The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation and Burnout in Rural Ministry

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Abstract We present findings from an 18-month evaluative study in which we gathered survey and telephone interview data on 51 rural pastors who participated in an intervention designed to help them overcome some of the biggest hurdles in their professional lives (including loneliness, isolation, burnout, an imbalance between personal and professional life, and an absence of self-care activities) and to buttress the primary means by which they try to ameliorate these problems: cultivation of spiritual closeness to God. We contextualize our findings in rural environments, a reality that puts pastors in the position of ministering to their congregations but also performing an array of social services for which they never received training. Our findings suggest that rural pastors suffer an appreciable degree of loneliness and isolation. While some conditions improved over the course of the program, the participants continued to struggle with the structural and organizational barriers endemic to daily life as a rural minister. This intervention appears to have helped participants enhance their professional aptitudes, reduce their reported degree of loneliness, and connect horizontally with other congregational leaders. However, the program did not catalyze greater self-care among pastors, which may be a result of their perceiving self-care as a luxury. Finally, the data suggest that pastors attempt to make their lives better by reaching inside themselves rather than trying to connect with others. Loneliness—which may be ingrained in the job itself—remains the most robust explanatory variable, exhibiting a strong relationship with other variables such as burnout and professional excellence.

Rural American communities have undergone a substantial transformation in the past few decades. Interrelated phenomena such as depopulation, agricultural industrialization, an upwardly skewed age distribution (and associated health problems), attenuated access to health care, and the loss of light manufacturing jobs have engendered an increase in social problems

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such as crime, poverty, drug abuse, and violence (Bachman 1992; Brown & Swanson 2003; Lee & Ousey 2001; Tickmyer and Duncan 1990). These "social ills" have emerged and matured in tandem with a degradation of local social service infrastructures. As in many impoverished urban areas, small churches end up not only providing a sense of identity and belonging to their members but also shouldering the burden of a wide array of social problems, frequently pulling double and triple duty as they attempt to help their host communities adapt to tumultuous developments. In towns, hamlets, and unincorporated areas across the country, the church has become—either through intent or default—a central cog in social welfare provision.

Small rural churches typically operate under the stewardship of a lone pastor who in many instances splits his or her time between or among multiple congregations. The rural pastor only infrequently enjoys the support of a church staff and therefore must manage all aspects of the organization alone, including sermonizing, fiscal planning, managing the church office, and tending to the congregants' personal needs and problems. Pastors of small community churches discharge these numerous and diverse responsibilities while simultaneously representing and working on behalf of the church in the community's inter-organizational life. With myriad internal and external demands, rural pastors perennially suffer a weak or nonexistent support system for *themselves*. In essence, they often must run the church, or rather, *be* the church in every respect, from the sacred to the mundane, and they must carry out functions for which they may never have been trained.

Despite the centrality of the rural church and, more specifically, the pastor who in the eyes of parishioners embodies the church, very few interventions have targeted *rural* pastors for the purpose of equipping them to capably fulfill their multiple competing demands.[1] Of the interventions that "helping organizations" have mounted, none have undergone rigorous evaluation. In hopes of offering a slight corrective to this paucity of knowledge, this article presents the findings of evaluative research on the Rural Pastors Initiative (RPI). Developed and implemented nationwide by the Center for New Community (CNC) in Chicago, Illinois, RPI aspires to furnish a solid network of support and a set of specific skills to assist rural pastors in performing their many functions. Our findings have implications that reach beyond CNC's efforts to engage in social programming; arguably, they tell us something about rural community life generally and about the church's particular role in the rural community.

A slim volume of extant social science research addresses the church's role in rural community life, and an even smaller body of research deals specifically with the personal and professional lives of the pastors who shepherd these churches. Ultimately, our findings will contribute to knowledge development in these areas and, more important perhaps, serve as a significant contribution to a relatively new area of empirical research on the social, economic, political, cultural, and personal spheres of rural churches and their pastors.

Rural environments and communities

Research has repeatedly shown that the pastoral profession can be emotionally taxing (Berry et al. 2012; Charlton et al. 2009; Francis & Kaldor 2002; Francis et al. 2005, 2009, 2011; Lewis et al. 2007; Robbins & Francis 2010). *Rural* pastors face the dual challenge of being involved in a "helping profession" and also being located in geographically remote areas. Rural towns are characterized by small population size, isolation from other communities, and

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[1] Doehring (2013) conducted an intervention with theological students aimed at improving self-care by connecting the body to the spirit.

limited access to outside social services (Campbell et al. 2002; Storey 1992). The church is one of the few multidimensional resources in most rural areas. The importance of the church in rural settings has been widely acknowledged (Arcury et al. 2000). Religious life—particularly Christianity—in the United States is especially salient in rural areas of the southern (Mitchell & Weatherly 2000; Brody et al. 1996) and midwestern (King et al. 1997) regions of the country.

Rural congregants often live in economically depressed communities where the population is disproportionately comprised of lower-class families and fixed-income elderly persons (McDuff 2001; Tevis 1999). Social service providers in such small communities experience continual and often difficult crossings of the boundary between the personal and professional spheres of life (Cheers 1992; Brand & Kesting 1999). Boundary confusion almost invariably leads to "role conflict," or stress related to the tension between professional and personal roles (Dollard et al. 1999). Ellison and Mattila's (1983) study of pastoral burnout found that unrealistic expectations of self and perceived lack of time compound the stress associated with boundary murkiness.

Helping professions, pastors, and burnout risk

Researchers have long identified "burnout" as a considerable risk factor associated with the field of social work (Acker 1999; Egan 1993; Gilbar 1998; Jayaratne & Chess 1984; Pines & Aronson 1998; Pines & Kafry 1978; Sze & Ivker 1986; Um & Harrison 1998). Over-involvement with clients and an inability to disengage from their problems are the primary stressors contributing to burnout (Acker 1999; Borland 1981; Egan 1993). York (1982) found that pastors' mean scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory—a widely used and respected measure of burnout—closely resemble those of secular human service professionals (Maslach et al. 1996), and substantial empirical research has confirmed the high risk of burnout among clergy (Doolittle 2007; Hendron et al. 2011; Innstrand et al. 2011; Miner 2007). These findings should come as no surprise considering the parallels between pastoral care-giving and the type of emotional support provision that clinical social workers provide. Several studies have identified religious leaders as the principal resource for those who experience mental health issues (Pivette et al. 1994; Quackenbos et al. 1985). These studies demonstrate striking similarities in the work domains of religious leaders and social workers, two categories of professionals who provide services that demand much of them (Hall 1997; Henry et al. 1991).

Compassion fatigue

"Compassion fatigue," or secondary traumatic stress, refers to the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in those who work with people who have experienced trauma (Figley 1995; Perlman & Saakvitne 1995; Stamm 1997; Hendron et al. 2011). Compassion fatigue, like burnout, can inhibit one's ability to maintain clear personal and professional boundaries. Numerous studies have observed an overlap between job burnout and compassion fatigue in that both generate emotional exhaustion as a result of working with trauma survivors (Figley 1995; Gentry et al. 2002; Jenkins & Baird 2002; Nelson-Gardell & Harris 2003; Salston & Figley 2003; Stamm 2002). The primary difference noted between compassion fatigue and burnout is that compassion fatigue is marked by sudden onset, while burnout transpires more gradually (Figley 1995). Burnout often foreshadows compassion fatigue

(Weiner 1998; Beaton & Murphy 1995; Cerney 1995; Chrestman 1995; Dutton & Rubinstein 1995; Perlman & Saakvitne 1995; Stamm 1997; Rudolph et al. 1997).

