Theorizing how

Identity Harm

is a Barrier to

Clergy Well-Being

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# Introduction

There is evidentiary consensus that clergy experience physical, social, and emotional harm to a greater degree than other helping professions and the general population. There is less consensus regarding why and how this harm occurs. In this project, I will accept, as presumptive, that harm occurs and that several causative factors can be named. The focus here is to describe an additional causative process of psychodynamic harm to Clergy. I will label this harm as "Identity Harm."

The unique social role of Clergy exposes individuals to damage, wear-and-tear, impingement, or compromise to the psychological structures which maintain a healthy identity and sense of Self. I will theorize how this harm occurs using the language of Object Relations Theory (ORT). I will show that this harm occurs precisely because of and when Clergy do the job well. Therefore, better training, improved work conditions, and other strategies to mitigate burnout and compassion fatigue will not, by themselves, repair Identity Harm.

No discussion of this nature would be complete without also speaking to how Identity Harm might be restored. Clergy Peer Groups offer a means of mitigation and restoration of clergy identity. When a Clergy Peer Group is sufficiently safe that an individual is compelled to be open with the group, then the identity structures can be restored and maintained. It is the openness in a safe environment that restores. In short, all humans need a place in their lives where they belong, are accepted and known. Without a safe sense of belonging, healthy psychodynamic function is challenging to maintain. A secure and safe Clergy Peer Group is an ideal environment for Clergy to restore identity and a healthy sense of belonging. Suggested tools for Clergy Peer Group formation are available.

An important point of focus for this project is that the discussion centers on usual, day-to-day, low-grade identity challenges. Significant Self-damaging events, which occur at alarming frequency, are outside the scope of this project. Examples include: a priest coming out as a gay man, a Self, distorted in childhood being reclaimed as an adult, sinking into addiction because of untreated childhood wounds, inappropriate relationships with congregants because countertransference is not understood. This project is focused on minor and near-continuous wounding, which results from doing the work of Clergy well. As will be discussed below, it is not the degree of these impingements on Self that creates the problem. It is the volume and variety of the impingements that create Identity Harm.

## Social Location

I am a white, middle-class male in the latter half of my life. I have undergraduate training in religion and psychology and informal training in group dynamics through decades of work with men's support groups. This location informs my approach and perspective on this project. I will generalize to all Clergy, but my social location only gives me access to the white male experience as Clergy. As I describe it, Identity Harm may be analogous to other social locations of race, gender, orientation, or heritage, but I can only presume that is true.

This project is largely theoretical. In my 30+ years as a healthcare executive, I have observed this phenomenon happen to physicians. I am at least an average observer of human behavior, and as a professional, I understand the psychology of physician behavior better than most. These experiences form an entry point to this project.

I have engaged in psychodynamic therapy several times in my life. While I would not pretend that every stone has been turned over, I have worked extensively on understanding my developmental history, my defensive strategies, and my process of individuation. My lived experience inevitably shapes my theories and view of Identity Harm.

# Clergy Experience Poor Health

Much has been written on the health and well-being of pastors. Terry Swicegood says it this way, "*There is a growing crisis in church life, which robs our churches of good pastoral leadership and brings pain and hurt upon pastors and pastors' famili*es."[[1]](#footnote-1) A good summary of the evaluative science is available through the Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) aligned with the Duke Divinity School and the United Methodist Church.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The CHI has been the driving force behind a series of research projects focused on assessing clergy well-being. The research is summarized in Faithfull and Fractured by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, published in 2018.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although this data is generally narrow (the populations are commonly limited to North Carolina UMC ministers), the general conclusions reached ring true for the broader clergy experience. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee accurately speak for a broader body of research voices claiming that being a minister, pastor, Clergy, or priest is hazardous to health.

Clergy experience depression at substantially higher rates than the rest of the population. The graph below (Reproduced here) illustrates the degree to which clergy experience depression compared to the general population.[[4]](#footnote-4) That clergy experience greater than average mental health pain is also supported by data regarding Clergy's poor physical health status compared to a general population. A 2014 study by the CHI showed that North Carolina UMC clergy had higher rates of Angina, Diabetes, Asthma, Joint disease, and Obesity than all North Carolinians.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is important to note that all of these disease states have a history of psychogenic and lifestyle factors, meaning that increased anxiety and depression is a causal factor in each of these disease states.

Rates of attrition are a raw indication of poor well-being among clergy. In an American Baptist survey ministers were asked, "*How often do you think about leaving ministry?*" More than a quarter of respondents say they think of quitting as often as daily or once a week.[[6]](#footnote-6) That frequency suggests a tremendous degree of suffering.

## Why do Ministers Experience Harm?

Accepting the assertion that ministers experience diminished well-being compared to the general population, we must ask, "Why?" In my research, I have found two themes that describe why this harm happens to Clergy: Job conditions and Poor preparation.

### Job Conditions

Many helping professions experience burnout and compassion fatigue. Common job conditions generally present in helping professions: Excessive work hours (greater than 55 hours per week), Fuzzy authority and performance expectations, Perceived lack of control over the work and its conditions, and a Deficit of social or community support. These job conditions exist for Clergy as well, and as such, do not explain why clergy health is worse than other helping professions. In this section, I focus on those job conditions unique to the role(s) of Clergy and less likely to exist for other helping professions.

* The role of minister includes a built-in tendency to encourage **co-dependent behaviors**. In Clergy Burnout, Fred Lehr discusses how Co-dependency contributes to burnout. Lehr names co-dependent behaviors, such as caretaking, boundary violations, indirect communication, and others common to Clergy. Typical co-dependent roles like hero, scapegoat, rescuer, and mascot are also all too familiar expectations pushed on, and adopted by, the pastor.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* **Low structure** in an environment of high expectations for availability and excessive workload creates a rich environment for doubting one's competency. The high incidence of process addictions is an item of evidence that the low structure environment for Clergy is corrosive.[[8]](#footnote-8) Also, the low structure environment adds the additional task of creating structure, sufficient to ensure critical tasks are not missed while remaining flexible enough to maintain accessibility. Few helping professions require so much self-organizing.
* Doctors see patients; nurses administer treatment orders; counselors have scheduled appointments, etc. Consumer understanding of care-giver productivity is socially constructed and a means by which care-seekers compare their needs to the "busyness" of care providers. This common understanding assists care-seekers and providers in modulating expectations. Clergy/congregants do not have a similar metric of productivity. The closest approximation of a "production unit" for clergy/congregants, beyond messages from the pulpit, is accessibility. Is the minister available when I call? The **High accessibility requirement** contributes significantly to the clergy workload precisely because it is unpredictable and not communally understood. An example will help. A female congregant calls a female minister to invite the minister for lunch on Friday. "It has been a while since we talked." The minister responded, with gentleness, "Friday is my day off. I have office hours on Monday," knowing the congregant wants to talk about her struggling marriage. The congregant responded with, "I thought we would be meeting as friends?" The minister responds with, "We are friends, and Friday is my day off." This exchange illustrates, among other things, how the expectation of availability is not uniformly understood. One could argue that this example is just an issue of boundary enforcement, and it is, but the interaction also applies pressure to the minister to be available "as a friend," which is not so much a boundary violation as a misunderstanding of how the pastor is available. The point is that there is a cost to the minister, imposed by the congregant.
* Andrew Irvine discusses how the work of serving the needs of others can lead to an **Internalized Sense of Isolation**.[[9]](#footnote-9) The example provided above is also a story of how isolation can be forced on Clergy by congregants. The minister must choose between the risk of losing a friend to reinforce a boundary or losing a boundary to reinforce a friendship. Both responses risk isolation. Clergy encounters are unpredictable, both in terms of timing and intensity of engagement. The unpredictability makes planning for physical, emotional, social, or spiritual self-care unreliable. Meaning healthy habits are more difficult to develop. The lack of self-care increases the chance of feeling isolated and uncared for.

