

## Well-Being in Ministry Results Overview

Occupational stress has been recognised as a critical issue among religious workers such as clergy, cross-cultural workers, chaplains and youth workers. Although the empirical investigation of occupational stress experienced by religious workers has increased since the early to mid 1980s, the focus has exclusively been on burnout, with no published studies to date exploring work engagement – the positive antipode of burnout. Work engagement is a state of positive work motivation characterised by vigour, dedication, and healthy absorption in work. This research gap is surprising, since working in ministry has been recognised as possessing characteristics associated with significant job motivation and satisfaction.

Though religious workers share many occupational stress factors common with other helping professions, there are a number of unique variables associated with paid ministry work that influence work duties, practices, and the experience of occupational stress. The most notable is that of spirituality – both that of the worker and the spiritual nature of aspects of the work itself. While spiritual practices have been increasingly recognised as a significant domain to be considered in clinical and therapeutic practice, such factors have been largely overlooked in the work area, even among research focused on clergy and other religious workers.

It has been the combination of these background issues that led to the specific focus of the well-being in ministry research project. The two broad questions we have sought to address are:

- 1) What are the key organisational, personality, and spiritual factors that influence well-being in ministry over time, and
- 2) How do spiritual factors influence work engagement, and do they contribute over and above variations in one's natural temperament?

In order to address these two questions, over 1000 Australian religious workers serving here and/or overseas participated in a series of surveys and interventions over a period of 18 months. What follows are the central results and some implications from the main analyses conducted.

On behalf of the research team, I wish to convey my sincere thanks for your contribution to this project. It is our hearts' desire that the results of this study will contribute to influencing the ongoing personal and organisational practices that seek well-being in ministry among Australian Christian workers.

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## Introducing the sample of participants

Over forty denominational synods, state bodies, church and para-church organisations participated in this research. Concerning the individual participants,

- 42% were ministers,
- 11% were cross-cultural workers,
- 12% were chaplains,
- 6% were youth workers, and
- 29% were other (such as denominational/para-church leaders and administrative staff).

77% were born in Australia, and 87% were currently working in Australia.

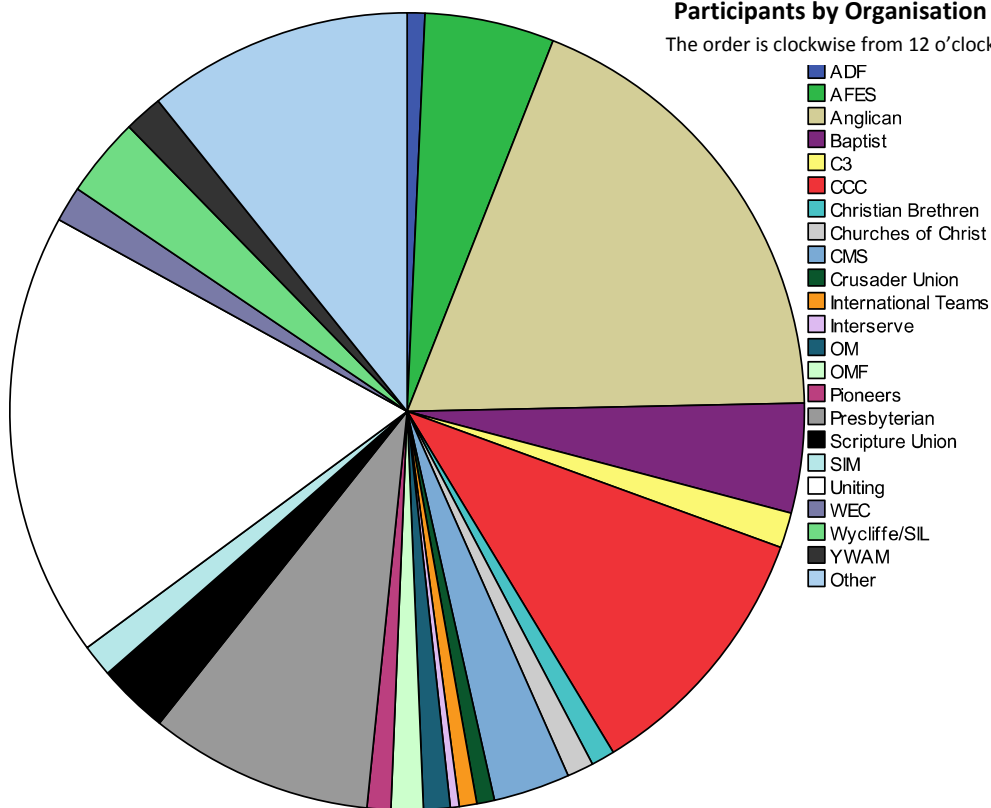
The majority were employed full-time (78% employed over 30 hours per week).

