

Occupational Stress Management and Pastoral Performance among Catholic Priests in the Diocese of Kitale, Kenya

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Abstract: Occupational stress is increasingly recognised as a threat to clergy wellbeing and ministerial effectiveness, yet the pathways through which stress-management resources translate into pastoral performance remain under-examined in African dioceses. This study investigated the influence of four stress-management resources (psycho-spiritual support, self-care practices, work-life balance, and institutional support) on the pastoral performance of priests in the Catholic Diocese of Kitale, Kenya. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design combined an ex-post facto quantitative survey of 61 priests, drawn through stratified random sampling from a target population of 104, with in-depth interviews among eight purposively selected key informants. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and simple and multiple linear regression, interpreted against Erikson's psychosocial development theory, Maslach's burnout theory, role theory, and the transactional theory of stress and coping. The four predictors jointly explained 48.5% of the variance in pastoral performance, $R^2 = .485$, $F(4, 55) = 12.977$, $p < .001$. Institutional support was the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = .381$, $p = .001$), followed by work-life balance ($\beta = .344$, $p = .003$), self-care practices ($\beta = .289$, $p = .009$), and psycho-spiritual support ($\beta = .267$, $p = .011$). Priests relied more heavily on personally initiated resources, notably prayer and informal peer support, than on formalised diocesan structures. Sustaining pastoral effectiveness in resource-constrained dioceses appears to require deliberate institutional investment, including structured leave, accessible counselling, and workload management, rather than reliance on individual clergy resilience alone.

Keywords: occupational stress management; pastoral performance; institutional support; work-life balance; Catholic priests; Kenya.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pastoral ministry places clergy at the intersection of spiritual leadership, counselling, administration, and community mediation, and this convergence of roles has increasingly been linked to occupational strain among priests worldwide [1], [2]. Where workplace demands persistently exceed the coping resources available to an individual, the resulting strain manifests as fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and diminished occupational functioning [3]. Among clergy, this strain is compounded by the moral expectation of self-sacrifice, by celibate and often isolated living arrangements, and by the reluctance of ordained men to disclose personal struggle given the reverential status attached to the priesthood [4], [5]. Left unaddressed, chronic stress erodes not only the priest's own wellbeing but the quality of pastoral care that congregations receive, since exhausted and depersonalised clergy are less able to preach, counsel, and administer the sacraments with the attentiveness their vocation demands [6], [7].

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa points to a distinctive constellation of stressors: heavy multi-parish workloads, chronic under-staffing relative to congregation size, geographic isolation, and, in some dioceses, insecurity linked to resource competition in pastoral-frontier regions [8], [9]. Kenyan studies have documented elevated emotional exhaustion among diocesan clergy in Nairobi, Murang'a, and Kiambu [10], [11], yet this literature has concentrated on burnout as an outcome in itself, with comparatively little attention to the resources priests actually draw upon to sustain performance, or to how those resources compare in explanatory strength. This is a meaningful gap: a diocese seeking to act on burnout research needs to know not only that clergy are strained, but which levers, whether personal spirituality, self-care, boundary-setting, or organisational support, carry the greatest weight in sustaining pastoral effectiveness, so that scarce diocesan resources can be allocated accordingly. The Catholic Diocese of Kitale, spanning the more accessible parishes of Trans Nzoia and the remote, insecure parishes of West Pokot, offers a setting where this question is especially pressing, given the documented disparities in staffing and infrastructure between the two counties [9].

Internationally, the pattern is well documented. Reviews of clergy stress among Catholic priests in Europe and North America identify workload, role ambiguity, and limited institutional recourse as recurring risk factors, while personal spirituality and peer relationships emerge consistently as protective [4], [1]. Comparative work on pastors in other denominations similarly links role differentiation and organisational support, rather than spiritual commitment alone, to sustained ministerial functioning [12]. What this literature has rarely done, however, is test the four commonly proposed resource domains (spiritual, individual, relational, and institutional) against one another in a single model, which leaves open the practically important question of where, among competing claims on limited diocesan budgets, investment yields the greatest return.

