

Managerial Stress among Religious Workers: Case Study of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian Pastors in Singapore

Margihon Bayu Putra Kaumpungan

Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand

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***Corresponding author:**

Margihon Bayu Putra Kaumpungan,
Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand

E-mail:

bayu@apiu.edu

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: While studies on occupational health risk among different professions is considerably extensive, such research for religious workers tends to be overlooked. This research is aimed to investigate work-related stress among Christian ministers in Singapore. The focus of the study is to investigate how church management work leads pastors to increased stress.

Methods: Due to the limited number of participants countrywide, a qualitative approach was chosen to investigate. Five selected Seventh-day Adventist pastors in Singapore were selected for the study. Each was interviewed separately, and their response was analyzed.

Result: The multidimensional nature of church management, conflict, inevitable responsibility, priority differences, and personalization have been shown to increase the stress level among all pastors.

Conclusion: Church management work leads to increased stress among pastors due to the nature of the work which is multidimensional, conflict-prone, and inevitable. All the pastors also see that the managerial task is not their main job yet it affects them in a personal way. Furthermore, the sociocultural aspect of Singapore which emphasizes professionalism and hard work, tends to push these pastors to an increased level of stress.

Keywords: Managerial Stress, Religious Workers, Seventh-day Adventist, Singapore, Stress

Introduction

There was a time when working as a clergyman such as a pastor was an ideal career. A career in which all ideal aspects of a profession are manifested. Pastors are often portrayed as the moral authority of the society. They are meant to promote all the good aspects of humanity such as love, unity, courage, and peace. In family life, the pastoral family often becomes a model of what an ideal family relationship may look. In work-life balances, pastor's office hours are flexible and they are not bound by the demanding corporate life. Also, pastoral work is often assumed to promote inner peace, because of the constant connection with the spiritual realm that provides tranquility.

A growing body of kinds of literature, however, has shown that pastors are struggling with health issues distinctive to the general population. Pastors in general have a greater struggle with lifestyle-related diseases such as obesity and hypertension [1], and stress-related illness [2]. Furthermore, the link between metabolic syndromes with stress in the Christian ministers'

population has been established [3]. These findings provide initial evidence that pastoral work may not be as ideal as what is being perceived. Thus, the investigation over what are some of the work-related health problems that pastors face is important.

While extensive studies on work-related health problems in other occupations are available, such research among pastors is considerably limited, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. This research is intended to fill the knowledge gap in understanding work-related health problems among pastors. The specific research focus of the study is on the mental health of pastors, particularly on the aspect of stress. The study looks at how church management work contributes to the stress of pastors. As one of the main activities of a pastor, managing the church and how it relates to stress has been relatively understudied. Therefore, narrowing the gap in understanding stress among this population not only provides additional knowledge on the topic of pastoral mental health issues, but occupational health in general.

Methodology

Case Study Approach

The study utilized the exploratory case study approach to examine pastors' experience in church management in Singapore. Since the research object as a phenomenon is highly affected by its immediate context, a naturalistic approach to capture the data in its real-life situation is important instead of the experimental method [4]. Furthermore, an exploratory approach to the case study was chosen since available data on the research population and context are considered as its initial stage. Therefore, exploring participants' experiences is appropriate for understanding their context [5].

Participants

The pastors that were selected are ministers who are serving in a Christian denomination known as the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA). From the population pool of 10 pastoral staff of The SDAs who are living in Singapore, five pastors representing 50% of the total population were purposively recruited. These pastors were selected because of their sharing of similar characteristics to ensure a stable sampling. These selection criteria include being an ordained minister of the SDA Church, having served in the full-time ministry for over 7 years, having a full employment status by the church, currently serving as the head pastor of their respective church in Singapore, and having been serving in Singapore for at least 3 years.

Research Locale

Singapore, as the research location, was intentionally selected for the study. Known to many as the economic miracle of Asia [6], Singapore defies the common challenges of its neighboring Southeast countries such as high corruption and heavy bureaucratic red tape to become one of the cleanest governments and wealthiest countries in the world.

Historically, due to a lack of natural resources, Singapore relies highly on its human capital [7]. Thus, creating a culture of highly skilled workers and a high standard of professional expectation for all kinds of professions. The meritocratic culture that has been built at the core of the national ideology pushes each Singaporean to place a special value on performing extraordinarily well. Furthermore, Singaporean values tend to place leadership positions with high expectations [8]. Leadership in the concept of many Singaporeans follows the concept of the founder of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew who believes a strong, professional, and corruption-free leadership is a non-negotiable value for a successful nation [9]. Lastly, Singapore adopted a rather unique working culture compared to its neighboring countries. Singapore syncretized the work culture of both the Western world emphasizing

efficiency and productivity, with the Asian high performance and hard work culture [10]. Such cultures affect the entire layer of society, including religious life. It is within this context; that the study would like to explore the experience of pastors in church management.

