community?

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Literature Review

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Restorative Justice

The use of the word "restorative" within most circles implies that something was broken in the first place and is being subsequently "restored." In fact, many of us link the word most commonly to the concept of "restorative justice," which primarily refers to the work of

reintegrating offenders successfully back into the society they "harmed" through their crime. This specific social justice work has various dimensions to it, notwithstanding at its core is relational repair and the re-establishment of social equality (Leung, 1999). While restorative leadership does not equate to restorative justice, it does share a restorative worldview which acknowledges that society's members are often broken or harmed in some way and "things can be made right" (Zehr, 1990, p. 211), thus forming a notable root within the restorative movement: Holistic hope.

Restorative justice advocate Howard Zehr (1990), when defining the boundaries of restorative justice, mentioned the healing side of relationships as something hoped for within the process. Later, Rupert Ross (1996) explored this aspect in particular in his work *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* in which he unpacked much older indigenous systems of justice that view an offense as breaking relationship with the victim, the tribe, and the earth itself. Moreover, the onus of restoration rests on the whole community, which together must examine each contributing factor involved in the offense so that a path toward both physical and spiritual healing can be achieved (Leung, 1999). In fact, such ancient notions of restoration have permeated religious thought for millenia; one must look no further than the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam* or the Christian concept of atonement. Though each is different in its solution, both concepts speak of a brokenness within the human-Creator relationship that is in need of ultimate restoration to wholeness (Rosenthal, 2005; Eberhart, 2020).

A wider recognition of the effectiveness of restorative approaches can be seen in the latter part of the 20th Century when several countries like New Zealand and Canada officially adopted restorative justice initiatives as alternative paths for dealing with criminal prosecutions and sentencings (Leung, 1999). Then, in 2002 the United Nations endorsed restorative justice

guidelines for all criminal proceedings, and in 2018 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe formally recommended restorative justice for its 28 EU countries (Minnow, 2021). If restorative justice is so highly esteemed globally, other restorative practices are certainly worth exploring too.

Restorative Practices

Taking into account the differences in restorative modalities, restorative *practices* (Costello et al., 2010) are specifically more applicable to a wider range of contexts, no longer limited to just criminal justice. Restorative expert Ted Wachtel (2005) identified restorative practices as a burgeoning social science in and of itself. He defined it as "the science of restoring and developing social capital, social discipline, emotional well-being and civic participation through participatory learning and decision making" (p. 86). Based on his research while still yet freshly emerging from the restorative justice movement, Wachtel concluded that restorative practices 1) invite participatory, side-by-side relationships versus authoritarian ones; 2) foster mutual exchange of honest affective expression and feedback; 3) create healthy, emotional bonds between participants; 4) build community; and 5) ultimately result in more overall happiness, productivity, and cooperation. Unsurprisingly, his initial notions successfully bear out in later studies.

Mwenja (2017) describes the overall distillation of these restorative approaches for wider praxis while conducting her own study. She further molds Wachtel's earlier definition by describing restorative practices as "facilitators work[ing] with all members of a group to create an inclusive and egalitarian community, to repair harms done to individuals or the community as needed, and to transform individuals and the community when possible" (p. 15). Mwenja used this definition as a framework for restorative writing with her first year college composition

students, and her definition astutely draws from the deep well of restorative justice. In addition, clearly folded within it is a keen awareness of the humanized *self* and humanized *other*, not unlike Martin Buber's *I-Thou* in which the emphasis becomes about the relational aspects between people rather than simply objectifying the *other* as *it* (see Buber, 1958). She found over the course of her semester-long study that by utilizing restorative circles for students to share their writing and express their feelings, deep connections formed and an authentic classroom community emerged.

O'Neil Golson (2018) conducted a comparative study analyzing three separate case studies in US schools where restorative disciplinary practices were implemented in lieu of traditionally, purely punitive disciplinary actions for offending students. Based on his analysis, restorative practices were instrumental in fostering relationship building, community cohesion, feelings of personal accountability, and a healthy reliance on leadership's help for sustained positive change. The conclusions of the study emphasized the role leaders specifically play in the success of restorative practices; they alone set the tone for the "climate and culture" where the practices are to be implemented and maintained (p. 144).

Restorative Leadership

The history of restorative leadership is an ever evolving one. While its formalization has begun to take some initial shape over the past few years, there is a noticeable dearth of published research on the topic specifically. Because only a handful of published works currently exist, cobbling together its ideological frame is an ongoing process. While Ted Wachtel has done some initial connective work bridging restorative practices to a wider applicability to include some leadership aspects through his organization the International Institute for Restorative Practices, little of that work has been published in the public domain apropos to restorative leadership

specifically; the same can be said for another organization called Restorative Education. In tandem, Seanna Lowe Steffen, before her sudden death in 2017, did a considerable amount of groundwork on birthing a restorative approach to leadership within an earth sustainability model through her organization, the Restorative Leadership Institute. She had intended to produce a more formative published work connecting the dots for restorative leadership's viability as an emerging ideological framework (Steffen, 2012, p. 280), but was unable to do so before her untimely passing. However, *vis a vis* her mostly unpublished data, Steffen (2018) briefly abstracted the totality of her qualitative and quantitative research as follows:

> "Over 40 individual, organizational, and community case studies were chosen purposively for their record of positive outcomes on global sustainability and collective wellbeing. Some have been clients. Through years of watching, listening, and reading, the emergent phenomenon of restorative leadership can best be described as a holistic approach to leadership that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life and acts for the highest benefit to all. Striving to do no harm and to heal the earth, our communities, and ourselves, restorative leadership cultivates the best and most balanced expression of universal values and natural laws" (p. 19).

Steffen was able to capture the core of what a potential framework for restorative leadership could look like and shared glimpses of it in her written works. Law professor Brandon Blankenship (2020), adding to Steffen's evolving concepts, later wrote a paper identifying the critical components of restorative leadership framed as a conceptual model; these leader-focused possibilities are largely informed from what Wachtel, Steffen, and others had already gleaned from earlier restorative justice models. In light of the gaps of published studies, the following will serve as a continuation of that initial patchwork, exploring the available relevant literature

on the topic and fleshing out the core principles pre-baked into restorative leadership's fundamental ethos.