Preventive measures and further research

Theoretical and empirical work on both compassion fatigue and burnout suggest that various forms of social support can prevent the occurrence of these adverse states (Figley 1995; Maslach et al. 1996). Numerous studies have attempted to assess the effectiveness of emotional support in decreasing the impact of job stress on social workers and psychologists (Coady et al. 1990; Coster 1997; Himle et al. 1986, 1989; Koeske & Koeske 1989; Schwebel & Coster 1998; Um & Harrison 1998). Um and Harrison (1998) and Himle et al. (1989) found that support networks decrease the toll of work stress for social workers. Koeske and Koeske (1989) found that heavy workloads and low social support increased the likelihood of burnout, while Coady et al. (1990) observed no correlation between perceived support and levels of burnout. Chandler (2008) found that a well-developed spiritual practice can help mitigate pastoral burnout, while others have pointed to the role of self-compassion (Barnard & Curry 2012) and spousal relationships (McMinn et al. 2005) in mitigating clergy burnout. Interventions aimed at increasing socio-emotional support and teaching self-care remain largely untested; while rural pastors face increasingly high risk levels of burnout and compassion fatigue, researchers have devoted little attention to evaluating the effectiveness of prevention or intervention programs.

Although sparse, the literature on rural pastors reveals some definable trends. The daily lives of rural pastors involve a sufficiently troubling degree of boundary confusion, role conflict, emotional exertion, and isolation (both geographic and social). As one of the few viable resources in rural communities—especially those suffering from economic depression—rural pastors perform a multitude of tasks with scant organizational or professional support (Beamount 2010). Conditions such as these may add up to fatigue and burnout if not addressed remedially at the individual, organizational, and/or structural level.

The Rural Pastors Initiative: an attempt at corrective intervention

CNC's Rural Pastors Initiative (RPI) comprises several interrelated interventions designed to achieve a twofold goal: (1) foster excellence and "professionalism" in pastoral leadership and ministry in contemporary rural settings, and (2) promote long-term personal well-being and satisfaction in rural ministry. To meet these goals, RPI offers pastors the tools necessary to overcome some of the profession's greatest challenges—namely, burnout, loneliness, and isolation. Beyond this, however, RPI's logic model posits a more distal outcome: the church-led advancement of community development agendas in rural areas based on the tenets of social justice. Hence, the program tries to do more than merely help pastors feel less burned out, less fatigued, and less isolated. Such achievements are necessary but insufficient in terms of the program's broader goal of mounting a nationwide, tightly integrated, church-led campaign of positive rural transformation.

RPI operates on several basic assumptions: (1) rural pastors are geographically, socially, and professionally isolated and are, therefore, facing higher odds of experiencing burnout/compassion fatigue (as compared to their urban counterparts); (2) connecting with other rural pastors and with local community leaders will help to ameliorate the above-stated condition; (3) as a result (or perhaps cause) of burnout and/or fatigue, rural pastors need assistance in

developing their own, tailored approaches to improved self-care and to balancing their professional and personal lives; (4) once taught and/or inspired to form self-care plans, pastors will do so and, as a result, their personal and professional well-being will improve; (5) professional excellence will increase as a result of regular contact with other pastors and secondarily through the actual material presented at RPI gatherings; (6) relationships that develop among program participants will extend beyond the program's life and will continue to function supportively; and (7) pastors who enjoy rich daily spiritual experiences and a feeling of closeness to God will exhibit less risk of burnout and loneliness. The analysis we present below tests these assumptions.

Two distinct modules make up RPI: The Summer Intensive (SI) and the Area Gathering (AG). These are the primary points of intervention and are supplemented by continuous, remote capacity-building assistance via telephone and email. The SI is a concentrated 1-week seminar-style venue in which CNC staff and a variety of external speakers and trainers convene to provide participants—all of them rural pastors—with new knowledge and skills and to reinvigorate their commitment to rural ministry. SI activities also encourage pastors to engage in self-reflection, particularly relating to feelings of isolation and personal satisfaction with their ministry. "Experts" deliver presentations on a variety of relevant areas—small church dynamics, rural sociology, clergy self-care, and rural culture in literature—and lead small group work centered on peer learning in the above areas. Participants also learn specific skills related to CNC's particular method of faith-based ministry and become familiar with the program's biblical/theological reflection method. Finally, the pastors in attendance learn to engage in experiential learning via one-on-one listening geared toward surfacing their congregations' and communities' needs and also toward developing the relationships necessary for carrying out a ministry.

The AG is a smaller regional meeting held in the period between the longer intensives. CNC staff organizes participants into four AG groups depending upon the region in which they work. These forums provide pastors an opportunity to discuss and share their progress in meeting both professional and personal goals and objectives. The AGs emphasize communication among pastors to encourage the development of rural pastor networks. CNC's logic model holds that reducing feelings of isolation among rural pastors is critical to ensuring professional excellence and personal satisfaction. CNC intends to reduce these feelings through the provision of learning and networking opportunities.

According to CNC's logic model, changes in attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge increase the probability that pastors will take action in their own lives to reduce their sense of isolation and increase their level of professional excellence in the ministry. Therefore, one of our principal tasks involves measuring the change in attitudes and beliefs pastors hold before and after RPI and, equally important, measuring the extent to which attitudinal and belief changes bring about behavioral change.

Data and methods

At five successive points over the 18-month program period we gathered data using a self-administered survey comprising standardized scales measuring *(1) loneliness, (2) compassion satisfaction and fatigue, (3) burnout risk, (4) daily spiritual experience, (5) closeness to God,* and *(6) marks of good ministry (*i.e.*, professional excellence)*. We administered the same instrument five times at approximately 6-month intervals, at both the SIs and AGs.

At two points in the program cycle we contacted all participants to conduct follow-up telephone interviews (TI_1 and TI_2), approximately 90 days after the first SI and 90 days after

the last AG. The interviews consisted of open- and closed-ended questions designed to assess the extent to which exposure to the RPI program had inspired pastors to take either collective or individual corrective action concerning the issues of isolation, balance, and self-care. These interviews focused on learning more about how pastors connect with CNC staff, colleagues within RPI, and colleagues and community actors not involved in RPI. In these interviews we obtained nuanced, textured data (both qualitative and quantitative) regarding how the participants define, construe, and experience balance, isolation, and self-care. Thirty-six individuals were interviewed in total, 25 individuals at both points, representing 57 % of participants at TI_1 and 74 % of participants at TI_2.

Methodological limitations

Several methodological constraints merit discussion. First, our beginning sample size ($N=54$) eroded to a sample of 34 program completers. In response to this sample size, we set our significance threshold conservatively ($p<0.01$). Second, because our final data set comprises only those who enrolled in and completed the program, the analysis may suffer from selection bias. Furthermore, CNC staff deliberately chose a leadership team of pastors with whom they previously had worked or whose activities they were aware of. And the program participants who opted into the program may possess greater motivation to perform their jobs better as compared with the rural pastors who chose not to participate in the first place. Hence, the findings may be skewed in the direction of satisfaction with the RPI program. On this note, however, many indicators show diversity among participants—their ranges of scores tells us that even though they may be the most motivated and capable with regard to program participation, they still represent a variety of experiences in their daily lives and in their views on program efficacy.