Data Collection

The researcher contacted the regional SDA church leadership in Singapore before any data collection process started. After approval was received from the Seventh-day Adventist Conference Administrative Committee in Singapore, the researcher contacted the pastor to participate in the research. During the recruitment stage, no pastors who were contacted expressed unwillingness to participate in the research. Once each participant consented to join, the researcher arranged an online interview session with each participant.

Before the interview session began, each participant received the information sheet informing the nature of the interview and the right of the participant to withdraw from the research at any time of their request. After the participant consented, the researcher asked 10 semi-structured questions to each participant, exploring their perspective on the managerial stress of ministry in depth. Each interview lasted on average between 60 to 90 minutes. After each interview, the researcher asked each participant if there were any matters that needed to be clarified, or if there were any concerns need to be addressed in the form of debriefing. No participants expressed any concern.

The interview was recorded digitally. Each participant gave their consent for the recording to be stored by the researcher in a secured file directory with limited access to the researcher. The recording then being transcribed for further analysis.

Data analysis

The transcribed manuscripts of each participant were analyzed with the aid of ATLAS.ti Web (Version 23.0-2022-06-15) [11]. The researcher read each manuscript repeatedly to analyses and identify in-depth data on the pastor's experience with managerial stress. Special attention to the consistent pattern of the data was utilized to establish generalization of knowledge [12]. Furthermore, the pattern of themes that are emerging in the transcribed manuscript is compiled systematically. Lastly, each theme that emerged were clarified and reclarified by eliminating semantics and synonym several times to maintain the validity of the data [13]. The pattern of the data went through repeated reclarification of themes to ensure the data remained consistent.

Results

The interview was able to collect substantial information from participants in relation to the challenges they face in their managerial duties. After the interviews were transcribed from their audio format, 17,315 words were generated in total from all the participants. During the coding process, five themes emerged, representing the entire data of the interview. These themes are multidimensionality, conflict, unavoidable responsibility, priority differences, and personalization. Details of each theme are elaborated below.

Multidimensionality of Church Management

All the participants interviewed expressed a consistent description of what they considered managerial stress in pastoral ministry. The first recurring pattern identified in the manuscript is that the managerial work of pastors is multi-dimensional.

The first dimension of church management mentioned by participants is related to the multiple administrative duties that pastors need to perform all the time. These duties vary from managing members in their voluntary work in the church, managing church finances, chairing different meetings, and providing reports and paperwork, to purchasing equipment and supplies for the church. These are some of the descriptions mentioned:

Pastor 1: Meetings on the regional level, specific ministry level, with the upper-level leaderships, then within the church, then some project things like that. Then also, administrative wise, dealing with things like the building, and the renovation, license, these things spoil, that things spoil.

Pastor 2: Run the service, volunteers, make sure everyone doing what they need to be done, run the board, run the church board, attend (meetings), be involved in the church school board, make sure administratively all that we keep whatever records that we pour things, all these things.

Most of these pastors are the chairman of the board and committees of their church as well:

Pastor 1: In church, I chair all the boards.

Pastor 3: Yes, I am the chairman of the board and committees in my church.

Pastor 4: Yes, I do chair the board of my church.

As a follow-up question, the researcher also asked all participants about the financial management of their respective churches. In which one participant provided the answer:

Pastor 5: The budget, of course (Treasurer/Elder, does it) but after the initial church approval budget (meeting), the rest I manage it.

Conflict

The next theme that consistently appears throughout the interview is conflict. Pastors who participated in the interview expressed their struggle in administration due to the outcome of their decision, which may not be acceptable to their entire congregation. Decision-making is part of every organizational leadership role. However, distinctive to pastoral work is the relationship between the decision-maker and the recipient. Maintaining the clergyman's ideal of a compassionate person tends to create tension in pastors when they must make decisions, as some of them express themselves:

Pastor 3: Making use of the participation of the people trying to make (other) people happy. Some people do not want to participate in church services and church activities, yet they would like to claim that they are very active members, so we need to convince them to take part in the life of the active part of the church.

Pastor 5: I think church administration for me the most challenging I guess, (long pause) conflict. If you want me to rate, I will say the highest and probably the most stressful for me as a pastor is dealing with conflict.

Unavoidable Responsibility

The third theme being mentioned is that managerial work is not easy to ignore. The expectation of accomplishing these tasks is inevitable. Often, the performance of the pastor is measured through these managerial tasks. Further, even when a pastor may not have direct involvement with the task in church, their presence as a pastor is expected to be in the church.

Pastor 5: So, I was there... I was in the office every single day. Because it was the requirement given to me. I think normally with whatever there is to do in church. Almost everything to do in the church...because everything revolves around the church so I was at the church every day. Every single day.