Just over half (64%) were male, and the mean age of the overall sample was 46, ranging from 20 to 78 years old. The average length of each participant's placement in their current role was 6 years.

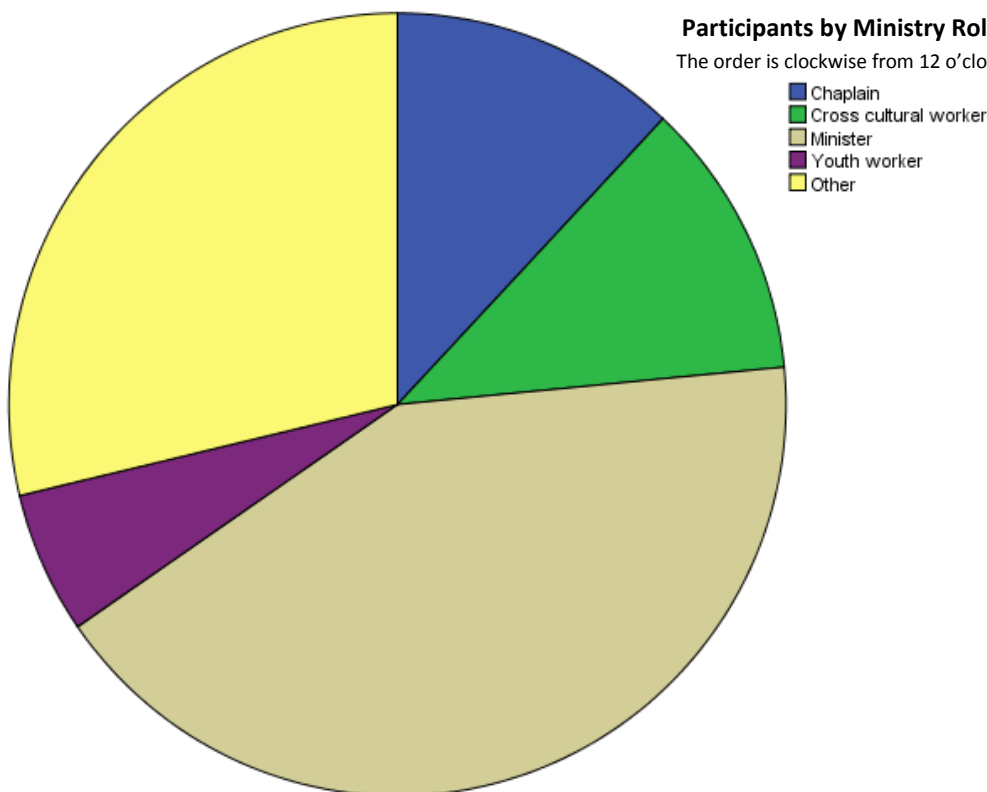
Most participants were married (79%), with half of the overall sample reporting that they had children currently living with them.

Australian Christian workers are highly educated, with the overwhelming majority (91%) of this sample having completed an undergraduate or postgraduate tertiary degree.

**Breakdown of total 1018 Participants by Organisation**  
The order is clockwise from 12 o'clock



**Breakdown of total 1018 Participants by Ministry Role**  
The order is clockwise from 12 o'clock



## Understanding the Key Terms

**Burnout:** The most widely understood definition of job burnout is that it is a psychological syndrome in response to chronic stressors related to work. The three dimensions that form the constellation of symptoms that is known as burnout are:

- Emotional exhaustion;
- Cynicism and detachment from the job or people involved; and
- A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.

Though some debate exists, the emotional exhaustion component seems to be the central facet of burnout, which may lead to the cynicism/detachment in an attempt to protect against the exhaustion, finally results in feelings of ineffectiveness. Regardless of their ordering, all three of the elements tend to interact with each other such that they eventually travel together.

**Work engagement:** Commonly considered the opposite experience to burnout, engagement is a positive state of motivation and fulfilment that is characterised by vigour and energy when at work, dedication to the work, and being happily absorbed in doing the work. Work Engagement has been associated with many personal and occupational indicators of well-being in numerous non-religious occupations, and is of central interest to this research. The overarching focus of our study has been to identify the processes associated with work engagement and well-being for Australian Christian workers.

