

Relationship Between the Level of Self-Motivation and the Level of Ministerial Burnout Among Catholic Priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Ministerial burnout has emerged as a significant concern among Catholic priests, potentially affecting their psychological well-being, pastoral effectiveness, and vocational commitment. This study examined the levels of self-motivation and ministerial burnout, and the relationship between these variables among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. Self-Determination Theory and the Balance Affect Model guided the study. A quantitative correlational survey design was employed. The target population comprised 145 Catholic priests serving in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. Due to the small size of the target population, a census approach was adopted. The study sought to include all 145 Catholic priests serving in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe at the time of data collection. Since the whole targeted population were given a chance to participate, selection bias could not be observed. However, the structured data were successfully collected from $n = 115$, with a 79.3% response rate. Data were gathered using the Self-Motivation Inventory (SMI) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and analysed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, and the Chi-square test were used for data analysis. The findings revealed that 46.1% of the priests reported high levels of self-motivation, while 48.7% reported low levels of ministerial burnout. Furthermore, Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a very strong negative relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout ($r = -.912$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of self-motivation were associated with lower levels of ministerial burnout. The study concludes that self-motivation is an important protective factor against ministerial burnout and recommends initiatives that strengthen priests' intrinsic motivation and overall well-being.

Keywords: Self-motivation, Ministerial burnout, Catholic priests, Self-Determination Theory, Balance Affect Model, Maslach Burnout Inventory, Pastoral effectiveness and Mental well-being

INTRODUCTION

Catholic priests, pastors, and other professionals often begin their ministries with high motivation and high ideals but may later experience disillusionment and despair due to the demanding nature of their work (Peach, 2022). Key contributors to ministerial burnout may include work overload, insufficient social support, emotional labour, fatigue, and a variety of responsibilities (Jones, 2024). The Archdiocese of Lilongwe has proactively supported its priests with financial assistance, reliable transportation, and adequate infrastructure to mitigate the risk of burnout. Nevertheless, burnout remains widespread. Protective factors such as self-motivation and personal accountability are crucial for Catholic priests and other helpers to combat this issue (Adams et al., 2024). Given the persistence of ministerial burnout within the archdiocese, further investigation into internal factors, particularly self-motivation, is essential. This study aims to explore the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe.

Self-motivation is an internal drive rooted in personal values, interests, and passions, enabling individuals to pursue growth and achievement independently of external influences (Elizabeth, 2022). For Catholic priests, it is a critical determinant of innovation, productivity, and pastoral effectiveness, helping them manage role

demands and reduce the risk of ministerial burnout (Williams, 2024; Davis, 2025). Scholars distinguish between extrinsic motivation, derived from external rewards, and intrinsic motivation, grounded in deep beliefs and purpose (Morris et al., 2022). For priests, intrinsic motivation is particularly significant, as it should emerge from faith, vocation, and a commitment to serving marginalised communities (Cherry, 2023). In contexts where external rewards are limited, such as the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, intrinsic motivation becomes vital to sustaining spiritual and psychological well-being, enhancing resilience, and maintaining pastoral effectiveness (Manu, 2024).

Conversely, Catholic priests' Ministerial burnout is a critical mental health issue characterised by emotional exhaustion due to excessive workloads, personality traits like neuroticism, and socio-cultural factors (Fosu-Ayarkwah et al., 2025). This condition adversely impacts priests' health, spiritual well-being, and interpersonal relationships, potentially leading to isolation, neglect of self-care, and anti-authoritarian behaviours (Fia et al., 2022). Research indicates that burnout contributes to feelings of alienation, decreased motivation, and increased anxiety, affecting approximately 33% of priests in Brazil and 24% in the USA (Dias, 2019). Prolonged ministerial burnout may cause emotional exhaustion, jeopardise psychological health, social functioning, and pastoral work, and pose risks of public scandals that could threaten the Catholic Church's reputation (Picornell-Gallar & González-Fraile, 2024). Addressing ministerial burnout is essential for preserving the well-being of both priests and their congregations. Notably, self-motivation is increasingly recognised as crucial for Catholic priests, particularly in challenging environments. It empowers Catholic priests to take the initiative in regulating their lifestyles and adapting more effectively to ministerial demands (Canoy et al., 2023). Similarly, Picornell-Gallar & González-Fraile (2024) found that Catholic priests with a high level of self-motivation tend to experience lower levels of ministerial burnout. Understanding this issue requires a focused examination of the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout.