Ironically, another pastor mentioned that despite the expectation for pastors to be present in the Church, yet some members do not realize the extent of the work involved in some of the managerial duties as one of the pastors expressed it this way:

Pastor 1: I think facilities management is the least admin work I enjoyed, then repair, maintenance, and renovation. The most unpleasant matter of it is the tedious part of it.

Priority Differences

All pastors expressed that church management they do as not their main role and duty as a pastor. Therefore, it distracts them from their main duty as a pastor and drains extra energy into their work.

Pastors do not see church management as unnecessary or not important. However, the amount of it had overtaken the main job of pastors brought stress to them. When participants were asked about their managerial work in the church, they described it in these answers:

Pastor 4: I don't hate administration itself. I just hate over-administration. Just to be honest, useless reports, or repetitive. I am stressed not by filling it in but by my resentment of having to fill it in.

Some pastors, did however, express a clearer statement that managerial work is not something that they find pleasant in the ministry work:

Pastor 1: I don't enjoy administrative work.

Pastor 2: Not really (enjoying it), that is why I keep disappearing to do other stuff. I don't really care.

The extra energy and time exerted by the church management led to emotional tension. As a result, it produced stress in pastors. During the interview, significant non-verbal communication expression indicating stress was detected in the interview. When participants were asked about the stress caused by managerial work and its impact on their personal life, they spoke faster, and in a stronger tone. Verbally, their stress response was expressed in this way:

Pastor 1: I don't hate administrative work, what I dislike about it is that it takes away time from doing what is more important.

Pastor 4: Of course, you feel frustrated about doing all these things, where as a pastor there are many more meaningful things I should be doing.

Personalization

Lastly, participants expressed how managerial stress affected their personal lives. They expressed that the boundaries between professional and personal lives tend to be blurred. Thus, their challenges at work influence their lives after work as well. Furthermore, such tension often went unnoticed by their congregation. Such distortions are expressed in these ways by some participants:

Pastor 1: I think members in general don't understand the broadness of the scope of the pastor's job.

Pastor 4: Sometimes I honestly felt that it is affecting my life, and my personal life because I have to take, other extra time out of my personal time and family.

While all participants received the same list of the pre-set questions, the variation of their answers depended on the nature of their personality, communication skills, and worldview. At the end of all interviews, however, each of the pastors expressed their appreciation that the issue of is addressed in research. Such expression indicates that managerial stress did

have an impact on the pastors' welfare regardless of their unique responses to the interview questions.

Discussion

The research captures the dynamics of church management for pastors and the mental health effect it creates for pastors. Pastoral ministry, as shown in the result, tends to be a "jack of all trades." Pastors play multiple roles for different types of needs of their members. From a management point of view, however, the level of authority of the pastor in each of these tasks seems to have various levels that tend to be too broad. On one side, a pastor is expected to exercise ultimate authority to execute a decision for the church, while on others, they must be on the receiving side of completing someone else decision. Such role confusion had been expressed by the participants to be tiring, frustrating, and sometimes unnecessary. Thus, the role confusion problem that led to stress in pastoral work discovered here replicates similar research from other studies [14, 15].

Another aspect of administrative work that is highlighted by the participants is the issue of conflict. From a purely administrative point of view, the decision-making process that involves people inevitably will bring conflict. However, in contrast with the corporate relationship between managers and subordinates, pastor's relationships with their members are multidimensional. Therefore, the decision-making process in pastoral work is not always a straightforward process. On one side, as the leader of the church, pastors must set a direction and exercise authority over the church and the congregation. Some of these decisions will create resistance among some of the members of the church. Yet, the decision must be carried over. However, on the other hand, pastors must juggle such an authoritative role with the pressure of a moral example of kindness and gentleness. Therefore, when it comes to conflict, these conflicts tend to cause personal emotional pressure and pain in pastors [16]. Furthermore, most pastors, by nature, are a people-oriented person [17]. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, they prioritize harmony and agreement. Therefore, conflict can be perceived as an emotional threat that increases the stress level among pastors.

The third aspect of administrative work that came out from the interview is the heavy number of administrative activities that pastors are involved. In almost all areas of church life, pastors are expected to provide some form of direction for the church. In other words, as a manager, pastors are expected to always be making decisions for the church. A constant, rapid decision-making in tasks has been shown to lead to decision fatigue [18, 19]. Decision fatigue has been defined as the inability of an individual to make an optimum decision due to the constant need for decision-

making over a short period [20]. The decision fatigue increased the stress level and frustration of these pastors.

Furthermore, as expressed by the participants in the result, many of the church managerial work done by the pastor tend to be underestimated or went unnoticed by members even though pastors spent a significant amount of time in it. Study indicates that effort-reward imbalances in pastoral work are associated with an increase in depression and anxiety problems [21]. Therefore, it is plausible to associate a similar impact to the situation of the pastors interviewed in the study. The unnoticed effort in the managerial work of pastors leads to mental health problems.

