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**A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING HOW PASTORS  
CULTIVATE EMOTIONAL HEALTH IN THEIR ELDERS**

By  
William M. Ham

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2025

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Graduation Date      May 16, 2025

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. While emotional health is increasingly recognized as essential for effective leadership, many churches and seminaries do not adequately address this crucial aspect of spiritual formation, particularly for those in ordained leadership positions. This often leads to challenges for pastors and elders and can negatively impact the overall health of the church.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight pastors in the Reformed tradition (primarily Presbyterian Church in America and Evangelical Presbyterian Church). The interviews focused on gathering data related to three research questions: How do pastors cultivate emotional health in their personal lives? What practices help pastors cultivate emotional health in elders? What challenges do pastors face in cultivating emotional health in their elders?

The literature review focused on three key areas: biblical and theological perspectives on emotional health, the field of emotional intelligence and its application to leadership, and leadership development within the church context.

This study found that personal suffering often serves as a catalyst for pastors' own emotional health journeys. It also identified key practices for sustaining emotional well-being, including intentional relationships, counseling, and spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, the research revealed significant challenges in cultivating emotional health in elders, including cultural stigma, ministry demands, and theological misconceptions. Key practices include creating safe environments, empowering leaders to have vulnerability, and pursuing spiritual disciplines.

To address these challenges, this study identifies specific, actionable strategies for pastors and churches to integrate emotional health into leadership selection, training, development, and evaluation. Prioritizing emotional health is not merely a matter of improving individual well-being, but is essential for creating thriving church communities that reflect the character of Christ. Cultivating emotional health is therefore not just helpful, but a necessary aspect of faithful ministry in the church.

**To Stephanie, my beautiful bride, who faithfully loves me through all my emotional highs and lows.**

**To Reverend Gerald M. Guzi, a faithful friend and mentor, who patiently invites me to live with emotional health.**

**To Roger Edwards, who consistently speaks words of grace and truth to my wounded, fearful, and angry heart.**

**American men are allotted just as many tears as American women. But because we are forbidden to shed them, we die long before women do, with our hearts exploding or our blood pressure rising or our livers eaten away by alcohol because that lake of grief inside us has no outlet. We, men, die because our faces were not watered enough.<sup>1</sup>**

**- Pat Conroy**

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Conroy, *Beach Music* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011), 243.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abbreviations**

EI/EQ	Emotional Intelligence
EPC	Evangelical Presbyterian Church
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In March 2001 American country music artist Tim McGraw released the song, “Grown Men Don’t Cry.” It rose to number one on the country music billboard charts, which was shocking, even to the men who wrote the song from personal experience. Tom Douglas and Steve Seskin were skeptical that people would enjoy such a deeply emotional song, thinking, “We can’t put out a song with no chorus about men crying.”<sup>2</sup> But they did, and the song resonated, so much so that one journalist stated, almost two decades after its release, “It seems no one is immune to the emotional power” of that song.<sup>3</sup>

The late Southern author Pat Conroy once wrote, “American men are allotted just as many tears as American women. But because we are forbidden to shed them, we die long before women do, with our hearts exploding or our blood pressure rising or our livers eaten away by alcohol because that lake of grief inside us has no outlet. We, men, die because our faces were not watered enough.”<sup>4</sup> Conroy nails the emotional landscape of America, especially the powerful message it sends to men. In McGraw’s hit song, he summarizes that cultural belief by repeating the line, “I don’t know why they say grown men don’t cry.” Those words are not defended or explained in any way but simply stated as unspoken law for men and their emotions.

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Paulson, “Story Behind the Song: Tim McGraw’s ‘Grown Men Don’t Cry,’” *The Tennessean*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/story-behind-the-song/2019/02/22/tim-mcgraw-grown-men-dont-cry-story-behind-song/2908261002/>.

<sup>3</sup> Paulson, “Story Behind the Song.”

<sup>4</sup> Pat Conroy, *Beach Music*, 243.

Sadly, similar words can describe the emotional landscape of the American church. As pastor and author Tim Keller explains in his book, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, “There is a tendency for us to say, ‘I am afraid of the grief, I am afraid of the sorrow. I don’t want to feel that way. I want to rejoice in the Lord.’ But look at Jesus. He was perfect, right? And yet he goes around crying all the time. He is always weeping, a man of sorrows.”<sup>5</sup> Keller is not writing those words from a narrow vantage point. He pastored in a small Southern town, taught in academic seminaries, and pastored thousands of people in New York City, a world city, accumulating over fifty years of ordained ministry. When he speaks to the deep struggle for emotional health in the American church, he is speaking with an abundance of first-hand experience.<sup>6</sup>

The struggle to gain emotional health in the church may be concerning but is not necessarily surprising. Ordained Lutheran ministers and authors Roy Oswald and Arland Jacobson explain that for pastors, “Emotional intelligence involves a set of competencies that are not taught in seminary but that are central to pastoral effectiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Pastor Pete Scazzero echoes the same thoughts for all believers, teaching, “The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship. We

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, 2013), 253, Kindle.

<sup>6</sup> Collin Hansen, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 119, Kindle.

desperately need, I believe, to reexamine the whole of Scripture — and the life of Jesus in particular — in order to grasp the dynamics of this link.”<sup>8</sup>

Scazzero and Keller point to Scriptures stating that Jesus was “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.”<sup>9</sup> Keller argues that because Jesus was emotionally healthy, he wasn’t all absorbed in himself, and as a result, he felt the sadness of others.<sup>10</sup> Author Steve Saccone’s argument lines up with Keller when he explains, “At the intersection of intelligence and relationships is a man who completely embodies the synergy of both. Jesus is that man. He was the most relationally intelligent person who ever walked this Earth.”<sup>11</sup>

As love incarnate and the most emotionally healthy person who ever lived, Jesus “rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept.”<sup>12</sup> The Apostle Paul said that this ability, to fully engage in an emotionally healthy way, is a sign of genuine love in relational form, and commanded the church to do likewise.<sup>13</sup> Dane Ortlund, writing on the emotional life of Christ in his book, *Gentle and Lowly*, asks, “What then do we see in the Gospels of the emotional life of Jesus? What does a godly emotional life

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church, Updated and Expanded Edition: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 18, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 53:3 (ESV).

<sup>10</sup> Keller, 253.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Saccone, *Relational Intelligence: How Leaders Can Expand Their Influence through a New Way of Being Smart*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 19, Kindle.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 12:15.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 12:9.

look like? It is an inner life of perfect balance, proportion, and control, on the one hand; but also of extensive depth of feeling, on the other hand.”<sup>14</sup>

To pastor well means following this aspect of Christ well, so there is a clear need for an emphasis on emotional health. Without emotionally healthy pastors and elders, churches have little to no hope of leading their people into the deep and rich waters that lead to genuine love. Not only that, but they are also in great danger of being in positions of power and deeply wounding those under their care. Dr. Diane Langberg, a Christian psychologist with over fifty years’ experience specializing in power dynamics and abuse within the church, explains in her book, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, “The more power a person holds in relation to other people, the less empathy they will have. That’s very troubling in any context. In a spiritual setting such as a church, it is frightening. A lack of compassion is diametrically opposed to the calling of God.”<sup>15</sup>

Langberg’s sobering words reflect Jesus’ own warning to his disciples when speaking of leadership and power: “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus knew the default mode of sinful hearts is to use leadership power for personal gain and not for sacrificial love.

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<sup>14</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 105, Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 132, Kindle.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 10:42–44.

Thus, he taught and admonished his disciples as clearly as possible to follow the humble way of love, the foundation of his kingdom. Sadly, the humble way of Jesus is often not the norm in the church. As the late Dutch Catholic priest, professor, and author Henri Nouwen explains in his book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, “The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led.”<sup>17</sup>

Jesus desires that his followers be so emotionally engaged with the needs of others that they are moved to love from their heart. Thus they can confidently resist abusing their power and not begrudge their sacrifices, living out the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>18</sup>

The late Princeton Seminary professor and author B.B. Warfield understood that Christ’s love flows from his perfect emotional health. Warfield explains, “It is the internal movement of pity which is emphasized when our Lord is said to be moved with compassion . . . His compassion fulfilled itself in the outward act; but what is emphasized by the term employed to express our Lord’s response is . . . the profound internal movement of his emotional nature.”<sup>19</sup> Ortlund echoes similar thoughts when he says,

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<sup>17</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (Redwood City, CA: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 36, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 26:37–39.

<sup>19</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023), 205, Kindle.

“Jesus did not simply operate in deeds of compassion but actually felt the inner turmoils and roiling emotions of pity toward the unfortunate.”<sup>20</sup>

Jesus’ emotional nature highlights, even more, the deep need for the emotional health of pastors and elders as they lead the church. If a church wants to reflect the gentle and lowly heart of Jesus, emotional health should be a priority. To the degree that this happens, especially among the pastor and elders, the church will more quickly and easily become a loving, empathetic, and safe community, an “emotionally healthy church.” Again, Scazzero explains, “The starting point for change in any nation, church, or ministry has always been the leader: As go the leaders, so goes the church.”<sup>21</sup> Authors Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie affirm Scazzero’s thoughts in their book *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*: “One of the most important outcomes of pastors working on their emotional intelligence is the impact it can have on their congregations. When the leaders of a church have low EQ, it affects the entire church.”<sup>22</sup>

Research in emotional health, which includes the study of emotional intelligence (EQ/EI), has been exploding for the past three decades, stemming from Daniel Goleman’s best-selling work *Emotional Intelligence*, published in 1995. Goleman’s research, which dated back decades earlier, shed new light on how significant emotions impact every area of life, especially leadership. Goleman’s research challenged the

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<sup>20</sup> Ortlund, 106.

<sup>21</sup> Scazzero and Bird, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 126, Kindle.

accepted science of the day, which assumed a narrow view of intelligence, based solely on a person's IQ, and taught that getting one's thinking straight solves problems.

Countering that assumption, Goleman strategically asked, "What can we change that will help our children fare better in life? What factors are at play, for example, when people of high IQ flounder and those of modest IQ do surprisingly well? I would argue that the difference quite often lies in the abilities called here emotional intelligence."<sup>23</sup>

The answers found by Goleman and others have broken through the previous status quo so much so that most now accept that people's emotional intelligence outweighs their IQ when predicting success in life. Dr. Travis Bradberry argues adamantly that is EQ the "single biggest predictor of performance."<sup>24</sup> He bases his belief on research data, not any personal love of emotional intelligence. "Our research has shown that emotional intelligence is responsible for 58 percent of performance in all types of jobs. It's no wonder then that 90 percent of top performers are high in EQ. It's the single biggest predictor of performance and the strongest driver of leadership and personal excellence."<sup>25</sup>

Bradberry is no lone ranger beating the drum for emotional intelligence and its impact on leadership. Authors Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, all experts in the field of emotional intelligence, echo his thoughts when they say, "At its root, then, the primal job of leadership is emotional. We believe this primal dimension of

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2020), xxi, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> Travis Bradberry, *Emotional Intelligence Habits: Change Your Habits, Change Your Life* (San Diego, CA: TalentSmartEQ, 2023), 6, Kindle.

<sup>25</sup> Bradberry, 6.

leadership, though often invisible or ignored entirely, determines whether everything else a leader does will work as well as it could.”<sup>26</sup>

The emotional health of those in ministry leadership sets the bar for the whole, as Oswald and Jacobson again explain, “Pastoral ministry is all about relationships. You may be a brilliant theologian, excellent at biblical exegesis, an outstanding preacher, a great pastoral care provider, and even give your body to be burned (remember 1 Corinthians 13), but if you are not emotionally intelligent, your ministry as a parish pastor will be difficult.”<sup>27</sup>

Further, ministry takes a heavy toll on ministry leaders’ physical health. As authors Gary Gunderson and Larry Pray explain in their book *Leading Causes of Life*:

One of the ironies of our time is that many people who serve in caring professions experience poor health. Perhaps the most ironic of all is the strikingly below average health of clergy. Age for age, clergy have significantly greater incidences of chronic disease, heart and GI tract conditions, and stress, which is a bit embarrassing for a group preaching about life every week. Clergy today have, on average, a pattern of health that is significantly worse than the average American.<sup>28</sup>

A primary reason for such poor physical health is a corresponding lack of emotional health.<sup>29</sup> More and more scientific research links emotional health directly to physical health.<sup>30</sup> Not only can poor emotional health lead to poor physical health, but as

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 10th ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), 10, Kindle.

<sup>27</sup> Oswald and Jacobson, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Gunderson and Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), location 1351, Kindle.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin R. Doolittle, “The Impact of Behaviors upon Burnout Among Parish-Based Clergy,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 49, no. 1 (March 2010): 88–95, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>30</sup> Yiying Song et al., “Regulating Emotion to Improve Physical Health through the Amygdala,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 10, no. 4 (April 2015): 523–30, Oxford Academic.

Bradberry highlights, the opposite is also true, “because emotional intelligence skills are critical to success and happiness.”<sup>31</sup> The message is becoming clearer and clearer that to lead well and live well, emotional health must become a priority. The problem for pastors, says Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, is that “most people, however, enter the ministry with little experience understanding themselves or others, especially in the area of emotions.”<sup>32</sup>

With little training in emotional health, pastors find themselves ill-equipped for the relational and emotional demands they face. Moses experienced this emotional burden as he obediently led God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. He often cried out to God with deep sadness, anger, and confusion over the emotional toil of ministry leadership, even asking the Lord to “kill me at once” during one particularly emotional experience in Numbers 11.<sup>33</sup>

Moses’s cry of desperation may feel extreme, but pastors can relate to the emotionally exhausting nature of leading, guiding, and directing God’s people. Author Dan Allender writes, “Caring for others is demanding; and far more than merely exhausting, it saps our hope.”<sup>34</sup> His words flow from years of counseling ministry leaders and also his experience of what the Apostle Paul described in his letter to the church at Corinth: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we

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<sup>31</sup> Bradberry, 5–6.

<sup>32</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 107.

<sup>33</sup> Numbers 11:15.

<sup>34</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2008) 34, Kindle.

experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.”<sup>35</sup>

As sad as Paul’s words may be, the relational brokenness of ministry and its emotional toil should not be surprising. Scripture makes it clear that the reality of sin deeply affects every aspect of life, and it is felt most acutely in relationships. Keller explains in his book *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work*, “Genesis 3 shows how sin warps every part of our nature, every aspect of human living...the impact of sin... means at least that misunderstanding, frustration, deep conflict, and unhappiness are now the norm in relationships.”<sup>36</sup>

The good news is that emotional health can be developed throughout life.<sup>37</sup> Thus, pastors can confidently cultivate emotional health in themselves as well as their elders to serve the Lord, following his example, without ducking emotional issues due to personality or preference. God graciously responds to Moses in his struggle with the demands of ministry by calling him to raise up elders to shepherd and bear the burden of the people alongside him. The Lord told him to gather seventy elders from the people, saying, “I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.”<sup>38</sup>

Numbers 11 highlights the fact that God never intended that pastors bear the burden of shepherding the church alone, a responsibility too big for any one leader to

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<sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:8–9.

<sup>36</sup> Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 88, Kindle.

<sup>37</sup> Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Numbers 11:16–17.

manage, no matter how talented, efficient, or driven. Pastors must prioritize raising up elders to assist in the work of leading and shepherding the local church. As Timothy Witmer explains in his book *The Shepherd Leader*, “We look at the plethora of reports that come out year after year about pastoral burnout and the alarming number of clergy leaving their churches or leaving the ministry altogether. Might not one of the contributing factors be that they are not receiving the help they need in shepherding the flock prescribed in the Scriptures?”<sup>39</sup>

Raising up elders is not a novel concept. Pastors committed to the Scriptures know the clear command to “appoint elders in every town.”<sup>40</sup> What is novel is the emphasis on cultivating emotional health in elders as they are called to serve. As Scazzero emphasizes, “Something is desperately wrong with most churches today. We have many people who are passionate for God and his work, yet who remain disconnected from their own emotions or those around them. The combination is deadly, both for the church and the leader’s personal life.”<sup>41</sup>

This project will focus on the specific need for pastors to cultivate emotional health in their elders so that they may be equipped to shepherd well. While the field of emotional health research has exploded in recent years, there is much to learn in applying this data to leadership development in the local church. Little research has addressed how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. Pastors receive theological training in seminary with little emphasis on emotional health. This study seeks to help equip pastors

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Titus 1:5.

<sup>41</sup> Scazzero and Bird, 38.

in how to prioritize officer training and leadership development, with an emphasis on emotional health, within the church.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. To examine this topic, the following research questions will guide participant interviews.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How do pastors cultivate emotional health in their personal lives?
2. What practices help pastors cultivate emotional health in elders?
3. What challenges do pastors face in cultivating emotional health in their elders?

### **Significance of the Study**

Former Heavyweight Boxing Champion Iron Mike Tyson once said, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.”<sup>42</sup> Those famous words embody truth applicable to so many areas of life outside of the boxing ring. One area where they consistently ring true in a sad, yet powerful way, is in ministry leadership. Most pastors and elders are woefully unprepared for the harsh emotional reality of relational ministry until it hits them right square in the face.<sup>43</sup>

One of the primary locations for relational connection within a community is the church. People come to a church to worship the risen Christ, and also to experience deep

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<sup>42</sup> Quote Investigator, s.v. “Plans Are Useless, but Planning is Indispensable,” last modified August 25, 2021, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2021/08/25/plans-hit/>.

<sup>43</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 199.

relational connection, seek healing for relational hurts, save and strengthen marriages, grieve losses, and find hope in the midst of a broken and fallen world. These reasons, and many others, carry deep emotional components. To care for all these relational needs, the church needs emotionally healthy leaders, pastors, and elders who shepherd with an “extensive depth of feeling.”<sup>44</sup> As Ortlund explains, “Throughout the history of the church God has raised up uniquely gifted and insightful teachers to walk the rest of us into the green pastures and still waters of who God in Christ is.”<sup>45</sup>

This study will have significance for pastors cultivating their own emotional health. It will also have significance for pastors cultivating emotional health in their elders and anyone engaged in cultivating emotional health in the leaders of the local church. It will have significance for elder candidates as they consider the weighty calling of shepherding the church. It will also have significance for churches overall as they cultivate an emotionally healthy community that loves well and reflects the heart of Christ. As Megan Hill explains in her book, *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church*, “When we love one another, worship God according to his word, submit to Christ’s appointed authority, and grow in holiness together, we display before the world the transforming power of the Spirit and testify to the loveliness of Christ.”<sup>46</sup> The simple goal of this work is that through the ongoing growth in the emotional health of church leadership, the loveliness of Christ will be on greater display for the world to behold.

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<sup>44</sup> Ortlund, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ortlund, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Megan Hill, *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 121, Kindle.

## Definition of Terms

**Elder** – from the Greek word *presbyteros* (hence, “presbyterian”), but the office itself is also referred to by the word *episkopos* (“overseer”). In the New Testament churches, elders were appointed to oversee and shepherd the flock of God.

**Emotional Health** – The ability to recognize, understand, and manage one’s own emotions and to navigate relationships effectively. A broad sense of well-being that enables people to function well in meeting the demands of everyday life. Emotional health is a more holistic term that for the purpose of this study will be used synonymously with the more focused constituent term of “emotional intelligence” (EI/EQ) but also encompasses a more general understanding of emotional maturity and well-being.<sup>47</sup> While no major author explicitly states that emotional intelligence and emotional health are the same, many recognize the close connection between the two. Emotional intelligence is often seen as a tool or a foundation for achieving and maintaining emotional health. Therefore, throughout this paper, the terms will be used somewhat interchangeably.

**Emotional Intelligence (EI/EQ)** - the ability to recognize and understand emotions in oneself and others, and the ability to use this awareness to manage behavior and relationships.<sup>48</sup> Abbreviations “EI” and “EQ” refer to emotional intelligence.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It’s Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature*, updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 19, Kindle.

<sup>48</sup> Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, (San Diego, CA: Talentsmart, 2009), 17, Kindle.

<sup>49</sup> John D. Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David R. Caruso, “Emotional Intelligence: Theory, Findings, and Implications,” *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (January 2004): 197–215, EBSCOhost.

**Pastor** – For the purpose of this study, the title “pastor” refers to those called to vocational ministry in the local church, as differentiated from those called as non-vocational elders/spiritual shepherds.

**Shepherding** –the functions of the spiritual shepherd, which include feeding, leading, protecting, and generally caring for the spiritual needs of God’s people.<sup>50</sup>

**Vulnerability** - Within the context of this dissertation, vulnerability is the intentional and courageous act of sharing one's authentic self – emotions, struggles, limitations, and experiences – with trusted others, in an appropriate manner. It is a purposeful, non-self-protective openness about one's inner life, acknowledging the inherent risk, and motivated by a desire for deeper connection, understanding, and growth. It is a demonstration of courage, a pathway to health, and a reflection of humility and dependence in the life of faith.

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<sup>50</sup> Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 19.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to describe how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. To understand this process, the researcher surveyed three areas of literature: biblical theological, emotional health/intelligence, and leadership development. The first literature review is a biblical theological study of the Scriptures as they pertain to emotional health. The Scriptures provide a host of stories that highlight where emotional health is seen or is clearly in need. The second literature review area is emotional health/intelligence. The area of emotional health/intelligence provides much needed information on the theory and practice of gaining emotional health. The final literature review area is leadership development. The leadership development literature provides a great framework for pastors to develop leaders while emphasizing emotional health. Each of these three areas of literature provided valuable information toward the goal of understanding how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders.

#### **Literature Review #1: Biblical/Theological**

It is right and important to start the literature review that specifically concerns the Christian church by looking first and foremost at what God has to say concerning emotional health in his revealed word, the Bible. Because emotional health consists of “the ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships,” it is easy to see how

the Bible has much to teach, primarily through its vivid stories.<sup>51</sup> As author Eugene Peterson explains, “In our Holy Scriptures story is the primary verbal means for bringing God’s word to us. For this we can be grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. . . . Story doesn’t just tell us something and leave it there. It invites our participation. . . . We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, and identify with the characters.”<sup>52</sup>

## Jesus

Jesus, the Word who became flesh and dwelt here on earth, lived out captivating stories, as even Albert Einstein, who was not a Christ follower, confesses, “I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene . . . Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrase-mongers, however artful . . . No man can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.”<sup>53</sup>

His personality pulsates through the gospel accounts as he demonstrates an extraordinary ability to navigate his emotions and relationships with wisdom, empathy, and composure. His emotional intelligence governs his teachings and how he engages people in challenging situations, modeling emotional health and a “non-anxious presence.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bradberry and Greaves, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) Ch. 3, Kindle.

<sup>53</sup> John 1:14; Geore Viereck, “What Life Means to Einstein,” *Saturday Evening Post* (Oct. 26, 1929), <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/wp-content/uploads/satevepost/einstein.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022), Ch. 7, Kindle.

One notable aspect is his capacity for empathy and compassion. Time and again, Jesus demonstrates deep understanding and wisely responds to the emotions of others. In the story of Lazarus, when Jesus arrived at the tomb of his dear friend, he encountered Lazarus' grieving sisters, Mary and Martha, and the mourning crowd. Though Jesus knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead, he allowed himself to grieve along with those around him. The shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept" testifies to his ability to connect emotionally with others, sharing in their grief and modeling vulnerability without being overwhelmed by it.<sup>55</sup>

As author Paul Miller explains, "Jesus possesses both tenderness and power. Usually, tender people lack strength, and strong people lack gentleness. But Jesus shows both goodness and strength."<sup>56</sup> Jesus consistently demonstrates a deep understanding of the human condition and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. His interactions with the sick, the marginalized, and the afflicted reveal a profound ability to connect on a deeply emotional level. This compassion allows him to offer comfort, healing, and hope to those in need, and in so doing, reveals the merciful nature of the very heart of God.<sup>57</sup>

Jesus also demonstrates remarkable self-awareness and the ability to manage his emotions under pressure. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus experienced profound anguish, praying fervently and even sweating

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<sup>55</sup> John 11:35.

<sup>56</sup> Paul E. Miller, *Love Walked among Us: Learning to Love like Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 28, Kindle.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 46, Kindle.

drops of blood from the immense emotional weight he carried.<sup>58</sup> Despite his distress, he poured out his emotions to God, saying, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”<sup>59</sup> This moment reflects profound emotional resilience: Jesus is able to acknowledge his fear and sorrow but remain committed to his purpose, showing how healthy emotional regulation can allow someone to not violate their values even in the face of overwhelming stress.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, Jesus exhibits emotional self-control and wisdom in his interactions with adversaries. When confronted by the Pharisees, who frequently tried to provoke or trap him with difficult questions, Jesus maintained calm and composure. In moments where many would respond with frustration or anger, Jesus instead engaged with thoughtfulness and clarity, turning potentially hostile exchanges into opportunities for teaching. For instance, when asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus responded with the well-known phrase, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” avoiding the explosive trap laid for him and offering an important biblical lesson on how believers should relate to government.<sup>61</sup>

Jesus’ emotional health is also clear in how he expressed anger in a controlled, purposeful, and appropriate manner. His anger is never driven by selfishness or uncontrolled impulses but by a righteous sense of justice and concern for the sanctity of God’s will. When he drove out the money changers from the temple, Jesus acted on his

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<sup>58</sup> Luke 22:44.

<sup>59</sup> Luke 22:42.

<sup>60</sup> Oswald, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Mark 12:17.

anger at the exploitation of worshippers and the commercialization of a holy space, but his response was measured and aligned with his mission to glorify God and love his neighbors.<sup>62</sup> His anger challenges injustice and corruption, and his actions reflect moral clarity and deep concern for the spiritual well-being of the people, as well as the glory of God. He thus demonstrates a high level of emotional intelligence, where anger is not repressed but instead channeled toward necessary change. Emotional health, in this context, allows for appropriate anger and ensures a constructive, rather than destructive, purpose. As Pastor Tim Keller explains, “To walk with God, then, we must do justice, out of merciful love.”<sup>63</sup>

In addition to his emotional health and regulation, Jesus displays a profound capacity for forgiveness. On the cross, as he endured immense physical and emotional pain, Jesus asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him, saying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>64</sup> Authors Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor explain, “Even in the midst of torture and mockery, Jesus extends forgiveness to his tormentors and embodies his earlier teaching on loving one’s enemies.”<sup>65</sup> Keller adds, “Instead of screaming at his executioners, ‘You’ll get yours,’ what does he say? ‘Father, they really don’t understand the magnitude of what they’re

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<sup>62</sup> Matthew 21:12–13, Mark 11:15–18.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 3, Kindle.

<sup>64</sup> Luke 23:34.

<sup>65</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 152–153, Kindle.

doing.’ Jesus was pleading for forgiveness for those who were killing him.”<sup>66</sup> This profound grace in the face of such cruelty underscores his extraordinary emotional maturity, showing that forgiveness and compassion are not signs of weakness but of deep inner strength and emotional health.

In all these examples, Jesus demonstrates an unparalleled level of emotional health, showing that emotional intelligence is not the absence of emotion but the ability to understand, manage, and respond to emotions in a thoughtful and productive manner.<sup>67</sup> His life presents a powerful model of how emotional health, empathy, and self-control can lead to a more compassionate and fulfilling way of life.<sup>68</sup>

## **Moses**

Moses also exhibits emotional strength and wisdom, as well as episodes of emotional struggle and frustration. His journey as a leader, tasked with guiding the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, was fraught with challenges that tested his emotional health in profound ways. Throughout the narrative, Moses displays the strengths and weaknesses of his emotional character, providing a deeply human portrayal of leadership under immense pressure.

One of the clearest examples of Moses’ emotional health is his ability to show empathy and compassion for his people. Early in his story, Moses witnessed the suffering of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Though he was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, Moses

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<sup>66</sup> Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York: Viking, 2022), 18, Kindle.

<sup>67</sup> Goleman, 42.

<sup>68</sup> Bradberry, 316.

attacked and killed an Egyptian overseer, to stop him from beating a Hebrew slave, demonstrating a deep sense of justice and empathy.<sup>69</sup> This is a turning point in Moses' life as James Montgomery Boice explains, "Moses made a deliberate choice to reject his Egyptian privileges in order to identify with his own people for what he understood to be the purposes of God in history. This was a monumental and noble choice."<sup>70</sup> Moses' concern for the oppressed in that moment catalyzes his future leadership and undergirds his calling and mission.

Moses' care and concern for his people is also evident when he repeatedly intercedes with God on their behalf, particularly after the Israelites sinned by creating and worshiping the golden calf.<sup>71</sup> Again Boice explains, "When it comes to the life of Moses, his finest hour was when he pleaded for the people of Israel before God on Mount Sinai and was heard by God, and the people were spared."<sup>72</sup> In the face of God's threat to destroy the Israelites, Moses shows selfless emotional maturity by putting the needs of his people above his own.

However, Moses also experiences moments of emotional instability, particularly when dealing with the persistent complaints of the Israelites. Leading such a large and often rebellious group of people was an immense burden, and Moses' emotional health was sometimes overwhelmed by the frustration and stress of his role. At Meribah, where the Israelites complained about the lack of water, Moses struck the rock to bring forth

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<sup>69</sup> Exodus 2:11–12.

