

## Engage360 Episode 146 | Resilience, Stress, and Wellbeing in Pastoral Ministry; Drs. Kristen Kansiewicz and Michell Temple

[00:00:00] **Don Payne:** Hey friends, this is Engage360 coming to you from Denver Seminary. Glad you have joined us. I'm Don Payne, your host for this episode. It's really no surprise that the role of pastor can be extremely stressful. And for that reason, among others, Pastoral sustainability is a really big concern. In the scriptures, Hebrews 13, 17, points to the importance of pastoral leadership being a joy and not a burden. And it also implies how detrimental it can be for people to have pastors whose work is a burden. So, if you happen to be a pastor who knows.

Something of that stress. And especially if you question whether you have the resilience for sustainability in that calling, then this conversation is going to be for you. Or if you happen to have a pastor, which I hope applies to everyone, this will be for you as well. So, we're grateful in this episode to have a call.

Conversation with Dr. Michelle Temple from our counseling faculty and with Dr. Kristin Kansiewicz, who is a counseling professor at Evangel University. Welcome both of you. Glad to have you here.

[00:01:26] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** Thank you.

[00:01:27] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** so much.

[00:01:28] **Don Payne:** So, the two of you have conducted some very important. research on the stress, the resilience, the psychological wellbeing experienced by both pastors and their spouses. And we're very interested to hear what you've learned in that research. Now I have a number of specific questions for you, but first, why don't you give us a sort of high-level overview of this research that you've conducted?

[00:01:55] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I actually the study that Michelle and I worked on looked at Baptist pastors and their spouses. Prior to that as part of my dissertation work, I did a national study of Assemblies of God pastors. I didn't look at spouses there, that was just looking at those that were in a pastoral role. And so, that dissertation project came out of. Some conversations within the Assemblies of God. Our General Superintendent, Doug Clay, had established a National Mental Health Committee that was specifically tasked with looking at clergy wellbeing and mental health. Of course, there's still work that needs to be done on de stigmatizing mental congregations, but specifically you know, Doug Clay had expressed that he was very concerned about, Pastors Mental Health.

That was all the way back in 2018. We've done some work since then, not only research, but some initiatives that the that the Assemblies of God has been working on as well to increase just the resources that are available for pastors. So, that's kind of how I got into this clergy wellness. My husband and I also have 20 years of ministry experience, so we've lived it and then started to explore it.

So, I can speak to kind of the findings of that study as well as the Baptist pastors and honestly the findings are very similar for both. So, it kind of helps us see clergy as a whole population. Now, there are some differences perhaps. When you're comparing protestant clergy with let's say catholic priests or something like that Their lives are very different.

But on the whole, you know, we can understand quite a bit about pastors and their mental

[00:03:32] **Don Payne:** Okay. Even across denominations.

[00:03:34] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Um,

[00:03:35] **Don Payne:** Michelle, how about the spouses?

[00:03:38] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** Thank you. So, I'm interested in the wellbeing of spouses of pastors. The particular areas of interest in this study were looking at how spouses were maintaining their psychological wellbeing. And as Don, as you mentioned, the role of the pastor is stressful. It can be right as well as meaningful and the research is pretty clear that spouses experience some of those same stressors as their husbands, typically husbands, not always. And in our particular study we did have All women as spouses and we what we found in that particular study that we could look at certain things, self-reports around stress of spouses, this thing that's called emotional exhaustion of spouses. We looked at their resilience and we can talk about that more a little later as well as We were really curious about their satisfaction in the ministry, right?

Because there's often a leadership role in some way the female wife has in the church in which her husband pastors. And we basically found that depending upon the combination of those experiences, women who are spouses have different levels of leadership. of psychological well being. And that actually encompasses more than one thing. It includes things like how they relate with others, so their relationships. It includes their feeling of mastery in their environment. And as a wife of a minister of music, so someone who is in a ministry role being able to navigate church spaces. It is really important for a spouse. It also includes personal growth this idea of autonomy as a spouse. So there are various other elements around of how we define specifically. Psychological well being and that's what we found

[00:06:01] **Don Payne:** This is fascinating. You mentioned, Michelle relationships for spouses. And I would assume that impacts relationships both within and outside a congregation.