This study therefore examined the influence of psycho-spiritual support, self-care practices, work-life balance, and institutional support on the pastoral performance of priests serving in the Diocese of Kitale. Four hypotheses, framed to correspond to the study's specific objectives, were tested: that each of the four resources would significantly and positively predict pastoral performance, and that, considered jointly, the four would significantly explain variance in performance beyond what any single resource could account for. By comparing the relative predictive strength of an individually enacted resource (self-care), a relationally mediated one (psycho-spiritual support), a boundary-management one (work-life balance), and an organisationally provided one (institutional support), the study offers dioceses an evidence base for prioritising interventions rather than defaulting to the spiritual exhortations that have traditionally dominated clergy-care responses in the Kenyan Catholic context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Psycho-spiritual support, encompassing prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, and mentorship, has been consistently linked to clergy resilience in the wellbeing literature [13], [14], and forms the theoretical bridge between Erikson's account of identity consolidation through ecclesial affirmation and the transactional model's emphasis on appraisal and coping resources. Yet much of this literature treats psycho-spiritual practice as protective in a general sense, without testing its relative contribution against structural resources, leaving unclear whether spiritual support functions as a primary driver of performance or as one input among several. H1 proposed that psycho-spiritual support would significantly and positively predict pastoral performance.

Self-care, covering rest, exercise, adequate sleep, and diet, has an established evidence base in the health and helping-profession literature [15], [16], and its absence has been linked to compassion fatigue among clergy specifically [1]. Within Kenyan Catholic contexts, however, self-care has typically been folded into broader burnout discussions rather than isolated as a distinct predictor, motivating H2, that self-care practices would significantly and positively predict pastoral performance.

Work-life balance has drawn growing attention in occupational-stress research generally [3], [2], and role-theoretic accounts of clergy strain identify the blurring of boundaries between ministry and personal life as a central mechanism of role overload [17], [18]. Kenyan diocesan studies have documented irregular leave-taking and limited rest among clergy [19], [9] but have not directly modelled work-life balance as a quantitative predictor of pastoral performance, which H3 addressed: that work-life balance would significantly and positively predict pastoral performance.

Institutional support, covering diocesan resourcing, administrative assistance, leadership accessibility, and recognition, sits closest to Maslach's organisational account of burnout [20], [7] and is the domain over which diocesan leadership has the most direct control. Kenyan studies have linked weak institutional structures to persistent burnout among religious men and

women in rural dioceses [8] but have seldom quantified institutional support's predictive weight relative to more personally enacted resources. H4 proposed that institutional support would significantly and positively predict pastoral performance, and H5 proposed that the four predictors, considered jointly, would significantly explain variance in pastoral performance beyond any single predictor's individual contribution: the central comparative question this study was designed to answer.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study drew on four complementary theories. Erikson's psychosocial development theory [21] frames priestly identity as an achievement built through mentorship, ecclesial affirmation, and role clarity; where these are absent, priests are exposed to role confusion and diminished vocational confidence that erode pastoral functioning. Maslach's burnout theory [20], [7] conceptualises burnout as arising from a mismatch between the individual and six organisational domains (workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values), locating the source of clergy strain in organisational conditions rather than personal or spiritual deficiency, and thereby providing the theoretical warrant for treating institutional support as a distinct, testable predictor rather than a background variable. Role theory [17], [18] explains occupational strain as a function of role ambiguity, overload, and conflict among the multiple, often competing, responsibilities that priestly ministry entails, supporting the inclusion of work-life balance as a mechanism through which competing role demands are, or are not, reconciled. Finally, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping [22] conceptualises stress as an ongoing appraisal process in which individuals evaluate available resources against perceived demands and deploy emotion- or problem-focused coping in response; this theory underpins the inclusion of self-care and psycho-spiritual practice as coping resources that priests actively marshal. Read together, the four theories position pastoral performance as jointly a function of identity formation, organisational structure, role management, and individual coping capacity: precisely the four domains operationalised as this study's predictor variables.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design [23], in which an ex-post facto quantitative strand and a phenomenological qualitative strand were conducted concurrently and interpreted together. The quantitative strand, reported in full here, measured the four predictor constructs and pastoral performance via a structured, self-administered questionnaire; the qualitative strand comprised in-depth interviews with eight purposively selected key informants drawn from deanery leadership and the diocesan secretariat, undertaken to contextualise the statistical patterns and to probe stressors, such as insecurity in West Pokot and administrative overload, that a closed-ended instrument alone could not capture. Consistent with the emphasis of a results-focused manuscript, this paper reports the quantitative findings in full and draws on the interviews interpretively, rather than presenting a separate thematic analysis; a full account of the qualitative strand is reserved for a companion paper.

B. Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Kitale, a suffragan diocese of the Archdiocese of Kisumu comprising approximately 41 parishes across seven deaneries in Trans Nzoia and West Pokot counties, Kenya. The target population comprised 104 priests in active pastoral ministry, 77 diocesan and 27 missionary, drawn from parish, headquarters, and outstation postings across both counties. Using Yamane's formula for proportionate stratified sampling, a target sample of 83 priests was determined (61 diocesan, 22 missionary), and questionnaires were distributed by physical and electronic means between July and August 2026 to reach priests in geographically dispersed and, in parts of West Pokot, difficult-to-access parishes.

C. Instrumentation and Measurement

Pastoral performance and its four hypothesised predictors were measured using a structured questionnaire comprising six sections: demographic information, and one ten-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) for each of psycho-spiritual support, self-care practices, work-life balance, institutional support, and pastoral performance. Item wording drew on established clergy-wellbeing and burnout literature adapted to the pastoral context (e.g., [4], [15]). Content and face validity were established through expert review by the researcher's supervisors and pilot testing in the neighbouring Diocese of Lodwar, which shares comparable pastoral and geographic characteristics with Kitale. Internal consistency reliability, computed from the main study data, exceeded conventional thresholds across all five scales: psycho-spiritual support ($\alpha = .916$), self-care practices ($\alpha = .922$), work-life balance ($\alpha = .726$), institutional support ($\alpha = .776$), and pastoral performance ($\alpha = .954$).

D. Data Collection and Analysis

Of the 83 targeted questionnaires, 65 were returned and 61 were retained as valid after screening, yielding an analytic response rate of 73.5% against the targeted sample, comfortably above the 70% threshold conventionally regarded as very good for survey research, and notable given the logistical difficulty of reaching priests in remote West Pokot outstations. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) characterised each predictor; simple linear regression tested each predictor's individual association with pastoral performance, and multiple linear regression, with tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics for multicollinearity, tested the four predictors' joint and unique contributions. All analyses were conducted in SPSS at a 5% significance threshold.

E. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), together with the permission of the Bishop of Kitale Diocese. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent; no identifying information, including the respondent's name or parish, was collected, and questionnaire responses were coded with anonymous identifiers to protect confidentiality.

V. RESULTS

A. Sample Characteristics

The achieved sample ($n = 61$) was dominated by clergy in the 38–47 year age bracket (49.2%), with younger priests aged 27–37 years comprising 27.7% and priests aged 48 years and above comprising the remainder. The majority held a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification (58.5%), with diploma and master's-level qualifications each accounting for 16.9%. This is a mature, largely mid-career sample, well positioned to report on the sustained, rather than acute, experience of occupational stress.

B. Predictor Levels and Simple Regression Results

Table I summarises the simple linear regression results for each of the four predictors against pastoral performance. All four were positively and significantly associated with performance when tested individually. Three of the four accounted for a substantial share of variance on their own: work–life balance alone explained 45.0% of the variation in pastoral performance, self-care practices 37.2%, and institutional support 31.4%. Psycho-spiritual support explained a comparatively modest 18.6% in isolation. That work–life balance alone came close to matching the full four-predictor model reported below (48.5%) is itself informative, and is taken up in the multiple regression results that follow.