Third, the surveys were conducted when pastors had convened for one of the events described above, so the dedication and enthusiasm they may have felt at the event's outset may have skewed the findings in a pro-RPI direction. However, to minimize the "excitement" and pro-RPI sentiments they may have felt at the close of the event, we administered the survey at the very beginning of the event. Fourth, even though the survey was identical at every data point, it occurred in two different venue types: the SIs and the AGs. These events differed fundamentally; whereas the SIs were large gathering of all program participants, the AGs were intimate environments attended by a small number of pastors (9–10). However, our analysis (not shown here) indicated no significant aberrations across the five data points. Finally, as with every survey including questions about personal matters, the issue of socially desirable responding may have slanted our data in a pro-RPI direction. This applies especially to questions about pastors' daily spiritual experiences and their closeness to God. Ultimately, pastors' scores were strikingly high in these areas, leading us to conclude that notwithstanding their high levels of risk of burnout and fatigue, they have these two positive resources in abundance. They are, after all, pastors, and to report low levels of daily spiritual satisfaction and/or disconnectedness from God would call into question the fundamental tenets of their deep-rooted mission. If socially desirable responding did occur in these areas, the pastor participants may actually have lower levels of personal resources for dealing with adversity than our data indicate.

Results

We administered the same survey instrument at five consecutive points in time. Scores in the aggregate and at the individual level tended to change little to moderately throughout the cycle,

depending upon the measure. Therefore, given our small sample size, to maximize the amount of variation explained we focus on comparing the first general survey of the pastors who attended the first SI (Time 0, or "T_0") with the final survey of the pastors who attended their final AGs (Time 4, or "T_4").

The participants

A total of 51 pastors enrolled in this cycle of RPI. A completion rate of 67 % left us with a total of 34 cases to analyze. "Completers" were defined as those who attended and submitted surveys at the first SI (T_0) and the final AG (T_4). According to qualitative information obtained from CNC staff, the "dropouts" quit the program for a variety of reasons including residential moves, health problems, and personal troubles, and at least a couple of pastors decided early on that RPI did not meet their needs. We conducted comparative analyses to ferret out any systematic differences between those who completed the program and those who did not ($n=17$ dropouts). We conducted statistical tests (e.g., t-tests and chi-squares) to compare completers with dropouts. Our results found no significant difference between those who completed the program and those who did not. Keeping in mind the small number of dropouts, slightly more men than women dropped out, and there is not enough variation in race/ethnicity to compare completers with dropouts. Thus, losing the 17 respondents did not appear to skew the results.

   Table 1 presents the descriptive demographic data of the RPI participants. The overwhelming majority of the participants are white (68.6 %) although 27.5 % of the entire sample had missing values for race/ethnicity. There are slightly more males than females—56.8 % vs. 43.2 %. Completers have served an average of 4.2 churches, have served their current church for 4.6 years, and have been in the pastoral career for approximately 15 years.

The self-administered survey

In this section we present our analysis of the survey data gathered at the first SI (T_0) and the final AG (T_4), with a focus on the following scales: (1) *loneliness*, (2) *compassion satisfaction*

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for race/ethnicity and gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Race/Ethnicity			
Caucasian	35	68.6	94.6
African American	1	2	2.7
Other or mixed	1	2	2.7
Missing	14	27.5	
N	51	100	100
Gender			
Male	21	41.2	56.8
Female	16	31.4	43.2
Missing	14	27.5	
N	51	100	100
	Mean	Median	*N*
Number of Churches	4.25	2	36
Tenure (months/years)	55.35/4.6	49/4	37
Career (months/years)	181.6/15	171/14.25	35

and fatigue, (3) *burnout*, (4) *daily spiritual experience*, and (5) *professional excellence*. We also measure closeness to God with one item—not a scale. At baseline, 48 respondents completed the survey, and at the final data collection event 34 pastors completed the survey. Owing to our small sample size, we are limited in statistical complexity, and to be even more conservative, as stated previously, we set our level of statistical significance at $p<0.01$.

Loneliness As stated above, rural pastors predictably experience feelings of loneliness and isolation due to their circumstances. To assess incoming participants' degree of loneliness, we employed the UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS) (Russell et al. 1978), a commonly used measure of loneliness. Respondents answer questions regarding loneliness and its frequency of occurrence in their lives. Researchers have used the ULS in a variety of contexts examining mental health (see Russell et al. 1978, 1997; Johnson et al. 1992; Jones et al. 1990; Cutrona 1982). Repeated trials have shown this scale to be both face and content valid and internally consistent. The evaluation team added four items (21–24) to this 20-item scale to capture aspects of isolation that may acutely affect rural pastors.

   The response options for all 24 items were: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, and Always, with items ranging from one to four, a maximum score of 96—higher numbers indicate a greater degree of loneliness (Table 2). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.924, indicating that the 24 items are highly related to each other and are therefore likely measuring a single unidimensional latent construct: loneliness. All items in this scale (and the other scales) were summed, with some of the items needing to be reversed coded.

   As Table 2 illustrates, the two items with the highest mean at both time periods were "feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you" and "feel that people are around you but not with you." Some of the scores that remained high even at the end of the program measured feelings of being "isolated from other clergy" and "isolated from the judicatory." These results coincide with other findings in the study (discussed later) that suggest pastors feel like they have people they can turn to but they feel isolated from people "like" them—i.e., colleagues and/or peers.

   Several significant changes emerged when investigating each item of the scale using paired sample *t*-tests. Pastors' scores *decreased* over time for the questions "feel that you lack companionship" ($p<0.001$); "feel that there is no one you can turn to" ($p<0.001$); "feel alone" ($p<0.01$); "feel left out" ($p<0.01$); "feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful" ($p<0.001$); "feel that no one really knows you well" ($p<0.01$); "feel that there are people who really understand you" ($p<0.01$); "feel shy" ($p<0.001$); "feel there are people you can talk to" ($p<0.01$); and "feel there are people you can turn to" ($p<0.01$).

   A paired sample *t*-test indicates that while the loneliness score significantly decreased over the course of the program ($T_0=51.88$, $T_4=44.97$, $p<0.001$, see Table 3), when looking at individual questions it appears that most of the change occurred in the questions pertaining to personal feelings (e.g., aloneness, shyness, etc.). The items that address the participants' relation to the "outside world" (isolation from other clergy, job-related sacrifices, etc.) tended to remain relatively unchanged. So, although pastors reported "feeling" better, a residual amount of isolation still remained. Moreover, as we discuss later, RPI seems to have achieved many of its objectives; however, the program appears to have reinforced pastors' tendency to *reach inside* to rejuvenate themselves, often providing their own solace and refuge. On the whole, these participants did not report a great deal of reaching out to others in an effort to reduce job-related stress due to isolation and burnout.

