

# Coping Strategies to Burnout in Pastoral Ministry among Catholic Religious Men and Women of Mbarara Archdiocese in Uganda

Ronald Musinguzi Kersteins<sup>1</sup>, Wambua Pius Muasa (PhD)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Psycho-Spiritual Institute of Lux Terra Leadership Foundation, Marist International University College, a Constituency of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya*

<sup>2</sup>*Institute of Youth Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Tangaza University College, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya*

**Abstract:** Coping strategies to burnout in pastoral ministry is paramount to the mental well-being of Catholic religious men and women. The objective of this study was to identify coping strategies for preventing burnout in pastoral ministry among the Catholic religious men and women of Mbarara Archdiocese Uganda. The study employed an exploratory research design. Through Purposive sampling the study utilized a sample size of 10 participants. The data was collected using Interview Guide. The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study revealed that spiritual practices such as prayer, retreats and recollections, are major ways of preventing burnout among religious men and women in their ministry. Moreover, the Catholic religious men and women prevent burnout in pastoral ministry through self-care which included activities such as taking time to rest, having time for recreation, breaks and holidays, and renewal courses. In addition, the findings showed that Catholic religious men and women prevent pastoral ministry through psycho-spiritual resources such as meditation, imagery, journaling, visualization, and awareness. The study recommends to Bishops and Major Superiors to put in place programs that emphasize self-care among their religious men and women. Programs such as regular vacations, sabbaticals, regular medical attention can help to enhance the wellness of the religious men and women even when they are involved in challenging apostolate.

## I. INTRODUCTION

From literature, it becomes apparent that burnout experience is a reality in pastoral ministry. Like any other professional worker, religious men and women are likely to suffer from mental health problems as a result of burnout emanating from pastoral ministry. If the situation is not properly handled, using effective coping strategies, it can be detrimental on their mental well-being. Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts that workers employ to master, tolerate and reduce stressful events. These strategies are behaviors, thoughts and emotions that workers use to adjust to the changes that occur in the job environment (Muriithi et al., 2020). In a study conducted with elementary teachers reported personal resources to be effective coping strategies in handling burnout (Krok, 2016). Meaning in life has been considered as one of the important factors that may play a beneficial role in preventing or decreasing the negative symptoms of burnout. The main reason lies in the fact that

meaning in life enables individuals to interpret, organize their experience, identify important aspects of life, and achieve a sense of purpose (Frankl, 2011).

Another study conducted by Krok (2016) to examine the relationship between different dimensions of meaning in life (personal meaning, the presence of meaning, a search for meaning) and burnout among firefighters. Participants were 189 firefighters randomly recruited from 12 fire stations in Southern Poland to participate in the study. The study collected data using the Personal Meaning Profile, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The findings showed that firefighters with higher levels of personal meaning and presence of meaning reported less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and more personal accomplishment. Furthermore, the personal meaning dimensions also had significant associations with burnout indicators: individuals with detached style had higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization than individuals with presence style and search style. These could be the same with pastoral agents serving in Church ministry and hence the need for this study.

Längle (2013), conducted a similar study with 271 female and male doctors in Austria. The results showed that doctors with a sense of meaning in their private and professional lives exhibited only minor to medium susceptibility to burnout. But doctors, who exhibited the manifestations of an existential vacuum, as described in the Maslach Inventory, displayed a high incidence of burnout with efficiency being only moderately affected. These reviews support what was earlier mentioned that a religious who lacks an existential meaning towards the activities he or she is engaged in, is more likely to experience burnout. Meaning structures are an important salutary factor that enables workers to effectively comprehend and interpret their work-related experiences, and thus reduces the likelihood of distress and weariness they experience (Krok, 2016). However, the two studies were conducted among firefighters and doctors while this study was conducted with Church ministers in relation to their pastoral ministry.

Several studies have also shown that workers who engage in religious practices suffered less depression and anxiety. For instance, Muriithi and his colleagues (2020) found that use of religious and spiritual beliefs is a significant way of coping with challenges at work and in making demanding responsibilities more endurable. A similar study was conducted to examine how religious beliefs and practices influence the psychological health of Catholic priests. The study used consensual qualitative research (CQR) design a qualitative methodology that is well suited to answer open-ended research questions. Participants consisted of 15 Roman Catholic priests, from a Mid-Atlantic city of the United States, of age ranging from 29 to 76 ( $M = 47$ ), and with a range of years in the priesthood from less than 6 months to 50 years ( $M = 16.2$  years). Qualitative data were gathered through a semi-structured interview, and analyzed again using CQR where Team members read transcripts individually, selected sections of participant responses, and coded them with existing domains or constructed new domains. The results showed that the participants who had a strong relationship with God had experienced psychological health leading to low stress and burnout (Isacco et al., 2016).