**Job demands** are those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and cause subsequent stress. Although job demands are not always negative, they always require investments of energy to meet them that, if not replaced, deplete energy resources and lead to burnout. Burnout results inevitably in negative personal and work outcomes such as anxiety, depression, diminished personal initiative, work quality and quantity, and employee intentions to leave the work.

Some of the commonly identified job demands reported by Australian Christian workers include workload and time demands, work-home interference and blurred family boundaries, high expectations from self/congregation/denomination/organisation, conflicts with others, personal financial stress, changing society, and the complexity and variety of roles they are required to perform.

**Job resources** are those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that:

- (a) Help a person achieve work-related goals – “they help me do my job”;
- (b) Reduce job demands and their associated physiological and psychological costs; and
- (c) Stimulate personal growth and development.

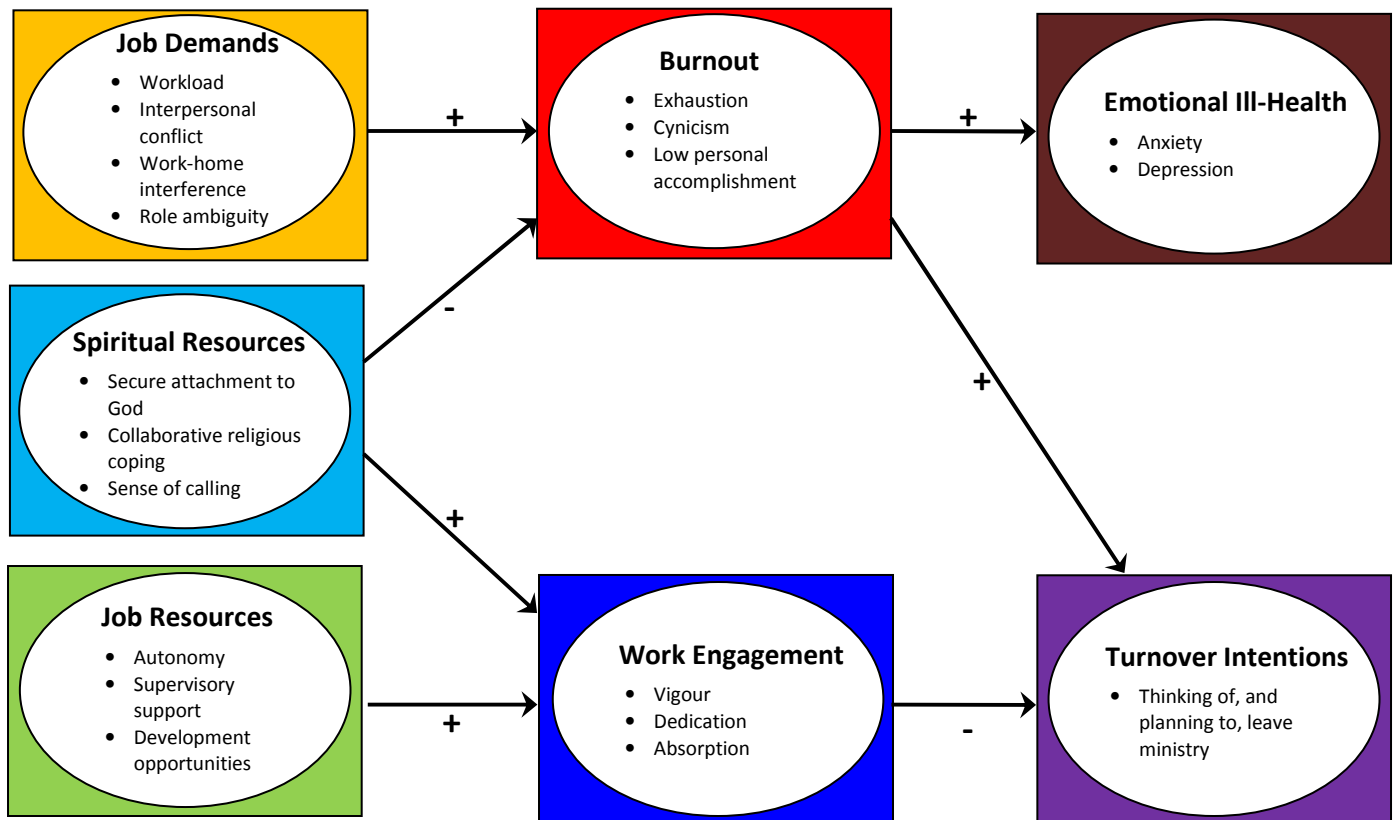
Some key job resources include supportive mentors/spiritual directors/teams, ongoing personal and skill development relevant to one’s role, and a sense of autonomy in how one conducts one’s work.