At least in broad strokes, restorative leadership represents the coalescence of restorative practices informing a specific leadership model. Restorative leadership branches upward and outward from its roots in restorative justice and its later iteration of restorative practices, widening its aperture to encompass contexts outside of just the criminal justice and education fields. In this way it can be applied to almost any domain as a potentially viable leadership approach. Dolowitz et al. (2021) summarize this emergent concept in its most basic form as "working together to achieve invitation over coercion, radical inclusion, equitable communities, and working together to achieve objectives" (p. 50). Stripped down to its most basic essence, restorative leadership is inclusive and egalitarian.

Despite not publishing a more robust work detailing her extensive research on the topic, in 2012 Sienna Lowe Steffen did publish the results of a three year long comparative study looking at two critical cases of global restorative leadership. She compared two leaders, both women and both based in Africa: Molly Melching of Tostan International in Senegal and Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. Both leaders had done substantial work over nearly three and a half decades educating, training, and empowering hundreds of thousands of community members between the two locales. Additionally, under Melching's leadership an estimated 660,000 girls had been spared genital mutilation and under Maathai's leadership nearly 47 million trees planted. Both leaders' respective work had far-reaching global impacts, and according to Steffen (2012) both leaders exemplified the qualities and approaches of restorative leadership: Melching and Maathai both 1) valued and elevated the voices of their communities; 2) embraced holistic interconnectedness; 3) held a global worldview in which one's impact must

be far reaching; 4) maintained resilience and adaptability; and 5) improved efficacy through participatory engagement (co-creation with others). Steffen noted both leaders' impressive ability to empower others to self-organize in the hopes of ultimately "sustain[ing] diverse and abundant life on Earth" (p. 280). Unquestionably, in many ways these two leaders well illustrate the far reaching potential of restorative leadership in action.

Hopkins reported on a five year case study she assisted with at the Monmouth Comprehensive School in South Wales, UK in 2015, where restorative practices were adopted. Her report said there were significant benefits to the students (i.e. increased attendance and improved grades), but Hopkins (2015) also noted the impact on the leaders themselves as constituting the most significant change of all, stating that "a restorative environment is good for staff health and well-being" (p. 30). Particularly, it was the modeling of "empathic listening" and other restorative approaches by the administrative staff which left the other staff members feeling "valued and cared for" (*Ibid.*, p. 30). The community and relational support aspects from Hopkins' report are certainly noteworthy: In the fostering of empathy, junior leaders felt listened to and appreciated by their senior leadership. This sentiment of being cared for is critical for stakeholders as well as for the leaders.

The interplay between stakeholders as equals is a fundamental characteristic of a restorative approach (Leung, 1999). Such restorative practices presume that the relationships themselves are supportive in nature (Miles, 2022). In this way, even restorative leadership takes on an almost archetypal role within more egalitarian styles of leadership; such egalitarianism prohibits coercion from the "leader" but does not preclude leader-follower relationships altogether, even among equals (Von Rueden et al., 2014). Instead, this style of egalitarian leadership is humble at its core, putting others above oneself (Steffen, 2012; Spencer, 2020). In

terms of restorative leadership, Steffen (2018) calls this "going net generous" (p. 20), which in some ways resembles a servant-leader like approach (see Greenleaf, 1970). This intention of elevating the needs of the whole group above one's own seems to come from deep within a notion of mutuality.

Interconnectedness is a paramount tenant within restorative practice (Steffen, 2018). This ever growing ideology carries with it a deeply held belief that all people and systems, and with it the surrounding biospheres, are inherently connected to one another (*Ibid.*). Therefore, restorative leadership cannot escape its primality. It is within this leadership framework that the inextricable link between each person, one's community, and one's larger environment is acknowledged and a concerted effort to "serve collective well-being" is modeled (Steffen, 2012, p. 276). The restorative leader sees the interconnectedness as collective responsibility, together shouldering the collective good for all stakeholders (*Ibid.*). When responsibility for the collective good is the goal, healing (or restoration) is often the means. In contrast to restorative justice, the proactive nature of restorative leadership occupies a slightly different lane. While restorative justice has historically been reactive, wider restorative practices are more anticipatory (Wachtel, 2016; Mwenja, 2017). Intentionally seeking to establish a culture of healing before and then continuing it after an offense or hurt has occurred is one of restorative leadership's defining traits (Steffen, 2012). This overall healing quality to restorative leadership is indeed a unique one.

Without healing, restorative approaches become fundamentally non-restorative: In other words, repairing the harm is absolutely essential to the process (Leung, 1999; Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Mwenja, 2017). It is the reconciliation of the fractured parts toward restored wholeness that fosters healing, even healing of the world itself (Steffen, 2018). In this way restorative leadership acts as a vehicle carrying humankind ever closer to realizing its

"evolutionary potential" (*Ibid.*, p. 18). This long-arc view of evolutionary actualization as the end goal for restorative leadership through transformational healing may seem lofty and out of reach; yet, for some leadership scholars it represents the extent to which this particular model inspires and is semblant of the larger holistic restorative healing aspired to, notably that which is still found among ancient indigenous practices today (Ross, 1996). For such practitioners, this natural chain reaction towards wholeness is an inevitable result, and quite potentially the key to sustainability.

As is central to Steffen's work with restorative leadership, ensuring a sustainable world is its ultimate consequence (Steffen, 2012; 2018). Balanced in situ at the apex of restorative practice, restorative leadership then becomes a quasi repairer of the world's ills, whether climate or otherwise (Steffen, 2018). However, world sustainability is more than its end goal. One must simply follow backwards the chain of events that led to its eventuality and one will quickly see that sustainability starts with a deeper self-focused work first. Steffen (2018) pointed out that the healing is not just of the communities and earth alone, but restorative leadership includes and perhaps most importantly requires the healing of oneself as well. Healing is a central part of a restorative approach (Minow, 2021), and sustainability naturally bifurcates so as to include both the earth and its inhabitants (Steffen, 2018). Ensuring the sustainability of the earth cannot occur when restorative leaders fail to sustain themselves and their communities simultaneously; ergo, self-sustainability is a critical component of a restorative leader's overall effectiveness and is only as effective as the intentionality that accompanies it.