Self-care has also been considered to be one of coping strategies to burnout. For instance, Smith (2015) conducted a survey study on compassion fatigue, burnout, and self-care. The study examined the impact of self-care, compassion fatigue and burnout on social work students of California State University, San Bernardino. A quantitative design was used with a sample size of 150 participants. Data was collected using the Self-Care Questionnaire, Professional Quality of Life Survey (ProQOL-V) and Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). The findings of the study indicated that the participants who knew and practiced self-care in such areas as spirituality, psychological care, emotional care, and a balanced work/professional life showed lower burnout and compassion fatigue issues compared to their counterparts with no knowledge and practice of self-care.

The current study involved Church ministers in the pastoral ministry. Self-care remains a substantial coping mechanism necessary to meet daily basic needs, prevent disease, and maintain physical and mental health, and spiritual wellbeing. Therefore, religious men and women on their part may need to be encouraged to nourish a constant care to their wellness, their psychological needs as well as human, they must be conscious of how to live their devotion to others, noting personal hardships, the profound motivations of their service and above all, the constant attention to the one whom they are called to imitate, Jesus the Good Shepherd. These are indices that can reduce the wearing spiral, burnout in the life of the ministering religious (Esibor, 2017).

The concept of psycho-spiritual is foundational in the understanding of the human person. It indicates the fact that the human person is an integral whole of body, mind, spirit, intellect, memory, will, relational and is holistic in nature (Esibor, 2017). According to Okpalaenwe (2019), psycho-

spiritual approach recognizes and accesses higher consciousness using tools such as mediation, imagery, metaphor, visualization, creative arts, awareness, intuition and inner attunement, all of which are used in the pursuit of understanding. The complexities of the mind, belief structures, stem of culture and environment, somatic events and spiritual messages are brought to the healing process. Some researchers have argued that matters related to psychological health need be enhanced so that, spiritual wellbeing may be heightened. This could well be achieved by making use of trained psycho-spiritual therapists who are in position to provide both counseling and spiritual direction. Conversely, there is plenty of empirical findings indicating that the experience of receiving love and kindness from people or the encounter of the beauty and wonders of nature and the arts is also an objective and empirically proven source of meaning and joy (Macdonald et al., 2018). Most of the studies on coping strategies to burnout have been conducted with other populations other than Catholic Religious men and women and therefore, the current study seeks to fill this gap.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The research design refers to the overall strategy that you choose to integrate the different components of the study coherently and logically, thereby, ensuring you will effectively address the research problem; it constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Tayie, 2005). The study employed an exploratory research design. The advantage of using this approach was that it allows collection of qualitative data through interviews (Leavy, 2017). The exploratory research design allowed the researcher to explore the coping strategies to burnout in pastoral ministry among the Priests, Brothers and Sisters in the Catholic Church.

### *Sampling Procedure and Sample Size*

The study employed purposive sampling in the recruitment of the respondents. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique that allows a researcher to use cases that have the required information with respect to the objectives of the study (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Through purposive sampling 10 respondents were selected to participate in the study. These were Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sister who were actively involved in the pastoral ministry.

### *Instruments for Data Collection*

The data was collected using Interview Guide. The interview guide had two parts. The first part captured the vocation type and years of working experience. The second part captured open ended questions on coping strategies to burnout in pastoral ministry. The major open ended questions were: how do you handle burnout in your pastoral ministry? and how can Bishops and Superiors of congregations help their members not suffer burnout in their pastoral work?

### Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcribed data was coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved reading and critically reviewing all transcripts to identify the themes, patterns, and contexts, of each individual response, that were related with the study objective.

### III. RESULTS

The study was set out to explore the coping strategies to burnout in pastoral ministry among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters in Mbarara Archdiocese in Uganda. The findings were presented based on the objective of the study. Using thematic analysis, the themes from the data collected was identified and supported by verbatim from the participants. The study began by presenting the demographic details of the participants followed by the findings of the study.