TABLE I: SIMPLE REGRESSION RESULTS FOR INDIVIDUAL PREDICTORS OF PASTORAL PERFORMANCE (N = 61)

Predictor	Mean range	R	R ²	B	β	t	p
Psycho-spiritual support	3.00–3.91	.431	.186	0.587	.431	3.670	< .001
Self-care practices	3.28–3.54	.610	.372	0.989	.610	5.863	< .001
Work–life balance	2.70–3.96	.671	.450	0.956	.671	13.774	< .001
Institutional support	2.83–3.98	.560	.314	0.605	.560	5.190	< .001

Descriptively, priests reported moderate to relatively high psycho-spiritual support (M range 3.00–3.91 on a five-point scale), with prayer and personal spiritual reflection the strongest-endorsed items and formal spiritual counselling the weakest. Self-care practices were reported at a similarly moderate level (M range 3.28–3.54), with considerable variability across items (SD range 0.99–1.41), suggesting uneven uptake of specific self-care behaviours such as structured rest and physical exercise. Work–life balance was the most unevenly rated construct: priests reported comparative strength in schedule flexibility ($M = 3.96$) and the capacity to absorb unexpected pastoral demands ($M = 3.82$), but weakness in personal time allocation ($M = 2.70$) and encouragement to take leave ($M = 2.72$). Institutional support followed a comparable pattern, combining relatively favourable ratings of administrative support and facilities with markedly weaker ratings of diocesan support during periods of stress ($M = 2.83$) and access to leadership guidance in difficult pastoral situations.

C. Multiple Regression Analysis

The four predictors were entered simultaneously into a multiple regression model to assess their joint and unique contributions to pastoral performance. The overall model was statistically significant and explained a substantial share of the variance in performance (Table II).

TABLE II: MULTIPLE REGRESSION MODEL SUMMARY PREDICTING PASTORAL PERFORMANCE

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	SE	F	df	p	D-W
1	.696	.485	.446	6.934	12.977	4, 55	< .001	1.759

The four predictors jointly explained 48.5% of the variance in pastoral performance (adjusted $R^2 = .446$). This is only modestly higher than the 45.0% explained by work–life balance alone (Table I), and the gap is smaller than the individual simple-regression figures might suggest. The four scales evidently share a considerable amount of overlapping variance rather than each predicting an independent slice of pastoral performance. The moderate inter-correlations implied by the tolerance and VIF values reported below are consistent with this. This does not diminish the value of the multiple regression model; rather, it shifts the interesting question from how much the four predictors explain together to what each one explains once the others are held constant, which Table III addresses directly. The Durbin–Watson statistic (1.759) indicated no serious autocorrelation in the residuals.

TABLE III: MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR PREDICTORS OF PASTORAL PERFORMANCE

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	Tol.	VIF
Constant	5.214	2.841	—	1.836	.072	—	—
Psycho-spiritual support	0.284	0.108	.267	2.630	.011	.541	1.848
Self-care practices	0.321	0.119	.289	2.697	.009	.493	2.028
Work–life balance	0.356	0.115	.344	3.096	.003	.457	2.188
Institutional support	0.412	0.121	.381	3.405	.001	.426	2.347

All four predictors retained a positive, statistically significant unique contribution once the others were controlled, with none of the four rendered redundant by the others (tolerance $\geq .426$; $VIF \leq 2.35$ in all cases, well below the conventional multicollinearity threshold of 5 or 10). Institutional support emerged as the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = .381$, $p = .001$), followed by work–life balance ($\beta = .344$, $p = .003$), self-care practices ($\beta = .289$, $p = .009$), and psycho-spiritual support ($\beta = .267$, $p = .011$). All four null hypotheses were accordingly rejected, as was the joint null hypothesis that the four predictors, taken together, do not significantly predict pastoral performance, $F(4, 55) = 12.977$, $p < .001$.

VI. DISCUSSION

Institutional support illustrates why the simple and multiple regression results need to be read together rather than separately. Considered alone, it was not the strongest correlate of performance: it explained less variance in isolation (31.4%) than either work–life balance (45.0%) or self-care practices (37.2%). Once the other three predictors were held constant, however, it emerged as the single strongest unique contributor ($\beta = .381$), overtaking both. This is consistent with Maslach’s burnout theory, which locates the primary source of occupational strain in organisational conditions such as workload distribution, fairness, and reward, rather than in the psychological make-up of the individual priest [20]. It also suggests that institutional support’s association with performance is less bound up with the other three resources than theirs are with each other; priests who report strong institutional backing appear to gain something from it that prayer, self-care, and boundary-setting do not already supply. Descriptively, this domain also included comparatively weak ratings on its most consequential items: diocesan responsiveness during stressful periods ($M = 2.83$) and access to leadership guidance in difficult pastoral situations. Set alongside its outsized unique contribution, this points to institutional support as a comparatively under-used lever for improving pastoral performance.