Blankenship (2020) discusses the importance of intention for restorative leaders, offering a list of core tenets which inform this intentionality. The first tenet centers around one's own humanity and a universal acknowledgement of the humanity of others, and according to

Blankenship it is from one's own capacity for empathy that strength and energy naturally flow. The second tenet of intentionality characterizes the restorative leader as existing in community alongside others; each step the leader takes is intentionally done for the sake of the wider community around them. Tenet three refers to the leader being intentionally just in all of their actions, recognizing injustice where it may manifest; this can take on various forms of justice work, like racial justice, economic justice, retributive justice, relational justice, etc. Echoing Steffen's (2018) own restorative premise, Blankenship's fourth tenet asserts that restorative leaders should intentionally maintain a net-positive approach to each action, ensuring that the community and world itself are always left in a better state than how one found it. Equally important, the fifth tenet calls for transparency or what Blankenship calls "reality," where stakeholders are guaranteed a place at the table and all voices equally heard. Lastly, Blankenship's sixth tenet positions the restorative leader as intentionally honoring themself, the process, and the stakeholders each step of the way. This final assertion perhaps more closely resembles an ethic than a tenet, but rightly ensconces the intentionality of being honorable within the restorative leadership frame as paramount. Such an ethical girding provides for a clearly more authentic restorative outcome.

Naturally, consistent with any ideological framework, there are tangible iterations played out in real life application. Dolowitz et al. (2021), in applying restorative leadership skills within teams of undergraduates competing in a mock trial, identified several restorative leader strategies that fit within this novel leadership model: 1) Invite others to participate 2) Affirm others 3) Respectfully listen to others 4) Encourage others 5) No gloating 6) Recognize the efforts of others 7) Provide support of others 8) Don't give up 9) Summarize others' points of view 10) Restore relational conflicts 11) Use "yes and" statements in responses 12) Critically assess

weaknesses of argument 13) Critically assess the strength of argument and at the same time 14) Critique authority (p. 56). One can see from this particular set of actions, a culture of inclusivity is possible when the language and behavior reflect it.

When all stakeholders are heard equally and evaluated respectfully, there is a sense of mutual care. Steffen (2018) articulated this sentiment when she said that within restorative leadership "there is a quality of deep connection and caring, intuitive in its insight and grounded in its love, respect, and even reverence for the intelligence, effort, and diversity of the life force present in our communities and nature" (p. 30). This network of inevitable connection seems to place the leader and those being led on equal footing, bonded by deep love and reverence for one another and all other life. In this way, restorative leadership honors its very essence without skirting its core intention: Mutual restoration.

Analysis

After a careful, systematic review of the literature born out of various geographic, socio-economic, and cultural landscapes apropos to restorative practices and their gradual coalescence into restorative leadership, four emerging themes were identified: Equitability, radical inclusion, interconnectedness, and sustainability. These themes surfaced over and over in the literature and thus warrant further exploration. So as to fully unpack the significance of each theme, we will analyze each of them through a specific theoretical lens that best correlates with its natural epistemological leaning: *Equitability* will be fleshed out using a critical theory lens, *radical inclusion* with a relational cultural theory lens, *interconnectedness* with a social-cognitive theory lens, and *sustainability* with a care theory lens. This will be accomplished through a deeper analysis of each theme in relationship to the leader (clergy), those being led (congregants), and the peripheral stakeholders (community) so as to discover how the informing theory can offer a

plethora of uniquely powerful perspectives through a restorative leadership paradigm in hopes of mitigating clergy burnout. These specific connections will be further laid out in the discussion and conclusion portions of this paper.

Critical Theory and Equitability

As humans we interact with the world in a critical way, almost innately (Freire, 1974). Therefore, meaningfully viewing clergy, congregants, and their community through the lens of critical theory offers a unique opportunity to deconstruct the power dynamics at play and re-order their placement to foster mutual cooperation by raising critical consciousness. Critical theory is premised on the notion that the world already contains plenty of power imbalance; so, identifying those imbalances by arriving to the realization of the "Namer" versus the "Named" or the "Subject" versus the "Object" (Freire, 1970, pp. 88, 67) becomes part and parcel to the eventual work towards mutual equity where ultimately all are equalized as "Namers" or "Subjects" (this idea is tantamount to removing the objectification of the *other*). Critical theory explores these struggles for dominance by offering a theoretical framework for dismantling inherently oppressive systems (Bohman, 2005), e.g., patriarchy, viriarchy, oligarchy, autocracy, etc., rather than simply relegating oppression as normalized acceptable behavior (Fleming, 2005). This particular sensitivity to disequilibrium within the parameters of systems makes critical theory an intriguing, analytical tool for a multi-perspective examination of restorative leadership's idea of equitability.

The Leader: Clergy

As in any power struggle, those who start with the most power are at a distinct advantage when it comes to keeping it. For clergy, however, it can be argued that their power is not always absolute and rarely theirs to give or keep. Such power and status is often given by the

congregation or given to them by a higher level leader, and in both cases can typically be just as easily taken away. Regardless of how the members of clergy ascertained their role, the power dynamics that inherently come with it can not be ignored. However complex the interplay between power bases may prove to be, restorative leadership calls for a more egalitarian approach when working with all stakeholders; in other words, the leader honors the voices of those being led ostensibly as co-equals in the process of going in a specific direction, often working from consensus. For the restorative leader, aspiring to a holistic solution for any problem encountered is typically an a priori assumption. Inherently, holisticism implies whole-ism, that is, the whole of the group; the inference is that it takes everyone working alongside each other in order to be successful through "dialogical action" (Freire, 1970, p. 168).

Restorative leadership offers clergy a unique opportunity to share the weight of the role by including one's co-equals to help shoulder some of the tasks and decision making so as to lighten the load. However, regardless of the current relationship between clergy and congregants, whether it is an oppressive or liberating one, if a more egalitarian approach is integral to the clergy's leadership style, then naturally they will begin the subtle process of re-ordering things to make room for equalization. Equitability is not instantaneous. It takes an act of critical consciousness on the part of both those in and out of power, and consistent monitoring by the disempowered to bring it to fruition and maintain it (Mandela, 2009). So, regardless of whether the power clergy members wield is perceived or actual, they are almost without exception considered "the leader" and therefore must work to change the typically didactic (vertical) nature of such relationships with congregants to be more dialogical (horizontal) in order to ensure equitability.

The Led: Congregants

While a congregant usually respects the role of the spiritual "leader" of their congregation, the feelings can be mixed as the roles themselves can be mixed (McClintock, 2004). There can be simultaneous feelings of care and subjugation within the complexity of the relationship where congregants feel obligated to the clergy member in some way (Dawson, 2021). While clergy may have feelings of powerlessness at times, their power is enshrined within the title itself and cannot be so easily absconded. Perceived clerical power is an immutable part of the power dynamic inherent to congregational life.