<sup>70</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Life of Moses: God's First Deliverer of Israel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 44, Kindle.

<sup>71</sup> Exodus 32:11–14.

<sup>72</sup> Boice, *The Life of Moses*, 181.

water instead of speaking to it as God had commanded.<sup>73</sup> This outburst, though understandable, led to serious consequences—God prohibited Moses from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience and failure to control his emotions.

This episode highlights Moses’ struggle with emotional regulation. Despite his profound faith and relationship with God, his inability to manage his frustration in that critical moment underscores the emotional toll of leadership. Dan Allender summarizes Moses’ emotional state: “If we have any sensitivity to the length of the journey ahead, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and want to quit.”<sup>74</sup> Moses’ anger wasn’t just a fleeting response; it revealed deeper frustrations with the people he was leading, who continually questioned and disobeyed him and God. His emotional reaction at Meribah illustrates that even the most faithful leaders face moments where emotions overpower reason and lead to actions that have long-lasting consequences.<sup>75</sup>

Another important aspect of Moses’ emotional journey is seen in his relationship with God. Throughout his life, Moses had an intimate and unique connection with God, and this relationship often served as his deep emotional anchor. For instance, when he felt overwhelmed by the burden of leadership, Moses openly expressed his feelings to God. In Numbers 11:11–15, Moses questioned why God had placed such a heavy burden on him and expressed his sense of inadequacy. His honesty in prayer reflects an emotionally healthy relationship with God, one where he could be vulnerable about his struggles. Instead of suppressing his emotions, Moses brought them to God, demonstrating that

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<sup>73</sup> Numbers 20:7–12.

<sup>74</sup> Allender, 178.

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

seeking help and expressing one's feelings are essential components of emotional health. As Allender and Tremper Longman explain in *The Cry of the Soul*, "In neglecting our intense emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God."<sup>76</sup>

Moses' journey reflects a complex interplay between emotional strength and vulnerability. His empathy, compassion, and ability to intercede for his people show his capacity for emotional intelligence, while his moments of frustration and anger reveal the emotional challenges of leadership and the constant need to cultivate emotional health.

## **The Apostle Paul**

The Apostle Paul presents a complex portrait of emotional health, revealing remarkable strengths and raw vulnerability. His emotional resilience and self-awareness, particularly in the face of hardship, are central to his effectiveness as a leader and missionary. However, Paul also displays intense frustration, offering a deeply personal view of someone tasked with a demanding spiritual mission.

One of the most striking aspects of Paul's emotional health is his resilience in the face of suffering. Throughout his ministry, Paul endured severe hardships, including imprisonment, physical beatings, shipwrecks, and persecution.<sup>77</sup> Yet, despite these trials, Paul maintains a remarkable sense of inner peace. Luis Cruz Villalobos argues that this was a result of Paul's self-understanding, "Specifically in relation to the suffering he

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<sup>76</sup> Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman, *The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions about God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 7, Kindle.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:23–28.

faces, Paul bases his understanding of himself exclusively on the free gift of God (grace) as a response to his impotence and his fragile condition.”<sup>78</sup> He frequently expresses joy in his writings, even while imprisoned, as seen in his letter to the Philippians, where he encourages believers to “rejoice in the Lord always.”<sup>79</sup> This ability to maintain a positive outlook amid extreme adversity reflects Paul’s emotional fortitude and spiritual maturity.

Paul’s emotional health is also evident in his empathy for the churches he founded. His letters reveal a deep concern for their spiritual and emotional well-being. In 2 Corinthians 11:28, Paul speaks of his daily anxiety for the churches, internalizing their struggles. As author Steven Lawson writes in his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Philippian church, “Our ministry must be carried out not only with our hands, but with our heart. We must be emotionally connected with others in our service for the Lord. We must seek to feel with them and feel for them.”<sup>80</sup> Paul’s emotional connection drove him to constantly write, visit, and pray for the church, offering guidance, encouragement, and correction. His emotional health in this regard is reflected in his willingness to confront sin and offer compassionate support, balancing tender and tough love.

Paul’s emotional health is evident in his boldness to confront sin by “speaking the truth in love,” even to respected leaders like Peter.<sup>81</sup> In Galatians 2, Paul recounts his public opposition to Peter for withdrawing from Gentile believers to appease certain

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<sup>78</sup> Luis Cruz Villalobos, “Keys to Post-Traumatic Coping in the Life of Paul of Tarsus,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 18, no. 2 (2023): 105–24.

<sup>79</sup> Philippians 4:4.

<sup>80</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *Philippians for You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2017), 131, Kindle.

<sup>81</sup> Ephesians 4:15.

Jewish Christians.<sup>82</sup> Paul’s willingness to address Peter’s hypocrisy highlights his deep emotional resilience and spiritual integrity. Rather than avoiding conflict, Paul prioritizes truth and the unity of the gospel over maintaining harmony at all costs. As John Stott explains, “It was just the kind of open, head-on collision which the church would seek at any price to avoid today.”<sup>83</sup>

However, Paul’s emotional journey is not without its challenges. At times, he displays intense frustration, particularly when dealing with opposition or the immaturity of some believers. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul expresses anger and bewilderment at their desertion of the gospel he preached, saying, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!”<sup>84</sup> His tone reflects a leader deeply invested in his mission but also personally affected by the wavering of his converts. This emotional intensity sometimes leads Paul to use harsh language, as seen in his rebukes of false teachers who caused division within the church, such as in Galatians 5:12, where he writes, “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”

The opposite end of the spectrum from Paul’s emotional outbursts is seen in his courageous transparency about his own weaknesses and struggles. In 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, Paul speaks of a “thorn in the flesh,” a persistent struggle or hardship that kept him humble. Despite praying for it to be removed, Paul ultimately accepted it as part of God’s plan, declaring, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” This openness about his limitations

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<sup>82</sup> Galatians 2:11–14.

<sup>83</sup> John Stott, *Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), Kindle.

<sup>84</sup> Galatians 1:6.

reveals a high degree of self-awareness and emotional humility, as Paul recognizes that his strength came not from himself but from God’s grace working through his weakness. As the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible* explains, “Nothing, not even mysterious painful experiences, will bring Paul to doubt his identity and calling in the gospel. His painful circumstances brought him to cherish the all-sufficient grace of God.”<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, Paul often grapples with loneliness and the emotional toll of his ministry. In 2 Timothy 4:9–16, Paul laments being abandoned by some of his companions and longs for the companionship of Timothy and others. Despite his robust faith, Paul’s writings show that even the most committed leaders experience emotional challenges such as isolation and disappointment. His ability to name these emotions reveals a high degree of emotional health and courage.<sup>86</sup>

In conclusion, the Apostle Paul’s emotional health, while tested by the pressures of his mission, demonstrates resilience, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. His ability to persevere through suffering, care deeply for others, and maintain joy amidst trials reflects profound emotional strength. At the same time, his moments of frustration, loneliness, and vulnerability provide a candid look at the emotional complexities of leadership.<sup>87</sup> Paul’s life serves as a testament to the importance of emotional health in enduring challenges and staying grounded in faith.

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<sup>85</sup> English Standard Version, *Gospel Transformation Study Bible: Christ in All of Scripture, Grace for All of Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 1569.

<sup>86</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 108, Kindle.

<sup>87</sup> Allender, 59.

## Ruth and Esther

The only two females with books of the Bible named after them, Ruth and Esther, also highlight resilience, faith, and emotional strength in the face of adversity.

Understanding Ruth's loyalty and grief, as well as Esther's courage and fear, provides insights into compassionate and well-rounded leadership, especially for those offering support in the midst of emotional and spiritual challenges.

Ruth's emotional health is characterized by resilience, loyalty, and capacity for love, even after significant personal loss. After the death of her husband, Ruth could have returned to her own family in Moab, as her mother-in-law Naomi suggested. Instead, she chose to stay with Naomi, demonstrating a profound sense of empathy and emotional intelligence. Ruth's famous declaration, "Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay," highlights her unwavering commitment and emotional strength.<sup>88</sup> Ruth's kindness to Naomi also demonstrates her emotional strength, even during her own grief and uncertainty.<sup>89</sup>

Ruth also displays remarkable emotional resilience throughout her journey. Rather than allowing grief to consume her, Ruth channeled her emotions into a deep bond with Naomi, showing her ability to prioritize relationships and care for others despite her own suffering.<sup>90</sup> She willingly took on the uncertainty of moving to a foreign land, where

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<sup>88</sup> Ruth 1:16.

<sup>89</sup> Renee Garfinkel, "The Biblical Book of Ruth and the Dynamics of Compassion," May 24, 2023, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-out/202305/the-biblical-book-of-ruth-and-the-dynamics-of-compassion>.

<sup>90</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentaries (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), location 142, Kindle.

she would be a stranger with no guarantees of security or acceptance. Her humility and determination are further evident when she worked in the fields to provide for Naomi and herself.<sup>91</sup> Ruth's emotional health shines in her steady perseverance and ability to navigate difficult circumstances without losing her sense of purpose or identity.

Ultimately, because Ruth found favor with Boaz, her emotional intelligence and steadfastness are rewarded, leading to her becoming part of the lineage of King David and, eventually, Jesus. Her story testifies to how emotional health, marked by loyalty, resilience, and love, transform difficult situations into opportunities for growth and blessing.

Esther's emotional health is marked by her courage, wisdom, and ability to manage intense pressure. As a young Jewish woman who became queen in a foreign land, Esther faced a deep emotional crisis when her people were threatened with extermination by Haman's genocidal decree.<sup>92</sup> Initially hesitant, Esther feared for her life, knowing that approaching King Ahasuerus without being summoned could be fatal.<sup>93</sup>

However, after counsel from her cousin Mordecai, she gathered her emotional strength, famously declaring, "If I perish, I perish."<sup>94</sup> This critical moment in her life reveals the depth of her emotional strength, enabling her to take calculated risks for the good of others. As Andy Crouch explains, "The vulnerability that leads to flourishing requires risk, which is the possibility of loss—the chance that when we act, we will lose

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<sup>91</sup> Ruth 2.

<sup>92</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *Esther: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 140–141.

<sup>93</sup> Esther 3:12–4:11.

<sup>94</sup> Esther 4:16.

something we value.”<sup>95</sup> Esther made the overwhelming choice to walk a path “that could most likely end in her death.”<sup>96</sup>

Esther’s emotional intelligence is further demonstrated in how she carefully navigates palace politics. Rather than acting impulsively, she devised a thoughtful plan, inviting the king and Haman to banquets before revealing her Jewish identity and exposing Haman’s plot. Her patience and strategic thinking reflect emotional maturity, using timing and persuasion to work for the safety of her people.

Throughout the book, Esther shows emotional resilience, balancing her fear with courage, and her humility with wisdom. She rose to the challenge of leadership, using her position and emotional strength to protect her people, making her a model of emotional health under extreme pressure. Esther’s emotional health highlights a unique paradox of strength through weakness. Again, Andy Crouch explains, “Here’s the paradox: flourishing comes from being both strong and weak. Flourishing requires us to embrace both authority and vulnerability, both capacity and frailty—even, at least in this broken world, both life and death.”<sup>97</sup>

## **Jonah**

Throughout the book of Jonah, the prophet exhibits multiple signs of emotional instability, illustrating a lack of emotional health. Jonah’s story begins by highlighting his lack of emotional health in his initial response to God’s call. Instead of obeying God,

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<sup>95</sup> Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 32, Kindle.

<sup>96</sup> Mike Cosper, *Faith among the Faithless: Learning from Esther How to Live in a World Gone Mad* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 15, Kindle.

<sup>97</sup> Crouch, 3.

which was his primary job as a prophet, when he was called to preach to Ninevah, Jonah ran away in fear and rebellion, boarding a ship to flee to Tarshish.<sup>98</sup> As Keller explains in *Rediscovering Jonah: The Secret of God's Mercy*, “In a deliberate parody of God’s call to ‘arise, go to Nineveh,’ Jonah ‘arose’ to go in the opposite direction.”<sup>99</sup> This avoidance of responsibility reflects emotional immaturity, in that Jonah allowed his fear and discomfort to dictate his actions.

Another instance of Jonah’s lack of emotional health is his extreme anger after God spares Nineveh.<sup>100</sup> Jonah refused to accept God’s mercy and expressed frustration that God did not follow through on his threat to destroy the city. Again, Keller explains, “Jonah bristles with self-righteous anger at God’s graciousness and mercy to sinners.”<sup>101</sup> His reaction reveals a lack of empathy and an inability to align his emotions with God’s compassionate nature.

Jonah’s emotional health further deteriorates when he becomes irrationally angry about the death of a plant that provided him shade in the last chapter of his story.<sup>102</sup> His disproportionate grief over the plant, compared to his indifference toward the potential destruction of an entire city, exposes Jonah’s distorted priorities and inability to manage his emotional responses. Jonah’s anger is a clear reflection of his deeply concerning self-centeredness, which led Jonah “to become too aligned politically and emotionally with

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<sup>98</sup> Jonah 1:1–3.

<sup>99</sup> Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah: The Secret of God's Mercy* (New York: Viking, 2018), 13, Kindle.

<sup>100</sup> Jonah 4:1–3.

<sup>101</sup> Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Jonah 4:6–9.

the national security interests of Israel.”<sup>103</sup> Jonah’s emotional immaturity leads to his prejudice and racism, as authors Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson explain, “Prejudice is rooted mainly in emotions that continue to distort our thinking.”<sup>104</sup>

Overall, Jonah’s story illustrates a man who struggles with emotional regulation, empathy, and understanding God’s grace. Even though God was overwhelmingly gracious to him, extending mercy and miraculously saving his life, he struggled to extend that same mercy to others. His journey serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of emotional immaturity.

## **Daniel**

The biblical character Daniel is a remarkable example of emotional health, particularly in how he maintained inner stability, resilience, and faith in the face of intense external pressures. At a young age, Daniel was taken captive from Jerusalem to Babylon, a foreign land with different customs and beliefs where the “pressures to conform were intense.”<sup>105</sup> Despite these challenging circumstances, Daniel exhibits emotional maturity through his unwavering sense of identity and purpose, his disciplined life, and his ability to navigate complex relationships with wisdom and grace.

Daniel displays remarkable emotional health by trusting God even amid divine discipline, the Babylonian exile. Despite being taken from his homeland and witnessing the judgment upon his people, Daniel maintained unwavering faith in God’s purposes.

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<sup>103</sup> Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*, 163.

<sup>104</sup> Oswald, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus*, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Daniel*, vol. 21, The Preacher’s Commentary Series (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 38, Kindle.

While Christians often associate God’s faithfulness with blessings, Daniel understands that God’s faithfulness could also manifest in discipline and judgment. Dale Ralph Davis calls this God’s “severe faithfulness.”<sup>106</sup> God’s decision to send Israel into exile was a form of negative faithfulness—severe but necessary for correction and restoration. Daniel’s emotional resilience, rooted in this trust, allows him to endure adversity without losing faith in God’s ultimate goodness and plan.

One consistent way that Daniel displays emotional health is through his humble dependence upon God. When faced with difficult situations, Daniel knew that he had “only one recourse, prayer.”<sup>107</sup> He prayed regularly, even when it became a dangerous act under King Darius’ decree.<sup>108</sup> His praying, multiple times a day, grounded him emotionally with the strength to face life-threatening situations. His deep relationship with God provides a sense of peace and confidence, regardless of external circumstances. Prayer serves as his emotional anchor, helping Daniel remain calm and collected in crises, such as when he faced the lion’s den.

Daniel also exhibits emotional resilience through his self-control and ability to set boundaries. When offered royal food and wine, Daniel respectfully requested a different diet.<sup>109</sup> His ability to say “no” to what seemed appealing for the sake of his convictions demonstrates a high level of emotional maturity. This self-discipline is not based on fear

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<sup>106</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 29, Kindle.

<sup>107</sup> Tremper Longman, *Daniel*, NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 78, Kindle.

<sup>108</sup> Daniel 6:10.

<sup>109</sup> Daniel 1:8–16.

or external pressure but on a deep-rooted understanding of who he was and what was important to him. His emotional strength enables him to stand firm without being confrontational or bitter.

Another aspect of Daniel's emotional health is his capacity for wisdom in difficult situations. When King Nebuchadnezzar demanded the interpretation of his dream and threatened all the wise men with death, Daniel calmly requested time to pray and seek God's guidance.<sup>110</sup> His measured response in a life-threatening situation shows emotional intelligence and trust in God's provision. Daniel's wisdom allows him to maintain composure under pressure, and his actions saved not only his life but also the lives of many others. His ability to navigate stressful environments without being overwhelmed speaks to his emotional strength.

Furthermore, Daniel's interactions with Babylonian kings show a remarkable blend of humility, respect, and firmness. When explaining the meaning of King Nebuchadnezzar's first dream in Daniel 2, a dream that no Babylonian wise man could interpret, Daniel displayed deep humility and took no credit for himself. As commentator Ian M. Duguid explains, "Genuine humility shone out from Daniel's life, a humility that enabled him to give all of the glory to God for revealing the dream and its interpretation to him, and not to take any of the credit for himself."<sup>111</sup> Even when delivering difficult messages, such as interpreting King Belshazzar's downfall, Daniel remained faithful to

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<sup>110</sup> Daniel 2:16–18.

<sup>111</sup> Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentaries (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), location 699, Kindle.

his calling. He did not seek personal gain but spoke truth with integrity, exhibiting a well-balanced emotional state that did not waver under political or social pressure.

In summary, Daniel's emotional health was anchored in his spiritual life, self-discipline, resilience, and wisdom. His ability to maintain peace, navigate complex challenges, and remain faithful to his values amidst external chaos serves as a model for emotional maturity and well-being.

## **Nehemiah**

The biblical character Nehemiah demonstrates profound emotional health through his leadership, resilience, and reliance on God in the face of challenges. As a Jewish exile serving as the cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah was deeply concerned about the plight of Jerusalem, whose walls were in ruins. His emotional health is evident in his capacity to manage his feelings, his strong sense of purpose, and his ability to lead others with wisdom and compassion.

Nehemiah displays emotional health powerfully in his ability to process and express his emotions in a healthy manner. When he first heard about the ruined state of Jerusalem's walls, he responded with deep sorrow, fasting, and, most of all, prayer.<sup>112</sup> Instead of acting impulsively, he took time to grieve and seek God's guidance, showing emotional awareness and the ability to manage his pain constructively. For Nehemiah, prayer "was not his last resort; it was his first."<sup>113</sup> His prayer is not only a way to express his distress but also a way to align his heart with God's will. Nehemiah's approach

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<sup>112</sup> Nehemiah 1:4.

<sup>113</sup> Derek Thomas, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Reformed Expository Commentary Series (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), 207, Kindle.

reveals the importance of spiritual discipline and self-control as key sources of emotional strength.

Another aspect of Nehemiah's emotional health is his resilience in the face of adversity. After receiving the king's permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls, Nehemiah faced constant opposition from surrounding enemies.<sup>114</sup> These adversaries tried to undermine Nehemiah's work through mockery, threats, and intimidation. Despite this pressure, Nehemiah remained focused on his mission, refusing to be bullied.<sup>115</sup> His ability to stand firm in the face of opposition demonstrates remarkable emotional resilience, as he was not swayed by fear or doubt. Instead, Nehemiah continually turned to prayer, asking God for strength and protection, which helped him maintain his emotional equilibrium.

Nehemiah also shows emotional intelligence in how he led and interacted with others. He inspired and organized the people of Jerusalem to work together to rebuild the walls, even though they were initially disheartened by the enormity of the task. His leadership style is empathetic and inclusive, as he listened to the concerns of the people and took action to address injustices, such as when he confronted the wealthy Jews who were exploiting their poorer brethren.<sup>116</sup> Nehemiah's empathy, fairness, and moral courage are key components of his emotional health.

Furthermore, Nehemiah demonstrates strong boundaries and self-control when dealing with distractions. For instance, when his enemies tried to lure him into a trap by

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<sup>114</sup> Nehemiah 4.

<sup>115</sup> Geert W. Lorein, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024), 255, Kindle.

<sup>116</sup> Nehemiah 5:6–13.

inviting him to meet them under false pretenses, Nehemiah firmly refused, recognizing the danger and staying focused on his work.<sup>117</sup> His ability to say “no” to distractions, even when they came under the guise of diplomacy, reflects his emotional clarity and commitment to his purpose.

In summary, Nehemiah’s emotional health is characterized by his reliance on prayer, his resilience in the face of opposition, and his ability to lead with empathy and wisdom. His capacity to manage his emotions, maintain focus, and stand firm in his convictions despite numerous challenges serves as a powerful example of emotional maturity and spiritual strength. Author Wallace Benn, encouraged by Nehemiah’s leadership, writes, “Let us follow the steps of a wise leader as he sought to share the godly vision and mobilize the people of God into action.”<sup>118</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Countless other examples throughout the Bible highlight the importance of emotional health, beyond well-known figures like Jesus, Moses, Paul, Esther, Ruth, Jonah, Daniel, and Nehemiah. However, these eight offer a comprehensive biblical statement on the importance of emotional health. Each of their experiences demonstrates the value of emotional endurance, compassion, courage, and personal reflection, giving a well-rounded biblical framework for the significance of maintaining emotional well-being. Each of these characters, except Jesus, also highlight what author Chad Bird

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<sup>117</sup> Nehemiah 6:2–4.

<sup>118</sup> Wallace P. Benn, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church*, Preaching the Word Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 83, Kindle.

explains in his book *Limping with God*: “Our flawed and frail friends of the Bible give us a profound hope. That hope is not built upon them, but upon the fact that the perfect God chose to use such profoundly imperfect people in his kingdom . . . such am I. Such are you.”<sup>119</sup>

## **Literature Review #2: Emotional Health/Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence has gained recognition as crucial for personal and professional success, particularly in leadership contexts. Various scholars, including Daniel Goleman, Travis Bradberry, and Jean Greaves, have extensively researched emotional intelligence, providing frameworks and applications proving its transformative impact on leadership and team dynamics. This literature review synthesizes these contributions, drawing from foundational and applied texts to explore how EI affects habits, leadership effectiveness, and team collaboration.

### **Emotional Health/Intelligence: Theories and Frameworks**

Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* pioneered work on the subject, arguing that EI—comprising self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—can often be a better predictor of success than traditional intelligence (IQ).<sup>120</sup> Goleman presents a compelling case that emotionally intelligent individuals are more capable of managing stress, maintaining positive relationships, and making sound

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<sup>119</sup> Chad Bird, *Limping with God: Jacob & the Old Testament Guide to Messy Discipleship* (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2022), x–xi, Kindle.

<sup>120</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 30.

decisions under pressure. Goleman's later works, such as *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, expand on this, providing empirical evidence that high EI correlates with greater success in professional environments, where interpersonal interactions are key.<sup>121</sup>

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's seminal paper, *Emotional Intelligence: Theory, Findings, and Implications*, deepens the theoretical understanding of EI by presenting a model that defines EI as a set of abilities: emotional perception, emotional facilitation of thought, understanding emotions, and emotional regulation.<sup>122</sup> This theoretical framework offers a cognitive perspective on EI, distinguishing it from other personality traits like extroversion or agreeableness.<sup>123</sup> Their work provides a more structured understanding of how EI operates, which complements Goleman's broader approach by offering scientific rigor and measurability.

Travis Bradberry's *Emotional Intelligence Habits* brings the theoretical into practical territory by emphasizing that EI is built through consistent emotional habits.<sup>124</sup> As Bradberry explains, "This book is all about outcomes—real-world results that come from the emotional intelligence habits you demonstrate every day."<sup>125</sup> Bradberry and Greaves argue that individuals can increase their EI by cultivating specific habits such as

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<sup>121</sup> Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, "Emotional Intelligence."

<sup>123</sup> Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso.

<sup>124</sup> Bradberry, *Emotional Intelligence Habits*, 18.

<sup>125</sup> Bradberry, 19.

self-reflection, mindfulness, and emotional regulation, supporting Mayer and Salovey's findings that EI is a skill that can be developed over time.<sup>126</sup>

## **Emotional Intelligence in Leadership**

The relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership has been a focal point in EI research, with Goleman's *Primal Leadership* being a key text. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee introduce the idea of "resonant leadership," where leaders use their emotional intelligence to create a positive emotional climate that fosters collaboration, innovation, and loyalty.<sup>127</sup> As opposed to a dissonant leader, who is "out of touch with the feelings of the people in the room," resonant leaders are attuned to the emotional needs of their teams and can adapt their leadership style to different situations, making them more effective in guiding teams through challenges.<sup>128</sup>

Building on this premise, Goleman's *Working with Emotional Intelligence* provides empirical support for the idea that emotionally intelligent leaders are more successful because they manage relationships better. Goleman's research shows that leaders with high EI outperform their peers, not simply because of their technical abilities but because they are more adept at understanding and managing their emotions and the emotions of others.<sup>129</sup> This focus on relationship management is crucial in motivating teams, managing conflict, and fostering trust.

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<sup>126</sup> Bradberry and Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 50.

<sup>127</sup> Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*, 10.

<sup>128</sup> Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, 36.

In *It's Always Personal*, Anne Kreamer explores the role emotions play in the workplace, particularly in leadership, and argues that emotional intelligence is essential for effective leadership. Kreamer emphasizes that managing one's emotions is a critical strength for leaders. She explains, "Real emotional intelligence is more than just being sensitive or 'nice,' . . . While those are important skills, effective emotional knowledge demands a profound level of self-reflection."<sup>130</sup>

Kreamer draws heavily on neuroscience and behavioral research to show how emotions impact decision-making, team dynamics, and productivity. Leaders who develop emotional health—through self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—are better equipped to foster positive, collaborative work environments. Emotionally healthy leaders are also equipped to more effectively respond to challenges and create a culture of trust. By prioritizing emotional health, Kreamer argues, leaders can enhance their own well-being and improve their team's performance and satisfaction.<sup>131</sup>

Steve Saccone's *Relational Intelligence: How Leaders Can Expand Their Influence Through a New Way of Being Smart* complements Goleman's work by emphasizing the importance of relational dynamics in leadership. Saccone argues that emotionally intelligent leaders expand their influence by building authentic, empathetic connections with their teams. Saccone explains, "We carry the virus of influence, which is called relationship. As carriers of the virus, we transmit our influence through our human-to-human interactions—for better or worse. And although this viral reality is true

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<sup>130</sup> Anne Kreamer, *It's Always Personal: Navigating Emotion in the New Workplace*, Random House Trade, Paperback ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2012), 24, Kindle.

<sup>131</sup> Kreamer, 131.

for everybody, it has heightened importance for leaders.”<sup>132</sup> He asserts that relational intelligence—a deeper, more relationally focused form of EI—enables leaders to navigate complex social environments and lead more effectively by fostering genuine relationships.

## **Emotional Intelligence in Team Dynamics**

While the focus of much EI literature is on individual leaders, authors Jean Greaves and Evan Watkins’ *Team Emotional Intelligence 2.0* shifts the focus to how EI operates at the team level. Greaves and Watkins argue there are four essential skills that make up team emotional intelligence. They explain,

The first two skills, emotion awareness and emotion management, are about how a team recognizes, understands, and manages its emotions. The second two skills, internal relationships and external relationships, are more about how team members connect with each other and other people outside the team, including other teams.<sup>133</sup>

According to their research, when teams have high emotional intelligence they see an improvement in cooperation, a decrease in conflicts, and an overall increase in task performance.<sup>134</sup> The authors argue that team EI is a critical predictor of team performance, as emotionally intelligent teams are better equipped to handle stress and adversity. They highlight how team leaders can foster EI by creating an emotionally supportive environment where team members feel valued and understood.

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<sup>132</sup> Saccone, 29.

<sup>133</sup> Jean Greaves, *Team Emotional Intelligence 2.0: The Four Essential Skills of High Performing Teams* (San Diego: TalentSmart, 2022), 38, Kindle.

<sup>134</sup> Greaves, 28.

Wendy Morton's *Everything You Need to Know About Emotional Intelligence & Leadership* reinforces the importance of team EI, emphasizing that emotionally intelligent leaders manage their own emotions and also help their teams navigate emotional challenges.<sup>135</sup> Morton suggests that leaders who invest in building emotionally intelligent teams see higher levels of creativity, problem-solving, and overall productivity. She further argues that teams with high EI are more resilient and adaptable, particularly in dynamic and high-pressure environments.

In *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, Peter Steinke uses systems theory to explore how emotional health can shape the life of a church community. He argues that congregations, like families, function as emotional systems where the actions and emotions of individuals affect the collective whole. Steinke emphasizes the importance of leaders maintaining emotional stability to guide the congregation through challenges. By understanding the congregation as an interconnected system, leaders can cultivate emotional health by managing anxiety, avoiding reactive behavior, and promoting healthy, thoughtful responses to conflict and change. This awareness allows leaders to foster a more emotionally resilient and supportive church community.

One of Steinke's key insights is that emotional health begins with self-awareness and differentiation: "Self-differentiation means 'being separate together' or 'being connected selves.'"<sup>136</sup> Leaders must learn to manage their own emotional reactivity so

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<sup>135</sup> Wendy Morton, *Everything You Need to Know About Emotional Intelligence & Leadership*, Need to Know Series (Newmarket, Ontario: BrainMass Inc, 2012), 17–18.