**Spiritual resources:** Resources derived from one’s personal spiritual life have been largely overlooked in the occupational stress literature. A central focus of this research is to try to identify what spiritual beliefs and practices are linked to resiliency and well-being. We identified and investigated three dimensions of religious life and practice:

- 1) Security in one’s attachment to God – a particular type of relationship where God is *experienced* as safe to depend on and be close to, and where the person does not fear abandonment or rejection by God;
- 2) Collaborative religious coping – a style of managing ministry stress characterised by the person actively addressing the stressor, yet consciously drawing support and a sense of personal empowerment from God; and
- 3) Calling to the work – possessing a sense that one has been and is being drawn to do this work, that “this is what I am meant (or even *designed*) to do”.

## Study 1: How the elements fit together – the expanded Job Demands-Resources Model

Below are the results of our first study which demonstrated how these factors of job demands and job and spiritual resources are related to burnout, work engagement and outcomes such as emotional ill-health (anxiety and depression) and intentions to leave ministry. Significant positive (+) and negative (-) relationships are indicated.



### Burnout and the Health Impairment Process

It is clear that burnout is a significant problem for Australian Christian workers, and that burnout is primarily driven by stressful and demanding aspects of the ministry work. Though some aspects of a person's personality also are related, it is the work environment that has consistently shown to be the strongest predictor of burnout. Our findings confirmed that burnout is strongly related to measures of emotional ill health, as well as thoughts and plans to leave ministry. This Job Demands → Burnout → Emotional Ill-Health/Turnover Intentions chain represents a health impairment process that exists for Christian workers.

Interestingly, the results indicated that spiritual resources were negatively related to all aspects of burnout. They seem to be associated with reduced levels of burnout regardless of the levels of Job Demands.

### Work Engagement and the Motivational Process

Both aspects of one's spiritual life and job resources were found to increase engagement in ministry for Christian workers. The ideal for Christian work is *not* simply avoiding burnout, but rather to be motivated and have energy for the work at hand. It is the presence of motivation, not just the absence of cynicism and its other burnout companions that is desired. Our results indicate that job and spiritual resources are what drive this engaged state in ministry. Though unrelated to emotional ill-health, having high levels of work engagement reduces intentions to leave ministry in the near future.

It is also interesting to note that one of the job demands we measured was somewhat *positively* related to aspects of work engagement. Specifically, workload was observed to have an influence of increasing absorption in work at the same time as being associated with burnout.

## Practical Implications from Study 1:

- 1) *The key to well-being at work is to build both job and spiritual resources; it is not simply a matter of reducing demands or symptoms of burnout.* Most burnout interventions seek to reduce demands (usually workload). Though important for increasing energy, reducing demands will have little influence on cynicism or a sense of low personal accomplishment. If your goal is positive engagement in ministry, then spiritual and job resources are needed to stimulate positive cognitions about the meaning, importance, and significance of the work, and to actually accomplish the tasks at hand.
- 2) *Identify the different job demands you face and how you experience them.* Which demands do you experience as toxic (that is, are always experienced as hindrances or threatening to your work and self)? Which demands, though requiring effort and energy, do you experience as challenging and positively extend you in your role? Do you have a mix of challenges that you perceive as being worth your energy, as well as those that are taxing without any felt benefits?
- 3) *Each day, take regular and effective breaks that allow you to emotionally recharge following peak periods of work.* Periods of intense work are not always associated with burnout when they find a place within rhythm of work peaks followed by compensatory recovery and recreation. Indeed, taking a focused period of personal detachment from work to recharge *daily* has been shown to be most beneficial for daily engagement in work. Seek some time daily to detach rather than trying to only hold out for the “day off” or a two week break in January (important as both of these may be).
- 4) *Work towards the best mix of demands and resources according to your current experience of ministry.* Demands are not all bad – if we have sufficient resources at the time, some demands can challenge you to call forth greater effort and increase your engagement. Thus, there appears to be an interaction between levels of demands and resources.

		Resources	
		High	Low
Demands	High	<b>A.</b> Highly motivating and stimulating, but need to detach from work to recover energy.	<b>B.</b> Burnout in role.
	Low	<b>C.</b> Average motivation but plateau in role with potential boredom.	<b>D.</b> Under-stimulated in role with definite boredom – becomes “just a job” at best.

As indicated above in quadrant “**A**”, a combination of high resources (job and personal/spiritual) with ministry demands experienced as challenges (i.e., that may lead to positive outcomes), creates a highly motivating and stimulating work environment.