[00:06:11] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** it does it even influences relationships with families One of the things we were interested in the study was the number of close friends or close relationships that spouses and their pastors reported in the spouses study interestingly What we were trying to? The number of close friends wasn't influential, however, what I can say is that there was, it is still important in how they, in particular, perceived, you're gonna, this is gonna blow your mind, their relationship, their daily experiences of spirituality. So if we, if we think about we are made to be in relationship, right? The spouses in particular deeply need close relationships. Not a lot, so I'm not talking about five, seven, eight friends. Most of them had an average of two friends, just two close relationships.

[00:07:24] **Don Payne:** Are these ones who were more satisfied and more

[00:07:27] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** that's, oh yes, where I was going. They actually were more satisfied. They had higher levels of psychological well being

overall. And they were able to manage some of the stressors related to ministry demands.

[00:07:44] **Don Payne:** Where, did you find any pattern of whether those close relationships were inside their congregation or outside their congregation? Okay.

[00:07:53] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** a great question. We did not ask that specifically about the location of those close friends. Honestly as I think about the research we reviewed, what it really talked about was a Some combination. It could be in the church. It could be outside of the church. It could be family, not necessarily the spouse, but someone else that was that person that could provide empathy, compassion, someone they could be vulnerable with,

someone who is non judgmental, those

sorts of characteristics when we talk about what it means to have a close friend.

[00:08:34] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Which I'll just interject

for one second that with pastors actually the number of close friends variable was significant on every well being variable that we tested and so things like depression, spiritual well being, burnout, even a willingness to seek professional counseling for themselves if they thought they might need it. All of those things were directly impacted, you know, straight on a trend line. So zero to four or more close friends, it kind of had this trend to it. So all of the things like let's say depression is highest when you have zero Close friends. And actually, I was looking at the numbers again recently, if you had zero close friends, this is the pastors that's separate from the spouses, it might be different for that population. The pastors had a mean of seven. on what we know as the PHQ 9 scale, the patient health questionnaire. So that puts them in diagnosable major depression at a

mild level. If you have one friend, it goes down a little bit closer to five, which is still that line. You're still diagnosable as depressed, but mild. And then once you hit two friends or more, it keeps going down. By the time you hit four friends, the mean score is 3. 5. So it's cut in half. from if you have zero friends. So that's just one example of how each number, like each addition of a close friend actually keeps improving your outcomes. So it's a pretty big deal for pastors to

[00:10:10] **Don Payne:** that, is significant. I'm no excuse for a statistician but that seems like a pretty linear trend line without a lot of variables in impacting it.

[00:10:18] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Yeah.

[00:10:20] **Don Payne:** Okay. So let's, we're going to, we're going to circle around to some constructive suggestions, but let's just be realist for the moment and see what the situation really is.

So what does the research show about patterns of pastoral attrition?

[00:10:35] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Yeah that has not been as much of a focus on the studies that I've done, although burnout is a piece of that, so I can't, you know, quote like the rates of how many pastors are leaving per year or things like that. One of the things we included in our study was the Francis Burnout Inventory, which is something they've described as a balance affect model. And that means that burnout isn't just one direction. It's not just, I'm stressed and therefore that leads to burnout. There's this balance Michelle mentioned it earlier, of satisfaction in ministry versus stress in ministry. Exhaustion in ministry. And so ultimately there's this balance. If you're experiencing some

level of exhaustion in ministry, but you're really satisfied, you have a strong sense of purpose and meaning in your work, then it kind of offsets that.

