

Always On: Clergy Burnout and Sustainable Leadership in the Digitally Mediated Church

William J. Triplett

PhD, Hampton University School of Religion, Hampton, VA, USA
william.triplett@my.hampton.edu

ABSTRACT: Normalization of the hybrid ministry has essentially transformed the pastoral leadership expectation in the modern life of the congregation. Churches are becoming more virtual and, at the same time, more physical, increasing the likelihood of engagement and the emotional, cognitive, and organizational pressures on clergy. The pastoral leaders are expected to be constantly visible, accessible, and responsive, now via livestream services, social media, online counseling, online discipleship, and online communities. In this paper, the author will explore the role of digitally mediated ministry space in encouraging clergy burnout and leadership drain. The study draws on the psychology of burnout, scholarly work on clergy health, digital religion, and technology ethics to present the Authority Compression concept, which identifies the structural narrowing of reflective and restorative leadership space due to the ongoing demands of digital visibility. The paper also offers a Sustainable Digital Pastoral Leadership Framework based on the theological construction of boundaries, distributed authority, digital rhythms of Sabbath, and humanistic governance of technology. This paper postulates that clergy burnout cannot be seen as a matter of personal frailty or inability to cope effectively, but rather a systemic effect of digitally-hypersped ministry systems that undermine the ability to recover and blur the lines between professional and personal life. The conclusion of the paper is that sustainable hybrid ministry requires organizational recalibration that emphasizes pastoral humanity, institutional limits, and the long-term sustainability of leadership in digitally mediated congregational ecosystems.

KEYWORDS: Clergy Burnout, Hybrid Ministry, Digital Religion, Pastoral Leadership, Organizational Sustainability, Emotional Labor, Digital Church

Introduction

The online congregational revolution has forever changed the form and demands of pastoral leadership. The churches are gradually operating in hybrid ministry settings where worship, teaching, pastoral care, discipleship, and community engagement take place simultaneously in both physical and online spaces. Although digital technology has broadened the boundaries of the ecclesial and enabled new forms of congregational involvement, it has also increased the emotional, cognitive, and organizational burdens on clergy.

The fast-tracked normalization of livestream worship, social media ministry, online counseling, virtual prayer groups, and online pastoral participation has radically redefined the role of the pastor. Clergy are now expected to be visible and accessible at all times across various communication platforms while retaining conventional pastoral roles (Hove, 2024). This is due to continued connectedness, which has led to the further blurring of the distinction between work and personal time for recovery.

Pastoral leadership traditionally had inherent rhythms of disengagement between its public ministry and its inner reflection. Nevertheless, the digitally mediated ministry spaces are gradually closing these boundaries through forming the expectation of always-responsiveness and constant relational accessibility. Attendees frequently interact with the

clergy via text messaging, social media, live streams, and other online communication channels around the clock, depriving them of time to recover psychologically and reflect.

Simultaneously, clergy work within larger organizational and cultural structures that are influenced by technological acceleration and the visibility of performance. Digital platforms reward immediacy, continuous engagement, and openness to the public, and often place pastors in systems that prioritize responsiveness over contemplation (Riley & Critchlow, 2025). As a result, this puts increased pressure on the leaders of these ministries to be constantly connected so that they can maintain relevance and relational connection with the congregation.

This paper will argue that clergy burnout in digitally mediated church settings should not be viewed simply as an individual psychological problem but as a structural and organizational phenomenon influenced by hybrid ministry systems. Drawing on the psychology of burnout, digital religion studies, research on clergy health, and technology ethics, the paper proposes an alternative concept, Authority Compression, to explain how the reflective leadership space is compressed by the continuous need to stay visible. The research also suggests a Sustainable Digital Pastoral Leadership Framework to help stabilize the clergy and the organization in long-term sustainability in the context of hybrid congregations.

Burnout Theory

One of the most important occupational and psychological problems that has emerged in the leadership of modern clergy is burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) define burnout as having three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the depletion of emotional and psychological resources resulting from long-term exposure to stress (Alexaki et al., 2025). Depersonalization is characterized by emotional dissociation and a lack of empathy toward individuals served, as well as lower levels of personal achievement, reflecting a decline in feelings of professional competence and meaningfulness (Wilkhoos et al., 2024).

