

Stress Management Techniques for Christian Leaders: A Qualitative Case Study of Clergy in the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION.

Stress management among clergy has become a global concern in recent decades, as the demands of ministry continue to increase alongside social, cultural, and economic pressures. Studies have consistently highlighted that clergy worldwide face significant stress due to factors such as long working hours, insufficient financial resources, exhaustion, lack of motivation, cynicism, decreased satisfaction, frustration, inability to concentrate, negative outlook, self-doubt, frequent mood changes, social isolation, and depression. This universal challenge affects even the most devout and dedicated ministers who may feel conflicted about admitting their struggles due to expectations of spiritual strength and resilience. Research by Amadi-Nche (2022) revealed that these stressors often culminate in burnout, compassion fatigue, and serious mental health challenges. Globally, conversations around pastoral care and self-care are growing, with denominations increasingly acknowledging the need for wellness programs, sabbaticals, peer support groups, and access to professional counseling as part of clergy development. The issue is no longer confined to individual pastors but is seen as a structural concern within church organizations that impacts congregational health and the broader mission of the church.

At the regional level, in East and Southern Africa, clergy stress is increasingly being documented as a public health and ecclesiastical issue. Among Pentecostal leaders in East Africa, for example, there is recognition of the deep impact that ministry-related stress and trauma have on pastors. Research shows that junior pastors, who often work under senior leaders without adequate mentorship or psycho-social support, are internalizing trauma in ways that affect them spiritually, emotionally, and physically (Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024). These pastors face the dual burden of serving congregants who are themselves struggling with poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, and political instability, while also dealing with their own personal and familial struggles. In many cases, congregants expect their pastors to be the constant source of encouragement and hope, leaving little room for clergy to express vulnerability or seek help. Furthermore, the limited resources allocated to pastoral well-being mean that stress management strategies are often improvised rather than structured. Regionally, there is also an emerging discourse on the intersection of African cultural expectations and Christian ministry, where pastors are often pressured to provide material support to church members, compounding financial stress and blurring professional boundaries.

Locally, in Zimbabwe, the stress experienced by pastors is deeply intertwined with the socio-economic realities of the nation. The country has faced prolonged economic challenges marked by inflation, unemployment, and unstable livelihoods. These conditions directly affect pastors whose financial support depends largely on congregational giving. With members themselves struggling to make ends meet, the sustainability of congregational support for pastors becomes uncertain. Scholars and church leaders have increasingly emphasized the need for “tent-making ministries” where pastors engage in bi-vocational work alongside ministry to alleviate financial pressures and ensure long-term sustainability (Mhembere, 2020). However, while tent-making may provide financial relief, it can also increase the workload and fatigue of clergy who already struggle with time management. The lingering emotional and spiritual toll of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated stress, as pastors had to adapt quickly to new forms of worship, provide pastoral care in the midst of grief and loss, and respond to congregants’ fears and anxieties. The Baptist Union of Zimbabwe, like many denominational bodies, is now grappling with how to equip its leaders with effective stress management tools that go beyond prayer and spiritual disciplines, incorporating psychological, social, and organizational strategies to safeguard clergy well-being. This study therefore aims to bridge the gap in understanding the specific stressors and coping mechanisms of Christian leaders within the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe. By examining how pastors

in this context experience, perceive, and manage stress, the research contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on clergy well-being, while also offering practical recommendations for church leadership, theological education, and policy formulation within the Zimbabwean setting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS.

1. What are the primary sources of stress experienced by Christian leaders within the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe?
2. What stress management techniques are currently employed by these leaders, and how effective are they perceived to be?
3. What strategies or interventions can be recommended to enhance the well-being, resilience, and coping capacities of Christian leaders in Zimbabwe?

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Christian leaders in the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe experienced stress and managed it. Qualitative methods were appropriate because they enabled exploration of meanings, beliefs, and behaviours that quantitative approaches could not fully capture. Through semi-structured interviews and a complementary survey, the researcher sought to interpret the social and spiritual lives of clergy, accessing their values, motivations, and emotional realities. Qualitative inquiry was especially suited to this topic because it allowed the study to reveal aspects of pastoral life such as internal conflict, spiritual identity, and stress-coping strategies that are not readily quantifiable.

Research design

A case study design was adopted. The case study method was appropriate for addressing “how” and “why” questions and for understanding phenomena whose meanings depended on contextual conditions (Simeonova & Fitzgerald, 2023). By focusing on the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe, the study bounded its inquiry within a particular organizational, cultural, and theological context, enabling exploration of both shared patterns across pastors and unique individual experiences. The case was bounded by place (BUZ), time (the period of data collection), and role (senior, junior, and urban clergy), which kept the inquiry focused while preserving rich contextual detail (Simeonova & Fitzgerald, 2023).