A restorative leadership approach attempts to disrupt the imbalance of power between clergy and congregations with co-empowerment. Since the relationship between clergy and congregants has historically been more didactic than dialogic, equitability has been largely elusive. Freire (1970) explaining this "banking" model in an educational context, illustrates it as the "teacher" depositing information into the "student" unidirectionally; in contrast, a dialogical dynamic would entail mutual learning in which both exchange information in cooperative problem solving (p. 80). So, once the clergy member shifts from solely depositing information into their congregation as a one-way action and accepts that they too can learn from their congregants, symbiosis begins to take shape and some version of co-empowerment (or at least mutual agency) naturally ensues. It is within this new dialogical relationship that the members of clergy and congregants shift from a vertical dynamic to a more horizontal one, a more equitable one, certainly a healthier one for both sides.

The Peripheral Stakeholders: Community

While the extent of power a clergy member wields within the larger community varies from congregation to congregation and community to community, there is little argument that clergy occupy a vital cultural or even spiritual leadership role within the society at large, often as

the official representative of their congregation. In this way the wider community in which the

congregation is embedded becomes a critical stakeholder within the clerical leader's restorative

purview. Foundational to restorative leadership is a shared responsibility for the community in

which one lives and the world around it (Steffen, 2018; Blankenship, 2020), so within this

landscape equitability emerges as a critical feature.

Creating opportunities for dialogue with members of the wider community is essential

work for many clergy who seek to engage with the society around them. Sometimes this work is

in response to social injustice (e.g., refugees overfilling local shelters) or even a community

tragedy (e.g., a shooting in the neighborhood). Whether expected to host a candlelight vigil or

lead a march on the streets, members of clergy are often looked to for answers and guidance in

times of community crisis. If a leader co-opts the event in order to proselytize people into

congregational membership, for example, such would be considered didactic in nature rather

than dialogical. Freire (1970) outlines equalizing attributes born from a critical lens like

humility, trust, and even love as necessary for true dialogue to occur. These affective

components resonate well within a restorative leadership frame (see Steffen's [2018] "quality of

deep connection and caring" p. 30 and Blankenship's [2020] "affective statements" p. 2) and in

many ways constitute praxis for equitability. If a member of the clergy wants to engage with the

community at large, it seems prudent to do so from a posture of equitability, none subservient to

the other, so as to create meaningful interaction that produces a betterment of both and where all

interests are served.

Relational Cultural Theory and Radical Inclusion

Human relationships are anything but simple and straightforward. They are fraught with

complexity: A continuum of relational connection and disconnection, defining and redefining.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) proposes that these layers of complexity within relationships be examined in light of culture and power dynamics with the ultimate goal of working toward mutual empathy through connection (Jordan, 2010). This particular theoretical lens lends itself well to the examination of the need for radical inclusion within relationships, a restorative leadership mainstay. RCT is especially helpful for identifying recurring relational disconnection often caused by past traumas, including cultural traumas (Westcott & Grimes, 2023). Attempts by dominant (empowered) groups to marginalize underrepresented (disempowered) groups by creating distorted images or narratives about them often results in unresolved relational disconnections (Jordan, 2010). RCT works to remedy this, resolving exclusionary acts (disconnection) by working toward inclusion (connection) through relational courage, resilience, and competence (*Ibid.*; Frey, 2013). In this way, RCT astutely informs restorative leadership's notion of radical inclusion through critical relational development.

The Leader: Clergy

For members of clergy, relationships are essential. They are in fact the vehicle through which much of their ministry is accomplished. However, if spiritual leaders participate in maligning or marginalizing particular segments of society, they in fact work against a restorative ideal of social connection. Such exclusionary behavior, while perhaps common in societies at large, is antithetical to the radical inclusiveness that restorative leadership proposes. When a leader approaches congregants restoratively, they seek to include all members. This kind of ideological practice requires a firm belief in total inclusion; for the leader it becomes a ceaseless work to connect with all people on some mutually respectful level and to ensure distorted narratives are rejected.

A core component offered within RCT that fosters radical inclusion is empathy. To counter societal dissonance between people or groups, empathy becomes a restorative salve, realigning what is otherwise relational incongruence. Mutual empathy becomes a key to unlocking inclusive relationships with others. This is accomplished largely through self-awareness and the capacity to take on the perspective of another (Gerdes et al., 2011). For clergy who take a restorative approach to relationships, empathy is a natural part of it. They strive to identify with the perspectives of their congregants and community members at large. The hope should be that all members in and out of their congregation would feel invited into some level of mutually respectful and empathetic relationship.

The Led: Congregants

It is easy to feel ignored or left out in a congregational setting at times, especially if one is from an underrepresented group ("4 ways diverse," 2021). When a clergy member affirms racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, or transphobic sentiments whether in or out of their congregational context, relational disconnection is almost a guaranteed outcome for some. Marginalization occurs in religious contexts and has for millenia; one only need to look at the repeated Judeo-Christian admonishment for the marginalizing of "orphans, widows, and foreigners" as a prime example (Jusu, 2017). Radical inclusion diametrically opposes the maligning of any person or group; it recognizes that a restorative approach must entail the inclusion of all stakeholders (Blankenship, 2020). A restorative leader, however, can work to empower the marginalized.

Working from a position of power, the leader has an opportunity to be inclusive. A restorative leader does so intentionally and congregants will feel its effects. At the same time, congregants have participatory power in their relationships with each other as well as with the

clergy member and do so from a position of autonomy. Such agency springs forth from mutuality rather than perceived sameness (Jordan et al., 2004); to be inclusive with one another is to create an environment that fosters mutuality, and this is best accomplished when led by clergy who recognize the restorative power of omnidirectional empathy.

The Peripheral Stakeholders: Community

Relationships are informed by past experiences as well as culture. Except with rare exception, clergy members and their congregations do not usually live in isolation from the wider community in which they live, and thus the interplay between society and a religious group is simply unavoidable. The restorative leader sees this as an opportunity to invite in the voices from the community as equitable stakeholders to be heard. However, sometimes the reality is something quite different. Congregations and their clergy can at times seem more focused within their own walls rather than engaging the community outside them (Regner, 2022). To ignore the community is to perhaps ignore the critically encompassing culture(s) and their significance.