However, such situations are still taxing on energy and necessitate adequate rest to recover. If adequate rest is not taken, or indeed your job or personal resources diminish, you will start to slide towards quadrant “**B**” and burnout.

But the right demands (that is, those that are challenging and stimulating) are important. If all job demands are removed, sub optimal work states are created. Even if resources are high as in quadrant “**C**”, you may plateau in your role and begin to lose that passionate interest experienced in the past. Or where there are low demands and low resources (quadrant “**D**”), ministry may begin to feel routine and boredom may take over.

### Summary message for promoting work engagement from study 1:

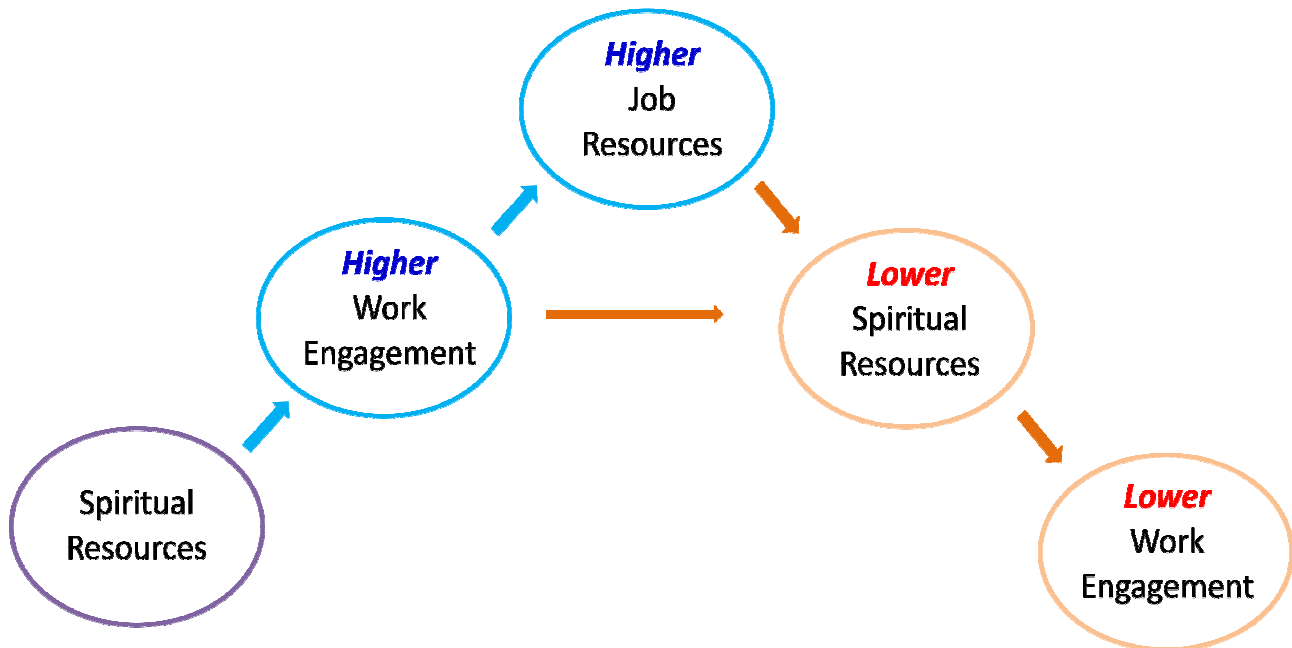
Christian workers need to:

1. Have abundant job and spiritual resources to motivate and enable the accomplishment of work tasks; and
2. Choose and manage the right kind of job demands (i.e., those we perceive as challenges rather than hindrances or threats) where possible.

## Study 2: What happens over time – is there a “dark side” of work engagement in ministry?

One of the most significant aspects of this research was seeking to follow Australian Christian workers over a period of 18 months to determine what factors are causally linked over time, and how are they related. Is it true that resources now will produce higher work engagement next year? Or is it that those who are already motivated and engaged now are able to generate more resources later? Is it both? Further, a couple of researchers suggest one can be too engaged at work. Is there any truth in this for Christian workers?

This study resulted in three significant (and at times unexpected) findings that can be summarised by the diagram below:



- 1) Only spiritual resources were antecedents of engagement over time. That is, Christian workers who had high spiritual resources at time 1 also had increased levels of work engagement nine months later. Intimacy and security in relating with God, sense of call, and collaborating with God in addressing work tasks, significantly promote positive motivation for ministry work over time.
- 2) Work engagement was an antecedent of increased job resources over time. It appears that Christian workers who are highly motivated have an ability to craft their work environment in ways that can lead to an increased reporting of supervisory support, a greater sense of freedom to organise and approach work tasks in a way they see best, and more opportunities to learn and develop skills and strengths in ministry.
- 3) Contrary to our expectations, those who reported higher work engagement and levels of job resources at one time point reported *lower* spiritual resources nine months later. Since the only positive predictor of work engagement was one's level of spiritual resources, there was therefore a subsequent reduction in work engagement itself.