Lastly, as indicated in the interview, the work of pastors also often lacks boundaries between professional and private life. Pastoral work tends to have no office hours. Pastors are often expected to provide their services at any time the need arises, including during time that is often outside of typical office hours, including holidays. In many situations, as shown in the result, pastors need to be able to decide on a church-related task anytime, anywhere. Due to these multiple angles of pastoral works and demands enhanced by the unclear form of boundaries seems to put an additional pressure that causes distress in pastors. This finding again remains consistent with earlier studies [22]. Most pastors tend to be at the center of the church life. Therefore, there is a tendency to centralize all tasks and responsibilities related to the church towards the pastor as well. Since the research locale of the study is Singapore, the tendency of centralizing all responsibilities to the pastor needs to be analyzed from the perspective of its cultural context. Singapore had been considered as an economic miracle that reached prosperity within one period of leadership despite lacking in natural resources [23]. The success of Singapore had been credited towards the high emphasis in utilizing the most important asset the country possesses that is their human resources [24]. Since the emphasis on human resources had been fully integrated in Singaporean society, individual performance and professionalism had been in constant high expectation. This includes the performance of pastors in the church ministry. As a professional, pastors are expected to perform to the best of their capability in their role as religious professionals. Therefore, pastors are often being placed in a difficult situation to discern what is professional and what is pastoral.

As shown in the result, the pastor-centric tendencies of the church lead to pastors having to work extra to ensure the church is in working condition. Such exerted effort caused the pastor to lose energy and time for families and personal needs, thus leading to an increased stress level in the pastor. Another angle of theory that can be established from the study is how pastors perceived priorities in their ministries. Most pastors interviewed perceived that managerial work was

not meant to be their main priorities and responsibilities. Therefore, pastors do not see it as the main platform on which they need to spend their energy. Instead, they are seeing administrative work as using up their main energy sources that are meant for other more important priorities. High reward task leads to an accelerated response when an individual need to select between multiple tasks to be completed [25]. For most pastors who are interviewed, administrative task tends to be associated with low to no reward, yet they need to complete them, nevertheless. The conflict between the obligations to complete the task with the low reward outcome likely leads to increased stress among them. From the perspective of occupational health, a healthier work-life balance is critical for the welfare of a worker, including their mental well-being. In pastoral work in Singapore, such balance tends to be at risk due to the high expectation of managerial duties that need to be performed by the pastor.

Since this study is considered a pilot study, it gives an opportunity for further exploration in research to address and discover a potential solution for the problem. As shown by the study, the pastor-centric nature of work in the church tends to overwhelm the pastor with managerial work. Perhaps the church needs to explore employment arrangements for a full-time administrator for the management of the church to reduce the pastor's responsibility in managerial duties. When organizational and congregational support is received by the pastor in their ministry, a significant reduction in fatigue can be seen among the pastors [26].

Lastly, the importance of having a disengaged connection with work is also critical in the reduction of stress in the workplace as well. There is a need for a break from the routine that causes stress among pastors. Studies have shown the protective benefits of disengagement from work toward pastors' mental and spiritual health among non-SDA ministers [27]. The present research had several limitations. As described earlier, selecting Singapore as the research locale provides several advantages for the data collection and the knowledge produced by it. Socioeconomic status has a significant impact on determining the health status of clergymen [28]. Therefore, data obtained from this study still needs to be compared to similar studies from the nearby region. Second, due to the nature of pastoral service in the SDA Church, the study only manages to interview male pastors. However, gender differences have been shown to impact the mental health status of pastors differently [29].

While quantitative research will provide further knowledge into the present research, the lack of enough population for a statistically significant result likely will halt the process. There were only 10 available participants countrywide. Thus, making qualitative approach is the best way to investigate. To overcome this, perhaps SDA pastors from the surrounding region

such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines should be included to fit the sampling requirements in future research.

Conclusion

For these pastors who were interviewed, church management had been one of the areas of pastoral ministry that tended to drain up their energy and bring stressful situations to their ministry. The combination of overwhelming tasks in managing the church, the potential conflict that resulted from their decision, and the result of the work that tends to be unnoticed lest appreciated by members makes church management a source of intense work-related stress. In the context of Singapore, in which higher pressure to perform is embedded in the culture, the task related to the managerial work of pastors brings even greater stress to these pastors. Task accomplishments, which often come with professionalism, were fully carried out by pastors on their own.

Several modifications to pastoral work need to be pursued to reduce the potential harm to administrative work in pastoral ministry. The decentralization of the task distribution away from pastors perhaps should be considered the most critical change. Alternatively, removing the managerial task of a pastor to a hired professional in management may be another radical idea that the church may need to consider.

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