Congregants (and the clergy members) usually originate from the wider community either directly or indirectly. Therefore, the cultural milieus from which the congregation is birthed are inextricably tied to the congregants themselves and logically need to be included in the restorative process. These ties can at times be strained or even disconnected for some reason or another. Nevertheless, RCT provides for awareness of cultural trauma and broken relationships (disconnection), as well as for processes incorporating courage and resilience in the restoration of relational connection based on necessary mutuality. Such work requires a commitment from clergy and congregants alike to engage relationally with the wider community.

A restorative leader values the community's myriad voices, seeing their equitable importance

and to whom they belong as co-equal stakeholders in the process of holistic restoration.

Social-Cognitive Theory and Interconnectedness

Examining the importance of interconnection between each person and their environment

has made Bandura's Social-Cognitive Theory (SCT) one of the most utilized theoretical

frameworks in the behavioral sciences (Baranowski et al., 2002). Bandura (1977) postulates that

a person's self-efficacy, one's belief in their own capabilities, is largely subject to experiential

mastery, social modeling, social persuasion, and emotional triggers. It is this interaction of

internal and external influences that makes the theory particularly interesting for restorative

work. The intersectionality of internal and external factors is critical to restorative praxis.

Internally, a constant ebb and flow of self-efficacy is at play, influencing external behavior.

Regarding the external determinants, the reciprocal nature between persons as well as persons

and their environment is articulated in SCT's basis for human behavior and potential

interventions (*Ibid.*); it highlights the phenomenological nature of mutual connection, or what

Steffen (2012) calls a global "web of interconnectedness" (p. 277). For the restorative leader,

these bonds are critical to both recognize and preserve.

The Leader: Clergy

The conscious awareness of mutual interconnectedness is perhaps one of the most

epiphanic moments for any evolving restorative leader. When a member of clergy discovers their

imminent tie to the environment, including to all other humans and for that matter to all other

species, an opportunity for restorative praxis emerges. It is within the clergy's purview that

relationships of connection are fostered among the congregation and the wider community by

modeling what healthy relationships can feature. SCT posits that such modeling elevates self-

efficacy when the recipients are able to internalize it and emulate it back. Positive relational pathologies form once they are repeated over and over. Therefore, a restorative leader has a unique opportunity to pioneer such behavior modeling in hopes of shaping a growing culture of positive interaction and mutual support.

One of the most critical lessons a restorative clergy leader learns is that they do nothing in isolation. Their interactions are by definition in concert with others and thus interconnected with the world around them. A chain of actions and reactions cascading from one person to the next becomes commonplace, to the point where those relationships contribute to self-efficacy for each human link. A clergy member has the unique opportunity to help nurture empowerment among these stakeholder links both individually and collectively, as well as self-efficacy within oneself. This could manifest in congregants feeling emboldened enough to honestly express their feelings and for members of the community this could manifest in the form of opportunities to genuinely voice their thoughts or concerns. Restorative clergy leaders value interconnectedness as critical to holistic restoration, and actively networking between members is critical to the benefit of all (Steffen, 2018). It is important, though, that the clergy member acknowledges their own need for personal agency and healthy connection with others, an often elusive endeavor.

The Led: Congregants

Congregations are intrinsically social in nature. They are predicated by layers of relational congruence and at times incongruence, each congregant ultimately vying for spiritual and communal fulfillment. A spiritual body already lends itself to restorative praxis by recognizing what a spiritual community entails: Interconnectedness and wholeness. Naturally, a congregation acts as a microcosm of larger group norms and cultural mores with which members are often deeply connected, all within a context of common purpose. SCT purports that behaviors

are based on expected outcomes (Bandura, 1977), which in this case includes various forms of mutuality. So, congregational relationships, which are typically generational, tend to be learned and some level of mutuality expected.

Clergy, more often than not, do not ascend to their position from within the congregation but are brought in from outside. This can cause stress on the congregation itself (and obviously for the clergy member too). It may take considerable time to form authentic bonds between congregants and their clergy. However, a restorative approach can be bidirectional, which means that the locus of control does not rest solely within the clergy member to catalyze such relational connections; congregants, utilizing their own levels of self-efficacy, can also initiate mutuality by recognizing the inherent interconnectedness between the congregation and its leadership and the immutable fact that one cannot exist independent of the other. Congregational leaders need a congregation and congregations need congregational leadership; in this way, neither becomes mutually exclusive, but instead each side voluntarily resides within a holistic web of mutual interconnectedness together.

The Peripheral Stakeholders: Community

Congruence between the congregational leader, the congregants, and the wider community is ideal but not easily ascertained. More often than not, the three entities are a maelstrom of incongruence leaving each to vie for survival independently. Restorative leadership, however, is opposed to such stakeholder disharmony and works tirelessly to remedy it through raising awareness of the unmistakable interconnectedness among all parties. Inherent to restorative praxis is the ideological premise of bringing all members alongside one another, and this includes the wider community.

Societal influence on behavior is an integrant part of determining how a person will ultimately act. The social persuasion aspect coincides with a person's past experience, along with a wide spectrum of other internal and external determinants in hopes of ascertaining a specific outcome and thus shaping the behavior itself to achieve it. The likelihood of communities feeling mutuality with a congregation or clergy leader is likely based on these interlayered factors. When a community feels the intentionality of a restorative leader specifically directed towards them, there is perhaps an intuitive process of mutuality that is reciprocated over time; this has an almost disarming effect by removing the natural barriers between the two sides. Such a level of mutuality most likely manifests after a series of repeated positive experiences, when ulterior motives are dispelled and interconnectedness fully respected. Moreover, this is often fostered from a deeper place of care and concern for each interconnected stakeholder, rather than out of duty or compliance.

Care Theory and Sustainability

Care ethics was born out of feminist theory in the early 1980s (see Gilligan, 1982 and Noddings, 1984), coalescing into an established theory of its own during the years that followed (Noddings, 2002). Its focus on the maternal aspects of relational care provided a novel yet potent avenue of exploration, especially for the fields of education and healthcare. It gave ontological shape to the notion that while all relationships are not equal, the relational aspect of human beings at the basic level includes relationships of care in which at least one is the "carer" and the other is the "cared-for" (Noddings, 2012, p. 772). This serves as the basis for exploring how role dynamics within relationships work, and creates a lens through which to examine mutuality, relational affect, and the ultimate goal of creating climates of care. Since at its core resides a question of preservation, the sustainability of human life sandwiches itself nicely within the

ethics of care approach through care theory, inviting a deeper analysis. The restorative leadership

framework already lends itself to the sustainability of individuals, a particular focus of care

theory, but it then stretches itself to include a more expansive goal of caring for society as a

whole, if not the world itself (Steffen, 2018).