And you're less likely to experience burnout. But if you feel like I don't even know what I'm doing here, you know, what's the point, no one's listening to my sermons or knowing, you know, I'm not seeing the fruit. And I'm exhausted, then that's the profile of a pastor or a spouse who's going to be burned out. And burnout does directly contribute to pastors leaving. When we asked pastors if they had an intent to leave the ministry, actually there was a very small

[00:11:54] **Don Payne:** Interesting. Okay. Okay.

[00:11:57] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** which was a surprise because we've seen higher numbers

[00:11:59] **Don Payne:** What do you make of that?

[00:12:00] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** I just wanted to contextualize our particular study because we collected this data so it was 2022 and I think that's important as we answer that particular question Don, because Not, I can't really speak to kind of, we didn't ask that question, right? That you presented to us. But if we kind of look contextually about what was happening in 2022. So we started collecting data May, right?

And we collected all the way through October. Um, Really just really recovering from the height of the COVID pandemic, right.

And things were settling, I think, for people and even for those churches that that survived COVID. Because I was surprised to see that those spouses were doing as well as they were.

And when I saw the, and I bring that up as you ask that question contextually but there may have been more hopefulness. I don't know. Post COVID churches opening again, people reconnecting that we longed for I'm only speaking of the spouses now because Kristen had already articulated where the pastors were at that time. So I think that has something to do with the timeframe of when we collected our data.

[00:13:35] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** which I can speak to that on the pastor side as well, because my dissertation data was collected from June 2020 to October of 2020. And so

Yeah. So at that time, actually, now this is where we don't know if it's a trend or a difference, but the one variable that was kind of slightly different, not in the regression analyses we ran, but just in terms of descriptive statistics, looking just at that depression level, then the percentage of pastors who had mild or higher depression in my study with the assemblies of God pastors. That was at about 40 percent of pastors that had either mild, moderate, or severe depression.

And then in the Baptist sample, it actually was 52%. So that was a jump. And we don't know, okay, is that assemblies of God pastors are just, you know, less depressed than Baptists. Certainly if you look at the data from Duke University, they've studied extensively Methodists. They had slightly lower rates than even the Assemblies of God. I think that is my personal hypothesis is that it is more of a time trend than it is a difference between groups. So in, 2012 to 2016, when Duke was collecting data, Versus 2020 early pandemic versus later on, kind of now some extra exhaustion after the

pandemic. So I'm really curious to, you know, collect some more data in 2025 or 26 and really kind of. Evaluate the trends Barna group is another 1. they've been reporting on this as well. So you could look at their trends as well.

There are some genuine theories regarding even how denominations are run or what kind of stressors are faced within each denomination. However, the studies that I've conducted so far is financial stress is not a significant variable that influences these things, even though you would think that it would be. I would love to create kind of this picture of who is the at risk pastor. And ultimately from the variables that we've looked at, solo pastors and younger pastors and pastors who have fewer friends. Are

the ones that are more at risk, but the finances that has not shown up as a factor that contributes as significantly as I would think

[00:16:03] **Don Payne:** I do wonder whether you found any correlation between what pastors and their spouses are experiencing and the, their longevity in ministry.

In other words, how long they have been in pastoral ministry. Are there any patterns, any trends that you know of?

[00:16:20] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** well, I think one of the challenges is the pastors That are responding to the survey the ones that are older Represent the people who are still in ministry so they actually the older, like when I've compared 45 or, and under or above 45 number of years in ministry, the older ones are doing better.

And so you think, well, why would that be partly? Maybe they're less. likely to say they're struggling, but partly these are the ones that have been resilient enough to remain in ministry. It's awfully hard to, I mean, you could, but not in the methods that we have done. Cause we've worked with ministry networks to find pastors who are actively credentialed with them, but it's challenging to find X pastors to survey and figure out exactly why they left.

That would be a different, approach to data

collection for sure to locate them. It's much easier to find groups of pastors that are currently in, you know, in place. And so, yeah, I think Barna is looking at some of those trends though regarding, you know, pastors who are leaving and some of those causes.