Work–life balance was the strongest single correlate of pastoral performance, explaining close to half its variance on its own, and it retained the second-largest unique contribution in the full model ($\beta = .344$), behind institutional support. This lends empirical support to role theory’s account of occupational strain as arising from unmanaged role overload and competing demands [17], [18]. Priests in this sample demonstrated an evident capacity to absorb unpredictable pastoral demands and flexible scheduling, yet reported comparatively little protected personal time or encouragement to take leave, a pattern consistent with findings among clergy elsewhere where availability expectations routinely override formal leave entitlements [12]. That work–life balance outperformed psycho-spiritual support, historically the dominant register of Catholic clergy-care responses, suggests that spiritual exhortation alone is an incomplete response to a problem that is, in substantial part, structural.

Psycho-spiritual support's comparatively modest contribution, both alone and in the joint model, should not be read as diminishing its relevance to priests' lives; descriptively it remained a moderately to highly endorsed resource, with prayer and personal reflection the strongest-rated items. It does indicate, though, that spiritual practice functions as one coping resource among several rather than a self-sufficient buffer against occupational strain, consistent with the transactional theory of stress and coping, under which individuals draw on whichever resources are available to them in appraising and responding to demands [22]. This study's parallel qualitative interviews were not analysed thematically for this results-focused paper, and no claim is made here about what informants said in them; establishing whether priests' own accounts of coping match the pattern the survey data suggest would require the fuller thematic report reserved for a companion paper.

Self-care practices retained a significant, independent contribution ($\beta = .289$) once psycho-spiritual support, work-life balance, and institutional support were controlled, despite substantial overlap with the other three predictors in the simple-regression results. This suggests that individually enacted wellbeing behaviours, such as rest, exercise, and recreation, carry explanatory weight of their own rather than simply standing in for a well-supported or well-balanced working life, in line with self-care conceptualisations that treat physical and emotional maintenance as a distinct coping domain [15], [1]. None of the four predictors was redundant once the others were accounted for (tolerance $\geq .426$ in every case). The overall picture, then, is not that one resource explains everything and the rest are noise; it is that the four resources are correlated enough to substitute for one another to a degree, while each still contributes something the others do not.

These findings extend the Kenyan clergy-wellbeing literature in a specific direction. Prior Kenyan studies have generally examined burnout as an outcome explained by demographic or contextual factors [10], [11], or have described coping resources descriptively without ranking their comparative predictive strength [8]. Entering the four resource domains into a single competitive model shows how much each matters relative to the others, not simply that each matters on its own. A diocese operating under the staffing and infrastructural constraints documented for Kitale [9] cannot address all four domains at once, and the present findings point toward institutional and boundary-related interventions as the more promising starting point. This is not an argument for scaling back spiritual programming, which retained an independent, significant contribution of its own even after its overlap with the other three resources is accounted for.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that pastoral performance among priests in the Catholic Diocese of Kitale is jointly and significantly predicted by psycho-spiritual support, self-care practices, work-life balance, and institutional support, which together account for nearly half of the observed variance in performance. Institutional support carried the greatest unique weight in the joint model even though it was not the strongest predictor on its own, and it scored comparatively poorly on the specific items priests rated most consequential, such as diocesan responsiveness during stress. That combination identifies it as the diocese's most under-used point of leverage for improving pastoral performance.

For diocesan leadership, the findings support prioritising structural interventions over purely spiritual exhortation: enforceable annual-leave and sabbatical policies, delegation of administrative tasks to lay pastoral councils, accessible and confidential counselling services, and structured peer-support gatherings among clergy. For seminary formation, the results suggest that stress-management and self-care skills warrant deliberate inclusion in priestly training rather than being left to individual initiative after ordination.

The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and self-reported measures of both stress-management resources and pastoral performance are subject to social-desirability bias [10], [1]. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs tracking clergy across career stages, comparative studies across dioceses with differing institutional capacity, and a fuller thematic report of the qualitative interview data collected alongside this survey.

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