#### Demographic Details for Participants Interviewed

A total number of 10 respondents participated in the study. The study captured their vocation type and years of working experience. Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Details of the Interviewed Respondents

Respondent Identity	Vocation Type	Years of Experience
Respondent R1	Priest	21 and above
Respondent R2	Priest	21 and above
Respondent R3	Sister	21 and above
Respondent R4	Brother	10-20
Respondent R5	Brother	21 and above
Respondent R6	Priest	21 and above
Respondent R7	Sister	21 and above
Respondent R8	Sister	10-20
Respondent R9	Sister	21 and above
Respondent R10	Priest	21 and above

#### The Coping Strategies for Preventing Burnout in Pastoral Ministry

Through thematic analysis three major themes emerged from the data which included spiritual practices, self-care and psycho-spiritual resources. The themes are described further with support of verbatim from the participants.

##### Spiritual Practices

The findings of this study revealed that spiritual practices such as prayer, retreats and recollections, are major ways of preventing burnout in pastoral ministry among Church ministers. All the participants emphasized on the role of prayer in alleviating life stress and pastoral burnout. For instance, one participant asserted that *"I always take time to pray; you know this work we are doing is not our work, it is God's work; so, I always seek His guidance"* (Interview, R1,

January, 2022). This was further supported by another respondent who said: *"I value the importance of prayer; it helps me to connect with the self and God, making life easier for me no matter what"* (Interview, R3, January, 2022).

Furthermore, the theme was echoed by another participant who said,

On our part as religious and priests, we have to know the core of our vocation which is a relationship of love between God and ourselves. We have to keep reflecting on it and feeding it with reading, seminars, workshops, retreats and other ways that can help us to deepen our spiritual life (Interview, R6, January, 2022)

Similarly, the theme was emphasized by another respondent who said,

And I always create time for solitude, time to listen to myself, a moment to breathe and relax. I can assure you that in such a time of silence, many things can come up, even the answer to your questions. Because sometimes we are so busy that we don't listen. Like Samuel, these words should also always be on our lips as we say, "speak Lord, your servant is listening." But sometimes we do the opposite and say, "listen Lord your servant is listening" (laughs), until we get fade up. This has been my experience. Moments of solitude is very important for it helps us to recharge our battery, it really gives us the strength that we need for our journey. It really helps me to be in touch with myself and to connect with God (Interview, R8, January, 2022).

##### Self-care

Self-care was another theme was pointed out by majority of the participants on regard to preventing burnout in pastoral ministry. Self-care was described by a number of activities such as taking time to rest, having time for recreation, breaks and holidays, and renewal courses. For instance, respondent 9 stated that *"the best remedy for burnout is having time to rest. Especially we the religious need time for meditation and self-examination. We also need time for holiday. Without holiday we are killing ourselves"* (Interview, R9, January, 2022).

This was affirmed by another respondent who said,

A person working in a busy and demanding ministry should make a time-table which should include a period for personal rest. If one week goes, and another one follows without time to rest, you can collapse. But if you plan well and put aside time for rest and prayer it will help and prevent you from getting stress and burnout. On a similar note, plan for a break when you can go away from whatever work you are doing; you will get refreshed and more energized. This break can also be in form of a retreat, maybe a week or month. This will also bring in the aspect of delegation of duties; leave others to do your work as you rest. It even empowers them (Interview, R3, January, 2022).

The theme of self-care was further supported by respondent 7 who said,

Self-care is very important. I think we have to keep reminding each other that we are human beings. We need to eat, to rest, to have fun. And we have to know that a time comes when we need just to sit back and look at what we have done or what we are doing and appreciate ourselves. But I think we don't have time for that, we are just rushing in everything. Also creating enough time for sleep or rest. We really need enough hours of sleep (Interview, R7, January, 2022).

The same participants emphasized the need for self-care through creating a meaningful time for relaxation when said,

Periods of relaxation are very rare in among the religious. However, we still have a problem with relaxation; people think that to relax is just to sit there (laughter). No, develop some hobbies like painting, playing games, and gardening. So, where do we relax and what do we do when we relax? Some think that to relax is to go into drinking. So, we need to be helped to know how to handle ourselves in this matter of relaxation. We can make use of something we like so that we can relax our mind there. And remember what I like somebody may not like, so we shouldn't impose our likes on others or them imposing theirs on us (Interview, R7, January, 2022).