Those job conditions unique to Clergy and those common to most helping professions all contribute toward diminished well-being. The job conditions can be resisted and overcome. However, the reality that additional effort must be put forward to resist the impact of these job conditions uses energy resources that might otherwise be put into well-being maintenance and the work itself.

### Preparation for Ministry

Most of the resources used for this project include recommendations for how ministers might better prepare themselves to thrive in clergy work's corrosive job conditions. Ideas range from improving coping strategies to establishing and enforcing boundaries. Proeschold-Bell/Byassee focus on strategies for dealing with anxiety and the importance of cultivating positive emotions. Epperly's book A Center in the Cyclone names a broad set of strategies: time management, focusing on physical needs, centralizing spiritual formation, openness to one's pain, and using close relationships for support. [[10]](#footnote-10) Hamman offers, in Becoming A Pastor, six competencies as central to pastoral well-being, the last being development of the capacity for play.[[11]](#footnote-11)

These books, and others, suggest the work of Clergy is difficult and that by understanding and preparing for those difficulties, a minister may avoid the harm familiar to so many. These assumptions and solutions are undoubtedly true. Whose flourishing would not improve through an increased focus on physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellness? I suggest there is something more needed.

A latent implication in these works is that poor well-being among clergy results from poor preparation for the job or poor adaptation to the job's working conditions. By assuming inadequate preparation and adaptation are the only causes of clergy harm, we risk a specialized form of "meritocracy" embedded in neoliberal thinking. "If you are not a healthy pastor, then you are not doing it right." As with meritocracy in general, shame is attached to poor well-being, increasing resistance to healing. Trapped in a meritocracy proposition, we are not likely to see that the nature of the work itself causes harm. If the work itself causes harm, then no amount of preparation for the work or adaptation to the work conditions will fully offset the harm. I further propose that the better a pastor is at doing the work of pastoring, the more Identity Harm will occur. I am positioning this theory as additive to the challenges of preparation and adaptation.

# Theorizing "Identity Harm"

The primary assumption underlying my notion of "*Identity Harm*" is that the nature of pastoral work imposes a tearing or impingement of the psychodynamic structures that form a person's Identity, or "Self." This impingement occurs in addition to, or regardless of, other causes described above. It is the very nature of the work that causes Identity Harm, which may amplify other causes of harm. In the case of Identity Harm, doing the work better increases the harm caused to Clergy, and better job conditions or preparation will not fully mitigate Identity Harm.

To explain how Identity Harm occurs and defend the other suppositions I make above, I will use the language of Object Relations Theory. (ORT). Specifically, the process of Projective Identification and its impact on the Self. To begin, I have provided context-specific definitions for key terms used here.

## Terms Supporting This Discussion

Self – (Self, Self-Object, and Self-Identity are used synonymously.) This term is borrowed from ORT. The Self is the part of a minister's personality that defines, maintains, and supports a sense of "I." The Self is who I think I am, to myself, in relation to others, and in relation to the external world. The Self includes both internal and external components in the form of Objects. The basic disposition of the Self, i.e., is the world safe? Will I get my needs met?, is primarily formed in childhood. However, the portion of the Self in contact with the world remains malleable. The metaphor of a bar of soap may help. Firm and fixed at the core, its basic constituent elements are set in the original formation. However, as the bar gets wet, the outside layers soften, allowing the bar to be changed and exchanged with the external world.

Pastoral Identity – Pastoral Identity is an internalized object of the minister, formed through typical identity processes via interactions with congregants and their ideas of what "minister" means. "*One can view Pastoral Identity as a social and relational construction mutually reached by pastoral care-givers and care-seekers through a dynamic interaction of lived experience and care-giving activities within specific social contexts*" – Samuel Park.[[12]](#footnote-12) I believe this description is consistent with how other Self Objects are created, but I like the focus on the socially constructed influence for our discussion here.

Object-Minister – A term coined for this project, represents the projected fantasy of what the minister is and should be by a congregant. The Object-Minister is formed within the Self of each congregant. It is at least as varied as the number of congregants. The pastor experiences the Object-Minister as a package of expectations, which may or may not be considered accurate by the Pastoral Identity.

The Object-Minister is more than the opinion of what a minister should/should not do. The Object-Minister is or becomes the internalized representation of the God interface (Object-God) between God and the congregant. This is not a theological statement. It is instead recognition that individuals generally learn about the nature of God in conversation with a religious leader. The Object-Minister, although not universally required, is commonly used as a medium for refining and internalizing an individual's spiritual connection and Object-God. In this way, the internal Object-God and Object-Minister become entangled. As an individual's internal Object-God changes, so will the internalized Object-Minister. In most cases, it is the minister promoting these changes. In the same way, individuals anthropomorphize God in the process of internalizing the Object-God; individuals internalize the Object-Minister. Regardless of who the minister is. The Object-Minister forms the context for understanding and interpreting all the interactions with the Pastoral Identity

Intimacy Mis-match – Intimacy develops as an interpersonal sensation of connection between two or more individuals, commonly from a shared emotional experience. In the case of minister and congregant, the sensation of connection is experienced differently for congregant and minister. Imagine a couple is being informed they have just lost their only child. The minister is present to offer support. The experience will be branded on the couple's psyches. They will never forget the moment, including hypervigilant details, like the color of the walls or sounds in the hallway. The parents are likely to feel an extraordinarily close sensation of connection, to the minister, because of her/his presence at that moment. However profound the experience is for the minister, it will not include an equal degree of vulnerability and connection sensation as for the parents.

This mis-match of intimacy occurs in a dramatic fashion like the scenario above and in casual interactions between minister and congregant. As a frequent public speaker, I have been approached many times by individuals who have heard me speak. They know me, but I do not know them. There is often a surprising familiarity in these interactions that is not explainable through the reality of our shared experience. Their bid for connection cannot be fully reciprocated by me. To be polite, I must often pretend a similar level of intimacy. This same process occurs through the normal process of preaching and teaching. The minister's message is one thing, but the congregant experience of the message is varied and separate. A congregant moved by a message will feel a closeness to the message's deliverer. This closeness is a mis-match of intimacy.

Mis-match occurs because the minister's job is to remain both compassionately present (required for both one-to-one and one-to-many encounters, i.e., sermons and good sermon delivery) and simultaneously sympathetically separate. The Self of the minister is necessarily restrained from full engagement while being partially engaged through the required compassion.

Self-objects are formed through childhood interactions between nurturer and child. The Self of both mother and child are fully engaged. Failure of child or mother to fully engage is a source of psychodynamic harm to child, mother, or both.[[13]](#footnote-13) For the minister/congregant interactions, the minister's empathy must be engaged, and sympathy must be restrained, while the congregant need not be restrained. The formation of the Pastoral-Identity/Object-Minister occurs differentially between minister and congregant. This differential, or Intimacy Mis-match, opens the door for potential for harm, as in mother-child bonding. However, for the congregant, the experience occurs once in a while and with insufficient gravity to create any real risk of harm. For ministers, the exposure is repetitive, even if the gravity of any single experience is slight. It is sufficient for this project to recognize, 1) intimacy engagement for the minister is different than the intimacy experienced by congregants and 2) modulating this mis-match is primarily the responsibility of the care-giver. The focus below is how this mismatch of intimacy places a burden on the Self of the minister.