<sup>136</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 12, Kindle.

they can stay calm and centered during difficult situations. Steinke explains that self-differentiation “is a life-long learning process, never attained, always tested.”<sup>137</sup>

The reason the pursuit of self-differentiation is so important is because the well-differentiated person is less likely to become anxious in stressful situations and therefore is less likely to provoke anxiety in others. Cultivating emotional health in a congregation involves leaders who can remain non-anxious presences, helping the church navigate emotional upheavals with clarity and compassion, rather than being swept up in emotional turmoil.<sup>138</sup>

### **Practical Applications and Implications**

The practical implications of emotional intelligence, particularly in leadership, are well-documented across the literature. Goleman’s works, especially *Primal Leadership* and *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, highlight the real-world application of EI in leadership contexts. These texts show that emotionally intelligent leaders can build more effective teams by creating an emotionally positive work environment. By fostering trust, empathy, and open communication, these leaders can enhance individual and team performance.

Bradberry’s focus on emotional intelligence habits adds a practical dimension to the theory, emphasizing that improving one’s EI is an ongoing process. By cultivating emotional habits like empathy, self-reflection, and emotional regulation, individuals increase their emotional intelligence in personal and professional situations.

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<sup>137</sup> Steinke, 12.

<sup>138</sup> Steinke, 61.

Saccone's concept of relational intelligence further extends the practical application of EI by offering leaders strategies for building deeper connections with their teams. Saccone argues that relational intelligence is key to expanding leadership influence because it focuses on the human element of leadership, making leaders more adaptable, compassionate, and effective in complex social settings.

Finally, Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's theoretical framework provides the scientific underpinning for many of these practical applications. Their model shows that emotional intelligence is a measurable and improvable skill, reinforcing the idea that leaders and teams can work to enhance their EI over time.

Building on the foundational works of Goleman and Bradberry, Peter Scazzero's exploration of emotional intelligence in the context of spirituality and leadership offers a distinct approach. In *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* Scazzero emphasizes that emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. He argues that many leaders focus on spiritual growth while neglecting their emotional well-being, leading to burnout and ineffectiveness. Scazzero's work parallels Goleman's insights on self-awareness and self-regulation, suggesting that true spiritual leadership begins with emotional honesty and self-reflection.<sup>139</sup>

Scazzero continues to apply the theme of emotional health and spirituality by focusing on *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* and *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. In *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, Scazzero explores how emotionally intelligent leadership is crucial for long-term leadership effectiveness. He mirrors Goleman's concept of "resonant leadership" by advocating that leaders be aware of their own

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<sup>139</sup> Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 49.

emotional health so as to lead others with empathy and wisdom. Scazzero underscores how emotionally unhealthy leaders project their unresolved issues onto their teams, damaging relationships and organizational health.<sup>140</sup>

In *Leading with Emotional Intelligence*, Reldan Nadler presents practical strategies for leaders to develop and leverage emotional intelligence to enhance their leadership effectiveness. Nadler emphasizes that emotionally intelligent leaders can create high-performing teams, build trust, and foster collaborative work environments. He outlines key emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, and provides actionable techniques to strengthen these areas. Through coaching exercises, self-assessments, and real-world examples, Nadler shows how developing these competencies enables leaders to navigate the complexities of the workplace, manage conflicts, and inspire greater productivity.

Nadler's work connects with Goleman's foundational research, particularly his framework that identifies emotional intelligence as a critical component of leadership success alongside IQ and technical skills. Nadler argues, "Leaders with more Emotional Intelligence are more adaptable, resilient, and optimistic."<sup>141</sup>

Like Goleman, Nadler highlights the importance of self-awareness and emotional self-management in leadership, echoing the idea that leaders with high EI are more effective in handling stress and building positive relationships. Other authors in the EI field, such as Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, also emphasize the role of emotional

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<sup>140</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 26.

<sup>141</sup> Reldan S. Nadler, *Leading with Emotional Intelligence: Hands-On Strategies for Building Confident and Collaborative Star Performers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 8, Kindle.

regulation and empathy in leadership, aligning with Nadler's approach. Nadler contributes to the broader conversation by offering a more hands-on, coaching-based methodology, helping leaders apply emotional intelligence in their day-to-day interactions and decision-making processes, reinforcing the importance of emotional health in achieving leadership excellence.

*The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Scazzero applies these principles to the church community, suggesting that emotionally healthy leaders create healthier spiritual communities. Much like Bradberry's emphasis on emotional intelligence in teams, Scazzero argues that emotionally healthy churches foster openness, accountability, and relational depth, allowing for more transformative spiritual experiences.<sup>142</sup> Together, Scazzero's works underscore the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into spiritual leadership and organizational settings, reinforcing Goleman's and Bradberry's findings about the essential role of EI in leadership and community well-being.

Another key theme is the impact of EI on burnout and emotional well-being, particularly in high-stress environments like leadership or pastoral roles. Doolittle's study on clergy burnout highlights how behaviors related to emotional intelligence, such as self-regulation and emotional awareness, can mitigate stress and prevent burnout.<sup>143</sup> Song et al. provide a physiological perspective, suggesting that regulating emotions through the brain's amygdala can improve emotional and physical health.<sup>144</sup> This connection between

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<sup>142</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Ch. 7.

<sup>143</sup> Doolittle, "The Impact of Behaviors upon Burnout Among Parish-Based Clergy."

<sup>144</sup> Song et al., "Regulating Emotion to Improve Physical Health through the Amygdala."

emotional regulation and well-being demonstrates how EI is critical not only for leadership success but also for personal health and resilience.

## **The Importance of Story Work for Emotional Health**

Story work, the intentional exploration and understanding of one's personal narrative, is a profound tool for emotional health. Authors like Dan Allender, Diane Langberg, and John Gottman emphasize the importance of confronting, exploring, and reshaping life stories to foster healing, resilience, and emotional well-being. Each of these authors contributes to a growing understanding of how personal narratives shape emotional health and relationships. By engaging in story work, individuals can heal from past wounds, gain insight into patterns of behavior, and foster deeper, more authentic connections with others.

Allender, in his book *To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Future*, underscores the idea that stories are intricately tied to emotional well-being. He explains that each person's story is unique and that by understanding the events, relationships, and experiences that shape our lives, people gain insight into their core beliefs and emotions driving current behavior.

Allender believes that story work is not just an intellectual exercise but also a spiritual journey. He encourages readers to engage with their stories in a reflective, prayerful manner, inviting God to reveal the truth and bring healing. Allender posits that people are not passive recipients of their stories but active participants who can reshape

and reinterpret their pasts in ways that promote growth and healing.<sup>145</sup> He emphasizes the redemptive power of engaging with one's narrative because this redemptive reframing allows people to see God's hand in their stories and find purpose and meaning in their experiences, even the painful ones. By doing so, they can rewrite their futures in ways that are grounded in truth, hope, and emotional resilience.

Langberg adds to this understanding by focusing on how suffering impacts stories and how story work is essential for emotional healing. In her book *Suffering and the Heart of God*, Langberg discusses how suffering and trauma often fragment personal narratives, leaving individuals with disconnected or distorted versions of their life stories. She thus advocates for the slow, compassionate reassembling of fragmented stories through the therapeutic process. Langberg introduces the concept of "bearing witness" to one's pain, which is critical to emotional recovery.<sup>146</sup> She explains that when people can tell their stories in a safe, non-judgmental space, they regain a sense of agency and wholeness. This process is emotionally reparative because it allows individuals to integrate painful experiences into their broader life narratives in a way that makes sense, rather than remaining fragmented and unresolved.

Langberg also highlights the importance of community in the process of healing. She explains that story work is most effective when done in the presence of others who can offer empathy, support, and validation. Emotional health flourishes when people feel

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<sup>145</sup> Dan B. Allender, *To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Future* (Westminster: The Crown Publishing Group, 2009), 40, Kindle.

<sup>146</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 104, Kindle.

accepted within the context of their stories. This collective aspect of story work affirms that healing is often a relational journey as much as an individual one.<sup>147</sup>

Gottman, a prominent psychologist known for his research on relationships and marriage, provides valuable insight into how story work is vital for emotional health within relational dynamics. In his books, such as *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman emphasizes the importance of shared narratives in healthy relationships. He identifies that emotionally healthy couples can share their life stories, including their struggles, triumphs, and dreams, in a way that fosters intimacy and trust.

Gottman's research highlights that the way individuals understand and communicate their stories affects how they relate to others, particularly in romantic relationships. When partners share their inner worlds through story work, they build emotional attunement and deepen their connection. On the contrary, avoiding or distorting one's story can lead to emotional distance and conflict.

Gottman notes that emotionally healthy relationships are characterized by a deep understanding of each other's stories, which includes knowing the key events, values, and struggles that have shaped each partner's life.<sup>148</sup> This knowledge allows for more supportive interactions, fostering emotional resilience within the relationship.

Across the perspectives of Allender, Langberg, and Gottman, several key themes emerge. Engaging with one's life story fosters self-awareness, helping individuals identify the emotional wounds or patterns that influence their current behavior. This

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<sup>147</sup> Langberg, 118.

<sup>148</sup> John Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 75, Kindle.

increased insight is crucial for emotional growth, as it allows people to address unresolved issues and make healthier emotional choices. Story work also promotes emotional healing by allowing individuals to confront past trauma, loss, or pain in a safe, structured way. Reclaiming one's story leads to emotional integration, where fragmented or painful memories are processed and reintegrated into the broader narrative of one's life. When people actively engage in reshaping their stories, they also develop emotional resilience. Story work empowers individuals to take control of their narratives, reframing past experiences in ways that foster hope and growth. Story work also deepens emotional intimacy in relationships by encouraging individuals to share their inner worlds. This vulnerability fosters trust, empathy, and emotional attunement, all of which are critical for healthy, lasting relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review on emotional intelligence provides a comprehensive understanding of its importance in personal development, leadership, and team dynamics. Goleman's foundational work, along with the theoretical models of Mayer and Salovey, offers a robust framework for understanding how EI operates in various contexts. Bradberry and Saccone add practical insights on how individuals and leaders can develop their emotional intelligence through habits and relational strategies. Building on the foundational works of Goleman and Bradberry, Scazzero's exploration of emotional intelligence in the context of spirituality and leadership offers an informative picture that directly applies to pastors and elders. Allender, Langberg, and Gottman use their collective voices to emphasize the role of story work in developing emotional health.

Collectively, all these engaging works illustrate that emotional health/intelligence is a critical component of effective leadership, fostering innovation, collaboration, and resilience in individuals and teams.

### **Literature Review #3: Leadership Development**

Leadership development has emerged as a critical topic across various fields, from business and non-profit organizations to religious ministries and community settings. The selected texts provide rich perspectives on leadership, each approaching the topic from unique angles but with common threads, such as the importance of emotional health/intelligence, spiritual formation, adaptive leadership, and personal transformation. By intertwining the themes, a cohesive understanding of leadership development can be constructed with practical skills and deeper inner transformation.

#### **Leadership as Spiritual Formation and Personal Transformation**

Several authors emphasize that leadership requires external competencies as well as deep personal and spiritual transformation. Ruth Haley Barton's *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* draws heavily on the concept of spiritual formation, focusing on the inner life of the leader. Barton suggests that the pressures and crucibles of leadership can be navigated only by leaders who are continually seeking spiritual depth. She asks a piercing question, "What would it look like for me to lead more consistently from my soul—the place of my own encounter with God—rather than leading primarily from my head, my unbridled activism, or my performance-oriented drivenness?"<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2018), 25, Kindle.

Similarly, Chuck Miller in *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders* argues that effective leadership development must involve integrating spiritual disciplines into one's leadership journey. Miller stresses the importance of leaders being formed in the image of Christ and following him on the narrow path that leads to life. One of Miller's most insightful points is the contrast between a rigid ministry model and a biblical process. He explains, "In contrast to this kind of rigid adherence to a plan that worked for someone somewhere, biblical process relies on the leader's growing relationship with Christ from whom comes focus, ministry ideas, and Spirit-led flexibility."<sup>150</sup>

In *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton underscores the vital connection between spiritual practices and emotional well-being for ministry leaders. She argues that leaders often neglect their inner lives in the pursuit of productivity, leading to burnout and spiritual depletion. "Most of us are not very good at sitting with longing and desire—our own or someone else's," she observes, highlighting the discomfort many leaders feel with vulnerability and dependence.<sup>151</sup>

Barton challenges leaders to create "the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place" by cultivating a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep them "open and available to God."<sup>152</sup> This involves embracing disciplines such as solitude, silence, prayer, and Sabbath, creating space for deep connection with God and a more grounded approach to leadership. She cautions against the tendency to "always [be]

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<sup>150</sup> Chuck Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders: Integrating Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development* (United States of America: Xulon, 2007), 27, Kindle.

<sup>151</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 31, Kindle.

<sup>152</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 12.

working hard to figure things out” rather than learning to “cease striving” and “waiting on God to make stuff happen.”<sup>153</sup> By integrating these rhythms, leaders can experience renewal, resilience, and a more authentic, grace-filled presence in their ministry. Barton’s work serves as a reminder that prioritizing spiritual formation is not a luxury but a necessity for those who seek to lead with integrity and compassion.

Timothy Z. Witmer’s *The Shepherd Leader* also connects leadership with spiritual oversight, particularly as it applies to pastors and elders. Witmer advocates for a pastoral model of leadership where the leader acts primarily as a shepherd, caring for the flock while consistently being formed and shaped by the gospel. Witmer says, “Shepherding is at the very heart of the biblical picture of leadership. Unfortunately, this emphasis is missing in many churches.”<sup>154</sup>

Paul David Tripp echoes Witmer’s emphasis in his book *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church*. Tripp writes out of a deep concern for the church, concluding, “I am convinced from conversation after conversation with pastors and their leadership that we have a leadership crisis.”<sup>155</sup> As a result, to foster better shepherding in leadership, Tripp provides practical principles rooted in the gospel, advocating for leaders to find their identity in Christ rather than in their achievements or organizational success. Tripp alerts leaders to the overwhelming danger that an achievement focus can have on the leadership and health of the church.

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<sup>153</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 41.

<sup>154</sup> Witmer, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 17, Kindle.

These works collectively assert that leadership development cannot be divorced from personal and spiritual growth. Leaders must first be transformed within before they can effectively lead others, whether in a church, ministry, or secular organization. As Henri Nouwen says so well, “The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, ‘a heart of flesh,’ in Jesus . . . This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits.”<sup>156</sup>

### **The Danger of Busyness in Leadership Formation**

In *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton observes, “How, I wondered, had my life in Christ gotten reduced to so much busyness?”<sup>157</sup> This question, reflecting a common struggle among ministry leaders, highlights the pervasive nature of busyness and its potential to hinder spiritual and emotional well-being. Barton emphasizes the importance of recognizing how our habits shape our desires and ultimately our relationship with God, others, and the world. “The habits and disciplines we use to shape our desire,” she argues, “form the basis for a spirituality.”<sup>158</sup>

John Mark Comer, in *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, echoes this concern, arguing that our culture’s obsession with busyness undermines our capacity for deep rest, meaningful relationships, and spiritual connection. He warns that this “new normal of hurried digital distraction” robs us of the ability to be present to God, others, and even

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<sup>156</sup> Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, 20.

<sup>157</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 31.

<sup>158</sup> Barton, 13–14.

our own souls.<sup>159</sup> Comer identifies hurry as the “great enemy of spiritual life,” hindering our ability to cultivate the inner stillness and attentiveness necessary for emotional and spiritual health.<sup>160</sup>

In *Practicing the Way*, Comer builds on these ideas by exploring the transformative power of spiritual disciplines and intentional habits. He emphasizes the importance of establishing an “emotional home” rooted in the inner life of God, where we can find solace, joy, and the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>161</sup> By cultivating practices that connect us to God’s presence, we can counteract the negative effects of busyness and create space for emotional and spiritual flourishing.

Comer underscores the profound impact of our habits, stating, “Show me a person’s habits, and I will show you what they are truly most passionate about, most dedicated to, most willing to suffer for, and most in love with. And I will show you who they will become.”<sup>162</sup> This highlights the formative nature of habits, shaping not only our actions but also our desires, affections, and ultimately our character. By cultivating practices that connect us to God’s presence, we can counteract the negative effects of busyness and create space for emotional and spiritual flourishing.

Dallas Willard, in *Renovation of the Heart*, offers a profound exploration of inner transformation, emphasizing the need for deliberate, ongoing renewal at the core of our

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<sup>159</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2019), 121, Kindle.

<sup>160</sup> Comer, 17.

<sup>161</sup> Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become Like Him. Do As He Did*, (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, 2024), 54–55, Kindle.

<sup>162</sup> Comer, 61.

being. He argues that true transformation is not merely about external behaviors but about a deep, internal renovation of the heart, which is the center of our emotions, desires, and spiritual lives. Willard highlights the importance of spiritual disciplines as tools for inner change, enabling us to cultivate self-awareness, emotional resilience, and a closer connection to the divine. He reminds us that “spiritual transformation, the renovation of the human heart, is an inescapable human problem with no human solution.”<sup>163</sup> True and lasting transformation, he argues, comes from aligning ourselves with God’s work in our hearts through the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines and the cultivation of life-giving habits.

The authors in this section collectively highlight the significant danger of busyness in undermining the emotional health and spiritual vitality of leaders. Ruth Haley Barton and John Mark Comer both emphasize how our culture’s relentless pace and obsession with productivity can lead to spiritual and emotional depletion, hindering our ability to be truly present to God, others, and ourselves. Comer specifically identifies hurry as a primary enemy of the spiritual life, preventing the cultivation of inner stillness and attentiveness. These authors advocate for a ruthless elimination of hurry and the development of intentional habits and rhythms that create space for rest, reflection, and a deeper connection with God. By prioritizing soul care and resisting the tyranny of busyness, leaders can cultivate a more grounded, sustainable, and emotionally healthy approach to life and ministry.

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<sup>163</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021), 13, Kindle.

## Adaptive Leadership in a Changing World

In a rapidly changing world, leaders must develop adaptive skills to respond to emerging challenges. Tod Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains* serves as a metaphor for adaptive leadership in uncharted territory, particularly in Christian settings. Bolsinger asserts that traditional leadership methods are insufficient for leading in today's complex world and that leaders must be willing to adapt and innovate. This emphasis is echoed in Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky's *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, which provides tools for leaders to navigate change within their organizations. The authors emphasize that adaptive leadership requires technical knowledge and the capacity to embrace discomfort and uncertainty. This dual capacity is difficult, explaining, "That is hard work not only because it is intellectually difficult, but also because it challenges individuals' and organizations' investments in relationships, competence, and identity."<sup>164</sup>

Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* complements these perspectives by addressing the importance of emotional resilience in leadership. Friedman argues that many leaders fail due to their inability to navigate the chronic anxiety that plagues society. He says, "Chronic anxiety is systemic; it is deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that resides within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelop, if not actually connect, people."<sup>165</sup> Leaders, he

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<sup>164</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 40, Kindle.

<sup>165</sup> Edwin H Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 93, Kindle.

insists, need to develop “nerve”—the ability to remain calm and self-differentiated in the face of challenges. Friedman describes a well-differentiated leader as, “someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected and, therefore, can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence.”<sup>166</sup>

Joe Rigney’s *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage* builds heavily on Friedman’s work and takes it a step further by exploring how leaders can resist anxiety and sabotage, whether from others or from their own insecurities. Rigney emphasizes the need for leaders to manage their emotional well-being so that they can avoid destructive behavior that can harm their organizations and families. Highlighting the biblical call to be “sober-minded,” he says, “Sober-mindedness includes at least three elements: clarity of mind, stability of soul, and readiness to act.”<sup>167</sup> Sober-mindedness is another way of describing a mature and well-differentiated leader.

Together, these works suggest that adaptive leadership encompasses external flexibility, emotional health, and psychological strength. Leaders must develop the capacity to lead through uncertainty, embracing change rather than avoiding it.

## **Relational Leadership**

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<sup>166</sup> Friedman, 35.

<sup>167</sup> 1 Peter 5:8; Joe Rigney, *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage: Resisting the Anxiety That Will Wreck Your Family, Destroy Your Church, and Ruin the World* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2024), 33, Kindle.

Goleman's *What Makes a Leader: Why Emotional Intelligence Matters* has become foundational in the discourse on leadership development. According to Goleman, leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically, thus fostering environments where others can thrive. Goleman's focus on empathy is insightful. He explains, "Empathy means thoughtfully considering employees' feelings—along with other factors—in the process of making intelligent decisions."<sup>168</sup> Goleman argues that emotionally intelligent leaders with empathy will do much more than just sympathize with the feelings of those around them; they will use that knowledge to create an environment where others can flourish.<sup>169</sup>

This focus on relational leadership is echoed in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni, which explores how leaders can build cohesive and high-functioning teams. Lencioni identifies trust as the foundation of successful teams and argues that emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in fostering this trust. He asserts that a leader's priority is to foster vulnerable trust within the team. "Trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another."<sup>170</sup> Emotionally healthy leaders who cultivate an atmosphere of vulnerable trust and safety are more likely to lead high-performing teams.

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<sup>168</sup> Daniel Goleman, *What Makes a Leader: Why Emotional Intelligence Matters* (Florence, MA: More Than Sound LLC, 2014), location 205, Kindle.

<sup>169</sup> Goleman, location 226.

<sup>170</sup> Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 195, Kindle.

Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan's *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader* also connects emotional intelligence to leadership, specifically in the context of managing inevitable relational conflict. Because conflict is inevitable in relationships and workplace environments, Runde and Flanagan argue that emotionally healthy leaders must learn to embrace constructive conflict. Leaders adept at managing conflict can turn potentially destructive situations into opportunities for growth and innovation and put others in positions to flourish.<sup>171</sup> Their emphasis on emotional intelligence and conflict management complements Goleman's argument by showing how relational leadership can enhance overall organizational effectiveness.

These works collectively underscore the importance of emotional health/intelligence in leadership development. Leaders who can navigate emotional and relational dynamics effectively are better positioned to foster healthy, collaborative, and innovative environments.

### **The Leader's Role in Organizational Change**

The role of leaders in shaping and transforming organizations is another significant theme across the literature. James Kouzes and Barry Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* emphasize that leadership is fundamentally about mobilizing people to achieve extraordinary outcomes. Their approach prioritizes setting a vision, inspiring a shared sense of purpose, and empowering others to act. To do each of these things, a leader must have credibility. They explain, "People want to follow leaders who, more than anything,

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<sup>171</sup> Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 171, Kindle.

are credible. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. People must be able, above all else, to believe in their leaders. To willingly follow them, people must believe that the leaders' word can be trusted.”<sup>172</sup>

Heifetz and Linsky's book, *Leadership on the Line*, discusses the dangers and challenges leaders face when driving organizational change. They argue that leaders must balance the pressures of maintaining stability with the necessity of pushing for innovation. Leaders must take risks, confront resistance, and stay resilient through the process of transformation. Leading, in their words, “is to live dangerously.”<sup>173</sup>

Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech in *The Leader's Journey* make a powerful plea for leaders to emphasize their own personal transformation to lead healthy organizational change. They explain, “Personal transformation is the foundation on which we construct effective leadership. Before we can lead our congregation to change so that it might be available to God for the transformation of our community, leaders need to experience God's transformation of their own lives into greater spiritual, emotional, and relational maturity.”<sup>174</sup> They argue that only leaders who are willing to first engage in their own journey of growth in specific areas such as emotional maturity will be equipped to lead their organizations through periods of change and uncertainty in a healthy manner.

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<sup>172</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, sixth edition (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017), 68, Kindle.

<sup>173</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line, with a New Preface Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 19, Kindle.

<sup>174</sup> Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 25–26, Kindle.

These authors collectively argue that leadership development builds on personal growth to lead others through the often-difficult process of organizational transformation. For leaders to inspire, challenge, and guide their organizations in ways that foster stability and innovation, emotional maturity is an absolute must.

### **Challenges of Leading in a Complex World**

Finally, several works address the challenges of leading in an increasingly complex world fraught with difficulties. Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* highlights the tendency of leaders to seek quick fixes in the face of complex challenges, hence the subtitle of his book, "Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix."<sup>175</sup> Friedman argues that effective leadership requires the ability to navigate complexity with courage and conviction, resisting the temptation to offer simplistic solutions to complicated problems.

Similarly, Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains* and Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow's *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* both emphasize the need for leaders to embrace complexity and lead through uncharted territory. Bolsinger explains, "Adaptive challenges are the true tests of leadership. They are challenges that go beyond the technical solutions of resident experts or best practices, or even the organization's current knowledge."<sup>176</sup> Leaders must adapt in real-time, rather than relying on outdated methods or paradigms. Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow explain that leading this way is "hard work

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<sup>175</sup> Friedman, Introduction.

<sup>176</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains Expanded Edition: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 19, Kindle.

not only because it is intellectually difficult, but also because it challenges individuals' and organizations' investments in relationships, competence, and identity.”<sup>177</sup>

Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* also speaks to the challenges of leading in complex environments, particularly in terms of managing team dynamics. Lencioni argues that leaders must navigate interpersonal conflict, build trust, and foster accountability within their teams.

In *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal explores how traditional leadership models are often insufficient in today's complex and rapidly changing environments. Drawing from his experiences leading the Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq, McChrystal argues that hierarchical, top-down approaches to leadership can hinder adaptability and responsiveness. Instead, he advocates for a shift towards a “team of teams” model, where leaders foster networks of smaller, empowered teams united by shared goals, trust, and transparency. He explains, “Efficiency, once the sole icon on the hill, must make room for adaptability in structures, processes, and mind-sets that is often uncomfortable.”<sup>178</sup>

A key component of this approach is developing leaders who can adapt quickly, delegate effectively, and facilitate open communication across all levels of an organization. McChrystal emphasizes that leaders must create an environment where information flows freely and team members feel empowered to make decisions. This

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<sup>177</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 40.

<sup>178</sup> Stanley A. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), 7, Kindle.

demands a high degree of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and the ability to foster mutual respect across diverse groups.

Ultimately, *Team of Teams* redefines leadership as less about control and more about enabling agility, resilience, and interdependence. For leaders, this means cultivating trust, breaking down silos, and equipping teams to act autonomously while remaining aligned with the broader mission. McChrystal's insights offer a valuable framework for leadership development, particularly for those facing dynamic and uncertain environments.

These works suggest that leadership in the modern world requires a unique combination of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and courage. Leaders must navigate complex challenges while maintaining their own emotional and psychological health, as well as fostering the growth and development of those they lead.

## **The Role of Suffering**

Suffering is an inevitable and universal aspect of the human condition, as Tim Keller explains in *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*:

No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career—something will inevitably ruin it. No amount of money, power, and planning can prevent bereavement, dire illness, relationship betrayal, financial disaster, or a host of other troubles from entering your life. Human life is fatally fragile and subject to forces beyond our power to manage. Life is tragic.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 3.

While many people minimize this reality, suffering can serve as a powerful catalyst for emotional health and leadership development. Throughout history, some of the most influential leaders have emerged from seasons of profound suffering. Rather than crushing their spirit, suffering shaped their character, fostered empathy, and deepened their capacity to lead others through adversity. The process of grappling with suffering refines the heart, promotes emotional maturity, and builds resilience—all crucial qualities in personal growth and effective leadership.

In the works of several well-known authors, such as Langberg, Curt Thompson, and Keller, suffering is not merely an unfortunate event to be survived a vital force transforming the human heart, emotional health, and leadership capabilities. Drawing on insights from their writings and podcasts, this section explores how suffering, when embraced and processed, can profoundly shape emotional health and foster the development of transformational leadership.

### **Suffering as a Gateway to Emotional Health**

Langberg, in her book *Suffering and the Heart of God*, emphasizes that suffering breaks open the human heart, revealing deep wounds and unmet needs.<sup>180</sup> This exposure is painful but essential for healing. Langberg explains that suffering forces confrontation with personal brokenness and dependency on God and others—a crucial step toward

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<sup>180</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 166, Kindle.

emotional maturity. True emotional health, she argues, is found in the ability to face suffering honestly, rather than shunning it, with a heart surrendered to God.<sup>181</sup>

Thompson, in *The Deepest Place: Suffering and the Formation of Hope*, echoes this perspective, suggesting that suffering, especially when processed in a community of love, can deepen one's emotional capacity. He believes that suffering leads to "the deepest place" in the soul, where the complexities of fear, shame, and sorrow reside. In this place, he contends, true healing begins. For Thompson, as for the others, suffering is not to be avoided but embraced as a path toward emotional healing and connection with others. He concludes, "It is through the development of deeply connected relationships that they come to discover that suffering is, counterintuitively, one of the key features of our world that God uses to bring about the lasting transformation that we who follow Jesus claim that we want in our lives."<sup>182</sup>

Similarly, in his podcast *The Place We Find Ourselves*, trauma therapist Adam Young, explores the role of suffering in fostering emotional attunement.<sup>183</sup> Young highlights the importance of being present with one's pain rather than escaping it, noting that when people allow themselves to fully experience their suffering, they develop greater self-awareness and empathy. This awareness, in turn, cultivates emotional intelligence, which is essential for both personal growth and effective leadership.