Population and sample

The population comprised ordained pastors serving in churches affiliated with the Baptist Union of Zimbabwe. Given existing relational access and practical constraints of time and resources, the researcher purposively sampled participants who were actively serving in pastoral ministry and able to speak meaningfully about stress and coping. The final sample included 15–20 pastors selected to represent variation in years of ministry, role (senior versus junior), and location (urban congregations). This sample size provided sufficient information power for in-depth qualitative analysis, prioritizing data richness over numerical breadth.

Data collection procedure

1. Ethical approval and access

Permission to carry out the study was granted by BUZ leadership (including the General Secretary and Executive), and participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and signed a Consent Form outlining the study’s purpose, their voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw.

2. Instrument development and pilot

Semi-structured interview guides and a brief survey instrument were developed to explore sources of stress, stress-management techniques, and recommendations for enhancing pastoral well-being, and these tools were

piloted with a small group of non-BUZ clergy (5–7 pastors) to evaluate clarity, relevance, and potential bias before being revised based on the feedback received.

3. Recruitment and data collection

Participants were recruited through BUZ networks (email, social media, and in-person contacts), and semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted either in person or via phone/online depending on participant preference. The survey was administered concurrently to collect demographic information, self-reported stress levels, and coping strategies, while field notes and a reflexivity journal were maintained to capture observations, non-verbal cues, and researcher reflections.

4. Data saturation

Interviews and surveys continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point when additional interviews no longer yielded novel themes or substantive new insights.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) guided by Braun and Clarke’s framework (Oka et al., 2022), which enabled deep interpretive engagement with the data while recognising researcher subjectivity and reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis followed six phases familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Oka et al., 2022). A deductive-reflexive stance was applied: although coding drew on existing literature on clergy stress, the researcher remained open to new and emergent themes arising directly from participants’ accounts. To strengthen methodological rigor, a reflexivity journal was kept to reflect on how the researcher’s positionality, theological identity, and relationship to BUZ might have shaped interpretation (Manchester researcher model, 2024). Methodological congruence was also monitored throughout to ensure consistent alignment among the research questions, design, data collection, and analytical processes (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

RESEARCH FINDINGS.

Findings

EIGHTEEN (18) PASTORS AFFILIATED WITH THE BAPTIST UNION OF ZIMBABWE PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY. THE TABLE BELOW PRESENTS A SUMMARY OF THE PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC AND MINISTERIAL PROFILES. TO ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY AND PROTECT THE IDENTITIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS, ALL NAMES USED IN THIS STUDY ARE PSEUDONYMS.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS’ PROFILE

Pseud.	Gen	Marital	Role	Location	Bi-vocational
P1	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	Yes
P2	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	No
P3	Male	Married	Associate Pastor	Urban	Yes
P4	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	No
P5	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	No
P6	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	Yes
P7	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	Yes
P8	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	No

P9	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	No
P10	Male	Single	Associate Pastor	Urban	Yes
P11	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Peri-Urb	No
P12	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	Yes
P13	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	No
P14	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	Yes
P15	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Rural	No
P16	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	No
P17	Male	Widowed	Senior Pastor	Rural	No
P18	Male	Married	Senior Pastor	Urban	No

THE STUDY WAS GUIDED BY THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, AND SIX MAJOR THEMES EMERGED FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA. THE MAJOR THEMES AND THEIR CORRESPONDING SUB-THEMES ARE SUMMARISED IN THE TABLE BELOW.

TABLE 1: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PASTORS' EXPERIENCES OF MINISTRY STRESS

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Participants' Responses
Emotional & Physical Strain	Emotional fatigue	<i>P1 'I often feel emotionally drained'; P5 'emotionally taxed'; P13 'dedicated but fatigued'; P18 'emotionally stretched but committed.'</i>
	Physical exhaustion & sleep disturbance	<i>P1, P4, P9, P12, reported exhaustion and sleep problems; P6 feels 'frequently drained.'</i>
Ministry Demands	Administrative workload	<i>P1 constant availability and admin duties; P5 church conflict and admin challenges; P11 administrative overload.</i>
	Boundary challenges	<i>P3 unclear work-home boundaries; P12 boundary diffusion; P14 role overload.</i>
Financial Pressures	Economic strain	<i>P2 low stipend and transport issues; P6 & P7 financial insecurity; P15 economic stress.</i>
Barriers to Support	Fear of appearing weak	<i>P1 feared appearing weak; P2 & P5 leadership visibility concerns; P10 feared appearing unfit for ministry.</i>
	Cultural stigma	<i>P4 vulnerability discouraged culturally; P17 pride and tradition.</i>
Theme 5: Spiritual Coping	Prayer and devotion	<i>P1, P6, P9, P13, P16 rely on prayer and devotion; P5 structured devotional discipline.</i>

	Sense of calling	<i>P2 has faith in calling; P9 has deep conviction of calling; P15 perseveres through faith.</i>
Organizational Support	Lack of formal systems	<i>P1, P3, P8, P10, P16 and P18 reported no structured counselling or wellness programmes.</i>
	Desired support	<i>P1, P2, P3, P4, P10, and P13 requested counselling services, mentorship, wellness workshops, and sabbatical policies</i>