Notably, burnout is not merely the consequence of personal weakness, lack of spirituality, or bad personal discipline. Instead, burnout results from structural incongruities between organizational requirements and human adaptive capabilities (Khammissa et al., 2022). Chronic accumulation of stress and psychological depletion is a result of too much work, no time to rest, emotional load, role ambiguity, and lack of organizational support.

In the pastoral ministry setting, the demands of clergy work are unique, emotional, and relationship-related, which exacerbates burnout. Clergy continuously offer emotional support in times of grief, illness, conflict, trauma, and crisis, while also addressing the demands of the organization, congregational demands, and spiritual leadership requirements (Tice et al., 2025). When emotional work is coupled with vocational identity, it increases susceptibility to fatigue and job burnout. Stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue are found to be high in populations of clergy. Doolittle (2008) discovered that unhealthy behavioral patterns and chronic overwork play a significant role in clergy burnout. Also, Jackson-Jordan (2013) found that organizational support systems and structured recovery practices can significantly impact clergy well-being and resilience.

Many of the sacrificial leadership expectations that discourage boundary-setting and normalize chronic self-neglect are also theologically internalized by many clergy. The culture of ministry, where constant availability is equated with spiritual faithfulness, can inadvertently support unhealthy work-related habits that undermine long-term sustainability (Alshahrani, 2022). Clergy burnout is therefore not only a psychological phenomenon but also an organizational, cultural, and theological problem that is entrenched in ministry systems.

Digital Ministry and Authority Compression

The growth of digital ministry spaces has heightened pre-existing strains in the pastor's leadership context, due to the rapid pace of communication and the constrained reflective space in leadership. In this paper, the term 'Authority Compression' is introduced to refer to the contraction of the space for contemplation, rest, and decision-making by unceasing demands for digital visibility and accessibility (Rankin, 2024).

Pastoral authority in conventional ministry contexts was frequently mediated through scheduled interactions such as worship services, office sessions, hospital visits, and community events. These rhythms facilitated a time of disengagement between these ministry activities among the people and individual meditation (Johnston et al., 2022). However, the situation has radically transformed as digital ecosystems, which create an endless line of communication and interaction, are introduced.

The use of online ministerial tools, social media, live stream services, messaging apps, and social media platforms enables congregants to reach the clergy 24/7. Pastors are increasingly under pressure to promptly respond to emails, direct messages, online prayers, and social media communications and to maintain a consistent online presence on multiple platforms (Iheanacho et al., 2025). This continuous connectedness leaves no opportunities for psychological aloofness and emotional recovery.

Authority Compression is, in fact, not only the proliferation of workload but also the re-creation of pastoral leadership in practice. Clergy are no longer in a predetermined leadership role, but are part of digitally accelerated relational systems that are more apparent and whose power is performative at all times.

There are also new forms of emotive labor arising from digital visibility. Generally, clergy are now forced to endure unavoidable criticism from the community, pressure from algorithmic visibility, online conflict, and the culture of comparison in congregations. In a more general sense, algorithms are not neutral communication mechanisms but systems that are premised on an incentive to remain continuously engaged, visible, and behaviorally captured to obtain rewards (Serttaş et al., 2025). As a result, pastors tend to work in technological settings that are structurally designed to be optimally effective at extracting attention rather than supporting human sustainability.

This digitally mediated ministry situation is a major factor in cognitive fatigue, emotional saturation, and a lack of contemplative ability. The loss of reflective space in the long term weakens pastoral resilience and impairs the capacity to reflectively exercise leadership, spiritual sensitivity, and to recover emotionally.

Boundary Erosion

Amongst the biggest impacts of hybrid ministry settings is the blurring of the line between personal and work life. Digital communication technology obliterates the historical separation between the space of public ministry and the space of private recovery, and thus, the situation arises in which the clergy are psychologically engaged in ministry duties even when they are supposed to rest.