Michelle, did you have more on the spouses or even just in general

[00:17:32] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** the things that I researched in our study were more about how people were doing well and how they were thriving in their role as a spouse. So I did not truly explore a spousal, if you will, burnout. We did regression analysis so we were predicting particular outcomes. What I can say as we look at that balance affect model, so the satisfaction in ministry in. In comparison to exhaustion in ministry, what we can see for the spouses is that their exhaustion in the ministry isn't as significant as their spouses. For one, they often, in our study, they had a higher level of satisfaction in the ministry, which might inform why, right, and even as I look at the amount to which those particular elements on the balance affect model contributed to psychological well being. So what I'm basically trying to say is, the women seemed more satisfied, right? They weren't

as exhausted. They had a high psychological well being, however, their sense of exhaustion did contribute to their level of well being. So it's an interesting dynamic. So it's not as Linear or black and white as one might think of how the spouses are able to navigate the various stressors of being a wife of a clergy person but they're doing it.

Overall their resilience was what we call average and basically what that means is they perceive that when stressors happen that they are able to recover after those experiences.

[00:19:43] **Don Payne:** That's encouraging. Speaking of stress, what have you learned about the patterns? of whether stress is productive or detrimental. Because, as we all know, , stress takes different forms. Sometimes it can be very motivational. What seems to make the difference between whether pastoral stress is detrimental or productive?

[00:20:05] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** You made a very interesting comment, Don, at the very beginning about the call of the ministry and then the stress of the ministry. Because just as I just mentioned with the wives, their level, even though their numbers were low.

And That low number still influenced their perceived well being more significantly, right, than their sense of resilience and more, even more significantly than their satisfaction in the ministry. And so I think it is a combination of Exhaustion, satisfaction in the ministry, the way they perceive the distress of the ministry, whether that is their husband's distress or their own distress, how they perceive they can recover, navigate the stressor, do they have the resources, the time, the support to do that. I think it's definitely a convergence of lots of factors that inform how spouses are able to thrive.

[00:21:15] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Yeah. And for pastors, I would, there's kind of two directions. It's not just stress, but it's what we do with it, right? And so there's two elements to that. One is meaning making this idea of getting a sense of satisfaction or a sense of purpose. There is a higher reason, you know, for the stress or the suffering.

Maybe I have a low pay, but I feel like God's called me here and I feel so sure of that. I see the fruit of what I'm doing. My husband and I, our experience has been in urban ministry where the paychecks are not, I call it high demand, low reward environments. And we've lived that. And so, but we felt the fact that there was a sense of calling to that.

We were, you know, as much as there was loss and hardship in what we were doing. And that spoke to sometimes why we needed to keep doing it. You know, we were working with people in recovery and things like that. And so some of that is kind of this meaning making, what are, how are we interpreting the events that we're going through? And it's not just stress as a static thing, but how we're telling, you know, the stories we tell ourselves about what that is and spiritual stories included in that. The other piece is coping. And so that's where both religious coping as well as just. Ordinary coping skills like any of us do, you know, things like eating well and exercising and having hobbies.

And of course this friendship piece comes into there as well as religious coping, my first study looked at that a little bit and the work of Kenneth Pargament would certainly be worth looking into in terms of positive and negative religious coping. So he talks about how sometimes religion helps us cope, things like, you know, hey, God's got this, or you know what, there's a, you know, bigger purpose here, there's a bigger plan, it's connected to that meaning making. negative religious coping, which pastors can also engage in is things like, God is just so disappointed in me or there's no fruit in my

ministry because maybe I, you know, sinned over here and God's punishing me for not being good enough or things. So kind of some of those negative messages that we can kind of incorporate into religion, as well as something we call spiritual bypassing.

Which

is this idea of

you know, I'm not angry because God, told me to let go of that anger. Or I'm not stressed because, God told me to cast my anxiety on him. Like, we kind of use spiritual excuses to not actually go there with our emotions. We kind of maybe bypass them with kind of spiritual language.