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The qualitative findings revealed several interconnected themes related to pastors’ experiences of stress and psychological wellbeing within the context of ministry. One prominent theme that emerged was emotional and physical strain associated with pastoral responsibilities. The data indicated that many pastors experience persistent emotional fatigue and exhaustion resulting from the relational and spiritual demands of ministry. Participants described feeling emotionally drained and stretched beyond their limits while striving to remain purposeful and dedicated in their ministerial roles. Alongside emotional strain, the findings also revealed evidence of physical exhaustion and sleep disturbances, suggesting that the cumulative demands of pastoral work can affect both psychological and physical wellbeing. These findings align with existing research indicating that pastoral ministry involves significant emotional labour and sustained interpersonal engagement, which can increase vulnerability to burnout and psychological strain (Francis & Crea, 2023).

A second key theme that emerged from the data related to ministry demands and role overload. Pastors described managing a wide range of responsibilities, including preaching, counselling, administration and congregational care. The breadth of these responsibilities often creates pressure to remain constantly available to congregants while simultaneously managing organisational and administrative tasks. The findings further indicate that many pastors experience difficulty maintaining clear boundaries between their ministerial duties and personal or family life. The overlapping nature of these roles contributes to feelings of role overload and ongoing pressure. These results are consistent with previous research which identifies role ambiguity, extensive expectations and the multiplicity of pastoral roles as common contributors to stress among clergy (Lee, 2024).

Another significant theme identified in the findings relates to financial and structural pressures within ministry contexts. Pastors serving in rural or resource-constrained environments reported experiencing financial limitations, low stipends and logistical challenges such as transportation difficulties when carrying out ministry responsibilities. Financial insecurity emerged as an additional stressor that can compound the emotional and occupational demands already present in pastoral work. These economic pressures may affect not only personal wellbeing but also the long-term sustainability of pastoral ministry. Similar concerns have been highlighted in previous studies which suggest that financial strain can significantly contribute to psychological distress among clergy (Proeschold-Bell & Byassee, 2023).

The findings also revealed the presence of barriers to seeking psychological support. Many pastors reported hesitation in accessing professional mental health services due to concerns related to leadership expectations, perceived weakness and the potential impact on their credibility as spiritual leaders. Cultural norms and institutional expectations within religious communities may therefore discourage openness regarding emotional struggles. As a result, some pastors may internalise their stress rather than seek appropriate psychological assistance. This observation is consistent with recent literature indicating that stigma and leadership expectations frequently prevent clergy from utilising mental health support services (Adams, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the findings highlight strong reliance on spiritual coping mechanisms as a primary means of managing stress. Practices such as prayer, meditation on scripture and personal devotional life were

consistently identified as important sources of emotional strength and resilience. Additionally, a strong sense of divine calling appeared to provide pastors with meaning and motivation that supports perseverance in the face of ministry-related challenges. However, while personal spirituality serves as an important coping resource, the data also revealed that formal organizational support structures are often limited or absent. This gap suggests that although pastors rely heavily on individual spiritual practices, institutional mechanisms for supporting pastoral well-being remain underdeveloped. Consequently, the findings point to the potential value of introducing structured support systems such as confidential counselling services, mentorship programmes, pastoral wellness initiatives and sabbatical policies aimed at promoting long-term psychological wellbeing among clergy.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that pastoral ministry involves complex psychological and structural demands that can significantly affect the wellbeing of clergy. Emotional exhaustion, role overload, financial pressures and barriers to accessing psychological support emerged as key stressors experienced within ministry contexts. Although pastors exhibit notable resilience through spiritual coping practices and a strong sense of calling, reliance on individual coping mechanisms alone may not be sufficient to address the cumulative pressures associated with pastoral leadership. The study therefore highlights the importance of recognizing pastoral wellbeing as both a personal and institutional concern. Ensuring the psychological health of pastors is essential not only for the individuals themselves but also for the sustainability and effectiveness of church leadership and congregational life.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Establishment of structured pastoral support systems:** Church organizations and denominational bodies should develop formal support mechanisms, including confidential counselling services and clergy support programmes.
- 2. Implementation of mentorship and peer support networks:** Structured mentorship relationships and peer discussion groups can provide pastors with safe spaces for reflection, encouragement and shared problem-solving.
- 3. Integration of pastoral wellness training:** Workshops focusing on stress management, emotional resilience, boundary setting and self-care should form part of ongoing ministerial development.
- 4. Clarification of pastoral roles and responsibilities:** Churches may benefit from clearer role definitions and shared leadership structures in order to reduce role overload and unrealistic expectations.
- 5. Strengthening financial and structural support:** Greater attention should be given to improving financial sustainability and logistical support, particularly for pastors serving in rural or resource-limited contexts.
- 6. Promotion of mental health awareness within church communities:** Addressing stigma surrounding psychological support may encourage pastors to seek help when necessary without fear of judgement or diminished credibility.

Collectively, these measures may contribute to the development of healthier ministry environments and support the long-term well-being and effectiveness of pastoral leaders.

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