#### *Psycho-spiritual Resources*

Psycho-spiritual resources are those resources that are utilized to enhance the integral wellbeing of a human person. They may include meditation, imagery, journaling, visualization, and awareness. One can make use of these on a personal level and with the help of significant others. On the latter, some of the participants pointed out that the religious need to seek the guidance of counselors and spiritual directors in their ministry. For instance, this was echoed by respondent 8 who said,

It is very important to have someone who can guide and accompany you in such challenging moments. On this I would say a very good spiritual director is very important. Such a person can help us to see the hand of God behind everything. St Padre Pio would say, "let us learn to see the hand of God behind the hands of men." I'm saying that because we see every situation in our own eyes, in the end we can collapse. But when you have someone mature spiritually can be of help. Let me highlight this, I used the word 'mature' because not all can help us. We need someone who has a deeper relationship with God and is able to listen to you attentively and understand what you are really going through and help you to discern what God is asking from that reality and what you can learn in your life from that situation and even how to help others because sometimes it is through such experiences that we can be able to help others (Interview, R8, January, 2022).

The theme was further supported by respondent 1 who said,

Where I feel that my expectations are not met, the best solution is to come to terms with myself, either through the retreat or talking to a counselor or a friend because the real issues are within me. That's why they say that a problem shared is half solved. So, if I share with someone, I will get to know why I am behaving this way. All in all, there is a need for awareness; to be in touch with the inner-self and God so that I can free myself from all those false beliefs and unrealistic expectations (Interview, R1, January, 2022).

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The study was set out to explore the coping strategies to burnout in pastoral ministry among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters in Mbarara Archdiocese in Uganda. The findings revealed that spiritual practices such as prayer, retreats and recollections, are major ways of preventing burnout in pastoral ministry among Church ministers. The findings resonate with the findings of Muriithi et al. (2020) who found that use of religious and spiritual beliefs is a significant way of coping with challenges at work and in making demanding responsibilities more endurable. Moreover, the findings were in line with the findings of Isacco et al. (2016) who conducted a research to examine how religious beliefs and practices influence the psychological health of Catholic priests from a Mid-Atlantic city of the United States and found that participants described their relationship with God as central to their psychological health and contributing to positive outcomes (sense of connection and decreased stress) and alleviating negative outcomes (internal conflict, depression/loneliness).

Self-care was another theme was pointed out by majority of the participants on regard to preventing burnout in pastoral ministry. Self-care was described by a number of activities such as taking time to rest, having time for recreation, breaks and holidays, and renewal courses. The findings were consistent with the findings of Smith (2015) who conducted a survey study on compassion fatigue, burnout, and self-care among social work students of California State University, San Bernardino and the findings indicated that the participants who knew and practiced self-care in such areas as spirituality, psychological care, emotional care, and a balanced work/professional life showed lower burnout and compassion fatigue issues compared to their counterparts with no knowledge and practice of self-care.

Likewise, the findings of this study resonates with argument of Esibor (2017) who considered Self-care as a substantial coping mechanism necessary to meet daily basic needs, prevent disease, and maintain physical and mental health, and spiritual wellbeing. Also, he emphasized that religious men and women on their part may need to be encouraged to nourish a constant care to their wellness, their psychological needs as well as human, they must be conscious of how to live their devotion to others, noting personal hardships, the profound motivations of their service and above all, the constant attention to the one whom they are called to

imitate, Jesus the Good Shepherd. These are indices that can reduce the wearing spiral, burnout in the life of the ministering religious.

The use of psycho-spiritual resources such as meditation, imagery, journaling, visualization, and awareness emerged as a theme for preventing pastoral burnout among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters. The findings are supported by other studies that have argued that matters related to psychological health need be enhanced so that, spiritual wellbeing may be heightened. This could well be achieved by making use of trained psycho-spiritual therapists who are in position to provide both counseling and spiritual direction (Okpalaenwa, 2019; Esibor, 2017).

#### V. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that religious men and women valued their spiritual life through prayer, retreats and recollections which act as a coping strategy to preventing burnout in pastoral ministry. Though Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters in Archdiocese of Mbarara Uganda utilize self-care and psycho-spiritual resources in preventing burnout in pastoral ministry, there is a need to spare more times for rest and relaxation in terms of breaks, holidays and recreations. There is a need for the Bishop and Major Superiors to put in place programs that emphasize self-care among its religious men and women. Programs such as regular vacations, sabbaticals, and regular medical attention to enhance the wellness of the religious men and women even when they are involved in difficult apostolate.

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