

# Pastoral Burnout and Meaning in life among Catholic Religious Men and Women in Mbarara Archdiocese, Uganda

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## ABSTRACT

People with meaning in life are motivated, happy and are likely to experience less burnout. However, there are minimal studies conducted with Priests, Brothers and Sisters in the Catholic Church. The current study had two objectives: To assess the levels of meaning in life among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters; to establish the association between pastoral burnout and meaning in life among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters. Correlational design was employed in the study. A sample size of 165 participants through stratified random sampling was selected to participate in the study. Maslach Burnout inventory and Meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ) was used to collect data in pastoral burnout and meaning in life. Both descriptive statistics and correlational analysis was utilized to analyze the data with aid of SPSS. The result showed that majority of the participants (n=109; 77%) have higher presence of meaning in life. Results from correlation showed that there was no relationship between the three dimensions of burnout and presence of meaning in life. Thus, correlation analysis showed that presence of meaning in life has no correlation with personal accomplishment ( $r= -0.19$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and emotional exhaustion ( $r=0.15$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). In addition, there was no correlation between depersonalization and meaning in life ( $r=0.117$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). The study recommends to Bishops and Congregational Superiors to come up with programs that create awareness of meaning in life among their members as a way of preventing them from experiencing pastoral burnout in ministry.

## INTRODUCTION

Psycho-spiritual well-being has been operationally defined as a person's state of happiness, fulfillment, and life meaning. According to Juanita (2005), psycho-spiritual well-being is a subjective experience that includes emotional health and meaning-in-life concerns. There are different ways of achieving meaning in life and the major one is having what to do. When people find meaning in what they are doing, they feel motivated, accomplished, and happy. This is because pastoral ministry is the source of motivation, happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction and accomplishment. These are important aspects of psycho-spiritual well-being that can only be achieved when one has a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This is based on Frankl's theory of logotherapy which holds that when people have what to do and find meaning in what they are doing, they feel motivated and accomplished which, eventually, enhances their psycho-spiritual wellbeing (Frankl, 2017). Work is more than just a source of income for many people; it also satisfies intrinsic needs such as motivation, belonging, and accomplishment (Lizano, 2015).

A Study conducted by Krok (2016) found meaning in life to be one of the important factors that may play a beneficial role in preventing or decreasing the negative symptoms of burnout. Furthermore, the same study findings, concluded that people who experience greater global-level meaning in life are more likely to experience greater domain-level meaning, which plays a preventive role in negative workplace experiences directly related to burnout. In other words, work fulfillment is the best preventative measure against burnout.

Längle (2013) argued that a person experiencing burnout lacks an existential meaning for the activities in which he or she is engaged. This means that personal fulfillment is a pipe dream. Contrary to that, Catholic pastoral agents experiencing burnout might not mean they are lacking meaning in life towards the ministry they are engaged. It is possible for the Catholic pastoral agents to experience emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment at the same time. Since they relate their ministry with calling, they are likely to find meaning in whatever they do. According to Steger (2010), when people lack a sense of meaning in their lives, they are likely to be dissatisfied with their lives. Catholic pastoral agents may not be devoid of meaning in their lives, but they are vulnerable to pastoral burnout. However, the Catholic clergy and consecrated religious experience with burnout may end up in a state of meaninglessness leading to unfulfilled life.

According to Macdonald et al. (2011), work frustration leads to an “existential vacuum” characterized by a sense of meaninglessness, boredom, apathy, or indifference. The study sought to understand whether burnout contributes to such emotional and psychological erosion. Esibor (2017), conducted a study in Nigeria to examine the impact of burnout among the Catholic clergy. The study focused on the effects of burnout on priests’ sense of commitment to their apostolate intra and inters personal relationships and the role of psycho-spiritual therapy as counseling interventions for priests in Minna Diocese. The researcher chose phenomenological design in order to capture Catholic clergy and consecrated religious meaning in life on regards to burnout experiences. Purposeful sampling technique was used to select 27-priest participants who live and work in Minna. Findings reported the Catholic clergy and consecrated religious to have suffered burnout in their apostolate work. Much as this study considered clergy only, the burnout phenomenon may apply to all pastoral agents working with Churches including Religious Brothers and Sisters. Kiplagat et al. (2019) discovered that while consecrated religious women are expected to have high levels of psycho-spiritual wellbeing and happiness, some of them suffer from suicidal ideation, depression, and other psychological complications. This supports the current study which anticipated consecrated religious women in Mbarara Archdiocese to experience burnout in equal measure with consecrated religious men.

Kamau (2018) also conducted a study to investigate the risk factors for compassion fatigue among clergymen/women of the Full Gospel Church in Nairobi’s Kasarani Sub-County. A sample of 14 male and 3 female clergy care providers from the Full Gospel Church in Nairobi North District completed a modified ProQOL-CSF-R-III instrument and a questionnaire to assess the negative and positive effects of helping others. One of the study’s findings was that compassion fatigue, which is characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, leads to decreased ministry satisfaction. Kamau further found that compassion fatigue negatively impacted the clergy’s wellbeing, and a willingness to remain in the pastoral ministry.