There does appear to be a potential dark side to work engagement to which Christian workers are vulnerable. High levels of engagement and motivation in ministry encourages a concentration not only on work tasks, but also on job resources that one recognises as helpful for reducing demands and/or accomplishing work tasks. However, strong motivation for work tasks and the corresponding focus on job resources can come at the expense of failing to cultivate spiritual resources, which may seem more distant from the meeting of numerous urgent work demands. Paradoxically, the motivation and job related focus of high work engagement appears to squeeze out and consume the very spiritual resources that bring it to life in the first place.

## Practical Implications from Study 2:

### **Work engagement and job resources are good, but spiritual resources always need to be cultivated**

Although work engagement and high job resources are important goals for both reducing burnout and increasing well-being in ministry for Christian workers, spiritual resources are important for cultivating work engagement over time. Spiritual resources are an essential antecedent of positive ministry work motivation. However, there is no natural feedback from work engagement and job resources to spiritual resources. It is as if one's spiritual resource reservoir is constantly being drawn upon and drained in Christian ministry, yet there is no automatic feeding back into the top of the tank.

*Hence, the main implication is to invest in the following three aspects of your own spiritual life continually.*

- 1) Consider how you involve your faith in your work stress. Do I defer all responsibility away, or just “suck it up” and go it alone? What does it mean practically for you to labour yourself, but struggling with all of God's energy that so powerfully works within you (paraphrase of Colossians 1:29).
- 2) Clarify your call/fit. Know your strengths, weaknesses, and what you are passionate about in life and work. If people can make a realistic appraisal of their abilities, limits, desires and ‘callings’, they can recognise the times when they should say “no,” take a break, or get help from others, or even change jobs.
- 3) At the core of the above two dimensions of faith is your ongoing experience of God. How can you continue to grow in paying attention to God's personal communication to you, respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God, and to live out the consequences of that relationship? Supervision? Engaging a spiritual director? Spiritual disciplines? Personal retreats? Conferences, etc?

This research validates spiritual resources as not only important for the development of work engagement among Christian workers, but identifies the need for organisations and individuals employed in ministry work to continue to cultivate the development of spiritual resources to combat this specific dark side of engagement.

### **Developing Spiritual Resources – findings from a pilot study**

A small group of 14 clergy from South Australia participated in an intervention designed to increase levels of spiritual resources. The focus of the intervention was on developing one's experience of God as assisted by meeting with an accredited spiritual director once a month for 6 months. The process of spiritual direction refers to help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her. The focus of these sessions was thus described to participants as “identifying, paying attention and responding to God's personal communication with you (however that is experienced), seeking to grow in intimacy with God, and living out the consequences of that relationship.” Compared to their pre-intervention scores, this group of clergy had significantly increased in their reported intimacy with God over the period of meeting with an accredited spiritual director. Further, this group had significantly higher post intervention work engagement scores in comparison with those of a control group of other clergy (matched for denomination, age, work role and gender) who did not meet with a spiritual director.

Though only a small pilot study, these results suggest that the practice of engaging an accredited Spiritual Director is one potential activity that improves spiritual and occupational well-being among clergy.

### **Study 3: A closer look at spiritual resources: How do spiritual resources relate together, with personality, and work engagement?**

We defined spiritual resources as religious beliefs and practices related to an interaction with God associated with resiliency and well-being. But how do the specific religious dimensions selected relate to one another? Do they all influence ministry work engagement in the same way? Further, what influence does one's natural personality and temperament have on work engagement? Indeed, are "spiritual resources" really any different to natural personality dimensions or are they merely temperament relabelled? If they are distinct, does one's personality influence one's capacity to possess these particular spiritual resources? This more detailed exploration of spiritual resources, personality, and work engagement was the focus of the final study.

#### **But what exactly are these "spiritual resources"**

Firstly it is important to take some time to clarify what are the various religious dimensions we have referred to as spiritual resources.