Pastoral Holding Environment – Donald Winnicott described the interpersonal space in which object relations are created as "the Holding Environment."[[14]](#footnote-14) Holding Environment has usefulness for this project. The Holding Environment created and maintained by the mother, allowing healthy object relations to be established or modified, is like the Pastoral Holding Environment created by the minister so that congregants may develop healthy Object-Minister attributes. The creation of a healthy Holding Environment requires compassion, and compassion engages the Self. The creation of a Holding Environment requires an investment of ego strength (i.e., resources of the Self) by the minister. However slight, this investment of resources is not benign. Even if the interaction is positive and celebratory, it still consumes psychic resources.

Projective Identification – This is a term borrowed from ORT. As described by Thomas Ogden, "*Projective identification involves unconscious narratives (both verbally and nonverbally) involving the fantasy of evacuating a part of oneself into another person*."[[15]](#footnote-15) Rewritten for the context of this project, Projective Identification involves the unconscious transfer of Object-Minister attributes on to the Pastoral Identity of the minister. These attributes may include basic functions like, how available the minister should be, to complex functions like, how well does the minister mirror the expected attributes of congregant’s Object-God. Congregants project on to pastors their expectations, their pain, their suffering, and their sinfulness (a sense of being alienated from God). Congregants also project their joy, their achievement, their reconciliation, and their celebration. Mere sharing of these experiences with Clergy is not, in itself, a projection. Projection develops when congregant's intra-personal experience becomes inter-personal.

The transfer of these attributes happens mostly unconsciously and has the effect of pressuring the Pastoral Identity to adapt, even if only circumstantially. These changes may be positive or negative, but they necessarily soften the Self to adaptation, and for the purposes of this project, to harm. Softening of the self is not necessarily negative. When humans learn the self is necessarily soft. The problem for clergy is this softening is frequent, unconscious, and beyond the control of the minister.

Projective Identification happens precisely through and as a result of the pastor's work to create a Holding Environment. Projective Identification happens because the pastor uses compassion to be open to congregants. This is doing the job well. A pastor could withdraw compassion, as some with a heavy harm load do, but the pastor will be less effective at the work.

## How Identity Harm Occurs

For this discussion, we assume a healthy and sufficiently robust Self and an individual adequately trained for the job, theologically, interpersonally, psychologically, and socially.

Pastoral Identity begins with an intrapersonal experience, the "Call."[[16]](#footnote-16) The Call is often a deeply emotional and spiritual experience. Like with other significant life experiences, the Self is shaped (the Pastoral Identity) by this experience's profundity. Identity of oneself as pastor begins. Pastoral Identity is further shaped by training. Training includes theological training, which frames the narrative of what being a "minister" means in relation to God. Good preparation would also include intrapersonal discovery into family-of-origin dynamics, exploration of one's defensive strategies, and training in pastoral counseling techniques and theories (specifically the processes of transference and countertransference).

Throughout training, the Pastoral Identity is formed, but relatively few stressors have been placed on it from the external world. This would appear to be the great benefit of the CPE experience, that is, creating a safe testing ground through which a minister can pressure test the Pastoral Identity.

After training, ministry begins. A wonderfully rich exploration of the early ministry experience can be found in Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church by Richard Lischer. Lischer describes a far more realistic pastoral journey than the idealized life of Father Tim in Mitford. In Lischer's first post as a newly minted Lutheran pastor, he is not allowed to perform any ceremonial duties until he has been installed by the Bishop. In an effort to break the ice, he hosts a dinner for church leaders as a "get-to-know-each-other" event. After an overly shy group has completed the meal, Lischer poses a question to break the ice, "Why do you want me to be your pastor?" "*The first to speak was a man named Leonard Semanns. He said rather cheerfully, 'Well, I didn't vote for you, but I know we will have a very good church with you as our pastor.'"[[17]](#footnote-17)* This event begins a long process where the Lutheran Church at New Cana began to shape the Pastoral Identity of Richard Lischer.

Pastoral Identity is continually being formed and reformed by the interactions with the external world as minister. This internalized object of the Self is buffeted by the large and many small interactions as pastor. Included in this healthy and normal functioning of Pastoral Identity is the Projective Identifications of the many and varied Object-Minister intrusions. The intrusions are not uniform, and they do not push/pull the Pastoral Identity in the same directions. Overlapping projections from many congregants pull in multiple and conflicting directions simultaneously.

Congregant A approaches the minister and tells how a recent sermon started her/him on a path to intervene in a long-standing abusive relationship at work. The sermon was not about courage or protecting others from abuse, but this congregant carried this message away. This interaction pulls the minister toward feeling her/his strength and increases confidence in being a conduit for God.

Congregant B comments on the very same sermon. This congregant describes, without apparent blame, how the sermon stimulated a sense of shame and guilt around actions as a parent. This interaction pulls the minister to feel judged and evokes feelings of inadequacy. The minister wonders if the sermon’s tone should have been more nurturing.

Congregant C, referencing the same sermon, describes feeling grief from a recent loss. Knowing about this loss, the interaction pulls the minister toward sympathetic pain.

These interactions and tugs on the Pastoral Identity all happen in the 10 minutes it takes the congregation to leave the sanctuary. Competing Projective Identifications, individually and in small doses, can be managed and contained. Generally, all Projective Identifications are subtle and unconscious. A healthy Self should be able to maintain Identity in the face of these routine interactions. The problem for ministers is not the individual interactions themselves. The problem is the extensive number of interactions that require a Holding Environment to be established, reestablished, and reestablished again. Identity Harm occurs not because of any one interaction nor because the nature of the interactions is unique from other helping professions. Identity Harm occurs because of the large number of interactions. Like the build-up of dust over time, these frequent and inconsequential interactions place the Pastoral Identity under stress.

Let's compare for a moment a minister and psychotherapist. We will presume both have good training in technique, theory, and practical experience. The therapist will see 6 to 8 clients every day, will receive crisis calls (unscheduled interactions) one to two times per week, and most therapists will maintain a counseling support system for themselves. If a therapist and client bump into each other at the grocery, the understood protocol is to avoid interaction to protect confidentiality. Clients do not show up unannounced, do not meet their therapists for coffee or a friendly lunch, and do not engage in intimate interactions (spiritual growth) outside the counseling room. Within the counseling room, the therapist also creates a Holding Environment for the client, but both understand the context, e.g., the therapist's purposeful distance. When clients project onto the therapist, the therapist knows how to use this experience as part of the treatment process.

For the pastor, the interactions are likely to be several times an hour and continue well beyond office hours for routine matters and 24 hours a day for crisis matters. The definition of a crisis is defined not by mutual agreement but by the Object-Minister of the congregant. Including the interactions of one to three services a week, the pastor may be engaged in 50 to 150 congregant interactions per week. The nature of the interactions will vary widely from the evocative response of a congregant to a sermon to mundane church business, to deeply personal struggles, to comments on the pastor's performance.