Nonetheless, the findings support Lizano’s (2015) observation that work is more than just a source of income; for many people, work fulfills intrinsic needs such as motivation, belonging, and accomplishment. When the religious find meaning and satisfaction in what they are doing, they feel motivated to remain in the pastoral ministry. This have a positive impact on their psych-spiritual well-being, which implies meaning and purpose in religious life. According to Büssing et al. (2018), feelings of spiritual dryness and emptiness are associated with distress, depressive symptoms, and burnout, decreased work engagement, lower self-rated psychological health, and finally lowers overall life satisfaction. Indeed a burned out religious will find it difficult to pray and lack of spiritual nourishment worsens it all.

Furthermore, Lizano (2015) conducted a study on the impact of job burnout on the health and well-being of human service workers. The researchers conducted a systematic review and synthesis of findings from 19 empirical studies published between 1970 and 2014 that investigated the relationship between job burnout and affective, psychological, physiological, and behavioral well-being among human service workers. The study’s findings indicate that job burnout has a negative impact on workers’ well-being. Workers expend

energetic resources coping with chronic stress and feelings of exhaustion, which leads to feelings of fatigue and psychological erosion. Furthermore, a “burned out” worker’s depletion of personal resources can lead to physical ailments by compromising the immune system (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

To supplement on this, Egunjobi (2019) has attested that priests and religious are exposed to traumatic situations, such as attending to auto accident victims or witnessing the death of a terminally ill patients, in their pastoral work. In the process of offering affection and compassion for the sufferers or traumatized patients, they lack adequate self-care, leading to terrible suffering, pain, and mental trauma or psychological and physical symptoms such as dissociation, anger, sleep disturbance, depression powerlessness, and so forth which are all warnings or signals of burnout that need to be addressed before they lead to serious disorders. Therefore, the current study aimed at assessing the levels of meaning in life and also establishing the role of burnout in meaning in life among the Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The descriptive research design was used in the study, which allows the researcher to describe the phenomenon under investigation. The design was more appropriate because it allowed the researcher to establish the correlation between burnout and meaning in life among the Catholic pastoral agents.

### Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The Yamane formula was used to calculate the sample size for the study. It provides a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error (Egberi, 2020). The formula is presented mathematically as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where  $n$  = sample size

$N$  = target population

$E$  = margin of error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{280}{1 + 280(0.05)^2} = 280/1.7$$

Approximately,  $n = 165$

In order to ensure proportionate representative of the sample size across the three groups, proportionate stratified sampling was used where 152 priests, 115 sisters and 13 brothers were selected to make a sample size of 165 participants. Table 1 shows the proportionate stratified sampling for the Priests, Brothers and Sisters in Mbarara Archdiocese.

**Table I**

#### *Sampling Frame*

Population Category	Population Total	Participants, Sample size
Clergy	152	90
Religious Sisters	115	68
Religious Brothers	13	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>165</b>

## Instruments of Measure

Questionnaire was used for collecting data on burnout and meaning in life among the participants. The questionnaire had three sections of data collection. The first section collected data from the participants on demographic details of type of ministry, years of pastoral experience and types of vocation. The MBI-HSS Scale developed by Maslach and Jackson was used in the second section to collect data on pastoral burnout (1996). The three dimension of burnout are measured with 22 items and scores range from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was used in the third section to assess meaning in life. The MLQ is a 10-item questionnaire designed to assess two aspects of meaning in life: (1) the presence of meaning (how much respondents believe their lives have meaning) and (2) the search for meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives) (Steger, 2010). With the scoring, respondents answer each item scale on a 7 Likert type scale ranging from absolutely untrue to absolutely true. A score of more than 24 on presence and less than 24 on search indicates that you believe your life has a valued meaning and purpose but are not actively exploring or seeking meaning in your life. You are most likely very happy with your life, optimistic, and have a healthy self-esteem. On the other hand, scoring less than 24 on presence and more than 24 on search indicates that you do not believe your life has a valued meaning and purpose, and you are actively seeking something or someone to give your life meaning or purpose. You're probably not always happy with your life (Steger, 2010).

## Data Analysis

The levels of meaning in life among Catholic pastoral agents were examined using descriptive statistics in SPSS. Correlational analysis was used to determine the relationship between burnout and life meaning among Catholic pastoral agents. Tables were used to present the findings.

## RESULTS

The study sought to investigate the levels of meaning in life among Catholic pastoral agents. Furthermore, it established a link between burnout and life meaning among Catholic pastoral agents.

### Levels of meaning in life among the Catholic Pastoral agents

A descriptive statistics was used to examine the levels of meaning among pastoral agents, and the results are shown in table 2.