The Leader: Clergy

Care theory frames relationships like clergy-congregant as unequal in light of the

traditional roles they occupy; that is, one role will constitute the "carer" (clergy) and the other

the "cared-for" (congregant). In this case, the clergy member acts as the source of spiritual care

for the congregant and not the other way around. However, in some initially unequal

relationships of care, turn-taking eventually develops. In those cases, the cared-for will at times

take on the role of carer and vice versa; so, a significant level of equal mutuality begins to take

shape in these rare instances. While mutual care on the surface seems ideal for most

relationships, for members of clergy and others in similar roles like therapists and teachers,

complete mutuality with congregants, patients, or students would be considered an unethical

expectation, at least within parameters of equal mutuality. Fortunately, care theory offers a

"climate of care" approach as well (Noddings, 2012, p. 777), stimulating a culture of care rather

than focusing on individual dyads of mutuality. For the restorative clergy member, sustaining

relationships throughout a specific network of stakeholders is fundamental and creating a climate

of care potentially accomplishes this without crossing ethical lines.

Sustainability of the individual, the group, or even the world for that matter comes into

focus as one begins to think in terms of restorative praxis. There is considerable interest on the

part of the restorative leader to ensure not only their own self-sustainability but also the

sustainability of their congregants and the wider community. By demonstrating genuine care to

their fellow stakeholders, they are in fact nurturing a climate of care for one another. While

reciprocation will not come directly from congregants per se (as ethical boundaries could be

inadvertently muddied), there would be a general sense of care among those being led, and

caring attitudes (empathy) would be a pervasive part of cohesion and general sustainability. Care

feeds one into another and omnidirectionally creates a global culture of care that becomes

cyclical in nature, sustaining itself while expanding at the same time to incorporate the world

around it (Steffen, 2012; 2018). The restorative leader can potentially be the spark for this

particular chain reaction of care.

The Led: Congregants

Congregations traditionally view themselves as a collective unit with common purpose

and as such some would even call themselves a community, and others would go as far as to

refer to themselves as a family. Regardless of the descriptor one chooses, congregants in general

feel a deep affinity for one another and as such caring for each other comes almost naturally.

Though most will not formally articulate their feelings of mutual empathy as an ethic of care nor

characterize it as a form of spiritual sustainability, history has proven (even if only

subconsciously) that if one invests in the caring relationships around them, their investment will

be reciprocated for years to come, perhaps even for generations. The desire to care for another

and be cared for by another almost seems intuitive for most, but at the same time maybe it is

simply a flame that needs to be fanned regularly in order to flourish and reproduce.

The restorative leader modeling a climate of care for congregants is infectious. Once the

feeling of authentic empathy is received by the congregants by way of the leader, a restorative

attitude begins to make its way into the psyche of individuals, and then groups of individuals,

and perhaps eventually to include people from outside the congregation itself. This is not to say

that the need for care was nonexistent previously; it is to say that regardless, once people feel cared for, genuine healing begins: Spiritual healing, emotional healing, and maybe to some degree even physical healing. Relationships of care then become priority for the stakeholders under a restorative leader, and thus unburdening the leader with the sole responsibility of care since fellow congregants also find themselves caring for one another just as the leader has modeled for them.

The Peripheral Stakeholders: Community

Communities want to feel heard, understood, respected, and cared for. Individuals in the community want the same. A climate of care provides an opportunity for communities to build on the need for care that all human beings have, and this can be channeled through a restorative leader who builds a coalition of stakeholders throughout the community they serve. Clergy leaders have the unique opportunity to establish an ethic of care within their congregations and begin to model what measured mutual care looks like in the larger community as well. It begins with a deep care for the persons in one's care and then the persons on the periphery. This is the key to sustainability for all.

While there is debate as to who and what truly constitutes a stakeholder, there is little question as to the need to include as many voices as possible when considering sustainability. Sustainability by definition includes everyone and everything, as it is the veritable essence of the preservation and renewal of life in perpetuity. In as much, restorative leaders find themselves modeling an ethic of care that encompasses the whole of society with little concern as to geographic or cultural boundaries. Instead, such leaders are hopeful that their work within the congregation sends ripples, if not tidal waves, of oscillating mutual empathy, pumping intricate

pathways with care through an endless web of relational synapses. For the restorative clergy leader, there is no such thing as too much care in this world.

Discussion

Utilizing the four theories (critical, relational cultural, social-cognitive, and care) as analytical lenses through which to explore the potential for restorative leadership within clergy circles is a starting point, strengthening the case for its relevance in real life application, but it is not the end point. Fleshing out the intricacies of how clergy members relate to their congregants and then how both relate to the world around them is a circular and in many ways recursive act. It requires constant re-examination and pivoting. However, based on the review of the literature and subsequent analysis from within the various theoretical frames, one can get a clearer view of what Athanasiou (2020) might refer to as the "impossible possible": A very real potential emerges from within the process, whether an all encompassing solution or simply a stepping stone upon which the leader inches themself ever closer to restorative wholeness.

Notions of equitability, radical inclusion, and interconnectedness can for the purpose of practicality be bucketed together in what Blankenship (2020) codifies as intentionally "being human." He explicates humanness as containing within it a universal acknowledgement of the humanity of others, inferring equality of personhood. Steffen's (2012) own characterization of the restorative leader embarking on holistic interconnectedness is keenly tied to the intentional listening of the voices around them, much like Hopkins' (2015) observation of lower level leaders being actively listened to by their senior leadership, and not unlike Wachtel's (2005; 2016) and Mwenja's (2017) restorative circles. This act of listening to one another fosters with it what Blankenship (2020) referred to as "the real," that is to say the transparency that comes with honest co-existence. Yet, the question for clergy quickly becomes what can mutual

empowerment do for them. In many ways, by design, clergy have little interest in relinquishing their power altogether but seek in some way to use it for the benefit of others. Perhaps emanating from this idea is the notion that empowered partners (i.e. congregation and community) are essential, and within which the clergy member can find an obvious compromise: Mutuality.