##### *Secure Attachment to God*

The notion of personal spiritual health, a relationship with God, or divine involvement in one's personal life and work, emerge as a consistent theme both in the literature regarding clergy and work stress and in our own exploratory interviews with a variety of religious workers. By conceptualising this aspect of religion as an 'attachment relationship', a theoretical framework is provided that can help understand how this relational construct with a non-physical divine being may act as a personal resource contributing to work engagement.

Referring to certain relationships as an 'attachment relationship' originates from a psychological theory developed to explain variations in relationship quality between children and parents. Over the past 25 years, it has been extended to include various adult relationships as well. Attachment theory suggests that within the first years of life, a child's specific experiences with caregivers become abstracted into more generalised beliefs and expectations about the warmth and responsiveness of others and about the worthiness of the self. Once formed, these beliefs and expectations are relatively stable and extend into adulthood to influence how emotions will be regulated, how others' responses will be appraised and interpreted, and how the individual will then respond. An attachment to God considers one's experience of God to be similarly influenced by these dynamics.

A person experiences a secure relationship where the other person is experienced as warm and nurturing. Conversely, an insecure relationship is experienced when the person feels anxious about being abandoned, or avoids the other who is perceived to be critical, not safe or unreliable to depend on. In a similar manner, attachment to God can be measured by two continuums of a person's sense of self as worth or likelihood of receiving God's care, and a sense of God as loving or threatening to be relating closely with. We measured both one's level of secure intimacy with God (i.e., positive model of God), and security from abandonment by God (i.e., positive model of self). Higher scores on both of these measures combine to represent a secure attachment to God, and it is this aspect of attachment to God security (i.e., positive model of God and self) we considered to be a key to the other spiritual resources outlined below.

*It is important to emphasise that we are not communicating that God is "nothing but" a psychological extension of some parental or other figure, but rather that one's personal or felt experiences of God may be 'coloured' by such psychological dynamics. A person's experience of the Australian beach on a hot summer's day may be influenced by the presence or absence of sunglasses. Just as various colours, polarisation, and shades of tinting influence our perception and experience of a view on a hot sunny day, so attachment dynamics developed over the years may colour our perception and experience of God.*



### *Collaborative Religious Coping*

Religious coping relates to how people involve their religious beliefs or behaviours to cope with stressful life circumstances. Three broad styles of religious coping behaviours have been identified: self-directing, deferring, and collaborative. We included collaborative religious coping as a spiritual resource as it is the only style that has shown consistently positive relationships with adjustment measures.

The collaborative coping style is based on the decision by the individual to share responsibility with God for solving the problem. One turns to and involves God in the stress and problems, but still retains personal agency in the situation themselves. Collaborative religious coping is contrasted with deferring religious coping (where one tends to defer all responsibility passively up to God and does not act with any personal agency) and self-directing coping (where one does not involve God at all for a variety of reasons). In collaborative coping, neither the individual nor God is seen as a passive participant. Instead, both participants are viewed as active contributors working together to solve problems. The means of God's involvement is not the focus (i.e., so called miraculous interventions, natural processes already present in God's creation, a combination of both, etc), but that both the self and God are active and efficacious.

### *Present sense of calling*

Definitions of calling and vocation in the psychological literature are diverse, often vague, and sometimes confounded. In our study, we defined a calling to be a sense that one has been drawn or guided to the work, or indeed this is what one "has been *designed* to do". Despite the lack of a unified definition, research on calling and vocation has thus far generated a highly consistent pattern of results. National Church Life Surveys found a strong sense of call when commencing ministry was unrelated to current levels of burnout, but present call strength showed a significant relationship with lower burnout scores, suggesting that feeling called to one's religious work can be sustaining in times of difficulty.

### **Interrelationships between Spiritual Resources and Work Engagement**

Our results indicated that one's quality of attachment to God was a key spiritual resource. That is, one's model of self and model of God as other significantly influences a current sense of calling to one's religious work, and how one involves God in coping with stress associated with the work. Having both a positive model of God (secure intimacy with God) and a positive model of self in relation to God (security from abandonment by God) was associated with a sense of calling to one's work, as well as collaborating with God in coping with stress. Interestingly, it is one's experience of God as other that was particularly important in predicting calling and collaboration with God. However, only calling and collaborative religious coping were directly associated with all three aspects of work engagement. Thus, while one's security of attachment to God is not directly related to religious work engagement, it has a fundamental influence on other spiritual resources (i.e., calling and collaborative religious coping) that are directly related to energy and passion for ministry.

### **Personality, Spiritual Resources, and Work Engagement**

Some links have been made between personality traits and both burnout and work engagement. Personality traits may be thought of as a mixture of general dispositions we all have, and both high and low levels of all personality traits have both positive and negative implications. The value of a certain personality trait depends on the requirements of the situation at hand, and thus all may be considered both useful and impediments accordingly. However, our primary interest is how the various dimensions of personality relate to our particular spiritual resources and work engagement.