The frequency, variety, and variable intensity of minister/congregant interactions are how Identity Harm occurs. Within each interaction, the minister is presumed, by congregants, to behave consistent with their personal Object-Minister. The bombardment of these repeated Projective Identifications builds up on the Self of the pastor, the Pastoral Identity. Like shellac, built up layer upon layer, the minister becomes encased in these Projective Identifications, as a defensive process. Over time the layers form a restriction or impingement of the Pastoral Identity and, by extension, the Self.

Even a very healthy and strong Pastoral Identity is permeated because a vulnerability is opened. The vulnerability is the result of offering compassion through the Pastoral Identity to create the Holding Environment.

As the encasement builds up, individual ministers may respond in various ways.

* One option is to harden, separate, or withdraw compassionate engagement. This strategy is intuitive and supported by the need to reinforce boundaries. Boundary incursions are endemic in pastoral work.[[18]](#footnote-18) The problem with this response is that as compassion is blunted, effectiveness diminishes. The result is growing disillusionment and often unconscious hostility toward congregants. This response is the beginning of the well-worn trail to burnout.
* Some clergy will attempt to "Push through" if they are not fully aware of why the encasement is happening and how the experience feels. This response rests on the mistaken belief that the problem is within themselves and that more effort, training, or persistence is required. More resources are summoned for compassionate engagement. This approach leads to the well-worn trail of compassion fatigue.
* A third response, and sometimes coupled with the other two, is to develop a sense of falsity or pretending. The Pastoral Identity is separated from the Self and converted into a conscious and pre-conscious projection into the external world. The consequence of this approach is isolation and frequently process addictions to ease the pain of that isolation. An additional burden is added as well. The minister must put energy into remaining hidden and the associated fears of being discovered, further draining resources. As an analog to this process, reflect on the increasing adaptations made by the family and individual experiencing progressive dementia. Adaptations begin even before awareness of the problem.

There are undoubtedly other responses to Identity Harm than those few I have described. Whatever the response, two consequences relevant to this discussion uniformly occur. First, Self and maintenance of the Self become impinged and muted. More and more resources are needed to maintain the same level of individuation and compassionate engagement. Vibrancy is diminished, and disillusionment may follow. Second and most importantly, the ability to maintain a sense of belonging elsewhere in the minister's life becomes difficult to maintain. The minister still belongs in family, in friendships, in collegiate relations, but the ability to feel that sense of belonging is blunted.

Brene' Brown describes belonging as *"… the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which is not only hollow substitutes for belonging but often barriers to it."*[[19]](#footnote-19) If we take this description and invert it, we see the encasement experienced by ministers. A falsity is forced upon ministers because of the gap between the minister's Pastoral Identity and the many expectations of varying congregant Object-Ministers. This work requires the repetitive creation and re-creation of Holding Environments, suited to each congregant's Object-Minister. The Intimacy mis-match opens a vulnerability that softens and distorts the Pastoral Identity. The constant bombardment overloads and restricts the pastor's ability to create and maintain a stable Pastoral Identity. As intrusions encase the Pastoral Identity, an otherwise healthy Self is left vulnerable, impinged, and under-resourced.

The impinged Self is less able to experience a sense of belonging in relationships with the rest of the minister's life. These disruptions and disturbances are low-grade and generally unconscious. Healthy relationships in which an individual feels welcome and feels a sense of belonging are central to maintaining a healthy and individuated Self. The weakening of Self structures and consequent loss of belonging begin a spiral of decline. As belonging diminishes, Self strength is weakened, the ability to restore belonging is reduced, isolation increases, belonging diminishes, and so forth. The continued buffeting from Projective Identification via congregant interactions accelerate, weakening Self, decreasing belonging, and so on until the minister is isolated and alone in despair and disillusionment, at a profoundly intrapersonal level. Most cases are not dramatic declines; rather, they are more like the experience of a boiled frog.

We know from the data clergy experience both poor physical and emotional health. Poor self-care habits, understrength boundary controls, loss of intimacy in family relationships, and under-nurtured spirituality are causal factors in clergy harm. I submit, they may also be symptoms of a minister struggling to maintain a healthy Self and suffering from a loss of belonging. In Brene' Brown's book Braving the Wilderness, she describes her lived experience before she regained her sense of belonging. She said, *"I am doing that thing I do when I'm afraid. I'm floating above my life, watching it and studying it, rather than living it.*"[[20]](#footnote-20) The suffering of not belonging is difficult for outside observers to see. Brown describes true belonging as *"[People] want to be a part of something – to experience a real connection with others – but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power [of the Self]*."[[21]](#footnote-21) What Brown is describing couldn't be a more apt description of the typical pastor experience. "Being part of something" – Yes, but being in charge of it and doing it while "at work" when the other participants (congregants) are volunteers, is a very different relationship to the work. A minister's sense of accomplishment is often isolated from the sense of accomplishment experienced by congregants. "Experiencing a real connection with others" – Yes, except the minister must remain both genuinely compassionate and sympathetically removed from the experience to stay "on the job," providing a safe Holding Environment. The encasement experience of pastoral work and its subsequent corrosive effect on the Pastoral Identity, and by extension the Self, diminishes the minister's ability to feel a sense of belonging through other spheres of her/his life. This experience is Identity Harm.

I am not arguing for an either/or description of Identity Harm. I am arguing for a yes/and position. The damage caused by the encasement of the Self represents a separate process in addition to the harm caused by job conditions and inadequate preparation for the work. The job conditions are both cause and effect of Identity Harm. Individuals who enter the work of ministry without thoroughly developed skills, knowledge, and wisdom, particularly regarding their psychodynamic structures, may be destined to struggle. Even those with good boundaries, excellent self-awareness, and resilience against the work conditions will still suffer under the bombardment of congregant expectations. The damage is an unfortunate reality of the work itself.

## Identity Harm Versus Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

Identity Harm is co-related to Compassion Fatigue and Burnout. For this discussion, I will combine compassion fatigue and burnout as though they are the same process, although they can be understood separately. This discussion aims to tease apart the unique qualities of Identity Harm, separate from compassion fatigue and burnout.

Leading researchers in burnout, Christina Maslach, and Michael Leiter, describe burnout as "*the dislocation of what people are [from] what they have to do,*" read, the dislocation of a Pastoral Identity from congregant's Object-Ministers.[[22]](#footnote-22) The American Institute of Stress defines compassion fatigue as "*the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events.*"[[23]](#footnote-23) Described more colloquially and for purposes here, Clergy experiencing either or both compassion fatigue and burnout are worn down and tired from depleting personal resources extended by creating a Holding Environment for congregants. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee describe burnout as having three component symptoms: Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (read fulfillment).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Compassion fatigue and burnout, if experienced separately, can be mitigated with separation and rest. The sabbatical is commonly recommended as a solution to burnout.[[25]](#footnote-25) Identity Harm may be a precursor to burnout and compassion fatigue, and they may be experienced coincidentally. However, separation and rest, alone, will not restore the damage to Self caused by Identity Harm.

## Other Helping Professions and Identity Harm

Since this project offers a theoretical proposition about Identity Harm in ministers, the question must be asked, "Do other helping professions experience Identity Harm"? In my experience, and I speak with some authority on this matter, physicians do experience Identity Harm. The mechanism is the same. Patients present with a "heal me" expectation, analogous to a congregant's Object-Minister. Physicians are fully aware they apply the scientific method and educated guesswork, but they do not heal or cure, that is done by the body. However, disabusing patients of this expectation is a predictor of adverse clinical outcomes, analogous to creating a Pastoral Holding Environment. So, physicians and patients participate in a "lie" that both parties protect. For the patient, the impact of this falsity is negligible. For the physician, the falsity occurs 15-30 times a day. For physicians, the result is a similar encasement in the expectations of patients.

