Thriving, Surviving and Burnout in Church Leaders

The Highs and Lows of Church Ministry
Those in Christian ministry can experience high levels of personal satisfaction in their work, and a great sense of effectiveness. It can be intensely rewarding, with a sense that their ministry is making a positive difference. In the 2011 National Church Life Survey Leader Survey the responses of over 2,000 senior church leaders showed that a vast majority rated their overall effectiveness highly.

Responses are shown in figure 1 to the following question, for senior church leaders in Australian churches:

"How would you rate your overall effectiveness in your present role here over the last few months?"

Levels of stress are more evenly spread, but with the majority indicating levels up the higher end of this subjective scale. Rather than 'feeling stressed' or 'feeling effective', many church leaders are experiencing a high level of effectiveness and high stress at the same time.

Defining Thriving and Burnout
Stress can sometimes be constructive because of the response it elicits - people can rise to a challenge. However chronic stress, will eventually take a toll, and lead one towards burnout. The balance of the positives and negatives of ministry, combined with the personal vulnerabilities and strengths of the leader will determine whether they are thriving, merely surviving, or burning out. While the causes and pathways towards or away from burnout are complex, there is widespread agreement that burnout itself is a...
combination of 'emotional exhaustion' with typical
distancing and coping behaviours (often referred to as
'depersonalisation'), and a low sense of personal
achievement and work satisfaction. NCLS Research
helped develop a pair of scales to examine these
negative and positive phenomena in church leaders.
The 'Scale for Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry'
(SEEM) is eleven questions related to emotional
exhaustion and depersonalisation. The results for
senior ministers across Australia are shown below in
Figure 3, with low exhaustion to the right.

To be **high on emotional exhaustion and low on
satisfaction/achievement** is to be in danger of burnout.
The converse (low exhaustion, high satisfaction/
achievement) is to be **thriving** in the role. Figure 5 below
shows both scales combined and where these
outcomes are located.

The 'Satisfaction in Ministry Scale' (SIMS) is eleven
questions related to personal achievement and
satisfaction in the role. Figure 4 shows the results for
senior ministers in Australia on this scale, with high
satisfaction towards the top.

Examining where one is on the spectrum from burnout
to thriving is an issue for all in church leadership - not
just senior ministers. Most leaders in Australian
churches are in the range of 'Managing well' to
'Thriving'. However, a large number are below this, with
some in danger or in the process of burning out.

**Moving beyond surviving to thriving**
Denominational leaders ought to consider what the
positions of all their church leaders might be, what the
main sources of stress and encouragement are, and
whether systemic or training issues could be playing a
role in the vulnerability or strength of ministers in their
movement. The NCLS Personal Foundations of
Sustainable Leadership offer a framework for personal
development and resilience of those in church
leadership.

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

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Research.