## Results of Personality on Work Engagement and Spiritual Resources

For religious workers, we found that people who are high in extraversion and highly conscientious report higher levels of all three aspects of work engagement. Extraverted individuals are naturally energetic, enthusiastic, and action oriented. Therefore, it intuitively makes sense to expect a positive relationship between extraversion and work engagement as both concepts share the characteristics of high energy and enthusiasm.

Individuals with high conscientiousness tend to have a high achievement-striving motivation. Conscientiousness is expected to manifest itself at work in strong responsibility, organisational skills, and steadiness. Therefore, such people are more likely to drive their energy into their ministry work, feel very connected to it, and devote consistent focused time to completing tasks set before them, and as a result report greater work engagement.

Low levels of emotional instability were also associated with high levels of energy and dedication, but not absorption. It may be that these people who present more composed, resilient and adaptable behaviours have greater energy reserves to invest in ministry matters, yet not necessarily motivated to become singularly focused on them. Conversely, those prone to anxiety and emotional instability may perceive their work environment as more threatening which drains emotional resources.

It is important to note that when these effects of personality were taken into consideration, spiritual resources continued to be significantly related to work engagement. The only significant overlap appeared to be between the personality dimension of neuroticism and anxiety about being abandoned by God. Overall, then, faith-related resources such as the quality of one's attachment to God, seeking to cope with ministry stresses by collaborating with God, and perceiving a sense of God's sovereign placing of the person for the ministry work, increase well-being in ministry over and above any dispositions of temperament.

### Implications of results from study 3

All personality types have aspects that are both advantageous in some situations and leave one potentially more vulnerable in others. Our personality *does* influence our motivation and approach to ministry, as well as our capacity to manage work stress. This does not mean that only people with certain personality types should be in ministry, but rather we should adapt how we go about ministry according to our own temperamental make up.

Over and above any influences of personality, one's spiritual life significantly contributes to motivation and energy for ministry. Specifically, cultivating a sense of what it is specifically that one has been sovereignly placed by God in the position to do, together with collaborating with God in the ups and downs of seeking to do it, directly aid well-being in ministry regardless of one's personality type.

Fundamental to the above two aspects of a person's faith and practice is their ongoing experience of God in personal relationship. What is my current experience and perception of God when in relationship? Safe to be close to or dependable and trustworthy in terms in both experience and doctrine? Or maybe I feel uneasy being too close or personal with God and have developed a more functional working relationship where I do my Christian ministry almost independent of God. Further, how do I consider God will relate to me? I know intellectually that "The LORD is my shepherd and I shall not be in want," but when push comes to shove, do I fear that my shepherd may actually forget about me and leave me alone on the precipice? Continuing to cultivate a relationship with God that contributes to a personal security is foundational to all other spiritual resources. What personal or corporate practices have aided this process for you in the past? Has mentoring or meeting with a spiritual director been a part of your routine?

## Concluding Comments

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.” (Romans 12:11)

This text has stood as a banner over the “Well-being in Ministry” study over the past 3 years. We have observed that “zeal ... (in) ... serving the Lord” in Australia involves significant work stress, high levels of job satisfaction, and even both at the same time. What contributes to one’s well-being in ministry is a combination of work environment factors (the mix of job demands that cause strain and job resources that help you in the doing of your work) and individual factors (such as spiritual resources and personality traits). Managing job demands and creating more resourceful work environments requires both organisational and individual interventions. Yet this study has identified that a specific category of resources – spiritual resources – are vital for the ongoing experience of positive motivation, energy, and significance in Christian work. Though they appear to be naturally squeezed out by the urgency of too many important tasks that need to be done, it is these spiritual resources that are the antecedents of passionate Christian service over time. The mediating injunction between “Never be lacking in zeal...” and “serving the Lord” does indeed turn out to be keeping your “spiritual fervour”.

Thank you for your involvement in this research. This report has sought to give you a reasonably full account of the background, aims, and results of the overall study. Yet this project has always had at its heart the generation of practical applications to support and encourage Christian workers. To that end, we have included some preliminary reflections that may stimulate some further consideration. If you would like to discuss the results in further detail, or indeed converse on practical ways to apply some of the findings in specific situations, I would warmly welcome such an opportunity.

Grant Bickerton

(on behalf of Dr Maureen Miner-Bridges, Prof. Martin Dowson, and Dr Barbara Griffin)

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