Table 2 Levels of Meaning in Life among Catholic Pastoral Agents

Dimensions of Meaning in Life	Scoring	Frequency	Percent (%)
Presence of Meaning	Higher: 25-35	109	77
	Average: 24	20	14.1
	Lower: 5-23	13	8.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 shows that majority of the participants (n=109; 77%) have higher presence of meaning while 73 (51.4%) participants have a lower search for meaning. This implies that many Church ministers in Mbarara Archdiocese have achieved meaning and purpose in life and this probably explains why most of them have moderate levels of burnout.

### Burnout and Meaning in life among Catholic Pastoral Agents

The second goal was to establish a link between burnout and meaning in life among Mbarara Archdiocese’s Catholic clergy and consecrated religious. The Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between burnout and life meaning, and the results are shown in table 3.

**Table 3 Correlation between Burnout and Meaning in life**

Correlations					
		Personal Accomplishment	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Presence of Meaning
Personal Accomplishment scores	Pearson Correlation	1	-.089	.089	-.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.291	.297	.822
	N	142	142	140	141
Emotional Exhaustion Scores	Pearson Correlation	-.089	1	-.051	-.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.291		.549	.863
	N	142	142	140	141
Depersonalization scores	Pearson Correlation	.089	-.051	1	-.117
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.297	.549		.169
	N	140	140	140	139
Presence of Meaning	Pearson Correlation	-.019	.015	-.117	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.822	.863	.169	
	N	141	141	139	141

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

According to Table 3, there is no correlation between the three dimensions of burnout and the presence of meaning. Thus, correlation analysis reveals that the presence of meaning has no relationship with personal achievement ( $r = -0.19$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) or emotional exhaustion ( $r = -0.15$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, there was no correlation between depersonalization and life meaning ( $r = -0.117$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to assess the levels of meaning in life among Catholic clergy and consecrated religious. Furthermore, it established a link between burnout and life meaning among Catholic pastoral

agents. In regard to levels of meaning in life, majority of the participants (n=109; 77%) have higher presence of meaning while 73 (51.4%) participants have a lower search for meaning. This implies that many Church ministers in Uganda have achieved meaning and purpose in life and this probably explains why most of them have moderate levels of burnout. These findings are consistent with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy theory, which states that there is nothing in the world that can help one survive even the most adversities as the knowledge that one's life has meaning. The findings show that when there is meaning in one's life, it is easier to overcome the challenges of pastoral work. For instance, the Catholic pastoral agents are prone to burnout due to the nature of their ministry but finding meaning on what they do can prevent them from experiencing high levels of burnout. Unlike other employees in the secular world, the Catholic pastoral agents are called in the ministry and they are likely to find meaning in life as they serve the humanity.

Findings reported lack of correlation between the three dimensions of burnout and presence of meaning. Thus, correlation analysis reveals that the presence of meaning has no relationship with personal achievement ( $r = 0.19$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) or emotional exhaustion ( $r = 0.15$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). As regard to depersonalization and meaning of life the correlation is presented as positive with ( $r = 0.117$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). That is, Catholic pastoral agents can experience burnout while also having high levels of meaning in their lives. The findings of this study contradicted the findings of Krok (2016), who claimed that meaning in life appears to be one of the important factors that may play a beneficial role in preventing or decreasing the negative symptoms of burnout. Furthermore, the findings contradicted Krok's (2016) findings, which concluded that people who experience greater global-level meaning in life are more likely to experience greater domain-level meaning, which plays a preventive role in negative workplace experiences directly related to burnout. In other words, work fulfillment is the best preventative measure against burnout.

The findings contradicted Längle's (2013) contention that a person experiencing burnout lacks an existential meaning for the activities in which he or she is engaged. This means that personal fulfillment is a pipe dream. Contrary to that, Catholic pastoral agents experiencing burnout might not mean they are lacking towards the ministry they are engaged. It is possible for the Catholic pastoral agents to experience emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment at the same time. Since they are relating their ministry with calling, they are likely to find meaning in whatever they do.

The current study's findings contradicted those of Steger (2010), who discovered that people who lack a sense of meaning in their lives are likely to be dissatisfied with their lives. Catholic pastoral agents may not be devoid of meaning in their lives, but they are vulnerable to burnout. However, the Catholic clergy and consecrated religious experience with burnout may end up in a state of meaninglessness leading to unfulfilled life. This is consistent with the position of Längle (2013) that burnout is a form of existential vacuum characterized by the feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness.

## CONCLUSION

The study concluded that majority of Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters have high levels of meaning in life which could be as a result of their religious way of life. Their higher score in meaning in life can play a big role in safeguarding them from experiencing pastoral burnout. There was no significant relationship between burnout dimensions and meaning in life, which could imply that Catholic Priests, Brothers and Sisters can have high levels of meaning in life and at the same time experience pastoral burnout due to the nature of ministry. The study recommends to Bishops and superiors to come up with programs that will help their members to find more meaning in life as they get involved in serving the humanity. The study also recommends to the future researchers on the subject to consider using qualitative or mixed method approach to enhance the findings.

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