

CENTER FOR FAMILY CARE

Toward a Better Understanding of Our Priests and Presvyteres

by George Stavros, M.Div., Ph.D.

A Day in the Life

Fr. John wakes up early on Friday morning to the sounds of his three children moving about the house, asking for breakfast, crying over a missing pair of socks, and the youngest, wanting to climb into bed with him for her typical early morning snuggle. Fr. John notices several things this morning.

The first is how unusually draining these interactions with his children feel today and how much he wishes his wife would simply take care of everything with the children and get them off to school. He doesn't always feel that way. The second is how he can't seem to shake free from the impact of his conversation with the parish council from the previous night, when they voted against using \$200 in parish funds for a substitute priest during the second week of his family vacation, asking him rather to return home for a day in the middle of his vacation to cover that weekend's liturgical services. The third is how anxious he is about the coming day in which he plans to make pastoral visits at the local hospital, meet with a parish couple with young children who have a history of domestic violence, and perform Trisagion prayers at the wake of a parishioner who died suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack.

In addition, he will be taking a phone

call from his Metropolitan who left him a message the previous evening saying he had been receiving complaints from parishioners regarding the recent change in the start time for the parish's religious education program on Sundays.

To make time for this, Fr. John has already cancelled his annual physical with his doctor, which he had scheduled six months ago, and he is considering asking his wife to attend their kindergarten son's open house without him.

Vulnerable Healers

While it is unlikely that all of these things could happen in one day of ministry, these types of experiences are a regular part of the daily lives of the priests and presvyteres of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. And, they are the kinds of stresses within ministry that put increasingly intense pressure on the emotional and spiritual well-being of our Greek Orthodox clergy and their families.

Pastoral ministry can be extraordinarily rewarding and fulfilling. And, pastoral ministry is difficult. This reality is supported by a growing body of social science research. Drs. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Sarah LeGrand, as part of the Clergy Health Initiative at Duke University, found that clergy suffer from higher rates of hypertension, obesity, depression, arthritis, and asthma than do most other Americans. Multiple studies across numer-

ous Christian communities show clergy are frequently stressed by many factors, including long work hours, difficult work-family boundaries, interpersonal conflicts within their parishioners, excessive paperwork, abrupt relocations, and perceived lack of support from their communities.

United Methodist minister Dr. Andrew Weaver and his colleagues found that clergy are frequently the first helping professionals contacted when mental health, marriage and family, and a variety of other problems arise. Our clergy are often expected to provide support, strength, wisdom, and healing across an incredible range of life problems and crises, often with limited actual training or ongoing guidance in counseling. They are expected to be present, competent, and engaged in the context of the most intense and difficult life situations experienced within our communities.

From Stress to Traumatic Stress

There are identifiable circumstances that tend to take the largest toll on the well-being of our priests, presvyteres, and clergy families, moving them from being stressed to traumatically stressed.

Clergy and clergy spouses who are regularly exposed to interactions with parishioners and parish leaders characterized by aggression, hostility, and control tend to be more vulnerable to higher levels of emotional suffering.

Priests and presvyteres faced with regular implicit and explicit threats to the stability of their positions and to the possibility of being removed and relocated tend to be more vulnerable to higher levels of emotional suffering.

Finally, the capacity for empathy and loving concern that characterizes the vast majority our clergy and presvyteres, especially their willingness to be open to and engaged with the suffering of others as part of their ministry, tends to make them more vulnerable to higher levels of emotional suffering.

Trauma Affects Everyone

One particularly important consequence of the kinds of stresses listed above is an all-too-common situation in which clergy and clergy families must shift to a self-protective or defensive stance in relation to their parishioners. In many instances when priests and presvyteres become emotionally and physically overwhelmed by their situation in ministering to a community, they naturally respond by withdrawing emotionally, becoming overly focused on particular parishioners or aspects of ministry, or avoiding conflictual situations and parishioners altogether.

Under these conditions, a priest can often be criticized or judged as "not caring" or "not doing his job," and a presvytera can be seen as "lacking faithfulness or commitment." When parish leadership and church hierarchy grow concerned and potentially critical of the priest, an overwhelmed priest and/or presvytera can inevitably experience this as a lack of support and protection. Under these circumstances, the trauma and suffering spiral can take on a life of its own, usually with negative and destabilizing outcomes both for the clergy family and the community.

Resilience is a Product of Relationships and Support

A recent study by the Danielsen Institute at Boston University found that many clergy and clergy spouses are strug-

gling deeply with ministerial stress, with over half of participants reporting feeling "overwhelmed, fearful, or helpless" in the face of events or experiences in their ministry and nearly half reporting clinically relevant trauma-related and mental health symptoms. Trauma symptoms are associated with an increase in emotional suffering, ministry burnout, and difficulties in coping with everyday life.

At the same time, there are many clergy and clergy spouses who continue to grow and thrive in the midst of these considerable stresses and challenges of ministry. It is imperative that our Church leadership and communities identify, implement, and make more readily available the resources required in creating a culture of resilience amongst our clergy families. While any one person's or family's needs for building resilience will vary, there are identifiable patterns in what helps in this effort.