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<sup>181</sup> Langberg, 209.

<sup>182</sup> Curt Thompson, *The Deepest Place: Suffering and the Formation of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), location 322, Kindle.

<sup>183</sup> Adam Young, "Your Story, Your Suffering, and Kindness with Dan Allender," Adam Young, June 19, 2021, <https://adamyoungcounseling.com/your-story-your-suffering-and-kindness-with-dan-allender-2/>.

In their memoir *Hope Heals*, Katherine and Jay Wolf provide a compelling narrative of suffering and resilience, highlighting how profound hardship can serve as a gateway to emotional health. Katherine's near-fatal stroke and their subsequent journey underscore the transformative power of vulnerability and shared experience. She observes, "I don't think any of us can tell our most vulnerable stories in the moments they occur for fear that they may undo us. We have to wait until we are in a season of safety before we can open up our deepest wounds."<sup>184</sup> This insight underscores the idea that emotional processing, particularly of traumatic events, requires a safe environment, often found within supportive relationships.

The Wolfs' experience further illustrates that "vulnerability is contagious. When we share our stories in real and messy ways, we give people permission to do the same, and in the sharing, we release some of the things that keep us trapped in our own isolated hotel rooms. We remember we are not alone. And that brings hope."<sup>185</sup> This perspective reinforces Thompson's emphasis on the importance of community in processing suffering, suggesting that shared vulnerability fosters connection and facilitates emotional healing. The Wolfs' story, like those of Langberg, Thompson, and Young, underscores that facing suffering, rather than avoiding it, is essential for emotional growth and connection with others.

Chuck DeGroat, in *Healing What's Within*, reinforces the notion that suffering, when acknowledged and processed, can serve as a catalyst for emotional and spiritual

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<sup>184</sup> Katherine Wolf, *Hope Heals: A True Story of Overwhelming Loss and an Overcoming Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 199, Kindle.

<sup>185</sup> Wolf, 203.

healing. He emphasizes that “suffering is inevitable. And suffering alone is what leaves an incalculable wound. Trauma’s best-kept secret, well-articulated by therapist Bonnie Badenoch, is that the ‘essence of trauma isn’t events, but aloneness within them.’”<sup>186</sup> This insight underscores the importance of community and connection in processing pain, echoing Thompson’s emphasis on the role of relationships in transformation.

DeGroat further elaborates on the necessity of “befriending suffering,” clarifying that this is not a masochistic pursuit but rather a journey of bringing one’s pain “into the light before God and others.”<sup>187</sup> He connects this concept to Jesus’ teaching, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,”<sup>188</sup> highlighting that mourning is an act of refusing to suffer alone, of living in truth, and of seeking care. This perspective resonates with Langberg’s emphasis on confronting personal brokenness and dependency on God. DeGroat argues that “ignoring your pain only leads to further weariness and woundedness,” and that “befriending suffering opens the way for reconnection and joy.”<sup>189</sup> His emphasis on naming and specifically addressing pain resonates with Adam Young’s focus on being present with one’s pain to cultivate self-awareness and empathy. By advocating for vulnerability and connection, DeGroat reinforces the central theme that emotional health is found not in the avoidance of suffering, but in its integration within a framework of faith and community.

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<sup>186</sup> Chuck DeGroat, *Healing What’s Within: Coming Home to Yourself—And to God—When You’re Wounded, Weary, and Wandering*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2024), 37, Kindle; Bonnie Badenoch, *The Heart of Trauma: Healing the Embodied Brain in the Context of Relationships* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), location 649, Kindle.

<sup>187</sup> DeGroat, 45–46.

<sup>188</sup> Matthew 5:4.

<sup>189</sup> DeGroat, 45–46.

## **The Role of Suffering in Leadership Development**

Keller, again in his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, expands on the idea that suffering shapes emotional health and prepares individuals for leadership. Keller argues that leaders who have walked through deep suffering possess a unique capacity to lead others through hardship. They have been refined by fire, and as a result, their leadership is marked by humility, resilience, and empathy. Keller emphasizes that suffering can bring leaders closer to God, grounding their leadership in faith and dependence rather than self-reliance.<sup>190</sup>

Tripp, in his book *Suffering*, reinforces this idea, describing how leaders shaped by suffering learn to lead from a place of authenticity. Tripp highlights that suffering strips away illusions of control and self-sufficiency, forcing leaders to rely on God and others. This dependence leads to humility, a key trait for effective leadership. He explains, “Weakness simply demonstrates what has been true all along: we are completely dependent on God for life and breath and everything else... You see, weakness is not what you and I should be afraid of. We should fear our delusion of strength.”<sup>191</sup> He contends that such leaders can empathize with the pain of those they lead, creating an environment of compassion and understanding.

In *Redeeming Heartache*, authors Allender and Cathy Loerzel emphasize the transformative power of suffering in leadership development. They believe that leaders

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<sup>190</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 83.

<sup>191</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 29, Kindle.

are most effective when they lead from their wounds rather than their strengths. Suffering, they argue, exposes the vulnerabilities of a leader, making them more authentic and approachable. It also gives them a deeper understanding of the human condition, enabling them to lead with greater wisdom and compassion.<sup>192</sup> Allender and Loerzel assert that through the redemptive process of suffering, leaders gain the capacity to inspire and guide others through their own pain.

### **Theological Perspectives on Suffering and Leadership**

Several authors also address the theological dimensions of suffering, highlighting how a Christian understanding of suffering can shape emotional health and leadership development. Elisabeth Elliot, in *Suffering Is Never for Nothing*, reminds readers that suffering is not meaningless. Rather, it is part of God's divine plan to refine his people and make them more like Christ. Her own life, marked by the tragic death of her missionary husband, testifies to how suffering can deepen one's faith and strengthen one's capacity to lead others through adversity. She shares, "I can say to you that suffering is an irreplaceable medium through which I learned an indispensable truth... that God is God."<sup>193</sup> Elliot emphasizes that God uses suffering to develop character and resilience, qualities essential for emotional health and leadership.

Similarly, Larry Crabb, in *Shattered Dreams*, argues that suffering often shatters illusions of what life should be like, forcing people to confront the deeper desires of their

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<sup>192</sup> Dan B. Allender and Cathy Loerzel, *Redeeming Heartache* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 177, Kindle.

<sup>193</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), location 280, Kindle.

souls. Crabb suggests that suffering can be a doorway to spiritual and emotional transformation, as it compels individuals to seek God in ways they would not have otherwise. He believes that through suffering, leaders learn to let go of their own agendas and become more attuned to the work God is doing in their lives and in the lives of those they lead. Crabb considers the story of Jesus being strengthened by an angel in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43) and concludes, “Perhaps we’re meant to learn that the richest hope permits the deepest suffering, which releases the strongest power, which then produces the greatest joy. Maybe there is no shortcut to joy.”<sup>194</sup>

Mark Vroegop, in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, adds that lament is a crucial practice in the process of transforming suffering into emotional health and leadership strength. He explains that lament allows individuals to express their pain honestly before God while clinging to his promises. He explains, “Biblical lament is transformative. It not only gives voice to the pain you feel but also anchors your heart to truths you believe.”<sup>195</sup> This practice of lament, according to Vroegop, is essential for leaders who wish to cultivate resilience and empathy in themselves and in those they lead.

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<sup>194</sup> Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Pathway to Joy*, (Vereeniging, South Africa: Christian Art, 2002), 44, Kindle.

<sup>195</sup> Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 104, Kindle.

## Empathy and Compassion:

### Suffering's Role in Shaping Relational Leadership

Tim Challies, in *Seasons of Sorrow*, writes about his journey through grief after the sudden death of his son. Through his reflections, Challies highlights how suffering deepens one's ability to empathize with others in their pain. He explains:

The only antidote I know is this: deliberately submitting myself to the will of God, for comfort is closely related to submission. As long as I fight the will of God, as long as I battle God's right to rule his world in his way, peace remains distant and furtive. But when I surrender, when I bow the knee, then peace flows like a river and attends my way.<sup>196</sup>

Leaders who have suffered are more likely to lead with compassion and grace, understanding that people are fragile and often carrying unseen burdens. Challies emphasizes that empathy is a crucial trait for leaders who wish to build trust and foster healthy relationships within their organizations or communities.

In *Beautiful People Don't Just Happen*, Scott Sauls explores the idea that suffering can create beauty in the human soul, leading to a kind of leadership marked by grace and compassion. Sauls believes that leaders who have suffered are more attuned to the struggles of others and are therefore more effective at creating environments where people feel seen, heard, and valued. He argues that suffering shapes leaders into people who can lead with vulnerability and authenticity, traits that are increasingly valued in today's leadership landscape. He points out, "As we read the Bible, it is important to see that so many of the books—both Old Testament and New—were authored by someone

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<sup>196</sup> Tim Challies, *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2022), 76, Kindle.

who was enslaved, seeking asylum, in prison, facing persecution, or under another form of distress. Beautiful people do not just happen.”<sup>197</sup>

In *Wholeheartedness*, Chuck DeGroat emphasizes the critical role of suffering in shaping empathetic and compassionate leadership. He argues that true relational leadership is formed not through perfection or performance, but through embracing one’s own wounds and limitations. By acknowledging suffering rather than avoiding it, leaders develop the capacity for deep empathy, allowing them to create spaces of grace and authenticity within their communities. DeGroat contends that leaders who try to present a perfect, “unwounded” image often lead from a place of deep internal division, marked by “exhaustion, loneliness, even despair.” He suggests that this division is primarily driven by shame, which fuels perfectionism and ultimately leads to burnout. “In shame,” DeGroat explains, “we hide behind masks that protect us from ourselves and others . . . Divided and fragmented, we work tirelessly to perfect ourselves but only end up exhausting ourselves.”<sup>198</sup>

This perspective provides further evidence for Langberg’s emphasis on confronting personal brokenness and Thompson’s concept of embracing suffering rather than rejecting it. DeGroat’s work serves as a powerful guide for cultivating leadership marked by vulnerability, relational depth, and a Christlike posture of mercy. By acknowledging their own suffering, leaders can foster genuine empathy, creating

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<sup>197</sup> Scott Sauls, *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen: How God Redeems Regret, Hurt, and Fear in the Making of Better Humans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2022), 20, Kindle.

<sup>198</sup> Chuck DeGroat, *Wholeheartedness: Busyness, Exhaustion, and Healing the Divided Self* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 16, Kindle.

environments where others feel seen, heard, and valued, which resonates with Sauls' vision of leadership marked by grace and compassion.

Mark Vroegop, in *Waiting Isn't a Waste*, highlights the transformative power of waiting and suffering in cultivating deeper empathy and compassion in leadership. He posits that enduring hardship with a posture of lament fosters spiritual maturity, softening leaders' hearts toward the struggles of others. Vroegop challenges the prevailing notion that "efficiency and immediacy are the hallmarks of success," asserting instead that "waiting is commended as something valuable. . . .The Bible commends and commands something that everything in us and everyone around us usually sees as negative."<sup>199</sup> This perspective encourages leaders to embrace seasons of waiting, recognizing their potential for spiritual and emotional growth.

Vroegop's own experience with uncertainty and the temptation to resort to "overworking, overthinking, and overplanning" underscores the challenge of embracing waiting in a culture that prioritizes immediate results.<sup>200</sup> However, he contends that by "living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what's true about my life," leaders can cultivate a deeper trust in God's redemptive work, leading to greater empathy and compassion for those they lead.<sup>201</sup> This resonates with Challies' emphasis on surrendering to God's will as a path to comfort and peace. Through biblical insights and personal reflection, Vroegop demonstrates that waiting refines leaders, teaching them

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<sup>199</sup> Mark Vroegop, *Waiting Isn't a Waste: The Surprising Comfort of Trusting God in the Uncertainties of Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 11, Kindle.

<sup>200</sup> Vroegop, 5.

<sup>201</sup> Vroegop, 5.

to walk alongside others with patience, tenderness, and a deeper trust in God's redemptive work.

In *Cry of the Soul*, Dan Allender and Tremper Longman emphasize the connection between emotional health and acknowledging our deepest desires and wounds. They argue that our emotions, often dismissed or suppressed, are vital indicators of our soul's longing for God and authentic connection. "Perhaps a better explanation for why it's so difficult to feel our feelings," they suggest, "is that all emotion, positive or negative, opens the door to the nature of reality."<sup>202</sup> This resistance to feeling, they argue, stems from a desire to avoid pain and escape the reality of our incompleteness and longing. By facing our pain, rather than avoiding it, we open the door to genuine healing and a richer relationship with God, allowing us to move beyond superficial coping mechanisms towards a more profound understanding of ourselves and our need for redemption. This mindset lends credence to the perspective of DeGroat's emphasis on embracing vulnerability and with Langberg's and Thompson's insights on the transformative potential of suffering.

In conclusion, suffering is not an obstacle to emotional health or leadership development but a crucible that refines and transforms individuals in profound ways. The insights of these respected authors reveal that suffering, when embraced and processed, can lead to greater emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and spiritual depth. Leaders shaped by suffering are often more authentic, compassionate, and capable of guiding others through adversity. Suffering, in the end, is a powerful force that shapes individual character and equips people to lead with wisdom, grace, and a heart attuned to

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<sup>202</sup> Allender and Longman, *The Cry of the Soul*, 3–4.

the needs of others. Thompson powerfully summarizes the power of suffering and story work to mature hearts:

No matter the circumstances of any story at first telling, one thing that each person shares in common who has done the work that creates lasting change leading to greater love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is that he or she has suffered. This is not to suggest that only these people have suffered. For it is fair to say that to be human is to suffer. We all do. However, what sets these people apart is that they have, to a person, developed a relationship with suffering in which they do not intentionally invite it into their lives but neither do they reject it. They have come to understand that they cannot escape suffering in life, so they no longer attempt to do so. They neither deny it nor become overwhelmed by it. Rather, they learn to be with it and acknowledge that it is with them.<sup>203</sup>

## **Leadership Development in Coaching**

High-stakes sports coaching provides invaluable insights into leadership, particularly in areas like team management, navigating relationships, resilience, emotional intelligence, and fostering a growth-oriented mindset. Coaches like Nick Saban, Dabo Swinney, Bill Belichick, and Mike Krzyzewski have won multiple championships and have shared their philosophies on leadership development, illustrating how to cultivate personal excellence and team unity. Their guidance highlights principles relevant to sports and any team-oriented environment, emphasizing emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and resilience.

Coach Nick Saban is well known for his process-oriented philosophy, which focuses on consistent improvement in the fundamentals. His “process” encourages players and coaches to center their attention on the task at hand rather than becoming fixated on the outcome. Saban explains, “Commitment is your dedication to your task,

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<sup>203</sup> Thompson, *The Deepest Place*, location 301.

your organization, and your teammates. It is an unwavering display of loyalty to the process and to achieving the desired result.”<sup>204</sup> This philosophy instills self-discipline and mental resilience, teaching individuals how to stay grounded under pressure.

Saban also speaks to emotional intelligence, emphasizing self-control and the importance of regulating one’s responses. By teaching his players to channel emotions productively, Saban helps them build mental toughness. This emphasis on focus and composure fosters an environment where leaders model calm, resilient behavior—essential traits for a high-performing team.

Coach Dabo Swinney’s transformative approach to leadership is often considered the direct opposite of Nick Saban. Swinney focuses on his unique blend of optimism, faith, and authenticity, with a healthy dose of laughter and fun thrown in. One coach who left Alabama’s staff for Clemson said, “There was a more businesslike approach in Tuscaloosa than the family-oriented, let’s-have-fun culture at Dabo’s Clemson.”<sup>205</sup> Swinney’s philosophy centers on creating a family-like team culture where each individual feels valued and connected. Swinney’s unwavering belief in his players helps foster resilience and mutual trust. Swinney emphasizes emotional health by encouraging gratitude, fostering empathy, and focusing on personal growth over pure competition. His “all in” mentality inspires his team to commit fully, not just to the game but to each other, promoting a deeply rooted sense of purpose and collective strength.

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<sup>204</sup> Nick Saban, *How Good Do You Want to Be? A Champion’s Tips on How to Lead and Succeed at Work and in Life* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 33, Kindle.

<sup>205</sup> Lars Anderson, *Dabo’s World: The Life and Career of Coach Swinney and the Rise of Clemson Football* (New York: Grand Central, 2021), 182, Kindle.

Swinney advocates for a people-first approach to leadership, grounded in empathy, positivity, and the importance of connection. Known for creating close-knit, family-like teams, Swinney's philosophy prioritizes emotional connection, trust, and recognition. He's candid about the power of gratitude and resilience, advising his players to remain centered by focusing on what they can control. Swinney's approach to emotional health includes celebrating small victories, encouraging players to be themselves, and most importantly, leading with empathy and gratitude. After losing the national championship game to Nick Saban in 2015, Dabo rewatched the film, and Lars Anderson describes his reaction:

Dabo watched every painful minute. He questioned a few of the calls he made. He analyzed every mistake that could have changed the final score. He fumed at the onside kick call by Saban. But his overwhelming feeling was that of gratitude. . . . In the shadow of such a crushing defeat, he was a contented man.<sup>206</sup>

Coach Bill Belichick has won more NFL championships than any coach in history. His leadership philosophy, as captured in *The Education of a Coach*, revolves around the principles of adaptability and accountability.<sup>207</sup> His “next play” mindset—moving on quickly from mistakes—teaches players to avoid emotional overinvestment in errors and focus on what they can do next. For Belichick, adaptability and emotional resilience are crucial for staying composed under pressure. His feedback-driven environment emphasizes humility and self-awareness, encouraging players to learn continuously. By modeling an emotionally detached, pragmatic approach, he reinforces a team-first mentality, which he considers essential for both individual and team success.

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<sup>206</sup> Anderson, 168.

<sup>207</sup> David Halberstam, *The Education of a Coach*, (New York: Hyperion, 2005) Ch. 3.

Mike Krzyzewski, or Coach K, is well known for his remarkable leadership at Duke University and with the U.S. Olympic team. Coach K has always placed value on emotional intelligence. His approach emphasizes building genuine connections with players and fostering loyalty and mutual respect. He deeply values “commitment, toughness, honesty, integrity, collective responsibility, pride, love, and friendship.”<sup>208</sup> He also advocates for servant leadership, where leaders prioritize the needs and growth of their team members.

Coach K’s emphasis on open communication creates an environment of emotional safety and trust, where players feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking risks. He also teaches that vulnerability in leadership is not a weakness but a strength, as it builds trust and authentic connection within the team. Coach K believes that emotional health is closely tied to a leader’s ability to listen, empathize, and respond thoughtfully. This focus on emotional intelligence has allowed him to create environments where individuals thrive, knowing they are respected and supported. Coach K noted, “Years after leaving Duke and going on to a successful career in the NBA, Christian Laettner told a reporter, ‘We won championships at Duke because of what happened behind closed doors.’”<sup>209</sup>

The leadership insights offered by these coaches reveal a blend of high performance and emotional intelligence. By emphasizing values like empathy, accountability, adaptability, and resilience, they demonstrate how leaders can foster

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<sup>208</sup> Mike Krzyzewski and Donald T. Phillips, *Leading with the Heart: Coach K’s Successful Strategies for Basketball, Business, and Life* (New York, N.Y.: Grand Central, 2001), 5, Kindle.

<sup>209</sup> Krzyzewski and Phillips, 93.

environments where individuals feel supported, motivated, and equipped to handle challenges. This combination of emotional health and effective leadership principles creates a foundation for sustained excellence.

## **Leadership Development within the Church**

The foundation of biblical leadership within the church is articulated well by Alexander Strauch in *Biblical Eldership*. Strauch emphasizes the importance of a shared pastoral responsibility, where church elders embody the model of Christ's servant leadership. His approach echoes the New Testament teachings on authority and humility, urging elders to lead with conviction and compassion. He explains, "We need to first examine the distinctive new principles of leadership taught by Jesus Christ: humility, servanthood, brotherly equality, and Christlike love. We commonly refer to this style of leadership as 'servant leadership.'"<sup>210</sup>

Similarly, David Dickson's *The Elder and His Work* provides practical guidance for elder duties, stressing the need for personal godliness and a commitment to the spiritual welfare of the congregation.<sup>211</sup> Together, Strauch and Dickson lay the groundwork for understanding the elder's role as servant leader and spiritual shepherd. Lawrence Eyres builds upon these ideas in *The Elders of the Church*, which explores the

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<sup>210</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Local Church*, completely revised edition (Colorado Springs: Biblical Eldership Resources, 2023), 19, Kindle.

<sup>211</sup> David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004).

theological foundations of Presbyterian governance, underscoring the collective responsibility of elders to uphold church doctrine and foster spiritual growth.<sup>212</sup>

Timothy Witmer's *The Shepherd Leader* deepens this discussion, presenting a model that encompasses knowing, feeding, leading, and protecting the flock, thus addressing the spiritual and practical needs of the congregation. Witmer knows the weighty calling of shepherding and explains, "When the work of shepherding is difficult, the commitment of the shepherd is truly revealed. Yet shepherding is a labor of love to the one who truly is a shepherd."<sup>213</sup>

In *Resilient Ministry*, Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie identify key factors that contribute to the long-term effectiveness and well-being of church leaders. Through extensive research on pastoral health, the book highlights five critical areas—spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management.<sup>214</sup> The authors emphasize that sustainable leadership requires intentional investment in these areas, helping pastors navigate the challenges of ministry without succumbing to burnout or isolation. This shares a similar view with the emphasis on personal and spiritual growth found in works like *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* and *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*.

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie highlight the crucial role of spiritual formation, stating that "pastors need to attend to their own spiritual growth."<sup>215</sup> They emphasize the

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<sup>212</sup> Lawrence R. Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980).

<sup>213</sup> Witmer, 13.

<sup>214</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 18.

<sup>215</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 21.

importance of a pastor's personal relationship with Christ, cautioning against the tendency to prioritize ministry work over spiritual intimacy with God. "The sad fact is," they observe, "that, for most of us in ministry, our work for Christ comes before our relationship with Christ."<sup>216</sup> This resonates with Clowney's warning against seeking ministry to "save your soul" and underscores the need for leaders to cultivate a deep, abiding connection with Christ.

By fostering resilience through personal growth, healthy relationships, and robust support systems, *Resilient Ministry* provides a framework for developing church leaders who thrive over the long haul. This emphasis on resilience complements Allender's concept of "leading with a limp," acknowledging that effective leadership often emerges from embracing vulnerability and dependence on God.

The cultivation of godly character is another central theme in church leadership development. Hudson Armerding, in *The Heart of Godly Leadership*, emphasizes humility, patience, and integrity as essential traits for effective Christian leaders.<sup>217</sup> His approach suggests that true leadership begins with personal holiness, setting a standard for others to follow. In *The Leadership Dynamic*, Harry Reeder also highlights the transformative journey of leadership, stressing the importance of leading through example and intentional discipleship.<sup>218</sup>

Edmund Clowney's *Called to the Ministry* addresses the inner call to ministry, urging leaders to seek humble self-awareness through prayer and reflection. Clowney

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<sup>216</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 32.

<sup>217</sup> Hudson T. Armerding, *The Heart of Godly Leadership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

<sup>218</sup> Harry L. Reeder III, *The Leadership Dynamic: A Biblical Model for Raising Effective Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers/Crossway Books, 2008).

issues one clear warning to those pursuing church leadership: “Don’t seek the ministry to save your soul.”<sup>219</sup> Clowney’s simple yet piercing point is that far too many people seek church leadership to earn God’s favor, not because of God’s call on their lives. He argues that the weighty calling of church leadership must come from the Lord and should be affirmed by the church community, creating a shared responsibility in recognizing God’s direction in a leader’s life.

Relational skills are indispensable to church leadership, and several authors highlight the importance of mentorship and relational dynamics. Walter Wright, in *Relational Leadership*, argues that strong, trust-based relationships form the core of effective leadership. He suggests that leaders should foster a supportive environment that allows for growth and mutual accountability.<sup>220</sup> Bob Thune’s *Gospel Eldership* also stresses the transformative power of a gospel-centered approach, encouraging leaders to embody humility and grace as they seek to serve those that they shepherd. Thune says, “If a church is to be healthy, its elders must be men who are grounded and rooted in the gospel.”<sup>221</sup> Out of that gospel foundation, elders are called to be “leaders of strength, wisdom, and integrity, whose lives and character are worthy of being imitated and reproduced in every Christian.”<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1964), 9, Kindle.

<sup>220</sup> Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership Service* (Bletchley, UK: Authentic Media, 2002), 31.

<sup>221</sup> Bob Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 4, Kindle.

<sup>222</sup> Thune, 4.

The journey of personal growth and leadership development is another focal area explored by several authors. Robert Clinton's *The Making of a Leader* outlines a model of "leadership emergence," in which leaders are shaped by their life experiences, understanding these events as formative under God's guidance.<sup>223</sup> Clinton's perspective encourages leaders to view their journeys as preparatory for future responsibilities.

Allender's *Leading with a Limp* takes a similar approach, urging leaders to accept their weaknesses as opportunities for growth and greater reliance on God. By acknowledging their limitations, leaders cultivate authenticity and empathy, fostering a more relatable and impactful leadership style. Allender's core leadership assumption is "to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader, to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues."<sup>224</sup> Allender makes the case that leaders who seek to hide their weaknesses will only end up insecure, rigid, and controlling.

For those entering formal leadership roles within the church, practical training is essential. David Hall's *A Manual for Officer Training* provides a structured curriculum covering core doctrines, Presbyterian polity, and the day-to-day responsibilities of church leadership, equipping leaders with a robust understanding of theological foundations and practical governance.<sup>225</sup> Building upon this foundation, John Sittema's *With a Shepherd's Heart* emphasizes the crucial pastoral dimension of eldership, calling for compassion,

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<sup>223</sup> Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development*, 2nd ed (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2018), 9.

<sup>224</sup> Allender, *Leading with a Limp*, 3.

<sup>225</sup> David W. Hall, *A Manual for Officer Training* (New York: Covenant Foundation, 2002), 9.

empathy, and a Christ-like approach to caring for the congregation.<sup>226</sup> Together, these resources provide a comprehensive framework for equipping elders with both the practical skills and the shepherding heart needed for effective ministry.

In conclusion, these works together offer a multi-dimensional view of leadership development within the church. From theological foundations and personal character development to practical mentorship and relationship-building, they collectively present a holistic guide for leaders striving to model Christ-like service. These texts emphasize humility, spiritual growth, and a dedication to nurturing others in a biblically grounded, Christ-centered manner. By incorporating these principles, leaders can fulfill their roles with integrity and grace, supporting their congregations and promoting spiritual flourishing within the church.

## **Conclusion**

The selected literature on leadership development offers a multifaceted perspective on what it means to lead effectively in today's world. Whether addressing the spiritual dimensions of leadership, the importance of emotional intelligence, the challenges of adaptive leadership, or the important role suffering plays in a leader's life, these works collectively assert that leadership is a nuanced internal and external journey, no matter the context. Leaders must cultivate personal and spiritual health, develop adaptive skills to navigate change, learn from suffering, and foster relational intelligence to build cohesive teams. Ultimately, leadership development requires deep personal

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<sup>226</sup> John R. Sittema, *With a Shepherd's Heart: Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of Elder* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1996), Ch. 1.

transformation and the capacity to lead others through the complexities of organizational life, a thoroughly holistic endeavor. Allender explains:

Leading is very likely the most costly thing you will ever do. And the chances are very good that it will never bring you riches or fame or praise in exchange for your great sacrifices. But if you want to love God and others, and if you long to live your life now for the sake of eternity, then there is nothing better than being a leader.<sup>227</sup>

## **Building Emotional Health in Leaders: A Literature-Based Guide**

This guide synthesizes key insights from existing literature, outlining evidence-based strategies for fostering emotional health in leaders.

### **1. The Transformative Impact of Suffering**

The literature reviewed consistently emphasizes the transformative impact of suffering and adversity, indicating that suffering is integral to leadership formation.<sup>228</sup>

#### **Key Practices:**

- **Reframing Adversity:** Work to reframe suffering so that it is viewed as an opportunity to mature.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Allender, *Leading with a Limp*, 2.

<sup>228</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*; Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*; Curt Thompson, *The Deepest Place*; Tripp, *Suffering*.

<sup>229</sup> Thompson, *The Deepest Place*, 166.

- **Processing Pain:** Utilize narrative reflection methods, such as structured storytelling, to integrate personal suffering into leadership development.<sup>230</sup>
- **Developing Emotional Endurance:** Seek professional counseling or spiritual mentorship to process past and present hardships.<sup>231</sup>
- **Practicing Vulnerability:** Foster authenticity by sharing appropriate struggles within trusted leadership circles.<sup>232</sup>

## 2. Strengthening Emotional and Spiritual Resilience

Resilience is key to sustainable leadership and long-term emotional health.<sup>233</sup>

### Key Practices:

- **Prioritizing Solitude:** Establish a routine of silent reflection for self-examination and spiritual renewal.<sup>234</sup>
- **Regulating Emotional Responses:** Implement emotional self-regulation techniques to maintain composure during high-pressure situations.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Crabb, *Shattered Dreams*, Ch. 2.