And so that can build up over time as well. And that in other studies has been looked at in terms of how that disrupts our coping ability.

[00:24:00] **Don Payne:** A little bit earlier, one of you, I think, Michelle you said something about this. I forget the word you used, but the word that came to my mind was agency. I think you were talking about having a sense of control over your work. Again, you have to remind me of the word you used but it does have to do with agency, I think. what role does that play in all of this?

[00:24:19] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** I think it plays, for the spouses, a significant role. That's why I want to emphasize it's not one particular strategy, it is a combination. It's very holistic, I think, as Kristen was talking. That's the word that really came to my mind. It's a lifestyle of wellness that allows the spouses. to navigate the stressors. And so agency for spouses there's, McMahon has done some really good studies on this topic. Another person by the name of Lee, but they, McMahon looked at Protestants in general. Lee really was looking at seven day Adventist as well as there's a study that looked at Wesleyan wives. And what they really talked about was wives.

In particular, setting clear expectations and boundaries around their family. So, what that might look like is, I mean, I'm going to say the obvious because for some people this might not be obvious. It's not pretending that their children are perfect and making their children behave as if they are perfect. The same thing as for the spouse. Being willing to say yes and no about certain activities that she really wants to be involved in, and not just participating because she is the pastor's wife,

It's more of having a sense of choice, right? I am actively choosing to participate and not obligatory. That was really significant for the spouse,

who is often the primary caregiver for the children, right? And so for the spouse, and as the spouse helps manage and care for the family. And something else that was interesting in previous studies was that, Wives, actually, their stress is managed when they are recognized and cared for, just

as women, right? Just as women, not, and so they have their own identity, if you will,

so they are the pastor's wife. However, she is still, I'll use myself, she is still Michelle, right? Her own sense of self and sense of being.

[00:26:51] **Don Payne:** Not all wrapped up in who they're married to.

[00:26:53] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** No, definitely, and you know, that's funny that you say that because as we may recall, sometimes, especially in Protestant denominations, there is a two for one, right? The husband becomes the pastor, the wife automatically takes an unpaid leadership role in the church in some way. And how does she navigate that in a way that still honors her calling, right, in her role and still supports her husband in a way that's meaningful, but she doesn't lose who she is as a discreet being. There is still some research out there that highlights that the spouse is often the primary support for the pastor, right, which that sense of having outside friends and outside relationships becomes really important.

[00:27:54] **Don Payne:** Yeah, well, let me build on that as we start to wrap up a little bit and maybe distill some of what you've talked about and if there's anything else that comes to mind into some key takeaways some steps that pastors and their spouses can take to move toward either less stress or better management of their stress, greater resilience, better psychological well being overall.

And then kind of coming alongside that how do you recommend that congregations can better support their pastors and spouses? Give us a few takeaways here.

[00:28:22] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Sure. I think one of the things for pastors the danger of this research is to say, Oh, pastors need more friends. Pastors, go make friends. And we put it back on them to do, and while yes, I agree, if you can go make friends, go do that. Kind of my next step in research is actually moving into more specifically looking at the complexities of clergy friendship. Because that is something that, yeah, I mean, it's not as easy as just saying, go make friends. Because when your life is eating, sleeping, breathing the church. My husband and I have talked about this extensively, you know, we've been told, and many people have been told, you can't really be friends with people in your congregation. When we were asking in our study about close friends, it was people that you can confide in, people that you can share important things. So you could hang out socially, With people in your congregation, although that ministry hat never, you know, it's like

glued onto your head. So it's hard to take off. But, you know, to really say, okay, how do I, especially if I find myself isolated in ministry, I can't just fabricate a friend out of nowhere.