Compassion satisfaction The Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Test is a Likert-type self-report inventory of items measuring feelings of compassion satisfaction, risk of burnout, and

Table 2 Descriptive and inferential statistics for survey scales

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
Loneliness											
Loneliness	0.924	48	34	71	52.48	10.37	35	30	77	44.97	11.03
How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?		48	1	3	1.90	0.371	35	1	3	1.77	0.547
How often do you feel that you lack companionship?		48	1	4	2.58[***]	0.767	35	1	4	2.03[***]	0.822
How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?		48	1	4	2.13[***]	0.789	35	1	3	1.63[***]	0.646
How often do you feel alone?		48	1	4	2.33[**]	0.753	35	1	4	1.89[**]	0.832
How often do you feel part of a group of friends?		48	1	3	2.02	0.699	35	1	3	1.80	0.632
How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?		48	1	3	2.06	0.697	35	1	3	1.91	0.562
How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?		48	1	4	2.06	0.885	35	1	3	1.66	0.765
How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?		48	1	3	2.63	0.531	35	1	4	2.51	0.658
How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?		48	1	3	1.63	0.531	35	1	3	1.57	0.558
How often do you feel close to people?		48	1	3	1.85	0.505	35	1	3	1.69	0.631
How often do you feel left out?		48	1	4	2.54[**]	0.617	35	1	3	2.11[***]	0.583
How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?		48	1	3	2.27[***]	0.536	35	1	3	1.80[***]	0.584
How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?		48	1	4	2.48[**]	0.714	35	0	4	1.91[**]	0.887
How often do you feel isolated?		48	1	4	2.29	0.798	35	1	4	1.97	0.857
How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?		48	1	3	1.69	0.689	35	1	4	1.49	0.702
How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?		48	1	3	1.98[**]	0.668	35	1	3	1.69[**]	0.583

Table 2 (continued)

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
How often do you feel shy?		48	1	4	2.48***	0.714	35	1	3	2.11***	0.796
How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?		48	1	4	2.60	0.610	35	1	4	2.37	0.690
How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?		48	1	3	1.77**	0.660	35	1	4	1.37**	0.690
How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?		48	1	3	1.69***	0.719	35	1	4	1.34***	0.684
How often do you feel isolated from other clergy?		48	1	4	2.46	0.771	35	1	4	2.26	0.817
How often do you feel disconnected from the judicatory level of your denomination?		48	1	4	2.52	0.922	35	1	4	2.26	0.852
How often do you feel that you are making sacrifices to minister in a rural area?		48	1	4	2.44	0.943	35	1	4	2.09	0.919
How often do you feel that in your present location you lack accessibility to modern conveniences?		48	1	4	2.08	0.964	35	1	3	1.74	0.741
Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue											
Compassion Satisfaction	0.940	47	58	123	93.94	15.52	34	55	123	97.65	15.79
I am happy.		48	2	5	4.04	0.824	35	1	5	4.09	0.853
I find my life satisfying.		48	2	5	4.17	0.781	35	2	5	4.29	0.825
I have beliefs that sustain me.		48	3	5	4.60	0.644	35	4	5	4.77	0.426
I find that I learn new things from those that I care for.		48	3	5	4.40	0.676	35	1	5	4.43	0.850
I feel connected to others.		48	1	5	3.56	1.109	35	1	5	4.03	1.014
I feel calm.		48	0	5	3.54	1.110	34	1	5	3.82	0.904
I believe I have a good balance between my work and my free time.		48	0	5	2.63***	1.265	35	1	5	3.06***	1.162
I am the person I always wanted to be.		47	1	5	3.34**	1.027	35	1	5	3.83**	1.043
I am a sensitive person.		47	1	5	3.91	0.905	35	2	5	4.03	0.822
I have good peer support when I need to work through a highly stressful experience.		48	1	5	3.10	1.309	35	1	5	3.54	1.221
I think that I need more close friends.		48	0	5	2.63	1.362	34	0	4	2.00	0.953

Table 2 (continued)

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
I think that there is no one to talk to about highly stressful experiences.		48	0	5	2.02[***]	1.407	35	0	4	1.20[***]	1.023
I have concluded that I work too hard for my own good.		48	1	5	2.58	1.456	35	0	5	2.31	1.323
Working with those in my congregation gives me a great deal of satisfaction.		48	2	5	4.13	0.815	35	2	5	4.06	0.765
I feel invigorated after working with my parishioners.		48	2	5	3.83	0.907	35	2	5	3.83	0.857
I have happy thoughts about those that I help and how I could help them.		48	3	5	4.04	0.743	35	2	5	3.94	0.725
I have joyful thoughts about how I can help the people I minister to.		48	2	5	3.92	0.942	35	2	5	4.00	0.907
I have felt "on edge" about various things and I attribute this to working with certain people in my congregation.		48	1	5	2.10	1.016	35	0	4	1.94	0.968
I wish that I could avoid working with some of the people in my congregation.		48	0	5	1.90	1.292	35	0	4	1.66	0.906
Some people in my congregation are particularly enjoyable to work with.		48	3	5	4.38	0.606	35	3	5	4.29	0.622
I feel that some people in my congregation dislike me personally.		48	0	5	1.50	0.923	35	0	3	1.23	0.770
I like my work as a pastor.		48	3	5	4.52	0.583	35	3	5	4.57	0.558
I feel like I have the tools and resources I need to do my work as a pastor.		48	2	5	3.94	0.861	35	1	5	4.11	0.900
I have felt weak, tired and run down as a result of my work as a pastor.		48	0	5	2.19	1.197	35	0	5	1.97	1.043
I have felt depressed as a result of my work as a pastor.		48	0	5	1.63	1.123	35	0	5	1.34	1.027
Risk of Burnout											
Risk of Burnout	0.871	46	15	66	33.07	10.82	34	14	55	27.94	9.52
I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a pastor.		48	0	5	3.27	1.144	35	1	5	3.49	0.981

Table 2 (continued)

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
I am not successful at separating helping from my personal life.		47	1	5	2.26	1.052	35	0	5	2.11	1.183
I enjoy my colleagues.		48	1	5	3.60	1.106	35	0	5	3.86	1.141
I depend on my colleagues to help me when I need it.		48	1	5	2.90	1.242	35	0	5	3.43	1.335
My colleagues can depend on me for help when they need it.		48	2	5	3.98	0.838	35	2	5	4.20	0.868
I trust my colleagues.		48	1	5	3.63	1.064	35	0	5	3.97	1.150
I feel little compassion towards most of my colleagues.		48	0	4	1.33	1.098	35	0	5	1.49	1.463
I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with technology that helps me in my role as a pastor.		48	0	5	3.08	1.200	35	1	5	3.11	1.078
I feel I am working more for the money/prestige than for personal fulfillment.		48	0	2	0.63	0.703	35	0	2	0.43	0.608
Even though I have to do administrative work, I have enough time to help people in my congregation.		48	1	5	3.48	1.203	35	1	5	3.40	1.143
I find it difficult separating my personal life from my ministry.		48	1	5	2.58[**]	1.235	35	0	4	2.09[**]	1.173
I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with new ideas in the church.		48	1	5	3.19	0.938	35	1	5	3.00	1.029
I have a sense of worthlessness/ disillusionment/ resentment associated with my role as a minister.		48	0	4	0.98	0.956	35	0	5	0.89	0.963
I have thoughts that I am a "failure" as a pastor.		48	0	4	0.90	0.881	35	0	4	0.74	0.852
I have thoughts that I am not succeeding at achieving my life goals.		48	0	4	1.31[**]	0.903	35	0	4	0.77[**]	0.877
I have to deal with unimportant tasks in my work as a pastor.		48	0	5	2.19	1.104	35	0	4	1.89	1.157
I plan to be a pastor for a long time.		48	3	5	4.35	0.729	35	1	5	4.34	0.968

Table 2 (continued)