Hybrid ministry tends to create the expectation of constant availability. Congregants can also reach out to clergy at odd hours (late at night) by sending text messages, using social media, or joining digital prayer groups, assuming 24/7 accessibility enabled by digital communication tools (Sipahutar et al., 2025). These technologies expand the range of pastoral care and make it more available, but on the other hand, they reduce the possibility of emotional detachment and of disengagement in a restful way.

Boundary erosion is especially perilous, as recovery and psychological detachment are key to sustainable leadership performance. The human stress systems are designed to cycle through activation and recovery to maintain emotional balance, mental clarity, and

good health (Yulita et al., 2021). In the absence of sufficient rest, chronic stress builds up and leads to fatigue, emotional burnout, and low resilience.

Moreover, the clergy often undergo vocational identity fusion, in which personal identity becomes indistinguishable from ministerial role performance. This fusion is heightened in digitally mediated environments, where online technology promotes the constant display of ministry identity (Rankin, 2024). The pastors might also be compelled to be spiritually accessible, emotionally supportive, and publicly active at all times, leaving them little time for real rest and renewal.

As a result, a sustainable ministry must have deliberate structural measures that guard against the boundary between ministry involvement and individual recovery. Without these precautions, digitally mediated ministry spaces are likely to lead to chronic affective saturation and depleted leadership.

Sustainable Digital Pastoral Leadership Framework

This paper presents a Sustainable Digital Pastoral Leadership Framework that aims to help clergy members become more resilient and sustainably long-term in a hybrid ministry setting. The model comprises four integrated dimensions: theological boundary-building, distributed models of authority, digital rhythms of Sabbath, and human-centered governance of technology.

Theological boundary construction underscores the significance of reframing boundaries not as an obstacle to ministry effectiveness but as theological practices required to sustain sustainable leadership (Thinane, 2025). Clergy should realize that human finitude is not an attempt to fail at faith but a key attribute of an embodied ministry. Maintaining healthy boundaries is the key to emotional health, strong relationships, and a sustainable vocation.

The distributed authority models also reduce leadership overload by decentralizing ministry duties among teams, volunteers, and collaborative leadership frameworks (Das & Dixit, 2024). The high relational and organizational expectations placed on clergy are often the focus of hybrid ministry setups. The parallel leadership systems enable emotional labor to be transferred and devise more sustainable organizational systems.

Digital Sabbath rhythms are optional periods of technology withdrawal to re-establish contemplative space, emotional rest, and spiritual renewal (Paris et al., 2022). Such rhythms can incorporate set communication-off times, scheduled online downtime, or company guidelines restricting after-hours online demands.

Lastly, human-focused technology governance concerns the ethical design and application of digital ministry technologies (Mišić, 2021). Churches need to consider whether digital systems facilitate human flourishing or bring about unhealthy pressures of visibility and accessibility. Technology is supposed to support pastoral humanity, not destroy it. A combination of these dimensions offers a system for recalibrating ministry systems to achieve sustainability, resilience, and human-centered leadership.

Conclusion

The emergence of the hybrid ministry has forever changed the pastoral leadership in modern-day congregational life. Although digital technologies have increased the possibilities for connection, discipleship, and outreach, they have also heightened emotional labor, compressed the reflective leadership space, and blurred the boundaries between ministry and personal life.

This paper argued that clergy burnout in a digitally mediated church setting is a structural and organizational concern, not just an individual psychological one. The

Authority Compression concept stresses that the endless visibility and accessibility require fewer opportunities for rest, reflection, and emotional sustainability.

The proposed Sustainable Digital Pastoral Leadership Framework in the current study offers a holistic perspective on the sustainability of the clergy by establishing theological boundaries, forming distributed authority, establishing rhythms of technology and Sabbath, and governing technology, with the human aspect central. Lastly, the life of the digitally mediated congregations will not depend on the extent of technological sophistication but rather on the restoration of pastoral humanity in the increasingly speeding-up ministry systems.

Futuristic churches should therefore prioritize frameworks that can help shape long-term clergy resilience, emotional well-being, and leadership sustainability. Sustainable ministry does not merely happen; it is a question of design, theological wisdom, and institutional stewardship.

