

Working Without a Safety Net: Exploring Struggles and Dilemmas Faced by Greek Orthodox Married Clergy Through a Mental Health Lens, in the Australian Context

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Abstract : This paper presents one aspect of the larger Masters qualitative study exploring the roles of married Greek Orthodox clergy, the Priest and Presbytera, under the wing of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia. This ground breaking research necessitated the creation of primary data within a phenomenological paradigm drawing from lived experiences of the Priests and Presbyteres in contemporary society. As a Social Worker, a bilingual (Greek/English) Mental Health practitioner and a Presbytera, the questions constantly raised and pondered are: Who do the Priest and Presbytera turn to when they experience difficulties or problems? Where do they go for support? What is in place for their emotional and psychological health and well-being? Who cares for the spiritual carer? Who is there to catch our falling clergy and their wives? What is their 'safety net'? Identified phenomena of angst, stress, frustration and confusion experienced by the Priest and (by extension) the Presbytera, within their position, coupled with basic assumptions, perceptions and expectations about their roles, the role of the organisation (the Church), and their role as spouse often caused confusion and in some cases conflict. Unpacking this complex and multi-dimensional relationship highlighted not only the roller coaster of emotions, potentially affecting their physical and mental health, but also the impact on the interwoven relationships of marriage and ministry. The author considers these phenomena in the light of bilingual cultural and religious organisational practice frameworks, specifically the Greek Orthodox Church, whilst filtering these findings through a mental health lens. One could argue that it is an expectation that clergy (and by default their wives) take on the responsibility to be kind, nurturing and supportive to others. However, when it comes to taking care of self, they are not nearly as kind. This research looks at a recurrent theme throughout the interviews where all participants talked about limited support systems and poor self care strategies and the impact this has on their ministry, mental, emotional, and physical health and ultimately on their relationships with self and others. The struggle all participants encountered at some point in their ministry was physical, spiritual and psychological burn out. The overall aim of the researcher is to provide a voice for the Priest and the Presbytera painting a clearer picture of these roles and facilitating an awareness of struggles and dilemmas faced in their ministry. It is hoped these identified gaps in self care strategies and support systems will provide solid foundations for building a culturally sensitive, empathetic and effective support system framework, incorporating the spiritual and psychological well-being of the Priest and Presbytera, a 'safety net'. A supplementary aim is to inform and guide ministry practice frameworks for clergy, spouses, the church hierarchy and religious organisations on a local and global platform incorporating some sort of self-care system.

Keywords : care for the carer, mental health, Priest, Presbytera, religion, support system

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