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
Daily Spiritual Experience											
Daily Spiritual Experience	0.926	47	48	90	71.02	10.09	35	47	90	75.14	11.10
I feel God's presence.		48	2	6	5.04	0.944	35	3	6	5.23	0.843
I experience a connection to all life.		48	2	6	4.69[**]	0.879	35	4	6	5.23[**]	0.690
During worship, or at other times, when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.		48	3	6	4.42	0.895	35	3	6	4.71	1.073
I find strength in my religion or spirituality.		47	3	6	4.94	0.870	35	3	6	5.23	0.843
I find comfort in my religion or spirituality.		48	3	6	4.98	0.887	35	4	6	5.31	0.758
I feel deep inner peace or harmony.		48	2	6	4.44	1.090	35	3	6	4.80	1.079
I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities.		48	2	6	4.88	1.064	35	2	6	5.11	1.105
I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.		48	3	6	4.58	1.007	35	3	6	5.00	1.000
I feel God's love for me, directly.		48	3	6	4.75	0.934	35	3	6	4.94	0.906
I feel God's love for me through others.		48	2	6	4.56	1.029	35	2	6	4.91	1.067
I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.		48	3	6	5.02	0.956	35	3	6	5.26	1.010
I feel thankful for my blessings.		48	3	6	5.13	0.866	35	3	6	5.20	0.901
I feel a selfless caring for others.		48	2	6	4.50	1.072	35	2	6	4.46	1.010
I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.		48	2	6	4.38	1.003	35	3	6	4.57	0.815
I desire to be in union with or closer to God.		48	2	6	4.92	0.919	35	3	6	5.17	0.954
Closeness to God											
In general, how close do you feel to God?		48	2	3	2.63	0.489	34	2	3	2.79	0.410
Professional Excellence (Marks of Good Ministry)											
Professional Excellence	0.834	48	52	82	68.77	6.62	35	57	81	71.11	5.62
I feel connected to the people of my congregation.		48	3	5	4.31	0.552	35	3	5	4.31	0.631
I feel connected to the place where my congregation is located.		48	3	5	4.23	0.627	35	3	5	4.29	0.667

Table 2 (continued)

	α	N T_0	Min T_0	Max T_0	Mean T_0	SD T_0	N T_4	Min T_4	Max T_4	Mean T_4	SD T_4
I strive to nurture a deep understanding of my parishioners' lives through listening to them carefully.		48	3	5	4.42	0.577	35	4	5	4.31	0.471
I am willing to establish personal relationships with members of my congregation.		48	3	5	4.33	0.630	35	3	5	4.26	0.611
I am willing to establish personal relationships with members of my surrounding community.		48	3	5	4.33	0.595	35	3	5	4.20	0.584
I use building relationships as a style for ministry.		48	3	5	4.23	0.660	35	3	5	4.40	0.604
I have a deep commitment to mentoring laity.		48	3	5	4.15	0.652	35	3	5	4.31	0.583
I actively work towards developing shared leadership in the life of my congregation.		48	3	5	4.29	0.582	35	4	5	4.46	0.505
I understand the total civic life of the larger community.		48	2	5	3.81	0.816	35	3	5	4.11	0.583
I am committed to being involved in the total civic life of the larger community.		48	3	5	4.04	0.651	35	3	5	4.09	0.702
I maintain a healthy balance between my personal and professional life.		48	1	5	3.31[**]	1.014	35	2	5	3.66[**]	0.725
I regularly take time away from my ministry for self-care and study.		48	2	5	3.27[**]	1.067	35	2	5	3.60[**]	0.881
I regularly take time away from my ministry for fellowship with colleagues.		48	1	5	3.35	0.956	35	2	5	3.66	0.838
My spiritual practice includes prayer.		48	2	5	4.48	0.684	35	4	5	4.60	0.497
My spiritual practice includes regular Bible study.		48	2	5	4.33	0.883	35	2	5	4.37	0.690
My spiritual practice includes theological reflection.		48	2	5	4.21	0.683	35	3	5	4.46	0.611
I have a dynamic spiritual practice.		48	2	5	3.67[**]	0.753	35	3	5	4.03[**]	0.618

$**p<0.01$ $***$ $p<0.001$

Table 3 Paired sample *t*-tests for survey scales (completers)

	Mean at T_0	Mean at T_4	Mean Difference
Self-Administered Surveys			
Loneliness	51.88	44.79	−7.09***
Compassion Satisfaction	93.13	97.53	4.41**
Risk of Burnout	33.30	28.18	−5.12**
Spiritual Experience	71.50	74.88	3.38
Professional Excellence	68.03	71.06	3.03**
N	34		

**p<0.01, ***p<0.001

compassion fatigue. This scale was originally developed for individuals in helping professions, and some portions were inappropriate for use with clergy. The evaluation team changed the wording of the items slightly to make them less clinical and more relevant to rural pastors. As we describe below, α is still very high, giving us confidence that our slight modifications to the scale did not adversely affect its reliability.

Twenty-five items collectively assess compassion satisfaction. The response options for all 25 items were: Never, Rarely, A Few Times, Somewhat Often, Often, and Very Often, on a range of 0 to 5 and a maximum score of 150, with a higher score indicating a greater degree of compassion satisfaction (Table 2). This scale produced a high degree of internal reliability (α=0.940), implying that all of the individual items measure a very similar latent concept or phenomenon: satisfaction with the compassion experienced in the ministry. Table 3 displays the results of a paired sample *t*-test illustrating that compassion satisfaction significantly increased over the course of the program (T_0=93.13, T_4=97.53, $p<0.01$).

Several "assets" for preventing and/or overcoming burnout emerged from the data. The highest scoring items pertain to job satisfaction and beliefs ("I have beliefs that sustain me" and "I like my work as a pastor"). Additionally, respondents report high scores for "I find that I learn new things from those that I care for" and "I find my life satisfying." While none of the changes on these items were significant, the scores remained among the highest on this scale throughout the program. There was also a significant increase for the item "I am the person I always wanted to be" ($p<0.01$) and a significant decrease for the item "no one to talk to about highly stressful experiences" ($p<0.001$). Consistent with the previously mentioned findings on loneliness, we find that one of the lowest scoring items pertained to "balance" ("good balance between my work and my free time," $p<0.001$); see Table 2. Even though there was a significant positive change on this question, it remained one of the lower scores at the point of program completion. Later we examine this particular issue in relation to burnout. But for now, pastors resoundingly expressed an imbalance even at the close of the program.

While all of the scores that measure connection to colleagues increased, none of these increases was significant at the $p<0.01$ level. These findings reinforce the notion that most of the increases in compassion satisfaction resulted from pastors providing their own solace rather than reaching out to colleagues. Pastors exhibited no change in their scores on answers to three questions relating to church role/staff support.

Risk for burnout Seventeen items collectively assess the underlying phenomenon of risk of burnout (Table 2). The response options for all 17 items were Never, Rarely, A Few Times, Somewhat Often, Often, and Very Often, on a range of 0 to 5 and a maximum score of 102,

with the higher score implying a higher risk of burnout related to the ministry. This scale has a high degree of reliability ($\alpha=0.871$). Table 3 displays a paired sample t-test for risk of burnout. The results specify that burnout significantly decreased over the course of the program ($T_0=33.30$, $T_4=28.18$, $p<0.01$).

Consistent with the findings in the previous section on compassion satisfaction, the item with the highest score for both time periods pertains to job satisfaction ("I plan to be a pastor for a long time"). Another high-scoring item was "colleagues can depend on me for help." The negatively worded items with the highest scores (indicating a greater risk of burnout) are those that relate to the achievement of "balance" (e.g., "not succeeding at achieving my life goals," ($p<0.01$, decreased) and "difficult separating my personal life from my ministry," $p<0.01$, decreased). These findings are also consistent with previous findings on the need to achieve greater balance.

Daily spiritual experience The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) is a Likert-type self-report inventory of 15 items measuring an individual's daily spiritual experience (Table 2). This model is built on previous research showing that an individual's daily spiritual experience can contribute positively to social well-being and physical health. The DSES provides information about an individual's relationship to their spirituality and potentially identifies ways in which their relationships with others can be enriched. Thus, this scale also provides information on an individual's sense of isolation based on how connected an individual feels to God.

