



Spiritual Foundations

Personal Foundation 1 of Sustainable Leadership

Introduction

This fact sheet examines the importance of a Christian leader's spiritual foundations and the relationship with sustainable leadership. Leader Survey results from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (senior leaders) show that those with strong spiritual foundations are more likely to be thriving in ministry rather than burning out. NCLS Research has conducted extensive research into sustainable leadership - avoiding burnout and moving from surviving to thriving in ministry.



Most church leaders face many challenges in ministry and also experience many encouragements. Numerous factors need to be taken into account to understand why some leaders struggle while

others manage well. Some factors may be difficult or even impossible to change. Spiritual Foundations is one area where change can occur - where a leader can examine their own identity, priorities, practices, and relationships to consider what could be different and how positive results could flow.

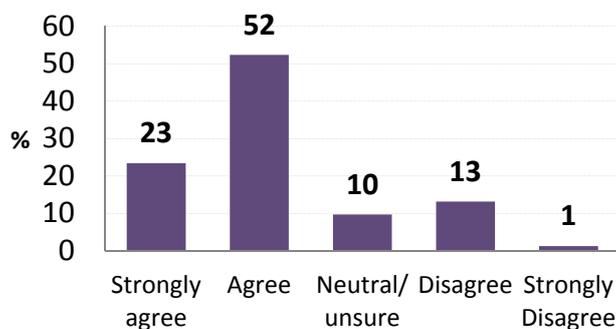
What are spiritual foundations?

Your spiritual foundations remind you of your identity and dependence on God and your place in the world. Active ongoing spiritual formation and a deepening relationship with God is a necessary resource upon which Christian leaders draw. NCLS Research has identified several questions that give a consistent picture of the priority that leaders give to their own spiritual formation and the impact they feel it has had upon them. In addition, these questions have been demonstrated to correlate positively with a sense of satisfaction and achievement in ministry, and negatively

with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation - the main features of burnout. Figures 1 and 2 show the responses of almost two thousand senior church leaders to two of these key questions.

" Most days I spend time alone in private devotional activities (prayer, Bible reading) "

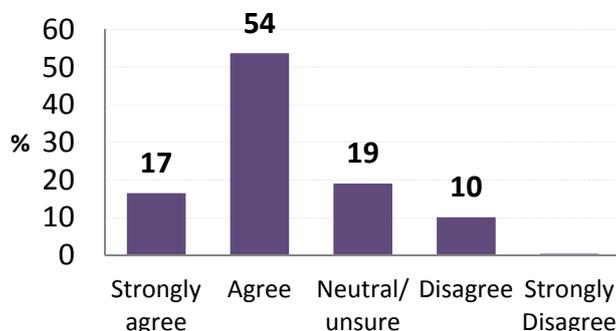
Figure 1: Regular private devotions



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,869, weighted).

" The quality of my spiritual practice has improved over my time in ministry "

Figure 2: Spiritual practice improved over time



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,872, weighted).

The results show that most senior leaders express a positive opinion about their own private devotional life.

Such leaders are more likely to be thriving in their ministry - less emotionally exhausted and more satisfied with their work and having a sense of achievement in it.

Factors that help or hinder spiritual foundations

A number of questions used for this foundation are negatively worded, so that agreement signals a sense of struggle or dissatisfaction in this area. These questions were:

*"During **busy times** my personal time with God is often the first thing to go"*

*"Most of my personal time with God is **preparing sermons** or other material for church"*

*"I am frustrated with the **lack of effect** my private spiritual practices have in the rest of my life"*

The percentage of leaders who agreed or strongly agreed with these questions is shown below in table 1.

Table 1: Leaders agreeing they struggle to maintain spiritual foundations

	'Busy times'	'Preparing sermons'	'Lack of effect'
All Leaders	43	37	11
	%	%	%
Senior Ministers	41	41	11
Assistant Ministers	45	34	10
Lay Leaders	46	16	11
Risk Factors			
Work over 50hrs a week	44	41	10
Feel highly stressed in role	49	42	14
No theological training	47	20	13
In ministry 3-6 years	51	44	13
Positive Factors			
Meets with ministry team for support	40	34	9
Meets with supervisor or mentor	38	32	8
Participated in retreats, spiritual formation	39	34	8

Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey (n=2,119, unweighted).

*Respondents not working 'full-time' (>30 hrs per week) are excluded.

Well over a third of leaders agreed with the first two questions above, while over ten percent agreed that they are frustrated with the lack of effect their spiritual practices have in their own life. Church leaders in this position may well have weaker spiritual foundations,

and this could affect their ability to perform their role well, and to survive well in their ministry. In addition, table 1 shows that high working hours, feeling stressed in the role, and having no theological training are potentially factors that heighten the risk somewhat. Those that had been 'in the accredited ministry' 3-6 years in particular showed a peak in these questions, suggesting a group to give special attention and support to.

There were also a number of factors identified that appear to be positive, in that such leaders indicate lower levels of struggling and frustration. Those who belong to a ministry team that meets together for support had lower levels on these questions. Those who met regularly with a pastoral or professional supervisor or mentor and those who participated in retreats or spiritual formation groups were also lower on agreeing with these struggle-oriented questions.

Spiritual foundations and thriving

The spiritual foundations of a church leader are an important part of thriving in the role, whether a full-time senior minister of a team or a part-time lay position. The spiritual foundations of leaders no doubt involves concepts that are rich and complex. The questions covered in this paper, while not capturing that full complexity, indicate Australian ministers having a varied experience spiritually. While most are feeling positive, there is a group expressing struggle, and there are factors that give some insights into factors positively or negatively related to a church leader's spiritual walk.

NCLS Research has found this foundation to be positively related to thriving in ministry: associated with lower emotional exhaustion and typical distancing and coping behaviours that go with it (often referred to as 'depersonalisation'), and with higher satisfaction in ministry and sense of achievement. Spiritual foundations are important not only in long-term survival but in fulfilling the role effectively and with joy.

Data sources

Powell, R., (2011) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Leader Survey. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Citation

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