<sup>231</sup> Tripp, *Suffering*, 197.

<sup>232</sup> Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, 31; Allender, *Leading with a Limp*, 109.

<sup>233</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, Introduction; Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*, Preface.

<sup>234</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 115.

<sup>235</sup> Friedman, 327.

- **Creating Restorative Rhythms:** Prioritize Sabbath practices and non-work-related hobbies to mitigate burnout.<sup>236</sup>
- **Building Support Networks:** Participate in peer accountability groups for emotional health and resilience.<sup>237</sup>
- **Eliminating Hurry:** Practice slowing down, discerning between essential and non-essential tasks, and intentionally creating space for rest and connection.<sup>238</sup>

### 3. Implementing Emotional Health Practices in Leadership

Several researchers emphasize the necessity of structured practices for developing emotional health in leaders.<sup>239</sup>

#### Key Practices:

- **Building Trust:** Establish transparency through consistent and honest communication.<sup>240</sup>
- **Enhancing Self-Reflection:** Conduct structured debriefs after major leadership challenges to analyze emotional responses.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 186.

<sup>237</sup> Tripp, *Suffering*, 173.

<sup>238</sup> Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, 217.

<sup>239</sup> Nadler, *Leading with Emotional Intelligence*; Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*; Bradberry, *Emotional Intelligence Habits*.

<sup>240</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 126.

<sup>241</sup> Nadler, *Leading with Emotional Intelligence*, 92.

- **Normalizing Emotional Health/Intelligence Training:** Integrate emotional health skill-building programs within leadership development frameworks.<sup>242</sup>
- **Fostering a Healthy Team Culture:** Encourage emotional awareness and accountability within leadership teams.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Bradberry, *Emotional Intelligence Habits*, 179.

<sup>243</sup> Nadler, *Leading with Emotional Intelligence*, 20.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The purpose of this study is to describe the process by which pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. Three literature areas have been identified that are crucial: biblical/theological, emotional health/intelligence, and leadership development. With these literature areas as a base, the following research questions will guide this research:

1. How do pastors cultivate emotional health in their personal lives?
2. What practices help pastors cultivate emotional health in elders?
3. What challenges do pastors face in cultivating emotional health in their elders?

The assumption of this study was that pastors can cultivate emotional health in their elders, and that by doing so, they can create a healthier church. A sampling of those pastors has been purposively selected; therefore, a qualitative study was used to demonstrate how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders.

### Design of the Study

The methodology used in this project was the qualitative research method as defined by Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell in their work *Qualitative Research*: “Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon.”<sup>244</sup> The goal of qualitative research is to better understand

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<sup>244</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, Fourth edition (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 26, Kindle.

how different people interpret and give meaning to their experiences. Again, as Merriam and Tisdell explain, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”<sup>245</sup>

Merriam and Tisdell give four characteristics of qualitative research. First “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning.” Second, “the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis.” Third, “the process is inductive.” And fourth, “the product is richly descriptive.”<sup>246</sup>

Because the purpose of this research was to understand process, qualitative research allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. Since the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection, the personal stories of the pastors interviewed formed the foundation of the research. The researcher compared the experiences of pastors and looked for common themes and inductively drew conclusions.

The one-to-one interview method was used with each participant as it allowed the researcher to gather data that cannot be directly observed. This included such things as the participant’s emotions, feelings, thoughts, intentions, and reflections of a given situation, thus allowing the researcher to gain another person’s perspective. As Merriam and Tisdell explain, “The goal of research is to ascertain how the person has processed the event about which inquiry is being made.”<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 5.

<sup>246</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

<sup>247</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 36.

## **Participant Sample Selection**

To conduct this study, the researcher interviewed eight pastors who have served in their church, or in church-related ministries, for at least five years. The key for sample selection was a participant who cultivated personal emotional health and had a reputation of seeking to cultivate it in leaders and elders.

The researcher considered his network of pastors but also enlisted the wisdom of his Covenant Theological Seminary advisor for recommendations of possible candidates. A list of candidates was established, and each pastor was contacted and given the purpose of this study, the interview protocol questions, and a consent form was signed.

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Matt Ham to investigate *“How Pastors Cultivate Emotional Health in their Elders”* for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate the process by which pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include learning how to create a more emotionally healthy church, better officer training processes, healthier relationships between pastors and elders, and healthier and more loving churches overall.
- 3) The research process will include semi-structured interviews with 6-8 pastors that have a reputation of prioritizing emotional health in their own lives as well as their elders.
- 4) Participants in this research will be interviewed for no more than 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Due to the personal nature of each pastor’s ministry, the researcher will use a semi-structured protocol employing narrative inquiry as primary tool for gathering data.

- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: The participant may experience discomfort or stress only as it relates to sharing about difficult experiences in pastoral ministry.
- 6) Potential risks: Minimal
- Participants are asked to reveal personal information regarding individual viewpoints, background, experiences, behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs.
  - People are selected to participate based upon particularly unique characteristics (e.g., they all hold the same position in an organization; they have similar training; or they come from a similar background) or extraordinary life experience.
  - Topics or questions raised are probably politically, emotionally, culturally, spiritually, or psychologically sensitive.
  - Participants are required to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that one might be influenced or affected, and/or anxiety or concern might be raised regarding the subject matter of the inquiry.
  - Participants may have regrets, concerns, afterthoughts, or reactions to the interview.
  - Participants may become tired, weakened, or be mentally or physically impacted in any way from the research interview.
  - The research may inconvenience participants by causing a delay or intrusion into their activities and/or may take more than 20 minutes of the participants' time.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

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Printed Name and Signature of Researcher	Date
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Printed Name and Signature of Participant	Date
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*Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.*

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

## **Research Subjects**

Information about the research subjects and their situations in ministry is provided here. Pseudonyms have been assigned, and the specific geographical location of congregations have not been identified.

### **Steve**

Steve is a 56-year-old pastor with over thirty years of ministry experience. Steve worked as a pastor and church planter in the Southwestern United States for over two decades and led a congregation of over 500 people, where he trained and led more than twenty elders. Steve is currently serving in a national leadership position for his denomination. Married with four children, Steve's journey into emotional health began when a trusted mentor challenged him to reflect on his patterns of overwork and reliance on external validation.

### **John**

John is a 67-year-old pastor serving in the southern United States, leading a church of roughly 4,000–5,000 members. He has been married to his wife for forty-six years, and they have three children and seven grandchildren. John has been on staff at his church for thirty-nine years and has helped train hundreds of elders. His emotional health journey was profoundly influenced by the encouragement of a close friend in ministry, who prompted him to seek counseling and explore his personal grief.

### **Ethan**

Ethan, a 55-year-old pastor in the Midwestern United States, has over thirty-four years of pastoral ministry experience in two different denominations. He currently leads a

church of approximately 400 members alongside a team of five elders. Married with four children and two grandchildren, Ethan is deeply committed to fostering grace-centered leadership. His awareness of the importance of emotional health emerged during a period of intense ministry pressure, when a colleague encouraged him to take a sabbatical and reflect on his priorities.

### **Carter**

Carter is a 74-year-old retired pastor in the Southeastern United States. Carter has served in church leadership for over forty years in various churches along the East Coast. Carter has trained over one hundred elders throughout his pastoral ministry and currently mentors many pastors and elders. Married with three children, Carter's approach to emotional health was shaped by a significant ministry failure that led him to counseling. This experience deepened his empathy for others and reshaped his leadership philosophy.

### **Palmer**

Palmer is a 69-year-old pastor in a suburban community in the Southeastern United States. With twenty-six years of ministry experience, he has served his current church of 1,900 members for eight years, working alongside forty-six elders. Palmer's journey toward emotional health was driven by relational struggles within his church that prompted him to seek counseling, uncovering patterns of defensiveness and relational blind spots.

### **Howard**

Howard is a 52-year-old pastor in the Southeastern United States with twenty-five years of ministry experience. He has served his current church for over twelve years, leading a congregation of approximately 400 members alongside a team of fourteen

elders. Married and a father of two, he has a deep passion for trauma-informed leadership. Howard's emotional health journey began after a PTSD diagnosis, which led him to seek counseling and embrace a more compassionate approach to leadership.

### **Daniel**

Daniel is a 56-year-old pastor in the Southeast with over thirty-three years of ministry experience, beginning in 1991. Daniel is entering his thirteenth year of leadership at his current church, which has 550 members and about 800 regular attenders. Daniel leads a team of twenty-two elders. Married with three grown children, Daniel's emotional health was profoundly shaped by seasons of personal loss that forced him to confront areas of pride and self-reliance, deepening his dependence on God.

### **Greg**

Greg, a 54-year-old pastor in the Southeastern United States, has close to thirty years of ministry leadership experience. He leads a congregation of approximately 900 members with seventeen elders. Married with two children, Greg's journey into emotional health was catalyzed by a supportive mentor who helped him recognize the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into his leadership.

## **Data Collection**

In each case, the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, employing an inductive investigative strategy.<sup>248</sup> Due to the personal nature of each pastor's ministry, the researcher used a semi-structured protocol employing

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<sup>248</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 37, Kindle.

narrative inquiry as primary tool for gathering data. The semi-structured approach allowed the interview to flow naturally as a conversation, which enabled the researcher flexibility to pursue responses in a more in-depth manner, seek clarification from earlier responses, and be curious as to where the interviewee would take the conversation as he processed emotional health in his ministry.

This approach bore much fruit as each person interviewed freely shared about his experiences, not just factually, but emotionally as well. The respondents were candid about what they learned through their experiences, the mistakes they made, and what was revealed about changes needed in their leadership, as well as their organization. They shared how that experience shaped their approach to ministry leadership. As Merriam and Tisdell explain:

Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us... Stories, also called “narratives,” have become a popular source of data in qualitative research. The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>249</sup>

The following questions served as the interview protocol:

- Describe for me your emotional health journey.
- What role has suffering played in your emotional health?
- Describe the specific practices you use to maintain your emotional health.
- How do you balance the demands of your pastoral duties with your personal emotional well-being?

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<sup>249</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 34.

- What are the challenges you encounter when trying to cultivate emotional health in your elders?
- How do these challenges impact your approach to leadership development within your church?
- Tell me about some practices you have implemented to cultivate emotional health among your elders.
- How does your personal approach to emotional health influence the way you guide your elders in their emotional well-being?
- What is the impact of these practices in cultivating the emotional well-being of your elders?
- Reflecting on your experience, what advice would you give to other pastors about maintaining their emotional health while also cultivating it in their elders?
- Would you walk me through, from start to finish, your officer training process?
- What are the challenges you encounter when trying to cultivate emotional health in your elder candidates during the officer training process?

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The constant comparative method was used to evaluate the data and draw conclusions based on the research performed. “The constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences... the constant comparative method of data

analysis is inductive and comparative and so has been widely used throughout qualitative research.”<sup>250</sup>

### **Researcher Position**

Since the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in a qualitative research project, every interview story was filtered through the researcher’s own story, perspective, and worldview. Merriam and Tisdell explain, “Related to the integrity of the qualitative researcher... Investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken... authors are being called upon to articulate and clarify their assumptions, experiences, worldview, and theoretical orientation to the study at hand.”<sup>251</sup> Explaining these biases “allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data.”<sup>252</sup>

The researcher is a white, male minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The researcher is a lead pastor of a multi-site church in the southern part of the United States. The researcher’s congregation is predominantly white, upper-middle class, educated, and conservative. The researcher has lived his entire life in the Southern United States and has been shaped by the conservative Southern culture.

The researcher spent most of his life in an emotionally unhealthy state and has had much experience with churches that placed little to no value on emotional health. The researcher currently focuses on leadership development in his local church and within his

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<sup>250</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 32, 202.

<sup>251</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 249.

<sup>252</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 249.

denomination, at a regional (presbytery) level. All these areas have greatly motivated the researcher to study this particular project.

### **Study Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. The literature on emotional health and leadership development is extremely vast. This study, while exploring these areas, sought to narrowly focus its application to pastors cultivating emotional health in their elders. The study was limited to pastors, elders, and church ministry. Due to limited time and resources, the conclusions drawn may not have universal application, especially outside of the local church context. With that in mind, the person who reads this study must ultimately decide whether the findings apply to their situation.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 256.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. This chapter provides the findings of eight pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do pastors cultivate emotional health in their personal lives?
  - a. Describe for me your emotional health journey.
  - b. Describe the specific practices you use to maintain your emotional health.
  - c. What role has suffering played in your emotional health?
  - d. How do you balance the demands of your pastoral duties with your personal emotional well-being?
2. What practices help pastors cultivate emotional health in elders?
  - a. Tell me about some practices you have implemented to cultivate emotional health among your elders?
  - b. How does your personal approach to emotional health influence the way you guide your elders in their emotional well-being?
  - c. What is the impact of these practices in cultivating the emotional well-being of your elders?

3. What challenges do pastors face in cultivating emotional health in their elders?
  - a. What are the challenges you encounter when trying to cultivate emotional health in your elders?
  - b. How do these challenges impact your approach to leadership development within your church?
  - c. Reflecting on your experience, what advice would you give to other pastors about maintaining their emotional health while also cultivating it in their elders?

Leading up to the interviews, each interviewee received an email outlining a description of the standard protocol that would be followed. Four primary themes emerged, which form the structure of this chapter, (1) The Role of Personal Suffering in Cultivating Emotional Health; (2) Practices Pastors Use to Sustain Emotional Health; (3) Challenges in Cultivating Emotional Health in Elders; and (4) Practices to Cultivate Emotional Health in Elders.

The pastors participating in this study represent diverse ministry contexts, ranging from large urban congregations to smaller suburban churches. Each pastor brings significant experience to the study, with twenty-five to forty-five years in pastoral ministry. They have all been involved in leadership training and discipleship, providing them with unique insights into how emotional health is fostered within the church.

## **Theme 1: The Transformative Role of Personal Suffering in Cultivating Emotional Health**

This theme explores how personal suffering often serves as a catalyst for pastors' journeys toward emotional health. The interviews highlighted the fact that suffering frequently acts as a starting point for an emotional health journey, revealing vulnerabilities and prompting a deeper exploration of inner life. Two key aspects emerged: the crucial role of personal invitation in initiating this journey and the various forms suffering takes, including ministry burdens, personal trauma, and the resulting impact on self-awareness and reliance on Christ.

### **The Power of Personal Invitation**

Many pastors described how their journey into emotional health began not only with suffering but also with a compassionate, personal invitation from someone who recognized their struggles. These invitations often came from spouses, mentors, or close friends and proved essential in prompting self-reflection and a willingness to address deep emotional needs. As Daniel recalled, his wife's persistent yet kind encouragement was pivotal: "She saw things in me that I didn't want to see. She was kind, but she was persistent. She asked me, 'What's the water like that is flowing out of your heart?' That question unsettled me in the best way possible." This "unsettling" question, born out of care, spurred Daniel toward counseling and a deeper understanding of his emotional landscape.

Similarly, Ethan emphasized the impact of observing "men who were gentle, who could cry. And also, who could laugh and speak very boldly—that was the first time I

encountered a way of imagining manhood in a different way.” These models of emotional expression challenged Ethan’s preconceived notions and opened him to new possibilities for emotional health.

For Greg, the unwavering support of a close friend was crucial, “I look back and I’m like, ‘I don’t really like myself and all that I’m seeing about me,’ and he didn’t flinch. That was a big part for me . . . the gospel friendship part.” This acceptance, coupled with the guidance of a pastor with counseling experience, allowed Greg to process past trauma, including his parents’ divorce, and begin his journey of emotional healing. He reflected on the profound impact of his mentor’s kindness, “He knew me really well . . . a lot of it was, ‘What do I do with the loneliness I’m feeling and disappointment and frustrations? All the emotions and inner turmoil? . . . And he was just so kind. . . . I loved him. . . . He is who I wanted to be when I grew up.” The impact was so significant that Greg’s wife even playfully remarked, “I wish you were more like him... his humbleness, gentleness, everything was just great.”

Carter’s story highlights the importance of multiple “invitations” to emotional health. He acknowledged that it “took failure . . . for me to really hit bottom.” However, even in this difficult place, two men offered crucial support. The first, Pastor Jack Miller, modeled humility and a reliance on prayer. Carter remembers how often he and Jack would be talking about deep, heart-level issues, and Jack would say, “Carter, we need to pray. . . . Carter, you don’t understand. I’m asking you to pray for me.” Having an older, wiser man admit his need for the grace of God like this was a new and powerful experience for Carter: “I was blown away. . . . I’ve never been around an older person

more humble, hungry, and teachable than Jack Miller.” This experience challenged Carter’s understanding of leadership and vulnerability and began to reorient his heart.

The second, counselor Dan Allender, persistently asked a probing question, “Where’s the door? Where’s the door?” This question, concerning the door to Carter’s heart, while initially frustrating, eventually led Carter to recognize his own emotional disconnect, “I was so angry and hurt. I did not know where the door was . . . and he finally really pissed me off. . . . But he was so gracious. . . . He didn’t save me. . . . That’s something I really learned, and I have to keep learning. I really want to rescue and save people, but if God’s not rescuing them, you can’t. Just let it go. God will rescue them.” Through Allender’s kind and gracious persistence, Carter eventually experienced a profound breakthrough: “In 2009, I saw the door and I was broken. I wept to my godly sorrow and repentance. I just wept and wept and wept . . . and Jesus really healed me.”

Howard succinctly captured the connection between suffering and the pursuit of health as he reflected on his own story and journey: “You talk about suffering to clarify health. That’s huge.” His experience, like those of the other pastors, underscores how suffering often reveals the need for emotional work, while the kindness and guidance of others provide the necessary support and direction.

## **The Varied Faces of Suffering**

These pastors’ stories reveal that suffering takes many forms. For some, it stemmed from the burdens of ministry. Daniel described his experience of burnout while planting a church, “I had absolutely nothing in the tank. I was depressed. . . . I was addicted. . . . I was just completely depleted. And I just quit. That was the beginning of

my emotional health journey.” Steve’s experience involved a growing sense of disconnection: “I was down about how things were going at the ministry, and I didn’t really know why. I just was down . . . and I just remember thinking, wow, I’m so disconnected from that joy. Why am I so disconnected?” Howard described a particularly challenging season of ministry marked by “brokenness, betrayal, and death,” leaving him feeling overwhelmed: “I was a broken mess, during all that time, and I was like . . . I don’t know if I can do this. Heck, I don’t even know if I can get out of bed in the morning.”

For others, suffering originated in personal trauma. Ethan recounted the impact of growing up in a “reactive and abusive family.” “Each of my parents have been married three times, and I grew up in a family of reactivity. I now know that to be what the Bible calls ‘folly.’ But if you asked an honest question, if there was a question that appeared negative, an emotion that appeared negative, it was viewed as a personal attack.” Howard discussed the lasting effects of childhood sexual trauma: “I was diagnosed with PTSD from childhood sexual trauma. . . . I did a lot of good therapy . . . I found a counselor who did eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) with me. It was super helpful . . . and now for the last two years, probably forty-five times a year, I’ve met with someone who does trauma and internal family systems work as a Christian.”

Palmer’s story illustrates how unresolved trauma can impact relationships and ministry. He described struggling to connect with others: “I didn’t know how to engage well with people . . . I just had trouble connecting with people.” He attributed this to growing up in an alcoholic home marked by conflict. “There was a lot of conflict in the house. So, I became all those things you often do when you’re in those kinds of

situations—a people pleaser.” This people-pleasing tendency, coupled with a sense of self-reliance (“if I don’t do it for myself, nobody else will do it for me”), ultimately proved detrimental to his relationships, contributing to the breakdown of his marriage. “So early on I burned through a marriage.” Not surprisingly, he also described a “crisis moment” in his career around the same time.

Carter’s experience demonstrates how unresolved anger and a sense of power—often rooted in earlier experiences—can manifest negatively in ministry. He described his teenage years: “I was so angry. And I hated my mother . . . I hated her. . . . I got all this power over her to keep her away from me.” This early struggle for control and the resulting anger became a pattern in his life, shaping his interactions with others. A sense of power, born out of anger in his youth, became a lens through which he viewed and reacted to the world.

This pattern of reacting from a place of anger and a need for control carried over into his early ministry. Carter described a defensive posture, reacting to perceived slights: “A number of people shamed me, and I shamed them right back. I either drove them away from the church or I shut them up.” He acknowledged his lack of self-awareness during this time, saying, “I’m very embarrassed and ashamed that I did that. But I had no idea what I was doing. Our sin binds, blinds, and grinds. I was so blinded by the deceitfulness of how much power I felt and would use against people who shamed me.” This highlights how unresolved emotional issues, even when stemming from understandable struggles, can negatively impact ministry, often without conscious intent.

Daniel reflected on the impact of unresolved grief, noting that “My dad’s death really screwed me up and I didn’t know it. And then a few miscarriages and a few

failures and old sin patterns and all of a sudden it was like, ‘What am I giving to anybody around me?’” Similarly, John’s experience demonstrates the long-term effects of childhood trauma. Growing up in a home with an alcoholic mother who died when he was sixteen profoundly shaped his life and ministry: “[My childhood] impacted me in a great way.”

Both Daniel’s and John’s experiences highlight how unaddressed significant losses and childhood trauma can deeply affect one’s emotional and spiritual well-being, influencing how they interact with others and carry out their ministry for years to come.

Greg described the emotional impact of his parents’ divorce and how, in college, he first realized something was wrong when he sat with friends as they took turns sharing how they were doing. “I’d get panicky as it got closer to me because I didn’t know . . . I just felt like something was wrong with me. I’m just so much better at knowing how other people are doing than knowing how I’m doing.” This lack of self-awareness, rooted in his childhood experience as the eldest child in a divorced home, was a significant obstacle. A college course on parent-child relationships provided a crucial breakthrough: “[The professor] just described all the ways I was operating and it really undid me . . . it was definitely a crisis of faith, a crisis of identity. Like everything I am was conditioned by this [trauma of parent’s divorce]. I don’t really know who I am below that. . . . It was pretty wild.” This realization, while painful, was essential for Greg’s emotional growth. It was the first step in a long process of delving beneath the surface of his outward behavior to address the underlying emotional wounds that had shaped his life.

## **Suffering, Humility, and Reliance on Christ**

While the forms of suffering varied in the lives of the pastors interviewed, a common thread emerged—their experiences often led to a deeper sense of humility and a greater reliance on Christ. Carter described his period of stepping away from ministry as a “dark night of the soul.” He shared, “I was broken all the way to the floor. And I felt like a leper in exile.” This experience of brokenness, while deeply painful, ultimately fostered humility and a renewed dependence on God.

Ethan shared a powerful reflection on the role of suffering in his faith, saying, “I was speaking at a conference recently, and someone asked me in a Q&A, ‘Why are you a Christian?’ And I heard myself say, ‘I’m a Christian because of the tears of God.’” He further explained how encountering Christ’s suffering in Scripture resonated with him. “I came across Hebrews 5:7, ‘In the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he prayed with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard.’ And when I read that at verse nineteen, I thought, ‘If Jesus can cry, I want to know more about him.’” This image of a weeping Savior not only offered Ethan a new understanding of strength and vulnerability but drew his heart closer to Jesus.

These pastors’ stories demonstrate that suffering, while often difficult and unwanted, can be a powerful catalyst for growth in emotional health. It can expose hidden wounds, challenge unhealthy patterns, and ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of self and a stronger connection with Christ. The crucial element in this transformation is often the presence of compassionate individuals who offer support and guidance, inviting pastors to explore their inner lives and embrace the journey toward emotional well-being.

## **Theme 2: Practices that Sustain Emotional Health in Pastors**

This theme explores the practical strategies and disciplines pastors employ to maintain their emotional well-being amidst the demands of ministry. Three key practices emerged as essential for sustaining emotional health: (1) cultivating deep friendships and community, (2) engaging in counseling and receiving care, and (3) consistently practicing spiritual disciplines.

### **The Vital Role of Friendship and Community**

A recurring theme in the conducted interviews was the indispensable nature of deep, trusted friendships. Pastors emphasized how close relationships, cohorts, and support systems provide perspective, resilience, and a sense of shared experience. As Daniel articulated, “You look up at times and go, ‘I’m tired of having to have it together all the time.’ When can I not have it together and let somebody come around me and say, ‘Hey, let me tend to your soul?’” This desire for reciprocal care highlights the importance of vulnerability and mutual support within pastoral friendships.

Structured cohorts and accountability groups emerged as particularly valuable. Howard described these groups as “a game-changer,” explaining, “Having a few guys who understand the unique pressures of ministry has been a game-changer. We encourage, challenge, and check in on each other, and that has kept me going.” Steve echoed this sentiment, sharing the long-term benefits of a pastor fellowship accountability group:

We created a pastor fellowship accountability group that's continued now for over 25 years, and I'm just grateful for those brothers. We spend a week together every year, and then we get together at General Assembly, and we Zoom call once a month. Early on, we mostly talked about ministry. Now, we mostly talk about our families.

This evolution from ministry-focused discussions to family-centered conversations underscores the deepening intimacy and trust within these relationships.

Greg emphasized the emotional sustenance he receives from genuine friendships, saying that he gains strength from “just being with people and feeling enjoyed. That was so much the lie in my head—that I’m needed but not enjoyed. And so, having friendships where I just feel enjoyed, the experience of it does more than anything for me.” This speaks to the fundamental human need for belonging and acceptance, a need that is often magnified in the demanding context of pastoral ministry. Howard further emphasized the life-sustaining nature of his close friendships: “Oh my gosh . . . I would either be dead or out of ministry or divorced without those guys. . . . We really share our lives together.”

## **Counseling and Receiving Care**

Many pastors stressed the importance of seeking professional counseling and receiving care, even as they provide care for others. They recognized the need for safe spaces to process their own struggles, acknowledging that their role as caregivers does not exempt them from needing care themselves. Carter succinctly stated, “Three C’s here. You need a coach, you need community, and you need counseling.”

John, who holds a graduate degree in counseling, emphasized the importance of self-care through counseling: “When I came on staff and worked in pastoral care, I was doing the majority of counseling. I’ve counseled hundreds of people . . . and I’ve been

through counseling myself because I felt that was necessary.” This highlights the importance of pastors prioritizing their own mental and emotional well-being as they counsel others.

Daniel echoed the same sentiment, encouraging pastors to “find somebody who can ask you really good questions. Somebody with whom you can be 100 percent free to say, ‘I’m having a bad day, I’m having a bad season right now.’ And they have enough skills, they’re trained enough to give diagnostic insight to help you really discover what’s happening.” Palmer shared the impact of counseling on his marriage:

We realized that we needed help. We couldn’t navigate or manage this thing on our own. And so we started pretty quickly . . . and we counseled for years, I mean, for years. It definitely had an impact. . . . We were just taking one step and putting one foot in front of the other. . . . We just knew we needed some help.

Greg emphasized the importance of receiving care in various forms, noting that for him, “[Being] in relationships where I am receiving care has been really important. These days, it looks more like spiritual direction than counseling, though we’ve done plenty of counseling.” This suggests that different forms of care, including counseling and spiritual direction, can be valuable at various stages of a pastor’s journey.

## **Spiritual Disciplines**

The pastors consistently highlighted the vital role of spiritual disciplines in maintaining emotional health. Practices such as Scripture reading, prayer, journaling, and worship emerged as foundational for processing emotions, maintaining a connection with God, and sustaining ministry. John described his daily routine:

I am an early riser, and the first thing I do each day is go to a coffee shop—I’m usually the first one there. The first thing I’ll do, typically, when I arrive is

journal. I try to journal every day, reflecting on what triggers me, what's going on inside of me—what am I feeling? What am I thinking? I see this as essential to my emotional health. Every day, I spend time in God's Word—reading, meditating, and thinking about it. That's crucial. Prayer certainly is an important part of that.

This integrated approach to spiritual disciplines demonstrates how these practices can work together to foster emotional and spiritual well-being.

Daniel emphasized the importance of solitude and prayer, saying that he prioritizes “being alone—in silence—for prayer as a critical aspect of my own soul care.” Steve described Scripture reading as an anchoring practice, “My ongoing devotional life . . . has always been an anchoring, centering liturgy for me. . . . It's looked differently, but I basically read through the Bible every year.” Steve also shared the role of journaling in his prayer life, saying that “grace is not just an idea, but we're to experience intimate communion with Christ. . . . I journal my prayers.”

Greg emphasized the importance of spending quiet time with God: “Nowadays, solitude is just such a big one for me. It takes that kind of space regularly and for extended times to really know how I'm doing. Just being able to sit with Jesus and try to believe, to hear Him say that I can rest, that I'm a son. I'm not the parent of everybody in my world.” This emphasis on abiding in Christ was echoed by Howard, who described his commitment to a daily prayer practice based on Scripture: “I'm 100 percent committed to the daily prayer practice, morning and evening prayers. . . . It's all about abiding in Jesus, that's the sustenance.” For Howard, this connection with God is cultivated through a daily rhythm of prayer, and “those practices orient our daily laborers.”

