



## Sense of Self

### Personal Foundation 3 of Sustainable Leadership

#### Introduction

This fact sheet examines the importance of a Christian leader's 'sense of self' and the relationship with sustainable leadership. This is the third of six Personal Foundations of Sustainable Leadership outlined by NCLS Research. The first 3 can be grouped under the heading 'Who we are' - qualities that are close to our very identity. Results from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) for church leaders who completed the Leader Survey show that those with a strong sense of self 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. The Personal Foundations are areas where change can occur - where a leader can examine their own identity, priorities, practices, and relationships and consider what could be different and how positive results could flow.

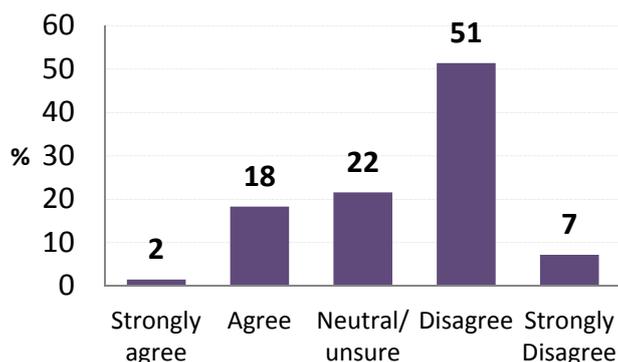
#### What is a sense of self?

A strong sense of self means maintaining a sense of identity separate from the influences of ministry work and relationships. It is having the personal autonomy to not be overly dependent on the affirmation of others or the authority of the position. It is not about 'not caring' or being arrogant, but being separate enough from

ministry in one's identity. This can be subtle to identify, and is a question of degree, as a level of personal investment in one's ministry is natural and right. Figures 1 and 2 show the responses of almost two thousand senior church leaders to two key questions in this area.

*" Without encouragement from others I find it really hard to keep going "*

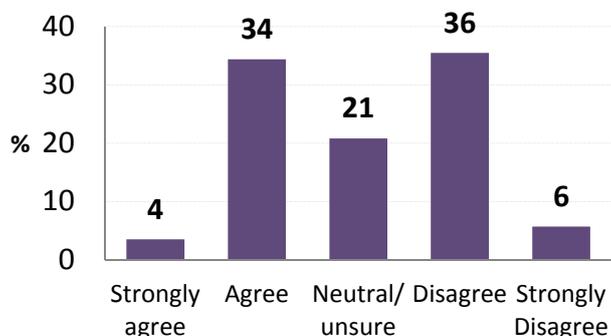
**Figure 1: Find it hard to keep going without encouragement**



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,866, weighted).

*" If people criticise the church I tend to take it personally "*

**Figure 2: Take criticism of the church personally**

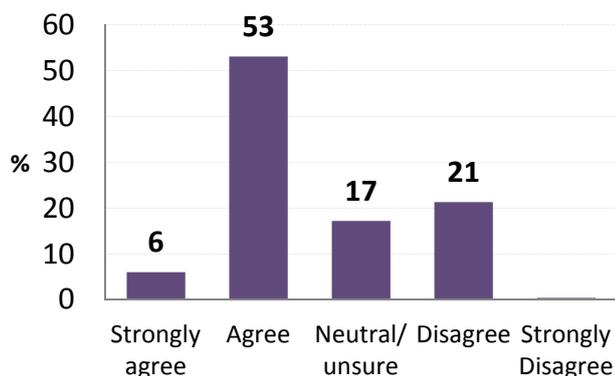


Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey Senior Leaders (n=1,868, weighted).

Most senior leaders affirm that they can keep going without encouragement from others (Fig. 1), but a very even picture is evident in those who say they take criticism of the church personally, and those who say they do not (Fig. 2). That ministers are personally invested in their churches is evidenced in Figure 3, which show the majority agreed with the statement:

*" If I know there's unrest at church I don't feel much peace personally either "*

**Figure 3: Don't feel peaceful if there's unrest at church**



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

The results highlight the subtle nature of a sense of self. A high level of personal identification with church is natural, yet NCLS have found that over-identification correlates with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation - the main features of burnout, and has an inverse relationship with satisfaction and a sense of achievement in ministry.

### Factors related to sense of self

This may be the personal foundation where change is the most difficult, perhaps because over-identification with ministry is an unconscious process for many, and therefore difficult to reverse. If one feels a sense of responsibility or burden for the success of the church, it's understandable that a 'need' for it to flourish, and to receive encouragement to that effect, is easily taken on. NCLS Research has found that those who are more prone to over-identification are:

- solo ministers
- senior ministers
- those who work long hours

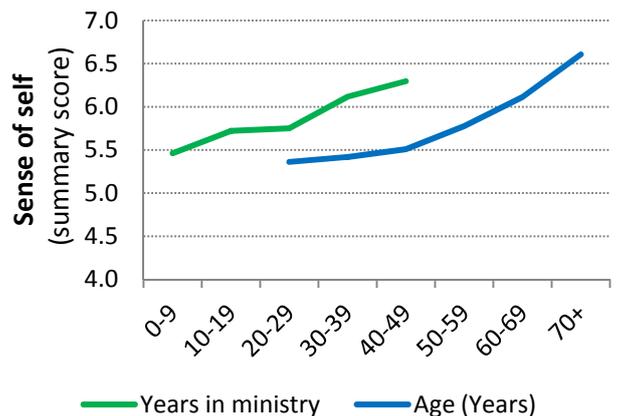
Leaders in these categories have a higher risk of over-identification, perhaps because of a higher sense of responsibility they feel.

Leaders who tend to have a stronger sense of self are:

- lay leaders
- those who are less stressed in their role
- those who feel supported by their team
- those who are older or have more experience

This last point is striking when observed graphically (see Fig. 4). A summary score for Sense of Self was

**Figure 4: Sense of Self across age and experience**



Source: 2011 NCLS Leader Survey respondents working >30 hrs per week (n=2,109 unweighted).

calculated by combining 5 similar questions on the topic (including the 3 shown in this paper). Ministers with more years of experience tend to have a higher sense of self score, as do older ministers. This suggests not only that change is possible, but probable as a leader matures both in age and experience.

### Sense of self and thriving

A strong sense of self can mean a healthy personal investment in church life without over-identifying church success with personal success as a leader. It means having a buffer zone in one's identity, so that when challenging times come the leader is not as vulnerable to burnout. Because this is caught up with identity so strongly, over-identifying can be an unconscious and potentially entrenched action. Change may require deep self examination - one's history, personality and leadership experiences may all play a part.

### Data sources

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

### Citation

Sterland, S. (2014) Sense of Self: Personal Foundation 3, Factsheet 1.14004. Sydney: NCLS Research.