The response options for all 15 items in this scale were: Never or Almost Never, Once in a While, Some Days, Most Days, Every Day, and Many Times a Day, ranging from 1 to 6 and a maximum score of 90, with the higher the score, the more positive daily spiritual experiences and greater connection to God. This scale turned out to have a very high degree of internal consistency ($\alpha=0.926$). Table 3 illustrates the results of a paired sample t-test; throughout the duration of the program, there was no significant change in participants' daily spiritual experience. Perhaps more than any other scale in this survey, the DSES points to the internal assets, or "resiliency factors," these respondents possessed. The level of daily spiritual experience was quite high even at the outset of the program, so while all these changes move in a positive direction, the positive change is not statistically significant.

These data demonstrate that respondents felt extremely "thankful for their blessings" at both time periods (Table 2). This high level of gratitude to the divine undoubtedly serves as a protective factor against the forces of burnout and loneliness (note: this assumption is tested and discussed later). In addition, and not surprisingly, respondents seemed to enjoy a very strong connection with God ("I feel God's presence" and "I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation").The only statistically significant change is a positive increase for "I experience a connection to all life" ($p<0.01$). In short, these pastors consistently expressed an exceptionally high level of daily spiritual experience.

Closeness to God A separate *item* (not a scale) assessed respondents' feelings of closeness to God, a central feature of both Muslim and Judeo-Christian spiritual traditions. The response options to this item were: Not Close at All, Somewhat Close, and Very Close, with a maximum possible score of 3. The mean score is logically very high (Table 2). There was no significant change over time in the mean value for this item, and there was very little variation in this indicator. Nearly all participants score near the maximum in terms of their perceived closeness to God. Therefore, we cannot conduct inferential statistics on this item due to the lack of variability in this item.

Marks of good ministry/professional excellence The Marks of Good Ministry & Professional Excellence Scale (MGM) is a 17-item Likert-type self-report inventory that the research team

developed for this project in conjunction with RPI staff (Table 2). The scale is designed to measure professional excellence by looking at concepts identified in intensive interviews conducted by CNC staff during the program development stage of RPI. This scale collectively assesses professional aptitude. The response options for all the items in this scale are: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree, so the range is from 1 to 5 with a maximum possible score of 85. Again, the higher the respondent's score is, the higher their level of professional excellence. This scale exhibits a respectably high degree of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.834$). A paired sample t-test indicates that the average professional excellence score increased significantly over the course of the program ($T_0 = 68.03$: $T_4 = 71.06$, $p < 0.01$).

Although average scores for most items tended to be rather high (with 12 of the 17 items having means of at least 4 at T_4), some of the lower-scored items stand out in light of our previous discussions of loneliness, burnout, and spiritual experience. For instance, the item with the lowest mean for T_0 and T_4 belongs to "self-care," which refers to the statement "maintain a healthy balance between personal and professional life" ($p < 0.01$, increased) and "regularly take time away from my ministry for self-care and study" ($p < 0.01$, increased). A paired sample t-test indicates (Table 2) that while there was significant change in this item, on average respondents do not even reach the Agree level with respect to this item even after going through the RPI program. On a related note, respondents reported not reaching out to colleagues or having a healthy balance of work and nonwork. They did not agree to the item "regularly take time away from my ministry for fellowship with my colleagues." The mean score for this item improved only slightly over the course of the program, although respondents still failed to reach the level of Agree. However, the respondents did indicate a significant improvement with balance at the end of the program. There was also a significant increase for "I have a dynamic spiritual practice" ($p < 0.01$). While some of the pastors' scores did improve over the course of the program, indicating feelings of less isolation even at the end of the project, isolation remains the single biggest issue for these rural pastors.

While the overall professional excellence score went up over the course of the program, three areas exhibited decreases. Pastors reported a mean decrease in "striving to understand parishioners," "willingness to establish personal relations with members of the congregation," and "willingness to establish personal relationships with members of the surrounding community." While all three of these areas showed a mean decrease at T_4, the mean was still well above the level of Agree.

On the more positive side, the majority of participants reported a substantial connectedness to their congregations. The pastors surveyed at T_0 reported "feeling connected to the people of congregations" and that "building relationships" was the cornerstone of their ministerial style. While the "self-care" score still did not reach the level of Agree, the scores for "prayer," "Bible study," and "theological reflection" in the spiritual practice questions were all high at the outset of the program and remained high. These behaviors are all indicative of the rising awareness/level of self-care among the respondents, even though their improvement failed to reach the level of statistical significance.

Correlational and predictive analyses

Loneliness, compassion satisfaction, and burnout The main goal of the RPI program was to reduce the risk of burnout and loneliness experienced by the pastor-participants. To test whether this goal was accomplished, we conducted paired sample t-tests (see Table 3, results previously discussed). We found that risk of burnout significantly decreased ($p < 0.01$) from 33.30 to 28.18; loneliness significantly decreased ($p < 0.001$) from 51.88 to 44.79, compassion satisfaction significantly increased ($p < 0.01$) from 93.13 to 97.53, and professional excellence

Table 4 Correlation matrix for survey scales

	Loneliness	Compassion Satisfaction	Total Risk of Burnout	Daily Spiritual Experience	Closeness to God	Marks of Professional Excellence
Loneliness						
Compassion Satisfaction	−0.904**					
Total Risk of Burnout	0.819**	−0.729**				
Daily Spiritual Experience	−0.612**	0.872**	−0.400			
Closeness to God	−0.456**	0.454**	−0.309	0.562**		
Professional Excellence	−0.757**	0.733**	−0.611**	0.715**	0.562**	
N	33	33	33	33	33	33

**$p<0.01$

significantly increased ($p<0.01$) from 68.03 to 71.06. Therefore, it appears that RPI was somewhat successful in accomplishing its goals.

To test the first assumption of RPI's logic model—that the participants' loneliness and compassion satisfaction significantly impact the risk of burnout they experience—we ran a bivariate correlation and regression with loneliness and compassion and risk of burnout at T_4. Modeling both scales at T_4 allows us to assess whether at the end of the program isolation and compassion satisfaction are still significantly correlating and predicting the risk of burnout. Table 4 illustrates that loneliness and risk of burnout have a strong, positive, statistically significant correlation—0.819 ($p<0.01$). In fact, not only are these two scales strongly correlated, but the R-square indicates that loneliness at T_4 explains 67 % of the variance in risk of burnout at T_4.[2]

Table 4 also demonstrates that risk of burnout and compassion satisfaction are also strongly, negatively, and statistically correlated (r) with each other ($r=-0.729$, R-square=0.531, $p<0.01$). To assess whether loneliness and compassion satisfaction significantly predict risk of burnout, we conducted two bivariate OLS regressions. The results are presented in Table 5. We found that both loneliness (Model 1) and compassion satisfaction (Model 2) significantly predict risk of burnout. Next, we conducted an OLS regression that includes both loneliness and level of compassion to assess which factor is a stronger predictor of risk of burnout. The standardized coefficient in the regression indicates that loneliness was the stronger predictor ($\beta=1.907$ vs. 0.274). However, we suspected that, given the very strong correlation between loneliness and compassion satisfaction ($r=0.904$, $p<0.001$), multicollinearity was present in the model, which explains why compassion satisfaction becomes nonsignificant in Model 3.

To conclude, loneliness has a strong, significant correlation with—and significantly predicts—the risk of burnout, while compassion satisfaction does not seem to have much explanatory power beyond what loneliness already contributes. Thus, RPI's logic model seems to correctly assume that loneliness does increase the risk of burnout. Consequently, if the goal of a social intervention were to reduce loneliness, reducing burnout would be a vital component of the program.