Teachers, nurses, social workers, and similar are profoundly exposed to compassion fatigue and burnout. However, any damage to the Self is far less a function of the work itself and more from individual psychodynamic structures. Teachers, nurses, and similar have more socially agreed boundaries which serve to protect these professions.

Counselors, therapists, and similar would seem to be directly exposed to Identity Harm through the same process described above. Three things distinguish the experience of therapists from Clergy in this respect. 1) When and where the work is done; the boundary confinement is much clearer for the therapist and client. 2) Therapists are specifically and thoroughly trained in transference/countertransference, which helps establish the Holding Environment while protecting the Self. 3) The sheer number of interactions and variety of interactions are quite different for Clergy than for therapists. For these reasons, therapists do not experience Identity Harm due to the work, as Clergy do.

## Additional Contributing Factors

Before turning to a solution focus, it will help to address some contributing factors that make this problem unique for Clergy, among other helping professionals. The first factor is a sense of "specialness" in the Call to be a minister. Without trying to establish a theological foundation for discussing what a "Calling" means, it is fair to generalize that the vast majority of ministers express a sense of an "Other's" voice. Whether from the inside or the outside, there is an implied duty to serve accompanying this voice. The profundity of the Call eliminates or minimizes an individual's freedom to say, "I don't like this work; I will choose something else," which is available to other professions. Some will say pastors have that freedom too, but that is to take a theological position not available to every minister and certainly not available from every congregant. There can be a loss of autonomy for ministers caught between their pain and their Call.

The pressure of Call is an internal aspect. The pressure of "holiness" is an external pressure. I have observed among physicians a profound professional pressure to be mistake-free. Perfect in bedside manner, in clinical decision making, in procedural skill, and in administrative competency. The physician's "Perfection experience" is a good analog of how "Holiness" applies pressure to clergy. Ministers are often presumed to be fault and sin free. The damage done by losing one's temper is very different for the minister than it is for the congregant. The pressure is oblique and rarely direct but still very powerful. The pressure is often pre-conscious in the minds of congregants and enforced by cultural or situational context. The pressure comes from all quarters, so much so as to seem systematic. The holiness pressure, commonly embedded in the Object-Minister, constrains the Pastoral Identity no matter how heavy or light.

Growth and intrapersonal spiritual formation is commonly difficult work. Most humans resist growth, naturally leaning toward homeostasis. As a minister works, over time, to create openness, promote courage for personal change, and point at areas that need reflection, congregants and congregations will commonly push back. As Clergy engage in this vital work of leadership, they can become caught between conflicting power points. Pastors are caught between two congregant roles. One is the subordinate power position of reporting to a board and influential (read high-level donors) congregants, "the boss." The second is the superior position of "the leader," shepherd to the sheep. Clergy caught between these two roles may put their livelihood at risk when driving for change. As clergy press a congregation for growth and resistance increases, Clergy expose themselves to resistant congregants. They risk political, social, and financial conflict because they are expected to be the leader but are also not seated in a controlling position.

# Restoration from Identity Harm

Summarizing the cause of Identity Harm as *diminished belonging resulting from a damaged Self*, we can see the solution embedded in the problem. Since, as I propose, Identity Harm results from the pastoral work itself, then doing the job better will not repair or eliminate Identity Harm. I theorize that finding a place of intentional healthy belonging outside the context of pastoral work will serve to restore and reinforce the Self Identity.

The prescription I would write for every Clergy would say,

"**Find, or create, a place in your life where you are safe enough that you are compelled to be open, with others, about who you really are.**"

Openness is a far more rigorous standard than honesty. Mere honesty is not sufficient for this restorative purpose. The experience of being oneself in a safe space has the effect of creating a sensation of being known and found worthy. A Self, discovered, lived, and acknowledged, in safety is an absolute requirement for this repair. Openness and safety are the required contexts for experiencing restorative belonging.

Intentionality is also a requirement for the repair purpose. The purposeful sharing of one's Self in an environment of acceptance is the distinguishing characteristic that makes this belonging different from other places of belonging throughout a life. Many of the roles individuals live out in their lives are produced externally. The roles of spouse, parent, female/male, child, neighbor, etc., are partially constructed in the social milieu. Changing these roles to more honestly suit one's Self Identity is challenging work and may involve a negotiated compromise. Listen to any coming-out story in the LGBTQI+ community. In the same way, the role of Pastor (Pastoral Identity) is, to a large degree, externally shaped through contact with the varied Object-Ministers. By intentionally presenting one's Self in a safe and nurturing environment designed for that purpose, Self is strengthened and restored beyond the pressures of daily ministerial life.

Individuals may find the necessary belonging in family relationships, but the necessary acceptance and safety is unfortunately rare. In family relationships, all partners play out roles that may sometimes supersede the freedom to be open. This is not an indication that these relationships are flawed in some way. Family relationships have many socially constructed elements which are overlapping and may even be conflicting. Families are common places humans find belonging, but they may not be sufficient for restoring damaged belonging resulting from Identity Harm. Using family as the only reparative source for belonging puts the whole process at risk and may stress family relationships.

Another place individuals commonly go to find belonging is through trusted friendships. Friendships here include mentoring relationships.[[26]](#footnote-26) Friendships can also work to restore belonging if the friendship is sufficiently robust. If chosen as a route, it should be outside the congregant environment. [[27]](#footnote-27) Friendships should not compete with family relationships and family intimacy. Friendships need to remain fair and balanced (meaning both friends are committed to being equally supportive and equally open). The relationship needs to be sufficiently long-lasting that it can be relied upon over years and decades. This last point is worth emphasizing. Restoration of belonging is not a "one-and-done" experience. Clergy need to engage in "belonging maintenance" as a career-long experience.[[28]](#footnote-28) The damage of Identity Harm is both continuous and cumulative; therefore, repair through belonging must be the same.

An obvious option for some will be the counseling environment. The language is known, the process is known, and the safety can be reasonably assured. Two difficulties arise with using therapy as a permanent solution for repairing Identity Harm. First, therapy may be challenging to maintain over the long arc of a minister's career. It can be expensive. A single therapeutic relationship is necessarily geographically limited. As often as Clergy relocate, therapy may not be a practical long-term solution. Second, the nature of the therapeutic Environment is intentionally one-sided in its openness. When repairing and adapting to childhood wounds, this Environment is sufficient. When the focus is belonging, a two-way interdependence is more supportive of belonging. A paraphrase of the twelfth step of AA is, "To keep it, you have to give it back." This fundamental truth is relevant here. Belonging, in a sense meant here, requires both receiving and giving of the profound safety required for openness. The giving element is not available in the therapy setting.

## Clergy Peer Groups as a Systematic Solution

The systematic solution that I recommend to the damage of Identity Harm is participation in a Clergy Peer Group (CPG). A Clergy Peer Group, if properly constructed, can provide the necessary safety to allow belonging to be restored. A non-clergy support group is a good second choice, as long as the required safety is maintained and a "special" role for Clergy is not unconsciously created.

Here are some arguments in favor of CPGs as a preferred and sustainable method for restoration from Identity Harm.