Globally, in Poland, research by Kowalski & Nowak (2022) shows that Catholic priests and seminarians are highly self-motivated, driven by appreciation, a firm sense of life's meaning, and a positive attitude. Their research shows that this motivation is not only psychological but also deeply spiritual, rooted in the connection between vocation and general well-being. Similarly,

at the regional level, in a Nigerian study, Gichuki & Muthami (2019) found that high levels of self-motivation and psychosocial motivation were significant predictors of the psychological well-being of priests in the Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province. The study found that more motivated priests reported greater life satisfaction and lower mental strain. Equally, locally, despite limited research in Malawi, Manda (2020) found that Priests showed high intrinsic motivation in the face of the challenges of a shortage of priests and tough pastoral terrain, supported by lay participation, inventive pastoral solutions, and genuine dedication to service. The trend suggests that high self-motivation can mitigate burnout and promote overall health and well-being among Catholic priests. Studies emphasise the need for self-motivation for sustained engagement during challenging times.

Self-motivation among Catholic priests is often shaped by how priests experience and respond to ministerial burnout. As Fabri et al. (2025) found, ministerial burnout among Catholic priests can undermine self-motivation and lead to serious anxiety, depression, social withdrawal and compromised self-care. If left unchecked, Ministerial Burnout can threaten one's psychological well-being, physical and emotional health, and pastoral responsibilities. It saps energy and breeds sadness, pessimism and resentment (Nganga et al., 2025). It drains priests' energy, undermines their relationships and pastoral commitments, and, by striking at the core of their vocation, harms both their well-being and the vitality of the communities they serve (Piedmont, 2020).

Across the globe, ministerial burnout has become a growing concern. In Brazil, José de Lima Dias (2019) found that approximately 30% of Brazilian Catholic priests are experiencing moderate to severe ministerial burnout, and 41.7% of the catholic priests were experiencing ministerial burnout syndrome caused by inadequate responses to ongoing emotional stresses. Again, in the USA, Smith and Jonson (2024) found that 35% of catholic priests reported high levels of emotional fatigue, 28% experienced more depersonalisation, and 40% reported a low sense of personal accomplishment. Similarly, Mwangi (2020) in the Diocese of Murang'a, Kenya, found that 62% of Catholic priests felt drained, 60% were tired and irritated, 62% were sad for no reason, 33% spent less

time with their congregation, and 57% were frustrated. Closer to home, Pononga (2020), in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi, among consecrated men and women, found that 36 (84%) experienced ministerial burnout due to external factors. Together, these findings underscore the global nature of ministerial burnout and its profound impact on well-being.

The literature has not established a clear link between self-motivation and ministerial burnout. This study fills that gap by exploring self-motivation as a buffer to burnout among Catholic priests of the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. On a global level, in Poland, Kowalski & Nowak (2022) found a significant connection between self-motivation and ministerial burnout and life issues, including spiritual concerns ($R^2 = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$). Similarly, Jamabo et al. (2022) studied the Warri Diocese in South Africa and found significant associations among self-motivation, empathy, social skills, and job satisfaction. The coefficients (r) were 0.871 for self-motivation, 0.873 for empathy, 0.921 for social skills, and 0.911 for clergy job satisfaction. In the related study in Malawi, Mchenga et al. (2025) found that strong motivation in the public service sector reduced the risk of burnout and enhanced employee commitment.

The existing literature reveals a significant gap regarding the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. At present, there is limited empirical quantitative research that specifically examines this important relationship in such a ministry environment. Although studies from other regions have demonstrated an association, similar research among priests in the archdiocese of Lilongwe remains sparse. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs and advanced statistical methods to better understand how self-motivation affects the risk of burnout.

The present study was grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Self-determination theory (SDT) was created by Deci & Ryan (1985). According to self-determination theory, the most important sources of motivation for all people are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, 2013). It is a method for Catholic priests who are burning out in their ministry. In general, it means that humans are driven by the need to create and find their own happiness. Self-determination theory contains two main assumptions: that humans behave in specific ways to advance themselves. The main point of the notion is that people want to develop themselves.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a fertile conceptual framework for the analysis of motivation. It is not simply about external rewards; it also reveals the staying power of internal motivation, the internal drive that keeps people working out over the long term (Deci & Ryan, 1991). It also contains several sub-theories, providing a rich, comprehensive way of analysing human motivation. The main emphasis is on self-motivation as a key method of overcoming ministerial burnout. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy, competence and relatedness are factors that can explain the development of intrinsic motivation and the prevention of burnout among Catholic priests. SDT misses the balance of positive and negative effects that is essential for well-being. Even priests who are inspired from within may get caught up in unpleasant emotions and be burdened by exhaustion and despair. This topic is addressed by the Balance Affect Model (BAM).