Though Noddings (2002) warns about mutuality within a relationship predicated on an ethic of care, especially for relationships that are inherently designed to be nonmutual (i.e. the clergy-congregant relationship), there is room for redefining what is meant by mutuality. Bandura's (1977) social-cognitive approach to mutuality does not equate it to emotive vulnerability as much as equating it to the reciprocity of empathy. It is true that Noddings' own hermeneutical understanding of an ethic of care would give pause to empathy since it shifts the focus away from the carer investing in the cared-for exclusively (central to care theory) and is instead replaced by the mutuality of relational care (another aspect of care theory, but less emphasized). Yet, mutuality is a key ontological aspect of interconnectedness, and the preservation of connection within relationships takes precedence. Moreover, it is the climate of care abstracted from care theory that can provide impetus for self and perhaps even global sustainability. Blankenship (2020) and Steffen (2012; 2018) affirm the restorative leader's goal to ensure each action has an impact beyond themselves, ultimately serving the greater good of all.

Conclusion

The guiding questions posed at the start of this paper revolved around clergy effectiveness and sustainability, as well as the fostering of healing among congregants, and support for the wider community. These should now be revisited within the scope of the restorative leadership paradigm. First of all, one may immediately ask what constitutes clergy

effectiveness. For the purposes of this particular inquiry, effectiveness for a member of clergy is the ability to mitigate clergy burnout effectively and to stay productive in one's role, all in a sustainable way. Consequently, examining the most frequently reported reasons for clergy burnout in light of a restorative leadership approach is crucial. The top reasons for clergy burnout included general feelings of loneliness and job related stress caused at least in part by the current political environment ("Pastors share," 2022). Restorative leadership posits an overall view of relational interconnectedness, a web (Steffen, 2018) serving as a safety net from isolation.

By design, restorative leadership includes more than just the leader, it includes all stakeholders and thus becomes itself an affinity group working in concert with one another regularly. It requires frequent dialogue (Freire, 1970), intentional listening (Wachtel, 2005; Costello et al., 2010; Hopkins, 2015; Wachtel, 2016; Mwenja, 2017), and care (Noddings, 2002, 2012). This particular leadership approach pulls the leader out from isolation and forces them to form healthy bonds with the stakeholders around them. The clergy's burdens become the group's burdens too, at least to some degree; this notion of "it takes a village" is sustainable as long as the "village" is sustained by one another. Simultaneously, the restorative clergy leader will nurture channels of healing among their congregants. One may ask what constitutes healing. Healing in this case is any act toward restorative wholeness, whether achieving personal actualization or perhaps repairing relational connections.

Built on relationships of care, mutuality, and connection, the restorative leader builds a coalition of life-giving relationships even among the congregants themselves. In this way, the clergy serves as the primary modeler of the behavior, but really the congregants themselves create the lion's share of what becomes a veritable climate of care, extending even beyond the congregational walls. A restorative leader understands the interconnectedness of all the

stakeholders surrounding them, including the community in which they live and work.

Therefore, the restorative clergy leader works to support the community members as much as the

congregants they serve in hopes of creating a culture which acknowledges the "real" and what

"being human" entails. Taken in its totality, restorative leadership can potentially serve as an

effective intervention for clergy burnout.

Ethical Implications

If clergy members are left to continue burning out at such a high rate, then what will

become of our cultural institutions, our spiritual centers, and our sacramental ceremonies?

Maybe our country would shift to a post-religious state of being. But could people imagine no

more religious weddings, baptisms, funerals, or bar/bat mitzvahs? No more Saturday night mass,

Sunday worship, Shabbat service, Sangha gathering, or Friday prayers? No more Christmas Eve,

Eid, or Diwali celebrations? These questions give the citizenry immediate pause and seemingly

put deep seated cultural traditions under the microscope. As postmodern as our society may seem

to be at times, at least ideologically, in many ways it is still tied to many of the traditional

religious norms of the past. Spiritual support has been a major need in the US and looks as

though it will for all intents and purposes continue to be one (Zinnbauer et al., 1999; Plante,

2008).

Since the need for spiritual support is undiminished, the need for clergy is equally

undiminished. In fact, this is further compounded with an increasing need for spiritual support

stemming from the recent pandemic (Upenieks, 2022). Because clergy leaders are needed

perhaps now more than ever before in recent history, there is an urgency to retain as many of

them as possible. A grand need on this level behooves the society at large to do all that it can to

safeguard against losing such a precious resource. A glaring lack of religious leadership during

ceremonies and holidays is one thing, but a lack of spiritual support for a population in desperate need of deeper spiritual assistance can be devastating to the mental and emotional health of the masses. Not to mention, the shift in cultural distinctiveness for those whose personal identity is in some way visibly linked to their religious identity may find itself suffering as well. One can only imagine what a lack of religious education and subsequent affirmation regarding one's critical self-distinctiveness in a faith based identity (i.e. the woman wearing a hijab or the man wearing a kippah or the young girl wearing a crucifix necklace, etc) might look like if there were no clergy to guide them.

Therefore, the case for clergy retention and sustainment is a critical one for our society. Additionally, the rapid rate of burnout and quite possibly rising rates of attrition among clergy is alarming. While piquing scholars' interest for further study, the mitigating of clergy burnout for those who share in the burden of the impending crisis, this issue should be solved with haste or at the very least begin traversing its way toward a solution with the utmost urgency. Furthermore, restorative leadership offers hope. If clergy were to adopt a restorative leadership approach, both with the support of their own leadership and congregation, the clergy member would then be free to implement critical tools for preventing their alienation from others, create a climate of care among the stakeholders, and realize the full potential of their collective work alongside one another rather than be caught vacillating in the throes of a politically divisive tug-of-war within the walls of their houses of worship.

Recommendations

As to the question "Where do we go from here?" there are legitimate, tangible responses. The clergy crisis is real and ongoing, and consequently there are viable recommendations to

consider for effecting immediate and long term, positive change within the religious institutions and congregational systems that clergy members serve:

Recommendation 1

Conduct a thorough mental and emotional health check for all current members of clergy. This will help unearth the specific pain-points experienced by the clergy leadership. Such information will be critical as part of the restorative process of listening to one another with critical transparency and the beginnings of a path to restorative wholeness. This is predicated on a willingness on the part of the clergy to make themselves vulnerable enough to take a personal inventory of their feelings and intentions, which is typically not an easy request to make. However, if a convincing case for clergy revitalization is made, perhaps enough buy-in can be achieved.

Recommendation 2

Create a Restorative Leadership Program (RLP) specifically for clergy members. Such a program could be created in concert with organizations that have already been doing versions of this kind of work in other contexts, like the International Institute for Restorative Practices and the Restorative Leadership Institute. Once an RLP with clear goals and practices that support clergy needs is established, the clergy members can then model it for the other stakeholders, and then mentor new incoming clergy through the same process and so on.