Carter emphasized the transformative power of prayer in his life and ministry, saying that “the character of Christ in me is that I am able to really reveal Jesus to [those I minister to] by letting them hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through my praying. To this day, what gives me great confidence is that I know how to pray.” These pastors demonstrate how consistent prayer, both in solitude and in community, is essential for spiritual and emotional resilience. They highlight the importance of regularly connecting with God to find rest, identity, and sustenance for ministry.

In summary, these pastors demonstrate a commitment to holistic self-care. They recognize the importance of nurturing their emotional and spiritual lives through strong relationships, professional guidance, and consistent engagement with spiritual disciplines. These practices provide the foundation for resilience, enabling them to navigate the challenges of ministry and sustain their own emotional well-being while caring for others.

### **Theme 3: Challenges of Cultivating Emotional Health in Elders**

This theme examines the obstacles pastors face when seeking to foster emotional health within their congregations, particularly among elders. Two primary challenges emerged: (1) cultural stigma and resistance to emotional vulnerability, and (2) the pervasive impact of busyness and ministry demands.

#### **Cultural Stigma and Resistance to Emotional Health**

A significant hurdle in addressing emotional health in the church is the cultural stigma surrounding vulnerability, especially for men. This stigma, often ingrained within

church culture, can lead to resistance when pastors try to introduce these concepts. Daniel experienced this firsthand when a former superior dismissed his emotional needs, stating, “If Daniel needs a hug, then he’s not the guy for this job.” This dismissive attitude reflects a common expectation for pastors to project an image of emotional self-sufficiency, hindering their own well-being and creating a barrier to fostering emotional health in others. Reflecting on this, Daniel shared his internal response during this discussion, saying, “Well, I guess I don’t need a hug. I need the job more than I need a hug. . . . Alright, here we go.” This incident highlights the pressure to project an image of emotional self-sufficiency, a pressure that can hinder pastors’ own pursuit of well-being.

Steve encountered similar resistance when discussing emotional health with his church leadership, noting that he remembers “some of the resistance related to talking about emotions. . . . ‘It’s not biblical,’ or ‘That’s just psychobabble.’” This resistance often stems from a lack of understanding about how emotional health relates to faith. Some may view it as “unbiblical” or irrelevant to spiritual growth. Steve went on to explain his perspective on this resistance, saying, “I think these concerns were rooted in fear. . . . We’re comfortable with theological language, but emotional health introduces a different vocabulary that we haven’t done the integration work to understand how it aligns with the Bible.”

John observed a common tendency to equate spiritual health with outward actions rather than inner well-being, noting that “when I ask elders how they’re doing spiritually, nine times out of ten, they list what they are doing or not doing. . . . And it’s hard for them to talk about it because they equate it with what they’re doing.” This misconception can have significant implications for a leader’s spiritual and emotional health. By

focusing primarily on external behavior, they may neglect their inner struggles and emotional needs, leading to burnout, isolation, and a diminished sense of connection with God. Carter often challenges his elders by responding, “I wasn’t asking about your spiritual disciplines; I was asking about your relationship with God.” This simple yet profound reframing encourages a more holistic understanding of spiritual health, recognizing the importance of both external practices and internal well-being.

Daniel’s experience further illustrates the challenges of integrating emotional health into church culture. He shared, “It’s actually been frustrating. . . . I can’t seem to get it as a part of our culture.” Despite this resistance, he sees glimmers of hope: “It’s just hard to get men to go there, but the few who start doing it, you start seeing them come alive!” This suggests that while cultural change is slow, the positive impact on those who engage with emotional health can be a powerful motivator for others.

Howard described how the pandemic exposed unhealthy patterns in their church, sharing that “our culture was not humble, transparent, or vulnerable, and I’m like, ‘We’ve got to be different people.’” This realization led to important conversations and a shift in focus from outward performance to inner transformation. Howard’s experience demonstrates the importance of leaders being attentive to the emotional and spiritual health of their congregations. By recognizing the unhealthy patterns and initiating a shift towards vulnerability and authenticity, he created an environment where individuals could experience genuine connection and support, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and spiritual growth.

Palmer initially experienced a disconnect between his faith and his emotional life, describing them as “parallel tracks.” He explained, “I had this new experience of life in

the gospel and in Jesus. . . . But then over here, there was all this discord that was still there that we were wrestling with.” This disconnect reflects a common tendency within the church to separate “spiritual” practices from “emotional” ones, leading to resistance in integrating emotional health into discipleship. Palmer noted, “There is a fairly significant amount of resistance there . . . it’s hard, hard, hard work to get churches to go there. It’s still a battle . . . it just takes a lot of patience.”

These experiences highlight the deeply ingrained cultural and theological obstacles to embracing emotional health in the church. Overcoming these obstacles requires patience, persistence, and a willingness to challenge traditional views of discipleship, maturity, spirituality, and leadership.

### **Busyness and Ministry Demands as Barriers**

The demanding nature of ministry and the pressures of daily life often make it difficult for elders to prioritize emotional health. Daniel encountered resistance from his elders when he tried to introduce the topic, saying that he “tried to insert [emotional health] with our elders, and they’re like, ‘Eh, that seems like namby-pamby kind of spiritual stuff.’” So I was like, okay . . .” This dismissive attitude reflects a common perception that emotional health is irrelevant or even incompatible with “real” spirituality, particularly among men. However, Daniel also acknowledged the role of busyness in neglecting his own emotional well-being, admitting that he was “so busy, I didn’t even really think about it. We’re just blowing and going, the church doubled, the church is doubling again, we gotta build a building, we gotta do this. And so, quite honestly, even my spiritual care got a little bit just lackadaisical.”

Daniel's experience highlights the tension between the excitement of outward growth and the necessity of inward self-care. While celebrating the church's expansion, he acknowledges the toll it took on his own spiritual and emotional health. This tension underscores the importance of intentionally cultivating practices that support well-being, even amidst seasons of rapid growth and activity.

Steve described his church's early years as outwardly successful yet internally fragile:

We were a high-performing, successful church plant. We grew rapidly, but we were fragile. We didn't know how to navigate weakness, disappointment, or mistakes, and fear remained unspoken. Though we preached grace, we functioned moralistically—not in our teaching, but in our behavior. What was missing was emotional safety. God had to work on me first before we could begin that work among our elders.

This contrast between outward performance and inner fragility highlights the dangers of neglecting emotional health in ministry. Steve reflected on his own journey, acknowledging that it took him years to truly engage with his emotional life: "It wasn't until at least the first five years out of seminary that I began to explore the intersection of emotions and the Christian life in a significant and serious way. . . . But it wasn't until years later in my ministry that I began to realize that I still hadn't gone very deep into that rabbit hole, as it were." He realized he needed to understand his emotional reactivity, questioning, "Why was I so subject to the opinions of others? . . . I didn't understand why my heart and life were so subject to external stimuli."

Ethan acknowledged his early neglect of his own emotional health, "I look back and don't know why I didn't go to counseling. It's a significant absence. . . . Even in my first years as a pastor, I never went to counseling, and I regret that. I just made a lot of

mistakes, a ton of mistakes.” This regret reflects a significant shift in perspective. Early in his ministry, Ethan, like many pastors, prioritized the needs of his congregation over his own well-being. However, as he grew in his own emotional health, he came to recognize the vital importance of rest and reflection, not only for himself but also for his church. So, he implemented rhythms of rest in his church, saying that now “we take three months a year that are resting months in the life of our church. . . . Without this, not only will people not grow in emotional health, but they will simply burn out or feel guilty for needing to rest.”

John discussed the challenges of setting boundaries in ministry, especially for those accustomed to high levels of performance—which usually describes men elected to the office of elder. John shared, “The challenge is that these are people who are busy, they are high performers, they’re very productive. They accomplish things. And with that comes sort of the illusion that life is under their control.” This illusion of control, fueled by the pressure to succeed and meet the demands of ministry, can make it exceedingly difficult to say “no,” establish healthy boundaries, and pursue emotional health.

Carter openly shared how this very thing showed up in his own heart and life early in his ministry and how much it negatively impacted his marriage: “When I first started into ministry, it really was challenging to my marriage, and the thing I had to learn to do was to set boundaries. I had to learn to say no.” The constant demands and pressure to “fix” things can take a toll on personal relationships and lead to emotional exhaustion. Carter learned the importance of saying “no” and recognizing his limitations: “I am not people’s savior. I can’t fix people. I can’t fix things I don’t have control over.” This

realization allowed him to create healthier boundaries, prioritize his marriage, and ultimately lead from an emotionally healthier and more sustainable place.

Carter shared his own experience of taking on a church planting role despite being in a fragile emotional state: “I shouldn’t have taken the church planting job. I mean, if I’d had more integrity or more support or more coaching, I shouldn’t have taken it. But they made me kind of a financial offer, and I felt like, well, I’ve got to keep working. And now my girls are in college. I’ve got to work. I have to have a job. . . . But I was not doing well.” This highlights the pressure to provide, even at the expense of one’s well-being. Carter’s words reveal the conflict between his desire to care for his family and his awareness of his emotional fragility.

The pressure to provide financially, especially with the added responsibility of children in college, can create a sense of obligation that overrides the need for self-care and rest. This pressure is often compounded by an unhealthy—and ultimately unbiblical—emphasis on always serving God and others, no matter the personal cost. Carter’s experience reflects a broader challenge in ministry: the expectation that pastors should always be available and capable, regardless of their personal struggles. This expectation can create a sense of shame and reluctance to acknowledge one’s limitations, leading to unhealthy coping mechanisms and potentially jeopardizing one’s ministry and personal well-being.

Greg reflected on how he personally recognizes when he’s neglecting his emotional health, saying that “the earliest thing I notice when I’m functioning in an unhealthy place is I stop listening to music in my car and I’m either making phone calls or feeling like I need to listen to a podcast. Every moment has to be used for efficiency in

ministry and all that. And there's no enjoyment—just self-neglect.” This realization serves as a crucial indicator that he needs to prioritize emotional restoration. Greg's observation highlights the subtle ways in which self-neglect can manifest in a pastor's life. The tendency to maximize every moment for “efficiency in ministry,” even during simple activities like driving, can be a sign that one is prioritizing productivity over personal well-being. The loss of enjoyment and the sense of obligation to constantly be “productive” can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Howard recognized the limitations of his own capacity, realizing that he couldn't effectively focus on emotional health and formation while maintaining a heavy preaching schedule. “I'm not gonna preach forty-plus times a year anymore,” he said. “I can't do that and be about formation and engagement.” This decision reflects a commitment to prioritizing depth over breadth in ministry, so much that he decided he needed to significantly change his role as senior pastor in order to pursue emotional health. He explains:

When I came back from sabbatical. . . I started talking to our elders about the fact that I can't be the senior pastor. . . There are very few people who can be a senior pastor and stay healthy—for the expectations of the church, the expectations of the elders, and the expectations of the person.

As a result of this awareness in his own heart and life, Howard's session decided to get rid of the senior pastor role and instead divide up the job into three different pastoral roles that enabled each man to function in a much healthier manner. This restructuring demonstrates a remarkable commitment to prioritizing the well-being of their pastors and creating a more sustainable model for ministry. By distributing the responsibilities among multiple individuals, the church reduced the pressure on any one

person, allowing for a greater focus on emotional health, personal growth, and deeper engagement in ministry.

In conclusion, the challenges of cultivating emotional health in elders are significant. Cultural stigma, resistance to vulnerability, and the constant demands of ministry create barriers that must be addressed with patience, understanding, and intentional effort. However, these pastors' stories also offer hope. By acknowledging these challenges, fostering open conversations, and implementing practices that prioritize emotional well-being, churches can create a culture that supports and nurtures the emotional health of their leaders and congregations. It requires a long-term perspective, recognizing that change happens gradually and that consistent effort is essential for creating lasting transformation.

#### **Theme 4: Practices to Cultivate Emotional Health in Elders**

This theme explores the practical strategies pastors employ to cultivate emotional health within their congregations, particularly among elders. Recognizing the challenges and barriers discussed in the previous theme, these pastors have implemented various approaches to address the emotional well-being of their leaders. These strategies include fostering a culture of emotional honesty, providing opportunities for counseling and spiritual direction, implementing training programs, building strong relationships among elders, and modeling emotional health as pastors.

## **Fostering a Culture of Emotional Honesty**

Fostering a culture of emotional honesty is essential for cultivating emotional health in elders. Ethan described his approach to creating such a culture, noting, “I think a big part of it is naming. Naming these things as a part of the culture of our church. . . . How we do ‘glad,’ ‘sad,’ ‘mad,’ and ‘afraid’ as a church. And how that shows up in the way we handle worship, volunteers, and in the way we respond to criticism. . . . Naming our way of being as a church.” He also shared a practical exercise:

Every Sunday morning, we have a quiet minute. The quiet minute is, we’re gonna pause, we’re gonna practice an ancient thing that Christians did. They called it “casting your cares upon the Lord, because He cares for you.” And in order to cast our cares, we have to know what they are. In order to know what they are, we have to stop and notice what’s going on inside of us.

This practice of a “quiet minute” not only encourages individuals to connect with their emotions but also models vulnerability and emotional honesty for the entire congregation. By creating a space for reflection and acknowledging the importance of attending to one’s inner life, Ethan fosters an environment where emotional honesty can flourish.

Steve shared how open sharing among elders fostered growth, recounting, “What was great was once I started growing and learning, they wanted to know what I was learning. And so that created all kinds of dialogue opportunities with my elders.” Steve went on to explain that not only did he dialogue with his elders, but he also invited them to learn along with him. He calls this the power of a “learning community” and emphasizes the practical importance of always growing and learning together. In light of this, he regularly feeds his elders books and other material on emotional health so that they can continually grow and learn together. This emphasis on shared learning contributes to a culture of emotional honesty within the eldership team. By openly

sharing his own journey and providing resources for growth, Steve creates a safe space for vulnerability and encourages mutual support among leaders. The ongoing dialogue and shared learning experiences foster deeper connection and trust, allowing elders to navigate the challenges of ministry with greater emotional support.

Carter argued that many men mask their emotional needs, saying things such as, “I grew up in a normal family. We were healthy. I mean, nobody ever hit me. I never saw anybody over drink. We had all of this.” He suggested a more direct approach: “Did you ever really feel seen and loved by your parents? Did your dad ever tell you that he loved you?” He explained that many men lack a deep sense of security in their identity as sons of God, which impacts their roles as fathers, elders, and husbands. He emphasized the transformative power of realizing and living out of the truth that “Even though my parents forsake me, my Heavenly Father will never forsake me.” Carter explained that when men really get this truth deep into their hearts, it will absolutely change their life.

Greg emphasized the impact of normalizing conversations about counseling and personal struggles, observing that “always talking about our own counseling and struggles and building a culture of vulnerability has made a significant impact.” By openly discussing their own experiences with counseling and vulnerability, Greg and the other pastors on his staff have worked to create a safe space for others to do the same, especially their elders. This normalization of vulnerability challenges the stigmas associated with emotions and encourages a more open and honest dialogue about emotional health within the church community. The result, Greg notes, is a significant impact on the overall emotional well-being of the congregation. Greg argues that if the elders are emotionally healthy, then the staff, volunteers, congregation, and even regular

attendees can pursue being emotionally healthy. But it all begins at the top. Greg truly believes that “grace runs downhill.”

Howard explained that fostering a culture of emotional honesty requires intentional leadership, reflecting, “This is gonna sound a little weird, but one of the things I realized my failure as a leader was . . . I don’t just create a culture by being the culture, I create a culture by demanding a culture. . . . I think what I learned was that part of leadership is demanding Christlikeness and curiosity and humility.” He explained that this allowed his elders to own the culture of health within the church: “I couldn’t be the keeper of the culture the whole time, the policer of the culture. And I needed them to own this because we’ve gotten through some hard things, now that they are the preservers of the culture of health. And that was my huge lesson learned . . . that I’m not the police.”

Palmer shared how creating a culture of trust allows for open discussion about suffering and failure, remarking, “In every case when I asked them what was a watershed moment in your ministry or what was one of those pivotal times in your ministry? To a person, every single story was negative, and what that taught me and reinforced for me was that God most often uses either the failures or the disappointments that we have in life as the greatest teaching moments.” Palmer learned that vulnerability and a willingness to discuss can lead to significant growth. He seeks to normalize these types of conversations within the church to create a culture that fosters emotional honesty.

### **Encouraging Counseling and Spiritual Direction**

Many pastors actively encourage elders to seek professional help for their emotional and spiritual well-being. Daniel strongly believes that seeking guidance from a

trained professional can provide elders with a safe space to process their struggles, gain new perspectives, and develop healthy coping mechanisms. He encourages his elders to find a skilled counselor or spiritual director who can offer support, challenge blind spots, and help individuals connect their emotional health to their spiritual journey.

John, who has a graduate degree in counseling, strongly encourages his elders to seek counseling in order to pursue emotional health. He believes that leaders who have personally experienced the benefits of counseling are better equipped to encourage and support others in seeking help. By openly sharing his own journey with counseling, John creates a culture of vulnerability and openness within his leadership team, demonstrating that seeking help is not only acceptable but also beneficial for personal and spiritual growth.

Carter uses the analogy of a family physician and a surgeon to explain the need for counseling, “I’m gonna say to everybody in the church, counseling is your friend. . . . I’m like your family physician. I see a lot of problems. But some of you are gonna come to me and say, ‘Hey, I’m getting in touch with something I did that I’ve never told anybody. And I need help.’ But I said, ‘I need to get you a surgeon.’ And that’s counseling.” Carter believes that just as a family physician refers patients to specialists for more complex issues, pastors should encourage those with deep emotional or spiritual wounds to seek professional counseling. He sees himself as a general practitioner who can address common problems but recognizes that some issues require more specialized care. Carter emphasizes that counseling is not something to be ashamed of but rather a valuable resource for healing and growth. He wants his congregation to feel comfortable seeking professional help when needed.

## **Training and Development Programs**

Structured training programs can equip elders with the tools for emotional growth. John shared, “We developed a series of workshops for our elders that focused on emotional health, self-awareness, and pastoral care.” John believes that these workshops provided a structured learning environment where elders could explore key concepts, develop practical skills, and receive support in their journey toward emotional health. By incorporating training programs into their leadership development, John is convinced that churches can provide elders with valuable resources and tools to navigate the challenges of ministry and cultivate greater emotional well-being.

Greg emphasized the importance of incorporating emotional language into leadership development and conversations with elders, saying, “There is a constant emotional vocabulary—the starting point is always, ‘How are you feeling?’ rather than ‘How are you thinking about it?’ You’re not as subjective as you think, so you have to know what’s driving you.” He explained that this approach helps elders understand their emotional needs and motivations, “What’s my heart attached to? What does it look like to unattach from these things and attach to Jesus? Just naming the emotional need and recognizing what’s driving it—when we use emotional language, it becomes normative.” Greg believes that using emotional language helps elders become more aware of their emotions, identify their underlying needs, and connect those needs to their relationship with Christ. By normalizing emotional language, he seeks to create a culture where elders feel comfortable discussing their emotions and seeking support when needed.

Palmer trains elders by sharing personal examples to illustrate the impact of past experiences on present emotions and behaviors. He shared a story about how he finally realized, after many years, that his visceral reaction to the sound of slamming cabinet doors stemmed from his childhood experiences in an alcoholic home: “And it took me dozens and dozens and dozens of years to finally realize that the reason I acted viscerally when I heard cabinet doors in a kitchen slam was because oftentimes when my dad would come home at night, my bedroom was close enough that I could hear him railing at my mother and slamming doors, cabinet doors, in the kitchen.” Palmer believes that sharing personal stories like this helps elders understand the connection between past experiences and present reactions. By openly discussing his own struggles and insights, he creates a safe space for elders to explore their emotional landscapes and develop greater self-awareness.

Steve also emphasized the importance of teaching and modeling emotional health:

When we got to the emotional health conversation, we did have to do some more work, and the biggest work we had to do was helping people see a Christian anthropology, just going back to the basics of what it means to be made in the image of God and seeing that God gave us emotions, that they’re also affected by the Fall. And so we’ve got to deal with this part of our story.

Steve believes that a proper understanding of human nature, rooted in a Christian worldview, is essential for cultivating emotional health. He emphasizes that emotions are an integral part of being human, created by God and impacted by the Fall. Therefore, addressing emotional health is not merely a psychological exercise but a spiritual one, requiring us to engage with our emotions in light of our relationship with God and the redemptive work of Christ. He believes that teaching about emotional health requires grounding it in a theological framework that helps people understand the role of emotions

in the Christian life. By connecting emotional health to a broader understanding of human nature and God's design, he seeks to create a space where people can engage with their emotions in a healthy and transformative way.

## **Building Strong Elder Relationships**

Strong peer relationships among elders are crucial for fostering emotional health and resilience. Steve emphasized the ongoing nature of emotional growth within community. "People often approach emotional health as if they need to fix something," he said. "But what happens after you 'fix' it? You're still living in community, still doing church together. Nothing will ever be completely finished. Even at your best, things will still be messy. So, stop being in a hurry—focus on the ongoing process of doing life together in healthier and healthier ways." Steve believes that emotional health is not a destination but a journey, a continuous process of growth and learning that happens in the context of community. He challenges the idea that emotional health is about achieving a perfect state of well-being, recognizing that even at our best, we will still face challenges and "messy" situations. Instead, he encourages a focus on the ongoing process of learning, growing, and supporting one another in the pursuit of healthier relationships and emotional well-being.

Ethan shared how his elders prioritize relationship building:

In our elders' meetings, we have an intentional thing that we rehearse every time we get together. We'll say, "The emergency room requires immediacy and relief. The boardroom requires efficiency and quantity. But it seems like Jesus often doesn't bring immediate relief, and He doesn't seem as concerned about efficiency and quantity as we often are. So if we take away efficiency, quantity, immediacy, and relief, what do we have left to lead with? We have time, appropriate touch, eye contact, laughter, tears, presence, the open Bible, the presence of His Spirit."

This intentional approach fosters deep relationships and trust. Ethan contrasts the typical approaches to leadership found in the “emergency room” and the “boardroom” with the approach modeled by Jesus. He believes that while efficiency, quantity, immediacy, and relief may be important in certain contexts, they are not the primary qualities that foster deep relationships and trust. Instead, he encourages his elders to prioritize time, presence, vulnerability, and spiritual connection in their interactions with one another. Ethan believes that this approach, modeled after Jesus’ own ministry, creates a space where elders can connect with one another on a deeper level, fostering emotional honesty and vulnerability.

John emphasized the importance of community, especially for men, “When a guy says, ‘I can deal with it on my own,’ I tell him, ‘No, no, no, you’re not. You’re not going to deal with it on your own.’ I share this saying about once a week, ‘Your mind is like a bad neighborhood—never go there alone.’” John believes that fostering a strong sense of community is essential for cultivating emotional health. He recognizes that isolation and the pressure to “deal with it on your own” can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms and hinder emotional growth. By encouraging men to connect with others, share their struggles, and seek support, he creates an environment where vulnerability is valued and emotional well-being is prioritized.

Howard explained how an emphasis on emotional health deepened relationships and trust among his elders. They began to pursue curiosity with one another, saying, “If you’re angry, then you have to ask, why am I so angry? If you don’t understand somebody, you have to ask them. Help me understand you, my brother.” They also implemented an emotional check-in at the beginning of their meetings:

It's really short, it doesn't take a lot. . . . It's just an invitation to be human as you walk into this place. It's not a group therapy session. . . . It's just creating this sacred space for emotional health. . . . What usually happens is there is a prompt and someone will say, "I'm sad but I'm here," and the group will say "Welcome" or "Bless you."

Howard believes that these practices have fostered a deeper sense of empathy and understanding among the elders. By encouraging curiosity and providing a space for emotional expression, he has created an environment where elders feel safe to be vulnerable and authentic with one another. This, in turn, has strengthened their relationships and built greater trust within the elder team.

Carter said that the way to build stronger relationships among elders isn't very complicated. "A lot of it is friendships, just being a friend to them and getting to know their stories and listening, to really draw them out," he shared. "And counseling, preaching the gospel, feeding them good stuff to read, praying together." Carter believes that building strong relationships is not just about fostering camaraderie but also about creating a culture where emotional health can thrive. By prioritizing friendship, vulnerability, and shared spiritual practices, elders can create a safe and supportive environment where they can process their struggles, encourage one another, and grow together in emotional maturity.

### **Modeling Emotional Health as Pastors**

Each pastor recognized that their own emotional health directly influences their ability to cultivate it in others. Daniel emphasized the importance of self-care, asserting that "everything that we give to our congregation is from an overflow. As the proverb says, 'Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the streams of living water.'"

Steve highlighted the importance of transparency and vulnerability, saying that “there needs to be a level of transparency and vulnerability. People have to see you as an emotional creature—that’s part of your story. If they’re going to deal with their emotions in transparent and vulnerable ways, you have to model the way.”

These pastors highlight the crucial role of modeling and cultivating emotional health within a church community. Daniel believes that pastors must prioritize their own emotional and spiritual well-being in order to model healthy self-care for their congregations. By “guarding their hearts” and attending to their own emotional needs, pastors demonstrate the importance of self-care and create a permission structure for others to do the same. Similarly, Steve believes that pastors must model vulnerability and emotional honesty if they expect their congregations to engage with their emotions in healthy ways. By being open about their struggles and demonstrating healthy emotional expression, pastors create a safe space for others to engage with their emotions and seek support. By modeling both self-care and vulnerability, pastors create a culture where emotional health is valued and practiced.

John described how he models emotional health in his interactions with elders:

I would say that one of the things I want to do is model for people. There’s always modeling going on. I want to relationally connect with officers in such a way that I’m really engaging with them. ‘How are you? How are you really doing?’ I want them to know that I genuinely care about connecting with them. That’s a key thing for me.

Greg affirmed this: “You have to prioritize your [emotional health] in order to lead others into it. Modeling that feels like it does that to a pretty significant degree.”

John believes that modeling emotional health involves genuine relational connection. By actively engaging with his elders, asking authentic questions, and

demonstrating genuine care, he creates a space where vulnerability and emotional honesty can flourish. Greg agrees, emphasizing that leaders must prioritize their own emotional health in order to effectively model it for others. By demonstrating a commitment to their well-being, leaders create a permission structure for others to do the same.

Palmer explained the importance of modeling authentic vulnerability:

What I've learned in emotional intelligence has helped because I came across that way for years. . . . I always managed so I didn't have to say too much. . . . It's a managed vulnerability or a managed transparency. And I think I have learned over the last ten years to really open that up, to understand that about myself and to say, "Okay, are you really being vulnerable and transparent, or are you just telling people enough to kind of carry them along?"

Palmer distinguishes between "managed vulnerability" and authentic vulnerability, believing that true vulnerability requires greater openness and honesty. By modeling authentic vulnerability, he creates a safe space for others to do the same, fostering deeper trust and connection within the elders specifically but also the entire church community.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented findings from interviews with eight pastors regarding the cultivation of emotional health in their elders. The pastors, representing a diverse range of ministry contexts and experiences, shared their personal journeys, challenges, and practices related to emotional health. The findings revealed the significant role of personal suffering in the pastors' own journeys toward emotional health. Many described

how suffering served as a catalyst for growth, leading them to deeper self-awareness, greater reliance on Christ, and a more compassionate approach to ministry.

The pastors also identified various practices that sustain emotional health, including cultivating deep friendships and support networks, engaging in counseling and spiritual direction, and practicing spiritual disciplines. They emphasized the importance of creating a culture within their churches where vulnerability, emotional honesty, and mutual support are valued.

However, the pastors also acknowledged the significant challenges in cultivating emotional health among their elders. These challenges include cultural stigma surrounding vulnerability, resistance to addressing emotional needs, and the constant pressure of ministry demands.

Despite these challenges, the pastors shared practical strategies for cultivating emotional health in their elders. These strategies include fostering a culture of emotional honesty, encouraging counseling and spiritual direction, implementing training programs, building strong elder relationships, and modeling emotional health as pastors.

The findings of this chapter offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of emotional health in ministry leadership. The pastors' experiences underscore the importance of personal growth, vulnerability, and intentional effort in cultivating emotional health, both for oneself and for others. While challenges abound, these pastors' stories also offer hope, demonstrating that change is possible and that prioritizing emotional health can lead to greater resilience, deeper relationships, and more fruitful ministry. As one pastor shared:

It's just hard to get men to go there, but the few who start doing it, you start seeing them come alive, it's been really fun to watch. . . . And their wives

comment and go, “I don’t know what you’re doing with my husband, but keep it up.” I’m like, “I’m not doing anything! The Holy Spirit’s doing some cool stuff though, isn’t he?”

In Chapter 5, conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of this research will be shared, and the question of how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders will be explored in greater depth. The literature review has laid out strong arguments that emotional health can be cultivated, and the research data from the interviewees has only confirmed this assertion. The pastors’ experiences and insights offer valuable guidance for other pastors seeking to cultivate emotional health in their leadership teams. Chapter 5 will explore the specific practices and strategies that pastors can employ to effectively cultivate emotional health in their elders.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Recommendations

This study examined how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders, operating under two key assumptions. First, pastors can indeed cultivate emotional health in their elders, a premise affirmed by both the literature and data analysis. Second, pastors must first cultivate their own emotional health before effectively fostering it in others; an emotionally unhealthy pastor cannot hope to guide elders toward emotional well-being. The findings strongly support both assumptions.