* CPGs can be long-lasting. Examples of CPGs I found in the research data and in my personal experience were usually years long in duration and, in some cases, decades-long.[[29]](#footnote-29) I have been a part of some men's groups (a good example of the power in this process) that have over 30 years of history as a group. That longevity creates a powerful container for members, new and old.
* CPGs can be safe. Developing safety in a group process requires deliberate attention, patience, and occasionally the courage of an individual to share deeply. The process and rules form an environment for safety. Safety must be protected by the group for the sake of all individuals.
* CPGs involve reciprocal support. An element that makes CPGs different from the serving space of pastoral work is that the support offered by one individual is reciprocated. This "equality" reinforces a healthy belonging because, as humans, we need to be known, and we need to be needed. "*All for one and one for all*."
* A CPG's purpose is focused on the needs of the individuals. The group does not have a purpose separate from the needs of individuals. The Twelve Traditions of AA 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 make clear each group exists only for the members of that group (meeting).[[30]](#footnote-30) These principles can exist in a CPG. One benefit of the focus on individuals is that we are all cyclical regarding when we are ready to deal with our pain. In a group, the focus of attention can move on from an individual giving that person an opportunity to be quiet and process.
* CPGs can morph to adapt to the changing needs of the group. Groups will add and lose members from time to time. Each addition/loss will change the dynamics of the group. Safety will have to be intentionally reestablished. Long-standing groups will deepen their exploration of each other and self. I am in a group going on now for five years. Several years ago, we established the strategy of reading a book together. We remind ourselves periodically; we are a support group that happens to read a book. The ongoing process, supported by the book, keeps the container available for when a member has a need. The book is always secondary to the emotional needs of the members. Had we started with reading books, we would not know each other well enough to keep the container open.
* CPGs are low-cost. Because there are no supplies or need for a leader, there is no necessary cost for a CPG. Groups can meet on a regular basis with no more need for infrastructure than a folding chair and maybe a room. The pandemic has taught me that established groups can meet virtually, but starting a group would require additional structure and intention. Regular meetings, like an hour and a half each week or three hours once a month, are a relatively low intrusion into family and work time commitments.

CPGs are mentioned in the research literature as a good idea for Clergy, as an offset to the rigors of the job, and as a tool for improving well-being. A cursory examination of the ATLA database identified fifty-one (51) journal articles and books that mention "Peer groups," "Ministerial associations," "Pastors in covenant," and similar labels. Among these resources, I could find none that described what structural elements were important for the construction of a CPG. The exception to the above statement was the obvious and bland suggestion that CPGs should be "safe and confidential environments."

## Theorizing How Clergy Peer Groups Help

In a properly safe CPG, a sense of belonging, including the dual sensations of feeling known and feeling of use, develops. The experience of belonging adds strength to a Self, buffeted and battered by congregant expectations (Projective Identification). This strengthened Self is carried into congregant interactions. The strengthened Self has a greater capacity for compassion which in turn reinforces the Holding Environment. The encasement from the steady Projective Identification inevitably continues and must be routinely scrapped off. An intentional and safe environment of a long-lasting CPG helps scrape off the encasement build-up. A secondary gain from CPG participation and its restorative impact on the Self is increasing engagement and belonging in other areas of a minister's life. This improvement encourages overall well-being.

## Minimum Requirements for Clergy Peer Groups

Foundational to the functioning of a CPG is that the group is emotionally, and in other regards, safe. With the word "Safe," I include the meaning of nurturing and supporting a person's unique identity. Safety, in the context of a CPG, is not an on/off proposition. Safety emerges from group-process and waxes and wanes over time. Safety in groups does not happen without intentionality and a systematic focus. The ground rules of a CPG should be established by the group, but some principles are common.

* Confidentiality - Individuals should regularly affirm their commitment to confidentiality. Violations of confidentiality must be addressed by the group. A confidentiality violation between two individuals in the group is still a violation to the safety of the entire group.
* Communication – A policy of no cross-talk, no advice-giving, and no problem solving should be enforced by the group. A good standard is the use of a talking stick, so it is clear who has the floor.
* Individual members – Each person represents themselves and only themselves in the group process. Using "I" statements is a good basic discipline. Every individual has a right to be heard, and that right is enforced by the whole group.
* Commitment to the group – Whether a group should be closed or open is highly subjective to the context of the group. Group size and its openness (a finite list of members or an unknown list of members) will substantially impact how quickly safety is established. Members of a group should be committed to the group or leave. This generally means a prohibition against casual or periodic attendance.

There are some elements of CPGs that can negatively impact safety. One is joining hierarchical authority with CPG participation. It is common in the UMC for Bishops to convene ministers under their charge for spiritual formation and administrative tasks. While worthy in themselves, these meetings will not be sufficiently safe to support the repair of Identity Harm. Second, it is not uncommon for ministers to enter a collegiate environment in a competitive mode.[[31]](#footnote-31) A competitive mode, whether conscious or unconscious, will be corrosive to the formation of a safe container for openness. This competitive posturing is symptomatic of the need for restoration from Identity Harm. Competition should be handled as a group process rather than treated as an eligibility criterion. Third, inconsistent membership. If each meeting consists of a different group of individuals, then two things will occur. A) safety will never deepen sufficiently for openness to emerge. B) The history of sharing is lost, inhibiting a sense of being known. Either of these events will impede safety formation. Fourth, finding the right balance of meeting structure can be difficult. The "Goldilocks doctrine" should be applied. Too much or too little meeting structure will impede progress. The group itself should determine and regularly revisit its process to ensure it is meeting the needs of the group. Fifth, size matters with CPGs. Too few members, four or fewer, can be exposed to the risk of triangulation and similar negative group processes. Too many members, 12 or more, can dilute and hinder the development of safety and intimacy.

CPGs need not require an organizational leader. Some research has been done on leader-less support groups among ministers.[[32]](#footnote-32) The consensus is that with decent group cohesion and communication, a leader is not required. Decades of 12-step recovery meetings are a testament to this reality. There are times a leader will help like raising, but not moderating, difficult issues for discussion, organizing operating decisions, encouraging process-related communications like "when are we gonna meet?" There are times when leadership should be the shared responsibility of all members, and examples are Group conflicts, violations of trust or confidentiality, a discussion that intrudes beyond an individual's safety, and ganging up to bury an individual with advice.

Additional and more detailed guidance on forming a Clergy Peer Group is available in the Resources Exhibits below.

# Summation

Being Clergy can be a rewarding life experience. Fulfilling one's Call from God is to find and fulfill one's personal meaning. Leading individuals into deeper relationships with themselves, family, society, and God is, in itself, a rewarding experience. Stimulating progressive change in one's community is to leave the world a better place. For all the rich rewards, clergy work is difficult, sometimes painful, often frustrating, and harmful to well-being. Insufficient preparation, particularly regarding one's Self Identity, is a setup for suffering. The job conditions of the work of Clergy are distinct among helping professionals and grueling, as experienced by all.

What I have tried to add to this discussion is an additional source of harm in the form of Identity Harm. The necessary work of interfacing Pastoral Identity with the many and varied Object-Ministers tears at the Self of the pastor. Individually the tearing is no different than normal living. For the pastor, the frequency, the variety of directional pull, and the variety of intensity all combine to encase the pastor in expectations which ultimately and inevitably impinge normal Self Identity functioning, specifically belonging. This encasement must be routinely scrapped off, like cleaning a ship's hull of barnacles. While there are multiple ways an individual can see this encasement scrapped off, a useful approach described here is participating in a Clergy Peer Group. For this purpose, a Clergy Peer Group must establish sufficient safety that individuals are compelled to be open with the group about their real ministerial and life experience. By participating in this safe and open environment, an individual can restore a sense of Self, gain power in that Self, have that Self known and affirmed by trusted others, ultimately leading to greater effectiveness as minister.