References

- Alexaki, P.-S., Antonopoulou, H., Gkintoni, E., Adamopoulos, N., & Halkiopoulos, C. (2025). Psychological dimensions of professional burnout in special education: A cross-sectional behavioral data analysis of emotional exhaustion, personal achievement, and depersonalization. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(9), 1420. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22091420>
- Alshahrani, S. T. (2022). Impact of self-sacrificial leadership on organizational engagement: A psychological mechanism of job satisfaction. *International Journal of Organizational Leadership*, 11(Issue 1), 112–126. <https://doi.org/10.33844/ijol.2022.60622>
- Das, N., & Dixit, M. (2024). Distributed leadership models enhancing collaborative decision making in educational institutions. *Stallion Journal for Multidisciplinary Associated Research Studies*, 3(1), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.55544/sjmars.3.1.3>
- Doolittle, B. R. (2008). The impact of behaviors upon burnout among parish-based clergy. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 49(1), 88–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-008-9217-7>
- Hove, R. (2024). A hybrid approach to spiritual care: The impact of social media in Pastoral Care Spaces. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, (105(4)). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.423>
- Iheanacho, I., Anyanwu, B., Mbiereagu, U., Ofurum, C. I., & Etumnu, E. (2025). Usage of digital platforms in promoting pastoral communication in Ecclesiastical province of owerri. *Skhid*, 7(1), 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.21847/2411-3093.2025.714>
- Jackson-Jordan, E. A. (2013). Clergy burnout and resilience: A review of the literature. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications*, 67(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154230501306700103>
- Johnston, E. F., Eagle, D. E., Headley, J., & Holleman, A. (2022). Pastoral Ministry in unsettled times: A qualitative study of the experiences of clergy during the covid-19 pandemic. *Review of Religious Research*, 64(2), 375–397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-021-00465-y>
- Khammissa, R. A. G., Nemutandani, S., Feller, G., Lemmer, J., & Feller, L. (2022). Burnout phenomenon: Neurophysiological factors, clinical features, and aspects of management. *Journal of International Medical Research*, 50(9). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03000605221106428>
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>
- Mišić, J. (2021). Ethics and governance in the Digital age. *European View*, 20(2), 175–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858211061793>
- Paris, L., Morris, J., & Bailey, J. (2022). The digital sabbath and the digital distraction: Arts-based Research Methods for new audiences. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5203>
- Rankin, J. L. (2024). Implications of digital church for Christian leaders. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2408868>
- Riley, L., & Critchlow, K. (2025). Digital transformation strategies used by church leaders to increase revenues and meet budgetary goals. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 13(05), 3679–3696. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2025.135198>
- Serttaş, A., Gürkan, H., & Dere, G. (2025). Synthetic social alienation: The role of algorithm-driven content in shaping digital discourse and User Perspectives. *Journalism and Media*, 6(3), 149. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6030149>

- Sipahutar, M., Gultom, R. A. T., & Damanik, D. (2025). Digital Theology and social media in Church Ministry. *Socio-Economic and Humanistic Aspects for Township and Industry*, 3(2), 325–333. <https://doi.org/10.59535/sehati.v3i2.500>
- Thinane, J. S. (2025). Reframing Tentmaking Ministry: A theological–ethical critique of contemporary practice in South Africa. *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya*, 10(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v10i2.39920>
- Tice, L., Salgado, G., Johnston, E., Nascimento, B., Lee Bo-Hyeong, J., Proeschold-Bell, R. J., & Eagle, D. (2025). The weight of the Yoke: A qualitative analysis of the stressors for clergy across a mental health continuum. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 28(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2025.2536533>
- Wilkhoo, H. S., Islam, A. W., Reji, F., Sanghvi, L., Potdar, R., & Solanki, S. (2024). Depersonalization-derealization disorder: Etiological mechanism, diagnosis and management. *Discoveries*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.15190/d.2024.09>
- Yulita, Y., Idris, M. A., & Abdullah, S. S. (2021). Psychosocial safety climate improves psychological detachment and relaxation during off-job recovery time to reduce emotional exhaustion: A multilevel shortitudinal study. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 63(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12789>