This research employed a qualitative methodology, as defined by Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, who describe qualitative inquiry as a means of understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences.<sup>254</sup> Given the focus on pastoral leadership and formation, the most effective way to explore this topic was through the lived experiences of pastors themselves.

One-on-one interviews served as the primary data collection method, providing insight into emotions, thoughts, and reflections that are not directly observable. Eugene Peterson captures the power of this research approach, stating that “Story is our most accessible form of speech. . . . Story doesn’t just tell us something and leave it there. It invites our participation. . . . We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, and identify with the characters.”<sup>255</sup> By engaging pastors’ personal narratives, this study not

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<sup>254</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 5.

<sup>255</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, location 851.

only uncovered recurring themes but also allowed for a deeper, more embodied understanding of how emotional health is cultivated in church leadership.

Through qualitative research consisting of eight in-depth interviews with pastors, key themes emerged that provide insight into both the challenges and best practices in fostering emotional health in elders. To meet the researcher's goal of understanding how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders, the following research questions were used:

1. How do pastors cultivate emotional health in their personal lives?
2. What practices help pastors cultivate emotional health in elders?
3. What challenges do pastors face in cultivating emotional health in their elders?

This chapter will summarize the key findings, discuss these findings in the context of the existing literature on biblical/theological perspectives, emotional intelligence, and leadership development, and offer practical recommendations for pastors and churches seeking to cultivate emotional health in their leadership. By synthesizing these findings and recommendations, this chapter aims to contribute to a more holistic and sustainable model of church leadership, one that prioritizes the emotional well-being of both pastors and elders, ultimately leading to healthier and more vibrant church communities.

### **Summary of the Study and Key Findings**

This section presents a dialogue between the findings of this study, the existing literature, and my own reflections as a researcher and practitioner. The goal is to explore how the themes identified in Chapter 4 align with, or challenge, previous research and theological perspectives.

## **The Transformative Role of Personal Suffering in Cultivating Emotional Health**

Emotional health, defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and to navigate relationships effectively, is often profoundly shaped by experiences of suffering. The research findings strongly support this assertion, echoing the work of Keller, Langberg, Thompson, DeGroat and Allender, who argue that suffering serves as a key catalyst for emotional and spiritual growth. Specifically, Keller emphasizes that suffering is not meaningless, but rather part of God's plan to refine and deepen faith.<sup>256</sup> Langberg describes how suffering exposes deep wounds, creating an opportunity for healing.<sup>257</sup> Thompson says suffering leads to the "deepest places" of our souls.<sup>258</sup> DeGroat notes that understanding and processing painful emotions will lead to lasting transformation.<sup>259</sup> Allender argues that story work, a process of engaging with one's narrative to find meaning, leads to emotional integration. This process of story work, as Allender terms it, involves intentionally exploring and reinterpreting one's past experiences, particularly those involving suffering, in light of God's redemptive purposes.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 83.

<sup>257</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, 166.

<sup>258</sup> Thompson, *The Deepest Place*, location 322.

<sup>259</sup> DeGroat, *Healing What's Within*, 61.

<sup>260</sup> Allender, *To Be Told*, 40.

The pastors in this study repeatedly described how personal suffering—whether through the intense pressures of church planting, navigating seasons of deep personal loss, or confronting the lingering effects of childhood trauma—led them to a crucial turning point in their journey toward emotional health. These experiences forced them to confront their limitations, their vulnerabilities, and their dependence on God in ways that comfort and success never could. For example, Daniel shared how a period of burnout and depression, stemming from the pressures of church planting, forced him to confront his own emotional emptiness: “I had absolutely nothing in the tank. I was depressed. . . . I was just completely depleted. And I just quit. That was the beginning of my emotional health journey.” Similarly, Carter described a “dark night of the soul” following a ministry failure, stating, “I was broken all the way to the floor. And I felt like a leper in exile.” These experiences, while profoundly painful, proved transformative, ultimately leading to greater self-awareness and a deeper reliance on God.

This finding powerfully affirms the biblical narrative, particularly the example of Jesus. His experience of suffering, culminating in the cross, demonstrated his profound empathy and capacity to connect with human pain, setting the ultimate example of servant leadership. We also see this theme reflected in the lives of Moses and the Apostle Paul. Moses’ time in exile, after impulsively killing an Egyptian, forced him to confront his own anger and inadequacy, ultimately shaping him into a humbler and more patient leader. Paul’s numerous trials, including imprisonment and persecution, deepened his reliance on God’s grace and strengthened his ability to encourage others facing similar hardships.

The pastors in this study similarly described their suffering not merely as setbacks but as crucial turning points. These experiences served as both a “breaking point,” dismantling old patterns of self-reliance and unhealthy coping mechanisms, and a “starting point,” initiating a journey toward greater emotional awareness, deeper faith, and a more compassionate approach to ministry. This process of breaking and renewal, while often painful, ultimately refined their leadership, equipping them to guide others with greater wisdom and empathy. As Palmer reflected on a past ministry crisis, he noted:

In every case when I asked them, “What was a watershed moment in your ministry?” or “What was one of those pivotal times in your ministry?” To a person, every single story was negative, and what that taught me was and reinforced for me was that God most often uses either the failures or the disappointments that we have in life as the greatest teaching moments.

This perspective highlights how suffering can become a powerful source of learning and growth.

This finding—that suffering can be a catalyst for emotional and spiritual growth—offers a powerful reframing of adversity for those in pastoral ministry. It challenges the common tendency to view suffering as something to be avoided at all costs, or as a sign of failure. Instead, it suggests that suffering can be a crucible for deeper formation, fostering a more authentic connection with God and others, and ultimately leading to more compassionate and effective leadership.

The data also provide compelling evidence for insights from Thompson, who emphasizes that suffering forces individuals to engage in deep, internal work, specifically the process of confronting and integrating their “deepest place” of fear, shame, and

sorrow. This confrontation, according to Thompson, is essential for developing genuine hope and resilience.<sup>261</sup>

The study participants corroborated this idea, noting that suffering often revealed hidden emotional wounds, such as unresolved grief, past traumas, or patterns of people-pleasing that had to be confronted before they could cultivate healthier leadership practices like setting boundaries, expressing vulnerability, and leading with empathy. Howard's experience with PTSD, stemming from childhood trauma, exemplifies this. He shared, "I was diagnosed with PTSD from childhood sexual trauma. . . . I did a lot of good therapy. . . . And now for the last two years, probably forty-five times a year, I've met with someone who does trauma and internal family systems work as a Christian." This intentional engagement with his past trauma allowed him to develop greater emotional resilience and a more compassionate approach to leadership.

Additionally, the concept of "dark nights of the soul," explored by Barton in the context of spiritual formation and leadership and Allender in the context of confronting one's "limp" or inherent weaknesses, strongly mirrors many of the pastors' experiences. Barton describes the "dark night" as a period of disorientation and spiritual dryness that, while painful, can lead to a deeper dependence on God and a more authentic faith.<sup>262</sup> Allender emphasizes that embracing one's limitations and vulnerabilities is essential for developing authentic and compassionate leadership.<sup>263</sup> For several pastors, this "dark night" manifested as a period of intense ministry burnout or a personal crisis that forced

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<sup>261</sup> Thompson, *The Deepest Place*, location 322.

<sup>262</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 55.

<sup>263</sup> Allender, *Leading with a Limp*, 3.

them to re-evaluate their priorities and their relationship with God. These periods of profound uncertainty led to breakthroughs in self-awareness, such as recognizing unhealthy coping mechanisms or confronting long-held insecurities. This reinforces the concept that suffering, while not to be sought out, can serve as a powerful catalyst for growth in both personal and pastoral leadership.

Building on these insights, the findings from this study strongly support the broader literature on suffering as a catalyst for emotional health and effective leadership. The pastors' experiences align with both psychological research on emotional resilience, particularly the concept of post-traumatic growth, which suggests that individuals can experience positive psychological change following adversity, and theological perspectives on suffering, specifically the themes of lament, divine sovereignty, and the refining power of trials. The consistent emphasis on suffering as a turning point, rather than a mere setback, is particularly noteworthy. It suggests that a crucial element in cultivating emotional health within church leadership is the ability to reframe hardship, not as an interruption to ministry but as an integral part of the journey itself. These hardships, while unique in their details, ultimately served as a critical turning point, leading to greater emotional depth, self-awareness, and a more profound reliance on God's grace in their lives and ministries. Key practices on how pastors help their elders do this will be explained in the next section.

### **Sustaining Emotional Health: Key Practices**

The pastors' emphasis on friendship, counseling, and spiritual disciplines as crucial for sustaining emotional well-being is strongly supported by the existing

literature. Goleman's framework highlights self-awareness, social skill, and self-regulation as essential components of emotional health. Friendship, as described by the pastors, provides a space for vulnerability and mutual support, directly fostering the social skill component of emotional intelligence.<sup>264</sup> Counseling offers a structured environment for self-reflection and processing difficult emotions, thereby enhancing self-awareness. Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and meditation, provide tools for managing stress and cultivating inner peace, contributing to self-regulation.<sup>265</sup> Saccone emphasizes the importance of relational intelligence, arguing that strong, authentic connections are essential for leaders to expand their influence and navigate complex social environments.<sup>266</sup> The pastors' reliance on close friendships and support networks directly reflects this emphasis on relational connection. Scazzero further argues that spiritual maturity and emotional health are inseparable, proposing that a deep connection with God, cultivated through spiritual practices, is foundational for emotional well-being.<sup>267</sup>

Building on these practices, the findings corroborate Barton's work on the crucial role of self-care in leadership. Barton emphasizes the importance of cultivating rhythms of rest, solitude, and reflection, arguing that these practices are not luxuries but necessities for sustainable ministry.<sup>268</sup> Pastors who engaged in intentional rest, such as

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<sup>264</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 34.

<sup>265</sup> Goleman, 47.

<sup>266</sup> Saccone, 89.

<sup>267</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 26.

<sup>268</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 84.

implementing regular Sabbath days, sabbatical rhythms, and boundary-setting reported greater emotional stability and longevity in ministry. For example, Steve shared, “My ongoing devotional life . . . has always been an anchoring, centering liturgy for me. . . . It’s looked differently, but I basically read through the Bible every year.” He also highlighted the importance of Sabbath-keeping, stating, “We’ve always had a Sabbath . . . I’ve always protected that.”

This is consistent with Heifetz and Linsky’s work on adaptive leadership, which stresses that leaders who fail to create space for reflection and personal renewal often succumb to exhaustion and decision fatigue. Heifetz and Linsky argue that taking “balcony time”—stepping back from the immediate demands of leadership to gain perspective—is essential for maintaining clarity, making wise decisions, and avoiding reactive responses.<sup>269</sup>

The research findings in Chapter 4 indicate that pastors who sustain emotional health prioritize intentional relationships, such as participating in regular accountability groups or maintaining close friendships with other pastors, and structured care practices, such as seeking regular counseling or spiritual direction. This finds strong support in Barton’s perspective on the importance of spiritual disciplines, particularly solitude and silence, in fostering self-awareness and a deeper connection with God, and Witmer’s argument that effective shepherding requires pastors to prioritize their own spiritual nourishment in order to effectively care for their congregations.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 54.

<sup>270</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 115; Witmer, 23.

The majority of pastors in the study reported that their emotional health was closely linked to their ability to maintain rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and solitude. John, for instance, described his daily practice: “I am an early riser, and the first thing I do each day is go to a coffee shop. . . . The first thing I’ll do, typically, is journal. . . . Every day, I spend time in God’s Word—reading, meditating, and thinking about it.” This echoes the practices of biblical figures like Jesus, who often withdrew to quiet places to pray before engaging in demanding ministry; Moses, who sought God’s guidance in the wilderness before leading the Israelites, and Paul, who spent time in Arabia after his conversion, likely in prayer and reflection, before beginning his public ministry.<sup>271</sup> These times of withdrawal and communion with God were not merely spiritual exercises, but also crucial for maintaining their emotional equilibrium, providing clarity, and fostering resilience in the face of overwhelming challenges. Howard affirmed this, stating, “I’m 100 percent committed to the daily prayer practice, morning and evening prayers. . . . It’s all about abiding in Jesus, that’s the sustenance.”

Additionally, findings from Chapter 4 demonstrate the necessity of professional counseling and mentorship for sustaining emotional health in pastoral ministry. This is consistent with Scazzero, who highlights that emotionally unhealthy leaders are often disconnected from their own inner struggles and relational wounds, leading to burnout and relational dysfunction. Scazzero argues that counseling provides a safe space for leaders to explore these hidden wounds, develop self-awareness, and learn healthier coping mechanisms.<sup>272</sup> Several pastors in the study who engaged in consistent counseling

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<sup>271</sup> Luke 5:16; Exodus 3:1–6; Galatians 1:17.

<sup>272</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 38.

reported that it provided them with the necessary insight and support to navigate the emotional burdens of ministry, specifically mentioning benefits such as gaining clarity on personal triggers, developing healthier boundaries, and processing grief and loss. Carter, for example, emphasized the ongoing need for counseling, stating plainly, “You need a coach, you need community, and you need counseling.” For many, counseling provides a structured environment for engaging in story work, allowing them to revisit and reframe past experiences that continue to impact their present emotional health.

Furthermore, research from Chapter 4 indicates that accountability groups, pastoral cohorts, and close friendships play a significant role in sustaining emotional health, particularly by providing a space for vulnerability, mutual support, and shared experience. This reflects Steinke’s work on emotional systems, which emphasizes the importance of self-differentiation and healthy emotional regulation within relationships, and Saccone’s argument that relational intelligence, the ability to build authentic and empathetic connections, is essential for long-term leadership effectiveness.<sup>273</sup>

Pastors in the study described how peer groups helped them process emotional burdens, such as navigating conflict within the church, dealing with personal criticism, and managing the stress of leadership transitions. Greg shared the value of feeling “enjoyed” in his friendships, stating, “Just being with people and feeling enjoyed. That was so much the lie in my head—that I’m needed but not enjoyed. And so, having friendships where I just feel enjoyed, the experience of it does more than anything for me.” This observation highlights the practical implications of Lencioni’s work on team trust, which asserts that leaders who cultivate authentic relational networks develop

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<sup>273</sup> Steinke, 12; Saccone, 89.

greater emotional resilience and sustainability in leadership. Lencioni emphasizes that vulnerability-based trust, where individuals feel safe to share their weaknesses and struggles, is the foundation for strong, cohesive teams.<sup>274</sup> The pastors' experiences in their peer groups, where they could openly share their challenges and receive support without judgment, directly reflect this principle. Howard expressed this powerfully, stating, "I would either be dead or out of ministry or divorced without those guys. . . . We really share our lives together."

Building upon this foundation of self-care and relational support, sustaining emotional health in pastoral leadership requires a holistic approach encompassing intentional relational support, structured self-care practices, and engagement with counseling and spiritual direction. These practices not only contribute to personal resilience but also model a sustainable approach to leadership that can be passed on to elders and congregational members alike, creating a ripple effect of emotional well-being throughout the church community.

### **Challenges in Cultivating Emotional Health in Elders**

The resistance pastors encountered when introducing emotional health concepts to their elders reflects the broader literature on the cultural stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability, particularly within church leadership contexts. Friedman argues that many church cultures implicitly prioritize a model of leadership that emphasizes strength, control, and stoicism, often viewing emotional expression as a sign of weakness or

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<sup>274</sup> Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 195.

instability.<sup>275</sup> This expectation for leaders to project an image of unwavering strength was a significant challenge highlighted by pastors in this study. For example, Daniel shared a telling experience from early in his ministry, where a superior dismissed his emotional needs with the blunt statement: “If Daniel needs a hug, then he’s not the guy for this job.” This reflects a deeply ingrained cultural bias against emotional expression in leadership.

Steinke further supports the observation that churches often operate as anxious emotional systems where leaders and those in positions of power feel pressure to maintain a facade of control, noting that many church leaders avoid engaging in emotional work due to discomfort with vulnerability and a fear of appearing weak or incompetent.<sup>276</sup> This theme was clearly reflected in the interview data, where pastors described elders who equated emotional health discussions with unnecessary introspection or even weakness. As Steve noted, “I immediately remember some of the resistance related to talking about emotions. . . . ‘It’s not biblical, or that’s just psychobabble.’” This resistance underscores the importance of pastors being aware of these ingrained cultural attitudes and approaching the cultivation of emotional health with sensitivity and intentionality.

Pastors in this study described how ministry expectations often prioritize performance and efficiency over emotional and spiritual well-being, with several pastors noting that their churches implicitly valued outward activity and visible results more than the inner health of their leaders. This echoes Palmer’s struggle to engage, stating, “I didn’t know how to engage well with people. . . . I just had trouble connecting with

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<sup>275</sup> Friedman, 271.

<sup>276</sup> Steinke, 61.

people.” This challenge is consistent with Heifetz and Linsky’s work on adaptive leadership, which highlights the constant pressure leaders face to deliver immediate results, often at the expense of long-term sustainability and personal well-being.<sup>277</sup> These pressures, such as the demands of constant availability, the expectation to solve every problem, and the emphasis on numerical growth, often leave little room for reflection and personal growth. As a pastor, I have observed this same dynamic in many church contexts—a relentless focus on “doing” ministry that often overshadows the crucial need for simply “being” present with God and with oneself. This imbalance can lead to a culture where emotional and spiritual health are unintentionally sidelined, impacting not only pastors but also elders and the wider congregation.

The findings demonstrate that many elders resist engaging in emotional health work because of the relentless demands of ministry, including the time commitment of meetings, the pressure to serve in various capacities, and the emotional toll of caring for others. John summarized this challenge succinctly: “The challenge is that these are people who are busy, they are high performers, they’re very productive. They accomplish things. And with that comes sort of the illusion that life is under their control.” This confirms Scazzero’s assertion that emotionally unhealthy leaders often operate from a place of exhaustion and avoidance rather than deep self-awareness and relational intelligence. Scazzero argues that this pattern leads to burnout, strained relationships, and a diminished capacity for effective leadership.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 54.

<sup>278</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 38.

Furthermore, Goleman's framework provides insight into why elders may initially struggle with embracing emotional health. His model identifies self-awareness and emotional regulation as critical for effective leadership, yet a majority of pastors reported that their elders lacked these skills due to a historical lack of training and prioritization in their leadership formation.<sup>279</sup> This lack of foundational skills often manifests as a discomfort with vulnerability, a difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, and a tendency to prioritize external tasks over internal reflection. This, in turn, contributes to the resistance encountered when pastors introduce emotional health concepts, as elders may not see the immediate relevance or value of this work. This finds strong support in Saccone's research, which emphasizes that emotional intelligence is often overlooked in leadership development, leading to resistance when these topics are introduced later in life. Saccone argues that this neglect results in leaders who are ill-equipped to navigate the complex emotional dynamics of relationships and teams, ultimately hindering their effectiveness.<sup>280</sup>

Another key challenge pastors identified was the theological misconception that emotional health is separate from, or even antithetical to, spiritual maturity. Thune directly challenges this view, arguing that gospel-centered eldership inherently involves leading with empathy, compassion, and self-awareness.<sup>281</sup> Witmer similarly emphasizes that true shepherding requires attending to the whole person—both their emotional and

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<sup>279</sup> Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 43.

<sup>280</sup> Saccone, 89.

<sup>281</sup> Thune, 4.

spiritual well-being.<sup>282</sup> However, many elders have been shaped by theological frameworks that prioritize doctrinal knowledge and outward behavior over relational and emotional formation. These frameworks often overemphasize intellectual assent to theological propositions, without a corresponding emphasis on the fruit of the Spirit, which includes emotional qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>283</sup> This created a tension, evident in the pastors' interviews. Elders often struggled to integrate emotional self-awareness with their understanding of spiritual growth. Daniel expressed this frustration: "It's actually been frustrating. . . I can't seem to get it as a part of our culture." This highlights the difficulty of shifting deeply ingrained theological perspectives.

Ultimately, the challenges in cultivating emotional health in elders are deeply rooted in cultural expectations, leadership habits, and theological misconceptions. However, as the literature and research findings suggest, these challenges are not insurmountable. By addressing these barriers through intentional leadership development that prioritizes emotional intelligence training, relational trust-building characterized by vulnerability and open communication, and theological integration of emotional health that emphasizes the holistic nature of spiritual maturity, pastors can create healthier and more effective elder teams. Overcoming these challenges is not merely a matter of improving team dynamics; it is essential for fulfilling the biblical call to shepherd the flock with compassion, wisdom, and genuine care, while also creating space for elders to personally experience the transformative power of the gospel, resting more securely in

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<sup>282</sup> Witmer, 23.

<sup>283</sup> Galatians 5:22–23.

the grace they've received as sons of God and finding deeper joy and freedom in their relationship with Him.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this study, combined with the insights from the literature review, suggest several concrete recommendations for pastors seeking to cultivate emotional health in their elders. These recommendations are not isolated strategies, but rather interconnected elements of a holistic approach. Cultivating emotional health requires attention to individual practices, group dynamics within the eldership team, and the overall culture of the church. Therefore, the following recommendations are organized into three categories: (1) Individual Practices for Pastors, focusing on the pastor's personal role in modeling and prioritizing emotional health; (2) Practices for Elders, addressing the specific strategies for fostering emotional well-being within the eldership team; and (3) Systemic/Church-Wide Practices, outlining the broader cultural changes needed to create a supportive environment for emotional health.

#### **Individual Practices for Pastors**

Pastors play a crucial role in setting the tone for emotional health within the church. Their own practices and attitudes significantly influence the elders they lead, and ultimately, the entire congregation. Therefore, the following recommendations focus on what pastors can do personally to model and promote emotional well-being. This emphasis on the pastor's personal emotional health is not merely a matter of individual well-being; it's a matter of congregational health. As Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie

assert, “One of the most important outcomes of pastors working on their emotional intelligence is the impact it can have on their congregations. When the leaders of a church have low EQ, it affects the entire church.”<sup>284</sup>

### **Model Emotional Health and Vulnerability**

A foundational recommendation for cultivating emotional health in elders is for pastors to actively model emotional health and vulnerability in their own lives. To foster this culture of trust, a shared understanding of vulnerability is essential. For the purposes of this discussion, vulnerability can be understood as the courageous sharing of one's authentic self – including emotions, struggles, and limitations – with trusted others, in an appropriate way. This openness is intentional, not self-protective, and carries inherent risk, but it is essential for building genuine connection and fostering growth. In this context, emotional health encompasses the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions, build healthy relationships, and engage in appropriate vulnerability, as defined earlier.

This practice is rooted in the understanding that leaders set the tone for the entire organizational culture. The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 consistently highlighted the transformative impact of their own vulnerability on their elders, creating a permission structure for others to engage in their own emotional health journeys. As Steve put it, “There needs to be a level of transparency and vulnerability. People have to see you as an emotional creature—that’s part of your story. If they’re going to deal with their emotions

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<sup>284</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 126.

in transparent and vulnerable ways, you have to model the way.” This statement captures the essence of this recommendation: modeling is not optional, but essential.

Modeling emotional health and vulnerability is not about indiscriminate oversharing or using the eldership team as a personal therapy group. Rather, it’s about strategically choosing moments to share personal experiences, both past and present, that illustrate key principles of emotional health, demonstrate vulnerability, and normalize the challenges of life and ministry. Experience shows that when pastors share their own struggles with anxiety, worry, or fear (in an appropriate and measured way), it often has a dual benefit: the pastor receives support, and the elders feel more comfortable sharing their own anxieties and seeking help.

In a sermon, a pastor might (with appropriate discretion) share a past struggle with anxiety or doubt, illustrating how they learned to rely on God's grace in that situation, and connecting that struggle to a broader biblical understanding of human emotions. This combination of personal vulnerability and theological teaching can be a powerful way to normalize emotional struggles and challenge unbiblical views of emotional health. While Steve initially faced resistance to these ideas, with some dismissing them as “not biblical, or that’s just psychobabble,” he found that by consistently modeling this transparency and teaching a “Christian anthropology,” he could begin to shift the culture of his church.

In a one-on-one conversation with an elder, a pastor might share a personal challenge they're facing, modeling vulnerability and inviting reciprocal sharing. This might involve acknowledging a period of burnout, as Daniel did when he realized he had

“absolutely nothing in the tank,” or sharing about the ongoing benefits of seeking professional help, as Daniel found through counseling.

This openness extends to acknowledging mistakes and limitations. A pastor who makes a poor decision should be willing to admit it and apologize. If a pastor doesn’t know the answer to a question, they should be comfortable saying so and committing to finding the answer. If feeling overwhelmed or burned out, the pastor should share this with the elders and ask for support, demonstrating that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. These seemingly small acts of humility—admitting, “I don’t know” or “I need help”—can have a profound impact on the leadership team, fostering trust, encouraging vulnerability, and creating a more supportive environment.

Furthermore, pastors should be open about their own commitment to seeking counseling or spiritual direction, destigmatizing these practices and encouraging elders to seek similar support. Simply mentioning, “I’ve been working with a counselor on this issue,” or “My spiritual director helped me see this situation in a new light,” can have a powerful normalizing effect. Several pastors in the study, including John, emphasized the importance of seeking professional help, both for personal well-being and for modeling healthy practices for their elders. John, drawing on his own background in counseling, made it a point to openly discuss his own experiences with therapy, creating a culture where seeking help was seen as a strength.

This modeling also extends to prioritizing personal self-care. Pastors should actively cultivate their own physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and they should communicate the importance of these practices to their elders. This includes establishing clear boundaries around work hours, email communication, and availability; taking

regular time off for vacation, Sabbath days, and other opportunities for rest and renewal; engaging in consistent spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Scripture reading, and solitude; pursuing hobbies and interests outside of ministry; and prioritizing their marriage and family. Greg emphasized the importance of open communication about these practices, noting that he regularly shares with his elders what he's doing to care for his own soul and why it matters. This transparency normalizes the need for self-care and encourages the elders to be proactive about their own well-being.

When pastors openly acknowledge the challenges of ministry, including the potential for burnout and diminished capacity, it creates a more realistic and relatable leadership model. Sharing the importance of self-care practices, not as a list of “shoulds,” but as vital components of a sustainable and fruitful life in ministry, encourages elders to prioritize their own well-being. However, deeply ingrained cultural expectations within many churches, often reinforced by a subtle (or not-so-subtle) sense of shame around admitting limitations, can make this openness difficult. As DeGroat explores in both *Wholeheartedness* and *Healing What's Within*, this shame often arises from unrealistic expectations and a fear of vulnerability, leading to unhealthy coping mechanisms and a disconnection from one's true self.<sup>285</sup> This pressure is exemplified not only by Howard's conclusion that “very few people can be a senior pastor and stay healthy, [given] the expectations of the church,” but also by Carter's decision to take on a demanding church planting role even when he knew he needed personal healing. To support this ongoing self-awareness and emotional regulation, pastors should cultivate a habit of regular self-reflection, examining their own emotional responses, motivations,

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<sup>285</sup> DeGroat, *Healing What's Within*, 36; DeGroat, *Wholeheartedness*, 16.

and patterns of behavior. This can be done through journaling, prayer, solitude, or utilizing self-assessment tools like the Enneagram.

Finally, pastors must learn to practice emotional regulation, managing their emotions in a healthy and mature manner, acknowledging and expressing them appropriately rather than suppressing them or allowing them to control their behavior. For example, if a disagreement arises, a pastor might say, “I feel myself getting angry or triggered, and I don’t want to relate in an unhealthy way. Can we take a break so I can get my emotions under control so that we can have a productive and loving conversation?” Or, if feeling overwhelmed, a pastor can take a short break to pray or practice mindfulness. When pastors make it a practice to name their emotions, both to themselves and, when appropriate, to their elders, it provides a powerful model for others.

This practice of “naming,” as described by Ethan, one of the pastors interviewed, is a crucial component of emotional regulation. Ethan explained, “I think a big part of it is naming. Naming these things as a part of the culture of our church. . . . How we do ‘glad,’ ‘sad,’ ‘mad,’ and ‘afraid’ as a church.” By simply acknowledging and verbalizing their emotions, pastors can gain a greater sense of control and prevent those emotions from dictating their responses. This simple act of acknowledging, “I’m feeling frustrated” or “I’m feeling anxious,” helps to regulate responses and avoid reactive behavior. This consistent modeling of emotional health and vulnerability provides a powerful example for elders, encouraging them to prioritize their own well-being and creating a culture of greater openness and support within the church.