And so. Where do pastors go to find friends? And one of the things, you know, here in Springfield, Missouri, the headquarters of the Assemblies of God, lots of pastors around here in this town, my husband and I started a non profit to kind of try to create some social experiences for pastors and maybe, you know, some small groups and different things. And it was interesting because my thought from our study was like, if you build it, they will come. Oh, they need friends. Let's give them opportunities to do that. And it actually really kind of failed and it was crickets. People didn't actually really jump on that. And so a couple of lessons learned, again, not formal research from that, but you know, the idea of being too busy is one piece, but a bigger piece was trust, especially when you're all in the same denomination.

Like if I really open up about how I'm feeling in ministry, who's this going to get back to? You know, is my, are my credentials threatened or is my

job threatened? If I start saying that I'm struggling in it and that's in the literature, historically pastors struggle with how to, you know, express what they honestly feel without risking their livelihood or even their credentials or things like that. So,



[00:30:48] **Don Payne:** They have to find safe networks of people, perhaps outside their own ecclesial, immediate ecclesial circles or something like that.

[00:30:54] **Kristen Kansiewicz, PhD, LPC:** Right. So yeah, doing that, I, my new kind of I don't know, campaign, I guess, is that's a lot harder than we think it is. So before we just go around saying, make friends, let's understand just how hard that is for pastors to do. And I think that is a difference

with spouses.

[00:31:12] **Don Payne:** Michelle maybe for pastors or spouses or congregations,

[00:31:17] **Michell Temple, PhD, LPC:** That's a really good question and I do appreciate it. And so I'll start with spouses and it really depends on the congregation and it also is influenced by region of the country because certain regions of the country when we think about congregations, they just have different expectations of the spouse. And so with that the first recommendation is know where you are, right, and take time to make some deliberate decisions as the spouse of how you will participate at the church talking with your husband about what you think you might want to do if you want to participate and finding a way to communicate that with the congregation early on.

And so you. Set clear expectations of yourself as well as of your children. And so if you are already in the congregation and things are starting to feel stressful, you're starting to feel overwhelmed about what's happening, your role, the expectations placed on you. Seek help. What was interesting in our study, Don, we were, one of the things we were trying to predict was attitudes toward help seeking for spouses, and we couldn't with our variables. And so I was hoping that there was something that we were looking at would say, yes, this is when a spouse would seek help. And so we really don't know enough from our study what would encourage us a spouse to seek professional help. So if they're feeling isolated, overwhelmed, burdened, reach out is what I'll say. So

first thing is be thoughtful about how you participate. I suspect we try not to be super women in the 21st century and yet we try to be super women in the 21st century. And so by that I just simply would encourage any spouse to be willing to let your yeses be yeses and your noes be no. And be

very, yeah, and be

okay. Be very okay with that. And be open handed, of course. With your spouse, with your congregation. And keep the lines of communication open with all those individuals about your level of involvement. And, again, I've used this word multiple times, the expectations. Because pastors are not perfect people, nor is their spouse or the children the first family, if you will.

[00:34:09] **Don Payne:** Thank you both. This has been very insightful and you've pointed out the research that still needs to be done. And I hope you and others will continue to dig into this and expand our understanding of what really is at issue, what really is most important, most central for pastors and their spouses so that they can You know, be faithful to the calling God has for them.

Be realistic about the demands of that calling and yet be healthy and be kind of inactors or embodyers of the good news that they proclaim. That's really what we want. So, Dr. Kristen Kansiewicz and Dr. Michelle Temple thank you both very much. This has been, yeah, so insightful.

Friends, we're really grateful that you also have chosen to spend a little bit of time with us and we would love it if you get the chance and are willing to leave us a rating or a review wherever it is that you happen to listen to podcasts. And if you have any questions or comments for us, please email those to us at [podcast@Denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@Denverseminary.edu). And additionally, you can visit our website, [denverseminar.edu](http://denverseminar.edu) for more information and resources about seminary, about events and degree programs and about other episodes of this podcast, Engage360. We also have full transcripts available on the website.

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