The first is the power of healthy relationships to be vehicles of restoration and resilience in the lives of our clergy, presvyteres, and their families. This resonates with our Orthodox Christian theological tradition that teaches that God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has always existed, and always exists in loving, dynamic relationship. Greek Orthodox priests and presvyteres who are less isolated and more connected to core relationships with family, friends, peers, and spiritual elders tend to experience a kind of protection from the more corrosive emotional and relational effects of stress.

According to the Danielsen Institute study, the marital relationship between priest and presvytera holds a special place in providing this relational buffer and protection.

In addition, ecclesiastical structures in the form of hierarchical support, financial stability, healthy rhythms of work and rest, and continuing education and training are another set of factors which build up resilience and emotional and spiritual protection from the destructive personal, spiritual, and familial consequences of trauma.

Conclusion

Priests and presvyteres tend to be idealized by many parishioners and are expected to be models of spiritual health and strength within their communities. Greek Orthodox priests and presvyteres face considerable challenges, therefore, in finding safe places to be authentic about their own spiritual struggles and their need for healing and support as they carry out the relentless and difficult work of pastoral ministry.

It is in response to these realities that the Archdiocese is advancing an ongoing, serious discussion intended to identify the needs of its clergy families and to respond with discernment and love to those needs. By building a culture of resilience and relational support within our clergy families and parish communities, the Church moves closer to fulfilling its role of being a healing and hospitable vessel of good news to a broken, traumatized world.

George Stavros is the executive director of the Danielsen Institute at Boston University. His teaching and research interests are in psychotherapy, psychotherapy training, and religion and spirituality in clinical practice. He is a licensed psychologist and holds a Master of Divinity from Holy Cross School of Theology and a Ph.D. from Boston University.

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FAMILY CONNECTION

WHAT IS THE CENTER FOR FAMILY CARE?

GROWING FAITHFUL FAMILIES IN CHRIST

In collaboration with the Metropolises and parishes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the mission of the Center for Family Care is to equip families with the resources to “affirm the importance of the family as a blessed gift of God and to address the specific needs of families as they try to live in a very challenging culture and world” (Archbishop Demetrios of America).



WHAT IS FAMILY?



In the traditional sense, family is comprised of the parents and children in a household all brought together by Divine grace—the “domestic church”. Additionally, it must be understood that the Church—the Body

of Christ—establishes a broader dimension of family through the very real spiritual relationship established through the baptism that unites all of its members. We are all one family in Christ!

SO THEN WHAT IS FAMILY MINISTRY?

Sound family ministry is, in reality, a systematic ethos of how a parish understands ministry. It is people-centered—not program-centered. The church community that embraces a family ministry approach:

- engages people at all ages and stages of life.
- empowers all members of the Orthodox Christian family to become active participants in the life of the Church.
- encourages families to “drive” the Church home so that their faith is lived out in day-to-day life.
- nurtures the parishioners’ relationship with Christ and one another.
- is aware of resources in the community that assist parishioners in need (mental health, elder care, social support, etc.).

Family ministry can be “messy.” Yet these inherent difficulties are acknowledged and, in a sense, embraced as opportunities for grace. It is not the goal of family ministry to create “perfect” families, but rather to promote church communities where family members can be welcomed with support, fellowship, and unconditional love—for the purpose of their salvation.



HOW TO LEARN MORE AND GET INVOLVED

- **Listen** to our Faith and Family podcast at www.myocn.net. Our summer parenting series includes topics on fatherhood, building independence, and preparing your child for confession.
- **Watch** our webinars (online workshops). Archived topics include parenting, marriage, domestic violence, and Internet safety, to name a few. In September, attend a webinar with cardiologist Trent Orfanos where he will speak about the connection between our spiritual heart and our physical heart. Invite some friends and watch together! See our website for details.
- **Discuss** our forums, “Stress and Resilience in the Family” and “Family and Faith: Building Generations of Faith” from the 2014 Clergy-Laity Congress.
- **Read** our family connection newsletter on the theme of philanthropy and learn about some really awesome activities and programs you and your family can participate in to build a compassionate spirit in your home.
- **Host** a *Family Outreach Sunday* in your parish. For more information visit our website.
- **Share** what you are doing with your families at home to live out the Orthodox Christian faith! Share your pictures with us by mentioning us on Facebook (@centerforfamilycare), using #familyfaith, or emailing us at familycare@goarch.org.
- **Sign up** for our Family Link Email Ministry to keep informed of new resources coming out of our office.
- **Like** us on Facebook to also keep connected and share with others.
- **Call** us to plan a retreat, find a resource, or brainstorm for your ministry.
- **Visit** our website at www.family.goarch.org to learn more about the above resources as well as other articles, events, and activities for families and parishes.

PRAYER FOR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD FAMILIES

I pray to You, God, for the families of my neighborhood. Visit them. Throw their troubles out of them and bring hope. Make the daily cares that devour the heart disappear. Present solutions to life’s problems. Settle the disturbed relationships among members of different families whom I know or I don’t know. O Lord, remind the people of our area that You exist, that You are a strong and loving Protector. Keep away, Lord, anything that causes the disappearance of peace from souls, and the escape of sleep from our eyes. Stay a little while more tonight in our neighborhood. Spread peace along with the night. Let the harshness of the day and its struggles not spread over the night too, God.

– Archbishop Demetrios of America, *Speaking to God, Volume II*



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