## **Both Develop and Teach a Theology of Suffering and Resilience**

A crucial step for pastors in cultivating emotional health among their elders is to actively develop and teach a robust theology of suffering and resilience. This is not about promoting a simplistic “suffering is always good” message, but about providing a biblical framework for understanding the purpose of suffering in the Christian life and for navigating adversity with faith and hope. This approach reframes hardship as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth, rather than an obstacle to ministry or a sign of God’s displeasure. Such a perspective reinforces Keller’s emphasis on suffering as an integral part of God’s plan for refinement and Vroegop’s advocacy for lament as a biblically-grounded way to process pain and maintain hope.<sup>286</sup>

The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 consistently highlighted the transformative role of suffering in their own emotional health journeys, underscoring the need for a theological framework that equips leaders to engage with hardship constructively. The pastors, overall, shared a common conviction that suffering was ultimately a painful mercy that God used to transform their lives. Carter, in particular, went through a painful and difficult season and summarized well what many pastors had to learn, “I was broken all the way to the floor. And I felt like a leper in exile.” This honest and raw emotion reflects the profound impact that suffering can have. A clear theology of suffering serves as a firm foundation that inoculates a person from the negative impact of a prosperity gospel mentality.

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<sup>286</sup> Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 83; Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, 104.

Pastors can begin this process by engaging in personal study and reflection on biblical examples of suffering. Examining the suffering that took place in the lives of figures like Jesus, Job, Ruth, Paul, David, and Joseph provides a rich tapestry of experiences that illustrate the diverse ways in which God works through suffering. From this study, pastors should articulate their own understanding of suffering in a written statement of faith. This statement is not merely an academic exercise, but a personal wrestling with profound theological questions, such as: the origin and purpose of suffering, the relationship between God's sovereignty and human pain, the role of lament in the Christian life, and how to best care for another brother or sister that is in a season of suffering. This personal statement then becomes a foundation for sharing their understanding with the elders, providing a model for them to develop their own theological frameworks.

Beyond personal reflection, pastors must actively teach this theology of suffering to their elders and the wider congregation. This can be accomplished through regular preaching and teaching that incorporates biblical passages on suffering, and by integrating the theme of suffering into sermons on other topics, demonstrating its relevance to all aspects of the Christian life. For instance, a sermon series on the book of Job could provide a powerful opportunity to explore the complexities of unexplained suffering while a series on the life of Paul could highlight the role of suffering in spiritual growth and ministry. Pastors should also take every opportunity to address common misconceptions about suffering, such as the belief that it is always a direct result of sin or a sign of God's disfavor. Offering classes or small groups specifically focused on the theology of suffering can provide a more in-depth exploration of these complex issues.

Furthermore, pastors can introduce the practice of lament, teaching elders about its biblical roots and providing opportunities for them to express their grief, pain, and doubts to God in a healthy and constructive way. This might involve incorporating lament Psalms into worship services, leading guided lament exercises, or providing resources on lament, such as Vroegop's *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*.

Crucially, fostering a culture of vulnerability within the eldership team creates a safe space for elders to share their personal struggles and receive support. This, combined with training on trauma-informed ministry, equips elders to respond with sensitivity and compassion to the suffering of others, both within the church and in their own lives. By proactively addressing the theological and practical dimensions of suffering, pastors can equip their elders to navigate hardship with greater resilience, faith, and emotional health. This proactive approach is not simply about preparing elders for future suffering, but about creating a present reality where suffering is acknowledged, understood, and integrated into the life of faith, fostering a deeper dependence on God and a more authentic expression of a grace-centered community.

### **Prioritize Personal Emotional Health Practices**

Pastors cannot effectively lead others toward emotional health if they are neglecting their own well-being. The demanding nature of ministry, coupled with the inherent pressures of leadership, can easily lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and relational difficulties unless pastors intentionally cultivate their own emotional and spiritual lives. This is not an act of self-indulgence, but a recognition that emotional health is essential for sustainable and fruitful ministry, a point strongly emphasized

throughout the literature. The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 consistently reported that their ability to lead with empathy, wisdom, and resilience was directly linked to their commitment to personal emotional health practices.

While modeling emotional health involves sharing these practices, prioritizing personal well-being is, at its core, about sustaining the leader for long-term ministry. A foundational practice for pastors is engaging in regular counseling or spiritual direction. As every single pastor in this study emphasized, seeking help is essential. It is a vital form of self-care that should be normalized and prioritized, not viewed as a sign of weakness.

Beyond professional support, cultivating close friendships outside the church leadership context is crucial. These relationships offer a sense of belonging and connection, opportunities for vulnerability and honest sharing, and a different perspective on life and ministry, free from the pressures of leadership expectations. Several pastors in the study highlighted the importance of having friends who “weren’t impressed” with their pastoral role, friends with whom they could simply be themselves.

Furthermore, establishing and maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal life is essential for preventing burnout and protecting personal well-being. This involves setting specific work hours, taking regular days off and utilizing vacation time, establishing clear communication protocols, learning to say “no” to commitments that would overextend them, and delegating tasks and responsibilities when appropriate. Creating a physical space between work and home, even if it’s just a designated corner of a room, can also help to reinforce these boundaries. John, for example, shared how

learning to say “no” was a critical turning point in his ministry, allowing him to set healthier boundaries and prioritize his marriage and family.

The consistent practice of spiritual disciplines is not merely a religious duty, but a vital means of nurturing the soul and maintaining a vital connection with God. These disciplines provide a foundation for emotional resilience and spiritual strength. Pastors should prioritize practices such as solitude and silence (creating space for quiet reflection and prayer), engaging in honest and vulnerable prayer with God, regularly immersing themselves in Scripture, practicing mindfulness and meditation, journaling their thoughts and feelings, and participating in corporate worship. For the pastors interviewed, these were not optional extras, but life-giving practices, serving as a crucial anchor amidst the turbulent waters of ministry life.

Finally, pursuing hobbies and interests outside of ministry is crucial for maintaining a healthy perspective and preventing emotional exhaustion. Engaging in activities that bring joy, relaxation, and replenishment—whether it’s physical exercise, creative pursuits, spending time in nature, reading for pleasure, or learning a new skill—provides a much-needed counterbalance to the demands of ministry. Several pastors emphasized how important a simple hobby or time with close friends made a huge difference in their lives. By prioritizing these personal emotional health practices, pastors not only safeguard their own well-being but also model a sustainable and holistic approach to leadership for their elders and the entire congregation.

## **Practices for Elders**

Cultivating emotional health in elders requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing individual practices, group dynamics, and systemic change. This involves creating systems and structures that prioritize emotional well-being, provide opportunities for growth, and build a culture of trust and vulnerability.

### **Integrate Emotional Intelligence into Leadership Selection, Development, and Evaluation**

To effectively cultivate emotional health within the eldership, churches must move beyond simply encouraging individual practices and implement strategies that foster emotional intelligence at the group level. This begins with integrating emotional intelligence into the entire lifecycle of eldership, from selection to ongoing development and evaluation.

The selection process provides a crucial opportunity to assess a candidate's emotional maturity. Rather than solely focusing on theological knowledge or ministry experience, churches should revise their nomination and interview processes to include specific questions that probe emotional health. For example, asking candidates to describe how they handle conflict, how they receive feedback, what their practices are for managing stress, and how they understand their own emotional triggers can provide valuable insights. In this process, it is important to hear stories of specific, recent examples, not generalized, vague, high-level answers. It is also beneficial to seek input from the candidate's spouse and close friends and, if possible, those they have led in previous ministry settings, regarding their emotional health and relational skills.

Beyond selection, emotional health training should be incorporated into ongoing officer development. The focus here is not a one-time learning event, but a continuous process of growing more emotionally healthy.<sup>287</sup> Churches can offer workshops, seminars, book studies, or retreats specifically focused on developing emotional intelligence skills, covering topics such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, social skills, conflict resolution, and stress management. For instance, a church might offer a series of workshops led by a qualified counselor, focusing on practical skills like active listening, non-violent communication, and understanding personality differences (using tools like the Enneagram, with proper training and caution). Another church might choose to incorporate a book study on emotional health into their regular elder meetings. Inviting qualified counselors or therapists to lead these training sessions is another option that can provide valuable expertise and guidance.

Furthermore, emotional health should be explicitly addressed in the evaluation process for elders. Churches can develop clear benchmarks for emotional health that are behavioral and observable, such as demonstrating active listening skills, responding non-defensively to feedback, handling conflict constructively, and expressing empathy. These benchmarks can be incorporated into self-assessments, peer reviews, and 360-degree feedback mechanisms, ensuring that emotional health is not just a theoretical ideal, but a practical expectation for leadership.

The goal is not to create a rigid checklist, but to foster a culture of ongoing growth and development, supported by tangible resources. It's crucial that this feedback

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<sup>287</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 213; Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership*, 268.

be delivered within a culture of grace and support, with the emphasis on growth and development, not punishment. Churches should, therefore, offer elders confidential access to counseling services, spiritual direction, or mentorship programs and budget for their continuing education in this area.

### **Foster a Culture of Vulnerability and Trust**

Creating a safe and supportive environment is essential for elders to engage in emotional health work. Without trust and vulnerability, elders are unlikely to share their struggles, seek help, or grow in their emotional intelligence. Lencioni identifies the absence of trust as the foundational dysfunction of teams, hindering their ability to achieve collective results.<sup>288</sup> Steinke emphasizes the importance of self-differentiation and healthy emotional regulation within relationships, arguing that leaders must be able to manage their own anxiety and maintain a non-anxious presence in order to foster healthy team dynamics.<sup>289</sup>

The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 consistently highlighted the importance of creating a space where elders felt safe to be honest about their struggles and receive support without judgment. This wasn't simply a theoretical concept; it was a lived reality in the churches where emotional health flourished. For example, Howard described how implementing emotional check-ins at the beginning of elder meetings, created a "sacred space" for vulnerability and emotional honesty.

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<sup>288</sup> Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 189.

<sup>289</sup> Steinke, 61.

One practical way to cultivate this culture is to incorporate emotional check-ins into elder meetings. This involves setting aside time at the beginning of each meeting for elders to briefly share how they are really doing, both personally and emotionally. Using a simple scale (e.g., 1–10) or a set of feeling words (e.g., tired, anxious, hopeful, frustrated, discouraged, grateful) can help elders identify and express their emotions.

Howard, again, provided a concrete example, explaining, “It’s really short, it doesn’t take a lot. . . . It’s just an invitation to be human as you walk into this place. It’s not a group therapy session. . . . It’s just creating this sacred space for emotional health . . . what usually happens is there is a prompt and someone will say, ‘I’m sad but I’m here,’ and the group will say, ‘Welcome,’ or, ‘Bless you.’” The key is to create a culture of non-judgmental listening, where elders feel safe to share without fear of criticism or reprisal. The leader of the check-in should model vulnerability by sharing their own emotional state honestly and appropriately. For larger groups of elders this example is scalable by breaking up into smaller groups of elders as well as keeping by keeping the check in to a one-word answer.

Beyond formal meetings, churches should create opportunities for elders to build deeper relationships and connect on a more personal level. This might involve planning regular elder retreats or off-site meetings, encouraging elders to meet one-on-one or in small groups outside of formal meetings, or facilitating activities or discussions that promote vulnerability and trust. Several pastors mentioned the importance of informal gatherings and shared meals in building camaraderie and trust among the elders. These seemingly simple acts of fellowship can create a foundation of connection that makes it easier to be vulnerable in more formal settings.

Furthermore, open and honest communication should be encouraged and modeled within the eldership team. This involves establishing clear expectations for communication, emphasizing the importance of honesty, respect, and empathy. Elders should feel safe to disagree, express concerns, and offer constructive feedback. Conflict should be addressed promptly and constructively, using healthy communication skills. The pastor and other key leaders play a crucial role in modeling this vulnerability by sharing their own struggles, admitting mistakes, and seeking feedback, setting the example for the entire team. By consistently demonstrating this openness, pastors create a “permission structure” for elders to do the same, gradually dismantling the cultural barriers to emotional expression.

## **Provide Opportunities and Encourage Participation for Ongoing Training and Development**

Churches should actively equip elders with the resources and skills they need to prioritize emotional health, recognizing that leadership, including emotional health, is a learned skill, not an innate talent.<sup>290</sup> The biblical call to equip the saints for the work of ministry extends to the realm of emotional and relational health.<sup>291</sup> By intentionally equipping elders to be emotionally and relationally healthy, churches are, in essence, equipping them to serve and shepherd the congregation more effectively, fostering a culture of grace, compassion, and mutual support.

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<sup>290</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 68.

<sup>291</sup> Ephesians 4:11–12.

The findings from Chapter 4 demonstrated that structured training and ongoing development were key factors in cultivating emotional health among elders. Pastors emphasized the value of equipping elders with practical tools and resources for emotional growth, although the specific approaches varied. This ranged from bringing in outside experts to lead workshops to incorporating emotional health topics into existing leadership development programs.

This ongoing development can take various forms, all designed to equip elders with practical tools and resources for emotional growth. Churches might offer workshops or seminars facilitated by experts in counseling, emotional intelligence, story work, boundaries, or communication. These workshops should not be viewed as “one-off” events, but as part of a sustained commitment to emotional health. For example, a church might offer a series of workshops over several months, covering topics such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution. They might also organize retreats focused on emotional and spiritual renewal for the elders, providing dedicated time and space for reflection, connection, and personal growth. Providing access to a curated library of resources, including books, articles, podcasts, and websites related to emotional health, can also support elders in their personal growth.

Crucially, churches should actively encourage and support elders in seeking professional counseling. This involves more than simply suggesting counseling as an option; it requires creating a culture where seeking help is normalized, destigmatized, and even expected. One tangible way to demonstrate this commitment is to include a line item in the church’s shepherding budget specifically for elder counseling. This financial assistance removes a significant barrier for many elders and sends a clear message that

the church values their emotional well-being. Pastors should also provide referrals to trusted, theologically sound counselors in the community.

By implementing these recommendations, churches can create a comprehensive and intentional approach to cultivating emotional health within their elders, moving beyond simply encouraging individual practices to creating a culture that prioritizes and supports emotional well-being at the group level. This, in turn, will contribute to greater leadership effectiveness, stronger team dynamics, and a more resilient and thriving church community.

### **Systemic and Church-Wide Practices**

Cultivating emotional health in elders is not solely the responsibility of individual pastors or the Session; it requires a systemic approach that permeates the entire church culture. This is analogous to the “process” emphasized by championship-winning football coach Nick Saban, where consistent attention to detail and a commitment to fundamental principles, even seemingly small ones, ultimately create a culture of excellence.<sup>292</sup> Just as Saban’s “process” involves every aspect of the team, from practice routines to player nutrition, fostering emotional health requires a church-wide commitment to creating a supportive and healthy environment. Creating a church-wide environment that supports emotional well-being involves intentional efforts in preaching and teaching, cultural values, and leadership structures.

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<sup>292</sup> Saban, *How Good Do You Want to Be?*, 33.

## **Preach and Teach on the Importance of Emotional Health**

The church's teaching ministry plays a crucial role in shaping the congregation's understanding of emotional health and its relationship to spiritual maturity. By explicitly addressing this topic from the pulpit and in other teaching contexts, pastors can destigmatize emotional vulnerability, challenge unhealthy cultural norms, and create a more supportive environment for emotional growth. This intentionality supports Scazzero's emphasis on integrating emotional health into the discipleship process, arguing that it is impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.<sup>293</sup>

The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 noted that a lack of understanding and acceptance of emotional health within the broader church culture often hindered their efforts to cultivate it among elders. This resistance often stemmed from a belief that focusing on emotions was somehow “unspiritual” or a distraction from more important theological matters. Steve, for example, encountered this directly when he began discussing emotional health with his church leadership. He recalled, “I immediately remember some of the resistance related to talking about emotions. . . . ‘It’s not biblical, or that’s just psychobabble.’” As Steve explained, this resistance was often rooted in fear and a lack of integration: “We’re comfortable with theological language, but emotional health introduces a different vocabulary that we haven’t done the integration work to understand how it aligns with the Bible.” By proactively addressing emotional health

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<sup>293</sup> Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 19.

from the pulpit, pastors can directly counter these misconceptions and demonstrate the biblical basis for emotional well-being.

Therefore, pastors should regularly incorporate sermons and teaching series that explore biblical perspectives on emotions, relationships, and mental health. This might involve preaching on passages that address suffering, lament, and the emotional life of Jesus, demonstrating that emotional expression is not only permissible but a vital part of the human experience, even for the Son of God. Pastors can develop series on topics such as “The Biblical Basis for Emotional Health.”

It’s also important to address the cultural stigma surrounding vulnerability and emotions, explicitly challenging the misconception that seeking help, particularly through counseling, is a sign of weakness, especially for men. This requires a direct and intentional effort to reframe emotional struggles not as failures but as opportunities for growth and deeper reliance on God’s grace. Pastors can use the pulpit to normalize seeking help.

Beyond the sermon, pastors can invite members of the congregation to share their stories during worship services or other church gatherings, creating a powerful platform for modeling emotional health. These testimonies should not focus solely on victories or neatly resolved issues, but rather on the process of navigating emotional and spiritual challenges. This might involve sharing about ongoing struggles with anxiety, experiences of grief and loss, journeys through counseling, or lessons learned from past failures. The emphasis should be on authenticity, vulnerability, and dependence on God’s grace, not on presenting a perfect image. This could involve sharing insights gained through personal story work, describing how past struggles have shaped their understanding of God’s

grace or highlighting the ongoing nature of emotional and spiritual growth. These stories serve as powerful models for the congregation, demonstrating how to engage with difficult emotions, seek support, and grow in faith amidst adversity. They also contribute to the overall culture of the church being one of emotional honesty and safety.

Pastors can model vulnerability by sharing their own struggles (appropriately and discerningly) and promoting a message of grace and acceptance, emphasizing that everyone struggles and needs support. This modeling might involve briefly mentioning their own experiences with counseling, suffering, or personal challenges, always being mindful of appropriate boundaries and the purpose of the message.

In addition to preaching and teaching, churches can offer classes or small groups focused on key aspects of emotional health. These smaller, more interactive settings provide a safe space for individuals to explore their own emotional lives, ask questions, and learn from one another. Topics could include processing personal narratives, navigating grief, resolving conflict biblically, and developing healthy emotional responses in various life situations.

Furthermore, churches should actively connect the emotional health conversation with existing ministries, both within the church and in the wider community. There is something powerful and humble about recognizing that other organizations may have expertise in certain areas, and partnering with them can expand the church's capacity to care for its members. This might involve referring individuals to trusted Christian counseling centers, promoting support groups for specific needs (e.g., grief recovery, addiction recovery), or collaborating with para-church organizations that specialize in emotional and mental health.

## **Create a Culture of Gentleness and Compassion**

A church culture characterized by gentleness and compassion creates a safe and inviting environment for individuals to explore their emotional lives and seek support, recognizing that emotional health is often a journey initiated by a kind and understanding invitation, rather than a mandate. This is in line with the biblical call to “bear one another’s burdens” and to “speak the truth in love.”<sup>294</sup> It also reflects the character of Christ, who is described as “gentle and lowly in heart.”<sup>295</sup>

This principle extends beyond the explicitly religious sphere. Dabo Swinney built his program on a foundation of love and genuine care for his players, demonstrating that a culture of compassion can be a powerful catalyst for both individual growth and collective success.<sup>296</sup> The pastors interviewed in Chapter 4 consistently stressed the importance of grace and the need for a non-anxious and inviting tone when it comes to emotional health. Nearly every pastor described how a gentle and kind invitation was the spark that ignited their own emotional health journey. This consistent emphasis on relational kindness, echoing Swinney’s approach, as opposed to a rigid emphasis on duty, highlights its crucial role in fostering a culture where individuals feel safe to be vulnerable.

To foster such a culture, churches should promote a message of God’s unconditional love and acceptance, even in the midst of our struggles and imperfections,

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<sup>294</sup> Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:15.

<sup>295</sup> Matthew 11:29.

<sup>296</sup> Anderson, *Dabo’s World*, 182.

challenging legalistic or judgmental attitudes that can create a climate of shame and fear. This involves teaching on the importance of forgiveness, both receiving it from God and extending it to others. Furthermore, churches should actively challenge perfectionistic tendencies and unrealistic expectations, encouraging a focus on grace-centered transformation, not perfection, in both spiritual and emotional growth. Promoting the idea that vulnerability and weakness are not liabilities, but opportunities for God's grace to be made manifest, is essential.

This culture of gentleness and compassion is built through fostering empathy and understanding among the congregation. Churches should encourage members to listen to one another with empathy, and provide training in active listening skills, kind and gracious communication, and conflict resolution. Leaders and volunteers should be equipped with the skills to recognize and respond to emotional distress in others, offering appropriate support and encouragement, and knowing how to refer individuals to professional help when needed. Pastors and other leaders must model gentleness and compassion in their interactions, and the preaching and teaching should reflect these values. This modeling should include not only what is said, but also how it is said, demonstrating that truth can be communicated with both conviction and kindness.

Furthermore, small group ministries should be leveraged as a key context for intentional story work. Small groups, by their nature, offer a more intimate and potentially safer space for vulnerability than larger church gatherings. Churches should train small group leaders in facilitating story sharing, emphasizing the importance of creating a non-judgmental, supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their experiences, both positive and negative. This might involve using specific

prompts or questions to guide the discussion, focusing on themes of redemption, resilience, and God’s faithfulness in the midst of suffering. The goal is not simply to share stories for the sake of sharing, but to foster deeper connection, mutual understanding, and spiritual growth within the community.

### **Establish Clear Boundaries and Expectations for Ministry Leaders**

Unclear expectations and a lack of boundaries can contribute significantly to burnout and emotional exhaustion among ministry leaders, including both pastors and elders.<sup>297</sup> The findings from Chapter 4 highlighted the challenges pastors faced in setting boundaries and managing the demands of ministry. Many pastors felt a constant pressure to be available to meet every need, and felt the weight from others, and themselves, of needing to “fix” people and situations. This pressure to be “always on” and to act as a “savior,” as Carter put it, can be incredibly draining. Carter came to learn, “I am not people’s savior. I can’t fix people. I can’t fix things I don’t have control over.” John’s experience highlights a crucial step in overcoming this challenge: learning to say “no.” He described this as a critical turning point in his ministry, allowing him to protect his time, prioritize his most important responsibilities, and ultimately, lead more effectively. This lack of clear boundaries led to feelings of overwhelm, resentment, and ultimately, diminished effectiveness.

To address this, churches must establish clear guidelines and expectations for all ministry leadership positions, not just the senior pastor. This requires developing

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<sup>297</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 54.

detailed job descriptions for pastoral staff and for elder positions, outlining specific responsibilities, expectations, time commitments, reporting structures, and decision-making authority. These descriptions should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain relevant and realistic, particularly as the church grows and changes.

Furthermore, churches should implement a sabbatical policy that provides pastors and elders with extended periods of rest and renewal. The sabbatical policy should be intentional and well planned, ensuring that pastors and elders get spiritual renewal and refreshment during times away from ministry leadership. Without such clear boundaries and opportunities for rest, even the most dedicated leaders are susceptible to the insidious creep of burnout, a reality that ultimately hinders the flourishing of both the individual and the church.

Beyond formal job descriptions, clear expectations regarding availability, communication, and responsiveness need to be established and communicated. For example, the church might establish a policy that emails will be responded to within 24 to 48 hours, or that leaders are not expected to be available on their designated day off, except in cases of genuine emergency. This also involves clearly defining the process for handling urgent requests and ensuring that there is a system in place for delegating tasks and responsibilities, rather than relying solely on the pastor or a small group of elders.

By implementing these systemic changes, churches can create a culture that supports emotional health, rather than undermining it. Clear boundaries and expectations, consistently applied and communicated, not only protect leaders from burnout but also foster a greater sense of transparency and shared responsibility within the church. This, in turn, creates a more sustainable environment for ministry, reduces the

risk of emotional exhaustion, and allows leaders to serve with greater effectiveness and joy.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to understand how pastors cultivate emotional health in their elders. Through a review of the relevant literature on biblical/theological perspectives, emotional intelligence, and leadership development, combined with qualitative interviews with eight experienced pastors, several key findings emerged. These findings highlight the transformative role of suffering in leadership development, the crucial importance of intentional practices for sustaining emotional well-being (both for pastors individually and for elders collectively), and the significant challenges pastors face in fostering a culture that supports emotional health within the church. The research underscores that emotional health is not merely a desirable trait for church leaders, but a necessity for effective ministry, healthy relationships, and long-term sustainability.

The experiences of the pastors interviewed, coupled with the insights from the literature, demonstrate that cultivating emotional health in elders requires a multifaceted and intentional approach. This includes pastors modeling emotional vulnerability and prioritizing their own well-being, integrating emotional intelligence into leadership selection, development, and evaluation processes, fostering a culture of gentleness and compassion within the eldership team, and providing ongoing training and support. Furthermore, it requires a church-wide commitment to preaching and teaching on the importance of emotional health, creating a safe and supportive environment for sharing struggles, and establishing clear boundaries and expectations for ministry leaders.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to a more holistic and sustainable model of church leadership. By prioritizing the emotional well-being of both pastors and elders, churches can create healthier and more vibrant communities that reflect the love and grace of Jesus. This is not simply about improving individual lives; it's about fostering a church culture that is better equipped to fulfill its mission in the world. When leaders are emotionally healthy, they are better able to shepherd their congregations with wisdom, empathy, and resilience, leading to greater spiritual growth and a more powerful witness to the transforming power of the gospel. This study both affirms previous research on the importance of emotional health in leadership and extends it by offering specific insights into the unique context of church leadership and the practical strategies pastors can use to cultivate emotional health in their elders.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

While this study provides valuable insights, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this critical area. This study focused on the cultivation of emotional health in elders from the perspective of pastors within the Reformed tradition, primarily within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for the church, and particularly for pastors and those involved in leadership development:

- **Longitudinal Impact:** Research examining the long-term impact of emotional health training programs on elder effectiveness, church health, and congregational

well-being. This could involve tracking specific metrics over time (e.g., conflict resolution rates, elder retention, member satisfaction, measures of spiritual growth) to assess the sustained effects of these interventions.

- **Denominational Differences:** A comparative study examining the differences in emotional health practices and outcomes between various denominational contexts. This research could explore how different theological traditions, governance structures, and cultural norms influence the cultivation of emotional health in leadership.
- **Elder Perspectives:** Qualitative research exploring the experiences of elders themselves (not just pastors) regarding emotional health. This could involve interviews or focus groups with elders from diverse backgrounds and ministry contexts, providing valuable insights into the challenges and benefits of cultivating emotional health in this specific role.
- **Specific Interventions:** Research investigating the effectiveness of particular interventions in promoting emotional health among pastors and elders. This could include studies on specific counseling approaches (e.g., Emotionally Focused Therapy, Internal Family Systems), spiritual direction models, mindfulness practices, or other relevant interventions.
- **Quantitative Measures:** While this study focused on qualitative data, future research could incorporate quantitative measures of emotional intelligence, burnout, and well-being to provide a more comprehensive assessment of emotional health in church leadership. This might involve using validated

instruments like the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i 2.0), the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), or the Flourishing Scale (FS).

- **Cultural Differences:** Research exploring how different cultural contexts (e.g., ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, geographic) influence emotional health and expectations for pastors and elders. This could involve examining how cultural norms around emotional expression, vulnerability, and leadership styles impact the cultivation of emotional health within different church communities. It could also explore culturally appropriate strategies for promoting emotional well-being in diverse contexts. For example, a study might investigate how emotional health is understood and addressed in Korean-American churches compared to African-American churches or predominantly white, suburban churches.

In conclusion, cultivating emotional health in church leadership is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is a journey that requires intentionality, vulnerability, a commitment to ongoing growth, and a reliance on God's grace. By embracing the principles and practices outlined in this study, pastors and churches can move toward a more holistic and sustainable model of ministry, one that reflects the gentle and lowly heart of Christ and fosters a thriving community of faith. The ultimate aim is not simply to manage emotions, but to create space for authentic discipleship, where both leaders and congregants can experience the fullness of life in Christ, marked by both joy and sorrow, strength and weakness, and a deepening capacity for love and service. This study both affirms previous research and extends it by offering specific insight into the role of a pastor to cultivate emotional health in elders.

As we strive to cultivate emotional health in ourselves and in our leaders, may we remember Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians, that we would be “strengthened with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith.”<sup>298</sup> It is in this divine power, and not in our own efforts, that we place our hope for the transformation of hearts—the hearts of pastors, elders, and entire church communities—for His glory and our good.

The journey toward emotional health in church leadership may be challenging, but it is a journey filled with hope. As the cultural narratives that equate strength with stoicism are challenged, and as churches embrace a more biblical understanding of emotional wholeness, we can anticipate a future where pastors and elders are free to lead with authenticity, vulnerability, and compassion. In contrast to the limiting expectations described in the introduction, where emotional expression was discouraged, perhaps—as Pat Conroy longed for—men’s faces will be “watered enough,” not with tears of despair, but with the tears of a heart fully alive in Christ.<sup>299</sup> And perhaps, the message of songs like Tim McGraw’s “Grown Men Don’t Cry” will become a relic of the past, replaced by a new anthem of emotional freedom and spiritual vitality within the church.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Ephesians 3:16–17.

<sup>299</sup> Conroy, *Beach Music*, 243.

<sup>300</sup> Paulson, “Story Behind the Song: Tim McGraw’s ‘Grown Men Don’t Cry.’”

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