The Balance Affect Model (BAM) was established by Norman Bradburn in 1969 based on his study on psychological well-being. BAM has been utilised in research with clergy and other religious workers. The idea suggests that psychological well-being is not a single continuum but a balance between two distinct dimensions: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). The paradigm aims to improve mental health, emphasising that a positive state is reached when positive impacts outweigh negative consequences (Diener & Larsen, 1993). This highlights the importance of balancing positive and negative emotions for mental health. If SDT is about motivation, BAM is about emotional balance so that highly motivated priests do not burn out. SDT alone does not explain how a highly motivated priest can nevertheless burn out. BAM fills this gap by showing that motivation requires a sustainable affective balance.

Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap by examining the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What was the level of self-motivation among the Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi?
- RQ2: What was the level of ministerial burnout among the Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi?
- RQ3: What was the relationship between the level of self-motivation and the level of ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi?

METHODOLOGY

The study was grounded in a positivist epistemological perspective, which emphasises the generation of objective knowledge through empirical observation, measurement, and statistical analysis (Omodan, 2022). Consistent with this philosophical orientation, the research adopted a quantitative paradigm and employed a correlational survey design. This design was considered appropriate because it enables the examination of the nature and strength of relationships between variables while minimising researcher subjectivity and bias. Furthermore, the design facilitated the collection of standardised data from a relatively large number of participants, thereby enhancing the objectivity and generalizability of the findings.

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To determine the level of self-motivation among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi.
2. To assess the level of ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi.
3. To examine the relationship between the level of self-motivation and the level of ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi.

The target population comprised 145 Catholic priests serving in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. The priests represented diverse congregations and ministerial contexts, including both urban parishes and rural mission stations. They varied in age, educational attainment, years of priestly experience, and pastoral assignments, thereby providing a comprehensive representation of priestly ministry within the archdiocese. All priests had received formal philosophical and theological formation, while some had pursued advanced academic qualifications in various disciplines. To enhance methodological rigour and ensure data quality, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Ordained Catholic priests currently serving in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi.	Priests serving outside the Archdiocese of Lilongwe.
Diocesan and religious priests are actively engaged in pastoral ministry.	Retired priests not actively involved in ministry.
Priests willing to participate and provide informed consent.	Priests who declined to provide informed consent.
Priests available during the period of data collection.	Priests unavailable during data collection due to leave, illness, studies, or other assignments.

Because the target population was relatively small and manageable, a census approach was adopted.

Consequently, no sampling procedures or sample size calculations were required. The study sought to include all 145 Catholic priests serving in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe at the time of data collection. Structured data were successfully collected from 115 priests, representing a response rate of 79.3%.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Tangaza University Research Ethics Committee (TUREC). Additional permission to conduct the study was granted by the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. All research procedures adhered strictly to established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Before participation, respondents were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose, procedures, benefits, and potential risks associated with the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or negative consequences. To safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, participants were identified using numerical codes rather than personal names, and no identifying information was recorded on the questionnaires. All information collected was used exclusively for academic and research purposes. Appropriate measures were also established to provide support and referral should any participant experience psychological discomfort during the study. The researcher further ensured academic integrity by accurately citing and referencing all scholarly sources and by subjecting the manuscript to plagiarism screening. The researcher declares that there were no personal, professional, financial, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the study findings.

Data Collection Instruments and Data Availability

Data were collected using two standardised instruments. Self-motivation was measured using the Self-Motivation Inventory (SMI), consisting of 38 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Ministerial burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), comprising 28 items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The instruments were selected because of their established psychometric properties and their suitability for assessing the study variables. Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted among 15 Catholic priests from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). The pilot exercise was undertaken to evaluate the clarity, appropriateness, and reliability of the research instruments. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha demonstrated excellent internal consistency for both scales. The Self-Motivation Inventory yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .988$, while the Maslach Burnout Inventory produced a coefficient of $\alpha = .973$. These coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, confirming the strong reliability of the instruments for use among Catholic priests. Data were coded, entered, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to determine the levels of self-motivation and ministerial burnout. Inferential statistics were employed to examine the relationship between the study variables. The dataset supporting the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical requirements, confidentiality obligations, and applicable data protection regulations.

RESULTS

This section presents the study's findings in three phases. First, the socio-demographic heterogeneous features of the people are presented. Then it examines the degrees of self-motivation (SM) and ministerial burnout (MB) among the Catholic priests. This stage provides the essential background for understanding the distribution of each variable. This is a very important stage in conducting a valid correlation study. Finally, the section presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis investigating the relationship between SM and MB.

