Congregation members count on clergy to see them through a crisis.
But clergy often need support themselves.

Healing what hurts

When stress was at its highest and the Rev. George Fuller was at his lowest, his mother spoke these words to him: "Jesus already died, George. You don't have to kill yourself."

The church Fuller pastored, Woodland Baptist in Wake Forest, was growing. It had bought land and built and paid for a fellowship hall. He was well liked.

Still, Fuller believed he was killing himself. It was a slow burn. Make that burnout.

"Things were going well, yet I was burning out," Fuller said. "I was on $90 worth of stomach medicine every month, three prescriptions.

"I had to realize that God wasn't looking for a workaholic to make him proud," Fuller said.
Frank Green directs Charis, a foundation in Wake Forest that seeks to heal clergy suffering from a myriad of emotional challenges. Support groups for clergy are being organized nationwide.

STAFF PHOTO BY JUSTIN CARLSON

Fuller’s dilemma isn’t rare. The circumstances vary, but all across North Carolina and the nation, clergy of all denominations are reporting stress, burnout and a myriad of emotional, physiological and psychological problems. It isn’t an easy job. Clergy members shouldered the needs of a congregation, serving as church administrator, counselor and spiritual adviser. They work long hours, visiting ill congregation members, preparing sermons, helping to raise money and such. Then, there’s the needs of their own families.

Fuller found help through Charis, a foundation based in Wake Forest that serves as a healing resource for those in Christian leadership. Support groups and ministries to hurting clergy are popping up across the state and nation in response to the growing need.

Just how great is that need? A study by Archibald Hart, a psychologist who teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., showed:

- 80 percent of pastors in America believe their work is negatively affecting their families.
- 50 percent feel unable to meet the demands of their work.
- 70 percent have a lower self-image than when they entered the ministry.

Dr. Frank Green, director of Charis, said 25 percent of pastors say they are “burned out.”

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That's different from stressed out," Green said. "Stressed out is a largely physiological phenomenon in which you can still be functioning fairly well. Burned out basically means you are emotionally dead and have nothing to give."

Don G. Mullis, executive director of Church Employment Network Transition Support (CENTS), an ecumenical support and maintenance organization for ministers, said, "Most people don't realize what these people [clergy] carry with them. ... In many cases they haven't done anything wrong, but they feel they've failed God and failed their family. It takes time for that to heal. It takes time for a man to regain his confidence."

The 'wounded heroes'
The Rev. Freddie Gage calls these ministers "wounded heroes." He was one himself. A prominent Southern Baptist evangelist for 45 years, Gage suffered from burnout, anxiety and depression before being hospitalized.

"I have been asked why I waited so long to seek help," Gage said. His answer: "Fear of what fellow ministers would think, and I knew I would be ruined as an evangelist."

Far from ruined, Gage has begun a ministry called Wounded Heroes. Though the need is clear, are ministers willing to seek help? Increasingly yes, experts said.

When Gage conducted his initial Wounded Heroes conference in Texas in January, more than 200 pastors asked to attend, though it was limited to 52.

Mullis, whose ministry is based in Monroe, reports talking with more than 1,000 ministers in North Carolina and directly helping 121 in 14 months, and that despite being in only 26 of the state's 100 counties so far.

LeaderCare, the Southern Baptist Convention's vehicle for prevention and intervention with pastors, reports handling an average of 15 calls per day on its hotline for pastors. In two years, it has worked with more than 2,500 persons individually and another 1,800 in conferences.

Locally, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina has set up the Bishop's Committee on Clergy Wellness to deal with a variety of issues related to clergy, including stress, burnout and any other duress a priest may face.

Speaking of stress and burnout among clergy, the Rev. Canon E.T. Malone Jr., secretary of the diocese, said, "I think it has probably been on the increase, but clergy in 1998 have access to help they didn't have 10 years ago, so we're attempting to do something to alleviate it."

The United Methodists are in the midst of a national survey of pastors on a variety of issues, including how to best help them deal with the pressures of ministry, said Dr. Belton Joyner, administrative assistant to the bishop and director of ministerial relations for the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Joyner said the conference's medical insurance plan also allows for certified counseling.

The Catholic Diocese of Raleigh utilizes a part-time vicar for priests. Father Michael Shugrue's role is to be available to the approximately 100 priests in the eastern portion of North Carolina.

"It's an advocacy position for the priests," Shugrue said, "where if a priest says in confidence that he really needs to take a break, then the vicar for priests can go to bat for him."

Shugrue said the diocese is hopeful the position will become full-time soon, enabling the vicar to visit with each priest regularly "to see how they're doing and if there is a difficulty," he said.

Why the pain?
Why do ministers end up in such distress?

"Pastors generally live in denial and idealize themselves," Green said. "They buy in to their own press, they deny themselves their own humanity, deny themselves healing and growth. They live in denial in order to keep their image going. The average pastor is motivated out of guilt. He never really rests. He goes home and sits down in his easy chair haunted my suspicions that there was something else he could have done, so his
Faith

A support group helped the Rev. George Fuller to recover from job burnout.

STAFF PHOTO BY MEL NATHANSON

body is never really able to recover from the stress overload."

The Rev. Julian Motley, director of denominational relations and placement at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, said many dynamics lead to a hurting pastor:

"The role of pastor is increasingly difficult in our day," said Motley, who is retired after 46 years as a pastor. "There's so much of the philosophy of the business world superimposed on the church. People want a pastor who can pull the church out of a slump and put it on the map and make it successful in worldly, business terms. And if he doesn't achieve it, there's a tendency to blame him. Of course, his leadership skills have a lot to do with his success. But it also has to do with the proper spiritual dynamics that may or may not be present to succeed. Not all success is measured in numbers, yet that is the way the world seems to measure."

Be prepared

What can pastors do to avoid distress? Assume it is coming, Green said.

"They ought to be engaged in a self-maintenance and growth program that is perpetual," Green said. "When you put a person into a job description like that expected of those in ministry, it is an incubator of real difficulty. I don't know if there is a more stressful job than the pastorate."

Green encourages church members to encourage their pastor to be real, to have a group of friends with whom the pastor can share hurts and frustrations.

"I think they have a commitment toward that person first of all not to idealize them as anything other than another struggling human being," Green said of the layman-pastor relationship. "The number one call of a pastor is to model grace, which means they've got to come out of the closet with their issues."

That can take place in part in a support group. Charis offers support groups to help pastors be open with each other. LeaderCare makes referral to similar groups, and CENTS is working with Dr. Mark Corts, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, to develop a curriculum to work with pastors and churches to help them avoid or cope with conflicts.

• Fuller, now pastor of New Community Baptist Church in North Raleigh, said a key is finding a support group that is genuinely open. "I had been a part of a support group that became a place of masks, not a place to hurt and bleed," he said.

He changed groups and came under Green's guidance. Six to eight weeks into the group, he gave up the medicine and has been healthy since.

"Six of us met for a year and a half, and in that process I learned to deal with the anger I was stuffing, and a lot of other issues," Fuller said. "My old Jesus had died burned out on the cross, kind of like an exhausted Savior. I was headed down a path like that Jesus. I would have been wrung out, would have died of a heart attack, and they would have said how hard I worked."

Fuller still works a lot of hours, but not as many as before, and they are better paced. Only emergencies interfere with coaching his sons' baseball team.

"I realized Jesus didn't burn out," Fuller said. "He stayed healthy and whole. He was anguished relationally at times, but he never burned out."