Daily spiritual experiences RPI's logic model assumes that pastors who enjoy rich daily spiritual experiences will exhibit less risk of burnout and loneliness and greater compassion satisfaction because gratitude to the divine serves as a protective factor against burnout and

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[2] We also ran analyses with all variables at T_0, and we found weaker correlations and standardized coefficients at T_0.

Table 5 OLS Regression of loneliness and compassion satisfaction on risk of burnout

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coeff.	SE	Beta	Coeff.	SE	Beta	Coeff.	SE	Beta
Loneliness	0.700***	0.087	0.819				0.927***	0.198	1.097
Compassion Satisfaction				−0.434***	0.073	−0.729	0.163	0.139	0.274
Constant	−3.422			69.942			−29.931		
Adj. R-square	0.661			0.516			0.711		
N	33			33			33		

***$p<0.001$

loneliness. To test this assumption, we conducted correlational and predictive analyses, shown in Table 4.[3] The correlation between daily spiritual experiences with risk of burnout is 0.400 (nonsignificant), with loneliness is −0.612 ($p<0.01$), and with compassion satisfaction is 0.872 ($p<0.01$). Table 6 presents the results of an OLS bivariate regression that indicates that loneliness does significantly reduce positive daily spiritual experiences.[4] Thus, if the program wanted to increase the positive daily spiritual experiences of participants, then decreasing loneliness would be a good starting point.

Professional excellence As stated previously, one of RPI's main goals was to foster professional excellence among its pastor-participants. We conducted analyses to determine which factors significantly correlate with and predict professional excellence. Table 4 illustrates that there is a negative, strong, significant correlation between loneliness and professional excellence ($r=−0.757$, $p<0.01$) and risk of burnout and professional excellence ($r=−0.611$, $p<0.01$). The R-square indicates that loneliness explains about 64 % of the variance in professional excellence, while risk of burnout explains 37 %. Daily spiritual experience and compassion satisfaction also have positive, strong, significant correlations with professional excellence ($r=0.715$, $p<0.01$ and $r=0.733$, $p<0.01$, respectively). Of all the factors, loneliness is most strongly correlated with professional excellence.

We conducted an OLS regression to understand which factor has more predictive power in explaining professional excellence (Table 7). The predictors are loneliness and daily spiritual experience.[5] The adjusted R-square for this model is 0.654, indicating that the two explanatory variables explain 65.4 % of the variance in professional excellence. The implication, then, is that an effective way to understand or increase professional excellence is to reduce loneliness and increase the quality of daily spiritual experience.

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[3] We excluded risk of burnout to avoid the possible moderation/mediation effect of loneliness on daily spiritual experiences, since we had already found evidence that loneliness significantly predicts risk of burnout.

[4] We ran two regression models. One model included risk of burnout on daily spiritual experiences and the second included risk of burnout and loneliness on daily spiritual experiences. Risk of burnout was not significant in either model, which is not surprising given that the correlation between risk of burnout and daily spiritual experience was nonsignificant.

[5] To test for multicollinearity problems in our model, we ran two models: one that included compassion satisfaction and loneliness (and daily spiritual experience) and one with without compassion satisfaction. We found (results not shown) that when we added compassion satisfaction, loneliness became statistically nonsignificant. In the second model, the model without compassion satisfaction, loneliness was statistically significant. These results indicate the presence of multicollinearity. Therefore, our best-fitting model excludes compassion satisfaction. We also exclude risk of burnout to avoid the possible moderation/mediation effect of loneliness on professional excellence.

Table 6 OLS Regression of loneliness on daily spiritual experiences

	Coeff.	SE	Beta
Loneliness	−0.616***	0.139	−0.612
Constant	102.866		
Adj. R-square	0.359		
N	34		

***p<0.001

The telephone interview

Stress, isolation, and privacy As expected, the analysis of the qualitative telephone interviews further supports the previously presented findings that feelings of stress and isolation are wide-spread among the pastor-respondents. At TI_1, several pastors reported that their isolation was compounded by feelings of competition with other pastors within their denomination and insecurity about their position within the church hierarchy. This insecurity may have its roots in the fact that, according to several pastors, rural posts are not seen as very desirable in many denominations.

In discussing the stressful aspects of rural pastoring two factors consistently emerge. Many of these pastors serve more than one rural congregation. This often demands that they spend extensive time on the road traveling and trying to integrate themselves into more than one community, a huge challenge in its own right. Adding to the burden is the fact that most of the congregations in these rural areas are older or "graying," with the majority of many respondents' congregations being over 75 years old. An unfortunate but natural consequence is having many funerals to preside over. Not only is this logistically stressful when working in several communities, but it is also emotionally taxing for the pastors as they perform grief counseling for the decedents' survivors.

Because many of the rural communities the pastors serve are quite small, our respondents reported a pronounced lack of privacy. The struggle to create balance and appropriate boundaries between home/personal life and work is all the more difficult when you cannot leave your house without seeing (and often necessarily interacting with) a parishioner. Isolation and lack of privacy are even more dominant themes for the female pastors in our study. Female pastors—particularly those who are single—feel the additional constraints imposed by community norms that govern gender practices.

Contact with peers and community RPI's logic model assumes that connecting with other rural pastors and with local community leaders will reduce isolation and burnout. Pastors were asked to reflect on the nature and degree of their communication with colleagues. Findings in

Table 7 OLS Regression of loneliness on professional excellence

	Coeff.	SE	Beta
Loneliness	−0.260***	0.065	−0.511
Daily Spiritual Experience	0.204**	0.065	0.402
Constant	67.530		
Adj. R-square	0.654		
N	34		

**p<0.01, ***p<0.001

this area suggested that RPI seemed to have a positive effect. For example, 72 % (TI$_1$) and 88 % (TI$_2$) of participants interviewed reported that being involved in RPI motivated them to seek out contact with other pastors in their area who were not participating in RPI, while 92 % (TI$_1$) and 84 % (TI$_2$) said that their level of contact with RPI pastors either increased or stayed the same after the first SI. All participants (100 %) reported that RPI has favorably affected their professional life (TI$_1$ and TI$_2$). When asked about these effects, they mentioned an increase in self-care, feeling supported and less isolated, and feeling affirmed in their decision to go into rural ministry—88 % (TI$_1$) and 76 % (TI$_2$) indicated that RPI had desirable effects on their personal life, as well. Common responses to specific questions regarding changes in personal life were less stress, "taking more time for myself," and "reading for pleasure."

Program's effects on ministry Pastors were asked to reflect on how participation in RPI had affected their ministry. The majority (more than 70 %) of the interviewees at TI$_2$ said the program had affected their thoughts on their relationship with the congregation, their actions with the congregation, their actions with congregants, and their thoughts on the relationship with the communities. However, when asked if the program had impacted actions they take in their communities, the group at TI$_2$ was divided into 60 % yes and 40 % no. So, for at least 20 % of the pastors, their *thoughts* about community changed but their *actions* in the community did not.

Discussion

From the outset of the Rural Pastor's Initiative it was clear that CNC's logic model correctly assumed the existence of several interrelated challenges in the lives of rural pastors. At the first SI, pastor-respondents reported suffering an appreciable degree of loneliness and isolation from their peers/the judicatory levels of their denominations. While some of these conditions improved over the course of the program, the participants continued to struggle with the structural and organizational barriers that shape daily life as a rural minister. From the beginning to the end of their involvement in RPI, pastors reported difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and incorporating self-care into their daily lives. Teaching self-care techniques comprised the centerpiece of the RPI intervention, and while scores improved over time, at the final data collection event pastors still reported feeling episodically overwhelmed, isolated, and unbalanced.