Social-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study gathered the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, which were analysed descriptively by age, years in the ministry, level of education, order of priesthood, and location of service. The results are presented in histograms and a table.

Figure 1: Age of respondents: The heterogeneous age distribution. are presented in Figure 1 below.

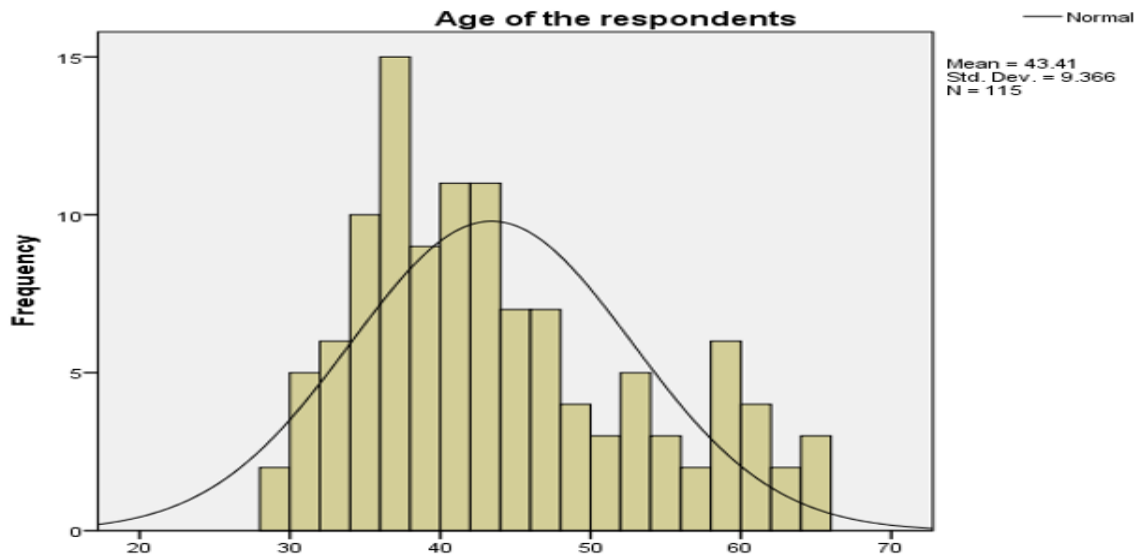


Figure 1 presents the detailed age distribution of participants, ranging from 29 to 65 years. A considerable proportion of respondents were classified as young priests, while others were middle-aged, and a smaller segment were older priests. This cross-generational composition enhances the robustness of the findings by incorporating perspectives from different stages of the life course.

Years in the Ministry

The study sample included a heterogeneous distribution of years in service. The detailed distribution of years in service is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The number of years in service for the respondent

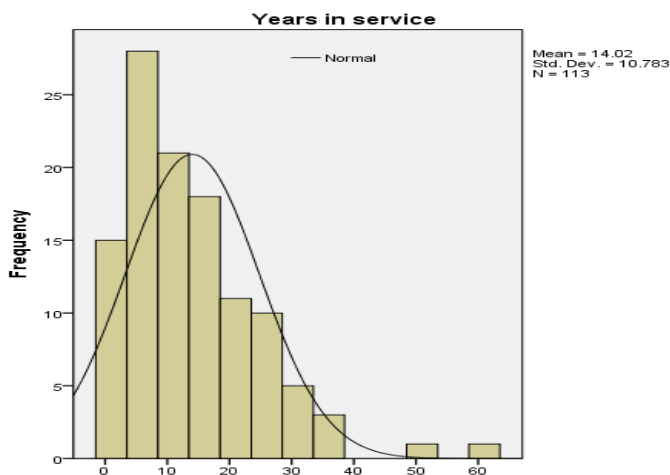


Figure 2 presents the number of years in service for respondents; years in the ministry ranged from 1 to 59 ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 10.76$). This mix of newer voices and seasoned perspectives enriches the study by reflecting the realities of ministry across various stages of service.

Other Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Respondents vary in educational attainment, from a Bachelor's degree to a PhD. They belong to both the diocesan clergy and religious congregations and serve in diverse contexts, including rural, urban, and institutional settings. The three characteristics are presented descriptively in Table 2.