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# Resources and Exhibits

## A Model for Starting a Clergy Peer Group

The following is a proposed 10-week cycle for starting a new CPG. The organizer might elect to modify these steps; however, there is a risk in shortening the formation phase to less than six weeks. A shorter formation phase may not allow enough time and experience to pass for minimal safety to become established. After the formation phase, the group will decide whether to continue as a self-lead group, disband as a group, or continue to move forward with fewer and/or additional members.

The ideal size for a CPG is eight (8) members. Groups of four or fewer individuals that do not already know each other will be too small. The organizer should wait until more individuals are ready. A small group of individuals who know each other and have good basic relationships can proceed with caution. In small groups, triangulation is a risk. If more than eleven (11) individuals are highly interested, consider breaking into two groups and having the groups proceed separately. If more than eleven (11) members are casually interested, then proceed and assume there will be attrition during the formation process.

During the formation phase, the group should be closed to new members and all members should commit to remain in the group and attend meetings until at least the end of the formation phase. Each member of the group should express this commitment early in group formation.

#### WEEK 1 – INFORMATION

This meeting is open to all individuals considering participation in a CPG. At this meeting, the purposes, process, benefits, and commitments are described. Take attendance with contact information and use name tags. Find a place that is quiet and private to meet. Schedule the meeting for at least 1 ½ hours. Start and end on time.

Sample Purpose Statement: *I/We are interested in developing a Clergy Peer Group to support ourselves as minsters.* The job of ministry is difficult, and by intentionally supporting each other, we can both improve our well-being and the effectiveness of our ministries.

Sample Process Statement: Because the effectiveness of a Clergy Peer Group is determined mainly by how safe each member feels, members who choose to join will commit themselves to an initial 10-week formation process. The formation phase's objective is to create a safe container so that members feel safe enough to open up about their experiences as ministers. The formation process will provide us discussion prompts and experiential activities to help us create the necessary safety. After the formation process, the group, assuming it decides to continue, will establish its protocol and process in a leaderless and self-administered fashion.

Sample Benefits Statement: If each member engages in the effort to create a sacred space, then we will gain the following benefits:

* A decreased sense of isolation in our ministry
* An outlet for safely expressing the pain and frustration of being a minister
* An increased sense of belonging within the group
* Increase strength and resilience in our ministerial and private lives
* Renewed vigor in our call to ministry
* Expansion of our capacity for love, compassion, and caring

Sample Commitments Statement: For the duration of the formation process, each member will keep the following commitments to the individuals and the group:

* Strict confidentiality of all activities and conversations of the group, both within and without the meetings
* Agreement to stay with the group and attend meetings for the formation phase's duration, barring unforeseen circumstances.
* If an individual must miss a meeting, the facilitator will be notified so that the group does not worry about the member's welfare.
* Each member will try her/his best to be courageous in being open about self and being honest about their experience.
* Each member is aware that rules regarding disclosure of privileged communications to clergy MAY NOT apply to information shared at CPG meetings, and state-required disclosure laws may apply. Each individual agrees to act according to this understanding for the protection of the whole group.

MEETING AGENDA

Classroom set up, with dry-wipe board or flip chart.

1. The organizer opens the meeting with a brief welcome and prayer.
2. Brief introductions: Name, ministry, years in ministry.
3. Review the statement of purpose and discuss
4. Discuss ministry satisfaction
   1. What is your greatest joy in ministry
   2. What is the most frequent hindrance
   3. What is the greatest sorrow about the work
      1. Invite 1-2 stories
   4. Show of hands – How many have considered quitting ministry in the last
      1. Year, ii. Six months, iii. Month, iv. Week
   5. Show of hands – how many have one or more of the following health conditions such that you have sought medical care or self-treated (don't specify which). Write the following list so all can see it.
      1. High blood pressure
      2. Anxiety/nervousness
      3. Back pain
      4. Leg pain
      5. Neck pain
      6. Substance abuse
      7. Diabetes
      8. Obesity
      9. Process addictions (porn, gambling, spending, other)
      10. Indigestion/ulcers
      11. Diarrhea or constipation
      12. Sleep disturbance
      13. Depression/sadness
      14. Difficulty in family relations

These physical illnesses all have a job stress component, and clergy have a higher incidence of these conditions than the standard population.

1. Open discussion about why doing ministry is bad for clergy health.
2. Open discussion about how difficult it is to be effective, using the reasons from #5.

The Clergy Peer Group's purpose is to provide a safe space where this pain and suffering can be expressed and heard by others who understand.

5. Read the benefits statement and discuss.

6. Read and discuss the process statement.

7. Read and discuss the commitments statement.

8. Open discussion about interest level. Take a straw poll of how many would be interested. Invite all to consider their participation carefully. Those interested and willing to agree to the commitments should come to the next meeting.

#### WEEK 2 – Creating a Common Purpose

MEETING AGENDA

Chairs in a circle. Place a candle, cross, or other items in the center.

1. Organizer opens with prayer and reviews agenda
2. Each individual introduces themself with Name, year in ministry, a brief description of their ministry, and a quick check-in on status, physically, emotionally, socially, mentally, and spiritually.
3. Revise purpose and values statement, discuss and author any changes.
4. Review commitment statement, discuss, make changes. Everyone commits by raising hands.
5. Discuss place and time issues
6. Discuss and amend ground rules
7. Review the agendas for the next nine weeks.
   1. Each week: check-in, opening, and closing ritual
   2. Each week until each member has had a turn: an individual tells their story of childhood, family life, call experience, training experience, and ministry experience, and non-clergy life. (30 minutes). See the "Telling Your Story" guide.
   3. Week 2 – Stories of success
   4. Week 3 – Exploring rotten job conditions and solutions
   5. Week 4 – Exploring preparation – What I wish I'd known
   6. Week 5 – Stories of harm and wounding
   7. Week 6 – Basic Object Relations Theory as a language to understand the harm
   8. Week 7 – Explore a personal Pastoral Identity
   9. Week 8 – Explore childhood vulnerabilities
   10. Week 9 – Re-evaluate, restate and personalize the Purpose Statement and Commitments
   11. Week 10 – Consolidation of learning and discussion of moving forward

## Sample Ground Rules

Any group that seeks to establish a container where members feel safe being open with the group must establish safety as a core process. One element of that process is a mutually agreed-upon set of ground rules (or principles) that continuously guide the group's processes (See the sample below). The Ground Rules of the group should be revisited and reinforced regularly. Any violation of the rules should be addressed by the group as a whole.

For individuals creating a Clergy Peer Group, the following are a suggested set of ground rules which could be a starting point for a group. The group members should add, delete, or rephrase these to suit the members' principles.

1. "*What happens here stays here,"* ***or* All matters of the group will remain confidential.**

Activities of the group should remain confidential. Specific refinements of this rule might center around the following questions. Is mere membership in the group confidential? Is attendance at a meeting confidential? Is it permissible to share content, shared at a meeting, with a group member not present at that meeting? When a group has thoroughly discussed these and similar questions, they will understand what confidentiality means.