Recommendation 3

Create an adaptability apparatus within the RLP. If a core construct within a newly formed Restorative Leadership Program for clergy is the ability to adapt to change and the tools to do so effectively, then the clergy member will not be caught off guard. In fact, the restorative clergy leader embraces change as praxis, knowing it is inevitable and critical to sustainability.

The recognition of one's need for adaptability toward change as praxis is much more effective than simply avoiding change altogether. Praxis denotes a clear investment on the part of the practitioner who is now equipped with an apparatus to navigate transformative change for a global impact rather than settling as a limited do-er or even an atrophic bystander. Change is tangible and so are the actions of the restorative leader for the ultimate betterment of the community and beyond it.

Recommendation 4

Conduct formal field studies regarding restorative leadership and its effects on clergy, congregants, and the community; the mitigation of clergy burnout can also be considered as a possible benefit, among others. Up to this point, including the results of this particular paper, the implementation of restorative leadership within clergy contexts has been strictly conceptual in frame and scope. Therefore, future studies must critically look at the evidenced effects of restorative leadership among clergy leaders and their tangential stakeholders. Additionally, if a positive correlation between clergy effectiveness and restorative leadership is established through the data, then subsequent studies can possibly include more exploration of restorative clergy leadership and its impact on the environment as well; eco-spirituality is a parallel emergent ideological framework (Bock, 2013; Saleem et al., 2018; Duke, 2020; Ramadhani & Ekaviana, 2020) that could offer unique intersectional insight regarding a global sustainability model.

Summary

First and foremost, clergy members are in crisis. Recent reporting has shown that members of clergy are burning out at an unusually high rate. For example, as many as 42% of protestant pastors considered stepping down in 2022 according to Barna ("Pastors share," 2022).

While the pandemic and political woes have exacerbated clergy leaders' stress loads (*Ibid.*),

healthy avenues for mitigating the burnout have proved elusive (Foss, 2002; Adams et al., 2016).

Feelings of loneliness and an unprecedented amount of job related stress have been among the

most salient causes for the burnout ("Pastors share," 2022). Without effective interventions,

society as a whole will suffer if clergy members decide to resign en masse. Therefore, possible

solutions must be seriously examined and the one(s) that prove to be most potentially viable

should be seriously considered.

Since the role of clergy is that of leader, leadership models best equipped to deal with the

complexities of the role had to be considered; subsequently, restorative leadership resonated

most clearly with the clergy leader's particular function. Therefore, restorative leadership was

selected for further inquiry regarding its feasibility as a potential intervention. The guiding

questions considered in the inquiry were 1) How might restorative leadership help clergy be

more effective and sustainable in their role? 2) How might restorative leadership help foster

healing among congregants? and 3) How might a restorative leadership approach among clergy

foster support for the wider community? This set of inquisitorial pre-work sparked a systematic

review of the pertinent literature: An exploration of the full history of the restorative movement

starting with restorative justice (Zher, 1990; Leung, 1999), then exploring it through general

restorative practices (Wachtel, 2005; Costello et al., 2010; Wachtel, 2016; Mwenja, 2017; O'Neil

Golson, 2018) and finally within its more recent iteration as restorative leadership (Steffen 2012;

2018; Hopkins, 2015; Blankenship, 2020; Dolowitz et al., 2021). These versions of restorative

approaches are not so much sequential as they are simply iterative within a restorative

framework, developing as needed over time.

Restorative justice started to become prevalent in the 1980s as an alternative path for offenders being integrated back into society, a path which aided in the repair from the harm done by their crime, taking into account the victims and the community in which the crime was committed. The method was labeled "restorative" as it actively worked to restore the offender back into being a productive member of society. The roots of such restorative approaches predate the late 20th Century cases of restorative justice, and could be traced back to some earlier indigenous justice systems of North America (Ross, 1996). Over time restorative justice approaches morphed into restorative practices which could be used in various contexts, not just for criminal justice. Restorative practices at their core include an ultimate goal of restoring and repairing relationships. Mwenja (2017) adopted a restorative approach for what she called restorative writing for her college writing students. O'Neil Golson (2018) examined multiple schools that were using a restorative approach in place of typical disciplinary procedures for student offenders. In all of these settings, restorative circles were used in an attempt to nurture safe space for sharing and for creating helpful social bonds. Through the universality of such restorative practices, restorative leadership emerged. Sienna Lowe Steffen, who Blankenship (2020) calls the "mother of restorative leadership" (p. 9), characterized it as "[s]triving to do no harm and to heal the earth, our communities, and ourselves" (2018, p. 19). Furthermore, after reviewing a handful of studies that looked at restorative leadership specifically (Steffen 2012; Dolowitz et al., 2021; and parts of Hopkins, 2015), coalescing themes emerged: Equitability, radical inclusion, interconnectedness, and sustainability. As a next step, four critical lenses were used to analyze each theme respectively: Critical theory, relational-cultural theory, social-cognitive theory, and care theory. Lastly, each theme through its respective theoretical lens was

carefully unpacked; particular attention was given to the perspectives of the clergy member, their congregants, and the wider community.

Through the post-analysis discussion, restorative leadership was determined to be a potentially viable leadership intervention for mitigating clergy burnout. It uniquely offers a model for leading that combats two of the leading causes of clergy burnout, job related stress and loneliness. Restorative leadership's focus on relational interconnectedness, empathic mutuality, inclusivity, and sustainability, offer immediate avenues for unburdening the clergy leader from both loneliness and unmanaged stress. Once the clergy leader is tied into relational care with stakeholders (like in a restorative circle), the burdens are mitigated as they naturally diffuse among the various relationships themselves reflexively. No one is an island anymore; mutuality becomes key. Instead of isolation, interconnectedness is cultivated among the stakeholders and a holistic approach to mutual healing is encouraged.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are twofold. Firstly, there was a lack of scientific studies that looked at restorative leadership specifically and none that looked at restorative leadership as an intervention. The clear lack of credible studies that look specifically at restorative leadership as an interventive model beckons further research. Secondly, there is currently no published empirical data (neither qualitative nor quantitative) regarding restorative leadership for members of clergy. Therefore, hard data should be collected in regards to the effects of restorative leadership on clergy. Actual data collected in the field will help establish the evidenced viability of restorative leadership as an effective intervention for clergy burnout. Otherwise, restorative leadership will remain largely conceptual and untested.

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