Table 2: Social Demographics of Respondents

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1. Level of education	Dip & BA holders	79	68.7
	Master's degree holders	30	26.1
	Doctorate/ PhD	6	5.2
2. Religious Affiliation	Diocesan priests	81	70.4
	Religious priests	34	29.6
3. Location/place of work	Rural Parish	34	29.6
	Urban/ city parish	43	37.4
	Institution	38	33.0

Table 2 presents Other Social-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents: education level (n = 79; 68.7%). The majority of respondents were BA graduates n = 30; 26.1%), Master's degree holders n = 6; 5.2%), and PhD holders. Regarding the order of the priesthood, the predominant group consisted of n = 81 (70.4%) Diocesan priests, and n = 34 (29.6%) religious priests. Additionally, the table indicates that respondents work in three different places. Rural parishes: n = 34 (29.6%), Urban parishes: n = (37.4%) and n = 38 (33.0%) had worked in institutions.

The Level of Self-Motivation among the Respondents

As a preparatory step for analysing the relationship between the level of self-motivation and the level of ministerial burnout, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to assess respondents' self-motivation levels. The level of Self-motivation was calculated and presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Levels of Self-Motivation (LSM)

Descriptions	Range	Frequency	Percentage
High level of self-motivation	140 - 190	53	46.1
Moderate level of self-motivation	89 – 139	32	27.8
Low level of self-motivation	38 – 88	30	26.1
Total	190	115	100

As presented by Table 3, the data interpretation showed that n = 30 (26.1%) respondents scored between 38 and 88; these respondents belonged to the low-level self-motivation category; n = 32 (27.8%) respondents scored between 89 and 139; these belonged to the average-level self-motivation category; and n = 53 (46.1%) fell into the high-level self-motivation category, scoring between 140 and 190. According to this study, more respondents (n = 53) reported high levels of self-motivation than the rest.

The Level of Ministerial Burnout Among the Respondents

To assess the relationship between the level of ministerial burnout and the level of self-motivation, a descriptive statistical test was also conducted to determine the level of ministerial burnout among respondents. The results of the test were presented in Table 4

Table 4: Levels of Ministerial Burnout (LMB)

Descriptions	Range	Frequency	Percentage
High level of Ministerial Burnout	103 - 140	31	27
Moderate level of Ministerial Burnout	66 - 102	28	24.3
Low level of Ministerial Burnout	28 - 65	56	48.7
TOTAL	140	115	100

As presented in Table 4, $n = 56$ (48.7%) respondents scored between 28 and 65, which placed them in the low level of ministerial burnout category; $n = 28$ (24.3%) respondents scored between 66 and 102, which placed them in the moderate level of ministerial burnout category, and $n = 31$ (27%) respondents were between 103 and 140, were in the high-level of ministerial burnout category. According to this study, a significant proportion of respondents ($n = 56$) reported low levels of ministerial burnout.

Relationship between the level of self-motivation and the level of ministerial burnout among Catholic Priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi

A crosstabulation was conducted to establish the relationship between the two variables at three levels across three categories: high, moderate, and low. The results of the cross-tabulation were displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Crosstabulation of the observed count of self-motivation levels and ministerial burnout levels.

Ministerial Burnout levels.

Self-motivation	low burnout	Moderate burnout	High	Total
High level	12	10	31	53 (46.1%)
Moderate level	21	11	0	32 (27.8%)
Low level	23	7	0	30 (26.1%)
Total	56 (48.7%)	28(24.3%)	31 (26.9%)	115(100%)

One of the key findings is that self-motivation is significantly and negatively related to ministerial burnout, as shown in Table 5. High self-motivation (46.1%, $n=53$) frequency is high, and this is associated with low ministerial burnout (48.7%, $n=56$). Low self-motivation (26.1%, $n=30$) frequency is low, and this is associated with low levels of ministerial burnout (26.9%, $n=31$). The importance of this link was tested using a Chi-square test, and the results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Chi-Square Test Results

Chi-square (X^2)	Degree of Freedom (df)	Number of participants (N)	Value of Chi-square test (Value)	Significance (p)
X^2	4	115	52.34	.000

As indicated by the results in Table 6, Chi-Square ($\chi^2 = 52.34$, p -value = .000), which means $p < .001$, and Alpha (α) = 0.05. Expected counts: All ≥ 5 , minimum expected count = 7.30. Generally, the results revealed a significant association between self-motivation levels and ministerial burnout levels ($\chi^2 = 52.34$, $p < .001$). Conversely, lower self-motivation levels were associated with higher ministerial burnout levels.