Feeling less lonely but still isolated

How is it that pastors reported feeling less left out and alone at the completion of the program yet still disconnected from others? Although several possible factors may explain this apparent contradiction, one stands out as most compelling: perhaps these pastors suffer provisional disconnection on a professional and collegial level. They are surrounded by people, as necessitated by the work they do, but they want a sense of connection to others who minister. They know that if push comes to shove, they can reach out and find someone with whom to talk and from whom to receive assistance, but reaching out requires a special effort, an exertion above and beyond the demands of daily ministerial life. And, as we have seen, they already feel overwhelmed to the point of near-burnout and report suffering an imbalance in their lives. Actually reaching out to others may require a level of initiative and energy not available to them on a daily basis.

The notion that pastors experience isolation from like-minded people is supported by data obtained from the questions about other clergy and the judicatory level of their denomination and their generally feeling "left out." In short, pastors experience persistent loneliness, which is

the strongest correlate and predictor of the variance in other indicators such as professional excellence—but they also enjoy a certain capacity for ameliorating their disconnectedness. Doing so, however, demands that they take special steps to gain meaningful companionship and support. While it appeared that these conditions improved over the program, the sense of disconnectedness from other clergy and the judicatory level of the church did not diminish. Those areas that did not change are those viewed as part and parcel of rural ministry: geographic isolation and the sacrifices it requires. These seem to be structural impediments to reduction of isolation and, in turn, the reduction of burnout.

While most aspects of compassion satisfaction increased during the course of the program, there was a reduction in three related aspects, namely, those domains pertaining to staff/church support. Participants reported being less satisfied with their ability to keep up with technology that could help them in their role and less satisfied with how well they stayed apprised of new ideas in the church, and they reported that at times their workload interfered with their need to help their congregants. As with the geographic isolation described above, this lack of organizational support may be just the way it is for rural pastors, but it appears to contribute to reduced compassion satisfaction.

When looking at the three measures together, an interesting pattern arises wherein it seems as though participants know they have a support system, but they tend not to tap into it for the purpose of engaging in self-care. Instead, they consistently engage in self-sacrificing behavior in order to serve their parishioners. Not only does this pattern of self-sacrifice have the potential to harm their relationships with congregants (by stimulating the accretion of compassion fatigue), but also the more they self-sacrifice despite available resources to engage in self-care, the faster those resources will disappear. If support systems remain underutilized and undernurtured, they will wither on the vine. There appear to be interlocking patterns between the pastor and congregants where everyone defers help-seeking behavior until a crisis emerges. This continual deferral of help-seeking ensures that issues are handled individually rather than through the building of ongoing systems of support.

Connection to God

Closeness to the divine clearly emerges as a factor in how these pastors deal with the daily tribulations of the ministry. While closeness to God is obviously crucial to good ministry, it does not appear to be enough. The same pastors who reported feeling extreme closeness to God also reported feeling a sense of isolation from those around them. A considerable share of the typical pastor's interpersonal communications involves helping people dealing with grief and trauma, especially in rural areas where the population comprises a disproportionate tier of elderly residents and also where such things as fatal farming accidents occur with some frequency. Counseling members of the congregation on these matters—as well as acting as the community's social service worker along with many other dimensions (see above) can be exceptionally taxing. A solitary connection to God is the resource that pastors use most often for "recuperating" from crisis intervention. This dynamic may in fact reinforce social isolation, which contributes to the experience of burnout.

Redefining self-care

From the time of the first survey, the data have strongly suggested that these pastors experience a severe imbalance with regard to their professional and personal lives. Pastors report not taking enough time out for fellowship with colleagues or for recharging their own batteries through study and self-regeneration. They report working too hard for their own good and not

being able to keep their ministry and their personal lives separated in a healthy manner. Even though it is clear that they enjoy being pastors, this imbalance, which always tips in favor of the work side, has the potential to exhaust them and create burnout.

From the outset, RPI's goal was to help pastors enhance their work lives by assisting them in achieving greater balance between their personal lives and their ministries. This group of pastors demonstrates a high degree of closeness to and spiritual experience of the divine, and they tend to enjoy high levels of compassion satisfaction. But they also are overwhelmed by the obligations attendant to a congregational ministry. Moreover, they tend to suffer from their overcommitment and lack of balance in isolation. Attempting to alleviate rather than add to this burden has been a central goal of RPI's intervention.

The scores for self-care questions that asked pastors how often they took time away for prayer, Bible study, and theological reflection all increased over the course of the program. While this is certainly positive, these are all activities that can be done in solitude and therefore may fail to ameliorate the sense of isolation these pastors reported feeling. Despite the fact that "maintaining a healthy balance," "taking time for self-care," and "taking time out for fellowship" were the focus of the program, these three items received the lowest scores. This seems to indicate the pastors' self-defined "need" to redefine self-care as a mode of work, as opposed to a luxury. In order to have the concepts of balance, connectedness, and self-care take root among pastors, a group of people who, by their very nature, are committed to self-sacrifice, the concepts must be defined as "work." The potential for this dynamic to become a self-reinforcing cycle of heightened burnout risk is evident.

We observed significant increases in terms of maintaining a healthy balance and self-care, although these scores did not start out as high as did the more internal methods. Overall, the most consistent sources of energy and rejuvenation for our sample are internal. While these internal sources are clearly valuable and important, the structural and organizational stressors must not be overlooked. While external factors are less within the realm of pastors' influence, they are still important contributing factors to burnout and isolation.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article illustrates RPI's partial effectiveness. We assert that RPI's logic model accurately assumed the existence of considerable risk factors in rural pastors' personal and professional lives. Baseline (T_0) scores on psychosocial indicators show that the pastor-participants indeed suffered from a substantial degree of isolation, burnout, and fatigue. On the more protective side, however, they also scored highly on daily spiritual experience and closeness to God. In short, what we have found is that these pastors experienced onerous external demands that they tried to accommodate and resolve through introversion, primarily by cultivating greater spiritual reserves. However, they rarely engaged in self-care that was not related directly to spirituality. This may be a result of the way they think about self-care. To these pastors, who believe themselves to be overworked and unbalanced in their professional lives, self-care is viewed as self-indulgence, an added luxury to life that they simply cannot afford due to the external demands placed on them. One possible programmatic solution to this dilemma is to alter the program slightly to assist pastors in viewing self-care differently, more as a mode of pastoral work, as a stepping-stone to enhancing their leadership abilities, as a method for improving their skills for relating more effectively to their congregations.

While these pastors may or may not be representative of rural ministers more generally, we can cautiously use these data and findings as one small step toward understanding a group of "helping" professionals on whom very little research has been conducted. Clearly this article

represents one attempt to better understand the challenges facing rural pastors and the resources they marshal to accomplish their multiple, competing demands. This is particularly important in light of recent transformations in rural life that have left pastors specifically—and churches more generally—in the position of being one of the few viable, stable resources for community members who need help dealing with said transformations.

Another central argument for extending our research enterprise is that this project lacked measures for gauging the more distal impacts of RPI. On an individual level, we have assessed how participants changed, but change at the individual level, while necessary, is insufficient for achieving program goals. The main program goal is to foment progressive community action among the churches represented by the participants. At this point, our data strictly permit an examination of pastors' change at the individual level. We cannot make any claims about other key levels of change, including the levels of the congregation and the community. How RPI might have propelled change at these levels—via intervention with individual pastors and the networks that may have emerged amongst them—remains unknown but worthy of further investigation. Our future research—more qualitative and ethnographic—will remedy this.

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