1. ***"****Only talk with the stick****" or* No Cross-talk, no side-bar, and no interruptions during a member's share.**

Cross-talk is addressing or commenting on someone else's share unless they invite or agree to input from others. Side-bar conversations are two individuals speaking with each other but not involving the group. Interruptions are stopping a member's share to comment. These bad habits indicate to the person sharing that they are not being heard or that their opinions are not valid. The use of "talking stick," or similar, is a good device for helping all members focus on who has the floor.

An additional advantage of the "talking stick" is that it lets all members know when the sharing of a member is completed (When they give up the talking stick). In many cases, individuals may need silence to compose themselves before continuing. Interruptions in these moments can be very upsetting and disturbing to the process of safety.

1. "*Speak for yourself***" or Every person's share should speak for themself and only themself.**

Shares should use "I" statements as much as possible. A member may at times want to comment on another member's share. Comments should be limited to one's own experience, as in "Your comments made me reflect on my own experience …" Members can share their own experiences but not others? I can share what I said about an issue but not what others might have said. If a member wants to comment directly to another member, permission should be gained first. For example: "Are you open to feedback?" or "May I comment on your share?" No member has the authority to speak for any other person or group.

Particularly critical for Clergy Peer Groups is that no one in the group can speak for God/Religion/Denomination/Bible. A member might say "The God I understand …", rather than "God says…" Other examples are: "What I understand the Bible to mean …" over "The Bible says …", or "My church history teaches me …" over "By Christian tradition we are supposed to …"

1. "*All emotions are* welcome," **or Profound feelings are okay and need not be soothed away.**

A sign the group process is safe enough is when an individual becomes emotional during their share. These emotions may be strong and may include crying, sobbing, angry outbursts, laughing, or others. A frequent temptation is to attempt to comfort the individual with a touch or comment physically. Efforts to comfort are usually more about our discomfort with a profound display of emotion than offering comfort. Touch or comment can disrupt the emotional process. Respect and caring can be best expressed by tolerating the emotional expressions in uncomfortable silence. Following a person's emotional share, it might be appropriate to ask, "How can we support you" or "We are witness to your profound emotions." Physical touch can often be disruptive as well. Ask permission first before touching anyone. For example, "Would you be comforted by a hug?"

1. **"***It is the group's business,***" or Conflict among group members should be addressed by the group.**

A conflict between two members of the group is rarely just between those members. Violations of group rules are a violation for the whole group, even if others are not directly involved. Conflict within the group is usually an expression of unconscious processes working themselves out within the group and impact the whole group. The group should have a pre-arranged protocol for dealing with Conflict within the group.

For example: If there is a conflict, the person wanting to discuss the Conflict will ask permission of the group and the member with whom the Conflict is held. With permissions stated, one member says their concern, being very precise on non-judgemental language and "I" statements. The receiving person, First reflects what the other person has said until the first person confirms they have been heard. Then, and only then, the Second person can offer their view of the issue. The originating person then reflects what they have heard. Then the group is offered an opportunity to comment without opinions on the issue but reflecting their own experience with the situation. This process repeats itself until all parties feel like they have been heard and any necessary action has been made clear.

1. **"***Who are WE?*" **or membership in the group is subject to group consensus.**

Members may be added to the group only through group consensus. Changes in the group's constitution will inevitably change the group's structure and safety, as experienced by the group. Discussion should proceed with any new members attending a meeting so that all voices can be heard. While new groups are in the initial formation stage, a group should remain closed to new members. If an individual chooses to leave the group, that individual should communicate with the group the decision to leave and not just stop attending. If a member does stop attending, then the group should reach out to that individual to inquire about their intentions.

## Sample Opening/Closing Rituals

OPENING RITUAL

* Five minutes of community chit chat and settling
* The facilitator calls to order and announces 5 minutes of quiet for each individual to get grounded
* Opening prayer or poem – responsibility rotates around the group
* Check-in – go around the circle, and each checks in on how they are doing physically, emotionally, socially, mentally, and spiritually. If a member has a need or topic for discussion, then space is requested for discussion during check-in time.
* Each individual concludes her/his check-in by saying "I'm in" to signal to the group that they are committed to the circle's sacredness and safety.
* Proceed to the meeting agenda or open discussion.

CLOSING RITUAL

* At 15 minutes before the end time, the facilitator asks if anyone has a burning desire that has not been spoken.
* Go around the circle. Each person comments on any observations from the meeting and concludes by saying "I'm out" to signal to the group that they are releasing the others from their commitment to the circle.
* All stand, join hands if appropriate, and hum three meditative Oms.
* They the group sings a short song or recites a brief poem or prayer of their choosing.
* In unison, all chant, "What happened here, let it stay here."

## Telling Your Story Guide

The purpose of this exercise is so that each member can get to hear your story from your own lips, the way you tell it. Try to open up to both the joyous and painful, the failures and celebrations, the pride and the embarrassment. If members leave with a general sense of the significant events in your life and your ministry, you have accomplished this task. There is no need to over-expose yourself to describe the significant wounds or, if necessary, skip these stories for now. It is entirely appropriate to say, "I have a deep wound that happened at this stage in my life, but I am not ready to share it yet."

**Here are some directing questions that may help you form your story.**

* Where did you grow up, and with whom (sibling, parents, others)?
* Tell a fun/funny story from childhood that reveals a bit of how you tick.
* Tell a story of a wounding or failure experience through which you learned about yourself.
* Tell the story of your call experience.
* Talk about your current faith walk. Try to be as honest about your strengths and weaknesses as you can.
* In general, detail, talk about your family and home life.
* Describe one or two things that give you joy and fulfillment.
* Describe one or two things the scare you.
* Name one thing that you struggle with every day.
* Name one attribute about yourself for which you are genuinely and healthfully proud.

1. Jackson W. Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*, Pulpit & Pew (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2006), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <http://clergyhealthinitiative.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard P. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today’s Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J. Fred Lehr, *Clergy Burnout: Recovering from the 70-Hour Work Week-- and Other Self-Defeating Practices*, Prisms (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 12–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Pastoral Addictions,” April 28, 2019, https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/pastoral-addictions/. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Andrew R. Irvine, *Between Two Worlds : Understanding and Managing Clergy Stress* (Herndon, VA: Mowbray, 1997), 101–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bruce Gordon Epperly, *A Center in the Cyclone: Twenty-First Century Clergy Self-Care* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jaco J. Hamman and Allan Hugh Cole, *Becoming a Pastor : Forming Self and Soul for Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Samuel Park, *Pastoral Identity as Social Construction: Pastoral Identity in Postmodern, Intercultural, and Multifaith Contexts* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Philip Leroy Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), chap. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Culbertson, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thomas Ogden, *Subjects of Analysis* (Taylor and Francis, Routledge, 2018), 99, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429480515. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For this discussion, I will set aside the theological implication of a dialogue between God and an individual, being called into ministry. The theological implications of the “Call” are confined by the theological frame used by the minister for interpreting the external world. The theological frame is only tangintally relevant for this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, First edition. (New York: Random House, 2017), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brown, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brown, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Olson, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 171–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Olson, 97–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Epperly, *A Center in the Cyclone*, 156–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hamman and Cole, *Becoming a Pastor*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 95–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole. 5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. 6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose. 7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. 8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. James T. Wagner, “A Leaderless Approach to a Minister’s Peer-Support Group,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 21, no. 3 (September 1, 1982): 228–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02274182. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)