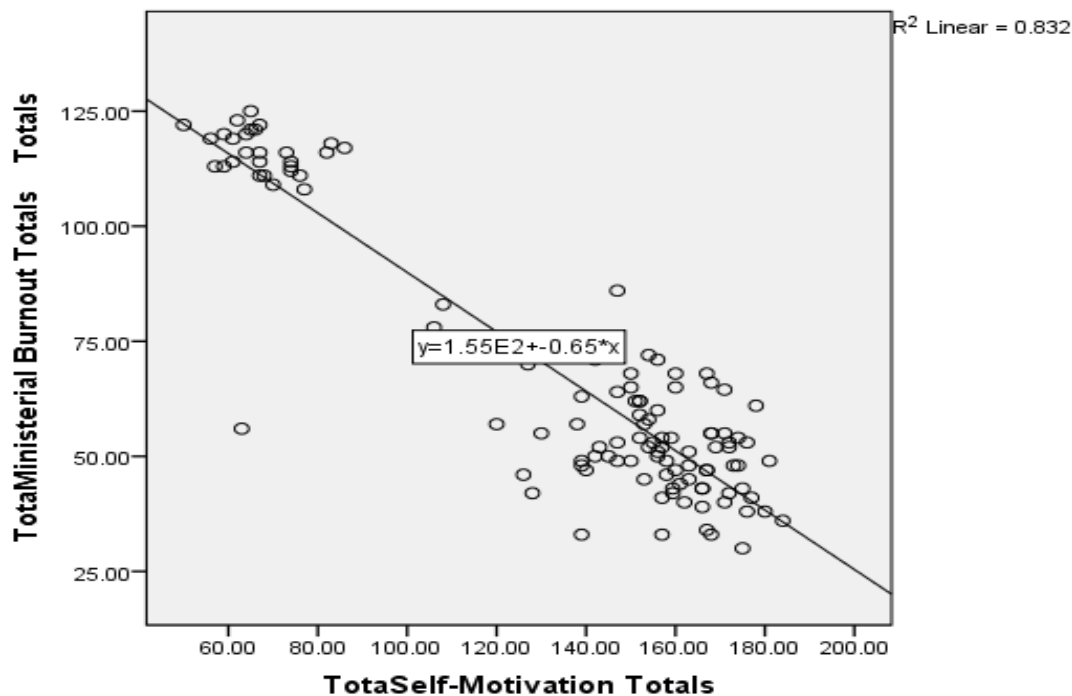
Relationship between Self-Motivation and Ministerial Burnout

The preceding analysis examined the association between categorised levels of self-motivation and ministerial burnout using cross-tabulation and the Chi-square test. Although the findings demonstrated a statistically

significant association between the two variables, this approach did not adequately reveal the direction and strength of their relationship.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, self-motivation and ministerial burnout were further analysed as continuous variables using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. This analysis was intended to determine whether changes in self-motivation were associated with corresponding changes in ministerial burnout and to establish the magnitude and direction of the relationship. The outcome of Pearson's correlation coefficient test was presented in a scatterplot (Figure 3), while the correlation statistics are reported in the subsequent Table 7.

Figure 3: Pearson's correlation coefficient test of the Relationship between self- motivation and ministerial burnout



The scatter plot in Figure 3 shows a negative general correlation between Self-Motivation and Ministerial Burnout. Most of the dots are clustered near the line, indicating a strong correlation. The inverse relationship holds that as self-motivation increases, burnout decreases. The Implication is that Individuals with higher self-motivation tend to experience significantly lower levels of ministerial burnout.

The scatterplot alone could only determine that the two variables were related; it could not establish the statistical significance of that relationship. A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the extent of the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout among Catholic priests. The detailed results of the significance of the relationship are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Pearson Product-moment Correlation

Total		Self-Motivation	Ministerial Burnout
Self-Motivation	Pearson Correlation	1	- .912**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	115	
Ministerial Burnout	Pearson Correlation	- .912**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	115	115

The results show a strong negative association between self-motivation and ministerial burnout ($r = -0.912$, $p = .000$). This implies that greater self-motivation is associated with lower ministerial burnout, especially among Catholic priests, underscoring the relevance of self-motivation in its management.

DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study sought to determine the level of self-motivation among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. The findings revealed that nearly half of the respondents (46.1%, $n = 53$) reported high levels of self-motivation, while 27.8% ($n = 32$) reported moderate levels and 26.1% ($n = 30$) reported low levels of self-motivation. These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe possess strong internal motivational resources that sustain their commitment to priestly ministry despite the challenges associated with pastoral work. The predominance of high self-motivation among the respondents is consistent with previous studies that have identified intrinsic motivation as a defining characteristic of priestly vocation. For example, Kowalski and Nowak (2022) found that Catholic priests and seminarians in Poland exhibited high levels of self-motivation rooted in a strong sense of meaning, purpose, and spiritual commitment. Similarly, Gichuki and Muthami (2019) reported that self-motivation was a significant predictor of psychological well-being among priests in the Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province of Nigeria. In Malawi, Manda (2020) observed that priests maintained strong intrinsic motivation despite challenges such as priest shortages, demanding pastoral terrain, and limited resources.

The relatively high levels of self-motivation observed in the present study may be attributed to the spiritual nature of the priestly vocation, which is grounded in a sense of divine calling, a commitment to service, and a dedication to the pastoral care of God's people. Priests who derive meaning and fulfilment from their vocation are likely to remain motivated even when confronted with demanding ministerial responsibilities. These findings reinforce the argument that self-motivation among Catholic priests extends beyond psychological factors and is deeply rooted in vocational identity, spiritual conviction, and commitment to ministry.

The findings can be interpreted within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are adequately satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Priests who experience a sense of purpose in ministry, confidence in their pastoral competencies, and meaningful relationships with parishioners and fellow clergy are likely to demonstrate higher levels of self-motivation. Conversely, priests who experience frustrations in these psychological needs may be more vulnerable to reduced motivation and diminished pastoral engagement. The findings therefore support the proposition that intrinsic motivation constitutes an important psychological resource for sustaining effective ministry and promoting priestly well-being.

The second objective sought to determine the level of ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. The findings revealed that 48.7% ($n = 56$) of the respondents reported low levels of ministerial burnout, 24.3% ($n = 28$) reported moderate levels, and 27.0% ($n = 31$) reported high levels of ministerial burnout. Although the majority of priests reported low burnout levels, the finding that more than one-quarter of the respondents experienced high levels of burnout remains noteworthy and warrants serious attention. These results suggest that while many priests appear to be coping effectively with ministerial demands, a significant minority continue to experience considerable psychological and emotional strain.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous international studies on clergy burnout. Dias (2019) reported that approximately one-third of Catholic priests in Brazil experienced moderate to severe burnout, while Ruiz-Prada et al. (2021) similarly documented substantial levels of burnout among clergy. Comparable patterns have been observed in African contexts. For example, studies conducted in South Africa (Phoseka, 2017; Hydinger et al., 2024) reported varying levels of clergy burnout, reflecting differences in ministerial contexts, support systems, and workload demands. The relatively lower prevalence of burnout in the present study may indicate the positive effects of spiritual resilience, vocational commitment, and institutional support available to priests within the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. Nevertheless, the existence of a substantial group experiencing high

burnout suggests the need for targeted interventions aimed at strengthening psychological well-being, promoting self-care, and addressing occupational stressors.

The third objective sought to examine the relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. The findings revealed a statistically significant association between the levels of self-motivation and ministerial burnout. More importantly, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation analysis demonstrated a very strong negative relationship between self-motivation and ministerial burnout ($r = -.912$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that as self-motivation increases, ministerial burnout decreases substantially. The magnitude of the relationship suggests that self-motivation is a particularly important protective factor against burnout among Catholic priests.

These findings are consistent with previous empirical studies. Picornell-Gallar and González-Fraile (2024) reported that priests with higher levels of self-motivation experienced lower levels of ministerial burnout. Similarly, Canoy et al. (2023) found that self-motivation enhanced priests' ability to regulate their lifestyles, cope with ministerial demands, and maintain psychological well-being. Beyond clerical settings, Alhadidi et al. (2023) reported comparable findings among nurses, demonstrating that higher motivation was associated with greater work engagement and lower burnout. The present findings, therefore, contribute to a growing body of evidence indicating that self-motivation serves as a significant buffer against occupational burnout across various helping professions.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strongly support Self-Determination Theory. SDT argues that intrinsically motivated individuals are more resilient, experience greater psychological well-being, and are less susceptible to emotional exhaustion (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The very strong negative correlation observed in this study suggests that priests who are internally driven by their faith, vocational commitment, and sense of purpose are better equipped to withstand the pressures of ministry. Self-motivation appears to provide psychological energy that enables priests to cope effectively with pastoral challenges and maintain ministerial effectiveness.

However, the findings also suggest that Self-Determination Theory alone may not provide a complete explanation of ministerial burnout. Although self-motivation was strongly associated with lower burnout, a considerable proportion of priests still reported moderate (24.3%) and high (27.0%) levels of burnout. This observation indicates that burnout cannot be explained solely by individual motivational factors. External influences such as excessive workload, administrative responsibilities, financial constraints, unrealistic congregational expectations, interpersonal conflicts, and institutional pressures may contribute significantly to burnout regardless of a priest's level of intrinsic motivation.

In this regard, the Balance Affect Model (BAM) offers an important complementary perspective. BAM proposes that psychological well-being is determined by the balance between positive and negative affective experiences. Within the context of this study, self-motivation may be viewed as a positive psychological resource that promotes well-being, whereas ministerial burnout represents a negative affective outcome that undermines functioning. The findings suggest that priests who maintain higher levels of self-motivation are more likely to preserve a positive emotional balance and therefore experience lower levels of burnout. Conversely, when negative ministerial experiences outweigh positive psychological resources, burnout becomes more likely. The integration of SDT and BAM, therefore, provides a more comprehensive explanation of clergy well-being by acknowledging the combined influence of motivational and affective factors.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that self-motivation is a critical protective factor against ministerial burnout among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. The very strong negative Pearson correlation ($r = -.912$, $p < .001$) consistently indicate that priests with higher levels of self-motivation experience substantially lower levels of ministerial burnout. These findings underscore the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation, vocational commitment, spiritual formation, and supportive ministerial environments as essential strategies for promoting priestly well-being and sustaining effective pastoral ministry.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the levels of self-motivation and ministerial burnout and investigated the relationship between these variables among Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Lilongwe, Malawi. Based on the findings, several conclusions were drawn.. First, the study established that a substantial proportion of Catholic priests (46.1%) reported high levels of self-motivation. This finding suggests that many priests possess strong intrinsic motivational resources that sustain their commitment to priestly ministry despite the challenges associated with pastoral work. However, the presence of priests with moderate (27.8%) and low (26.1%) levels of self-motivation indicates that motivational capacity is not uniformly distributed among all clergy and may require continuous nurturing and support.

Second, the study found that nearly half of the respondents (48.7%) experienced low levels of ministerial burnout. While this finding points to a generally favourable level of well-being among many priests, the existence of moderate (24.3%) and high (27.0%) levels of burnout among a considerable proportion of respondents demonstrates that ministerial burnout remains a significant concern within the Archdiocese of Lilongwe. Consequently, clergy well-being cannot be taken for granted, and sustained attention to factors that promote resilience and psychological health remains necessary.

Third, the study concluded that self-motivation and ministerial burnout are strongly and significantly related. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation ($r = -.912$, $p < .001$) demonstrated that higher levels of self-motivation are associated with lower levels of ministerial burnout among Catholic priests. These findings suggest that self-motivation functions as an important protective factor against burnout and contributes to priests' capacity to cope with the demands of ministry.

The study further concludes that efforts aimed at enhancing priests' intrinsic motivation, vocational commitment, and personal resilience may contribute to reducing the risk of ministerial burnout. At the same time, the persistence of moderate and high burnout levels among some priests suggests that motivational resources alone may not be sufficient to safeguard clergy well-being. Therefore, both individual and contextual factors should be considered when addressing ministerial burnout among Catholic priests.

Overall, the findings support the proposition that self-motivation is a vital resource for sustaining healthy and effective priestly ministry. The study therefore provides empirical evidence that can inform future initiatives aimed at promoting clergy well-being, strengthening vocational vitality, and mitigating ministerial burnout within the Archdiocese of Lilongwe and similar ecclesiastical contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Catholic Priests

Since self-motivation was found to be strongly associated with lower levels of ministerial burnout, Catholic priests should intentionally cultivate practices that strengthen their intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. This may include maintaining a balanced lifestyle through regular prayer, spiritual retreats, personal reflection, adequate rest, recreation, and healthy self-care habits. Priests experiencing signs of emotional exhaustion or reduced motivation should seek timely support through counselling, spiritual direction, or peer support networks to prevent the progression of burnout.

Church Authorities

Given that a considerable proportion of priests reported moderate and high levels of ministerial burnout, Church authorities should establish and strengthen structures that promote clergy well-being. Such initiatives may include regular wellness programmes, ongoing formation opportunities, spiritual renewal activities, and access

to professional counselling services. Particular attention should also be given to monitoring pastoral workloads and ensuring that ministerial responsibilities are distributed in a manner that supports the long-term psychological, spiritual, and pastoral effectiveness of priests.

Counselling and Pastoral Care Practitioners

Counselling professionals and pastoral care practitioners should develop preventive and supportive interventions aimed at enhancing self-motivation and reducing the risk of ministerial burnout among priests. Such interventions may include resilience-building programmes, psychoeducation on burnout prevention, and counselling services that integrate psychological principles with the spiritual dimensions of priestly life.

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