



## Sustainable Leadership Through Soul Care: Internal Balance Management Strategies to Prevent Clergy Burnout

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**Abstract.** This article aims to analyze and formulate Soul Care as a leadership management strategy to address the crisis of extreme fatigue (burnout) among church leaders, in order to achieve Sustainable Leadership. The burnout phenomenon is reviewed as a crisis of self-management and morals resulting from a misinterpretation of Servant Leadership that demands unlimited sacrifice. This research uses a qualitative literature review method with a Practical Theology approach and interdisciplinary analysis (Theology, Psychology, Management). Findings indicate that Soul Care is not a choice, but a normative command rooted in Sabbath Theology (the command for rest as a divine instruction) and exemplified by Jesus Christ (withdrawing for prayer and rest). Soul Care is practically implemented through disciplined and holistic Self-Boundary Management, encompassing temporal, physical, and emotional dimensions, which serves as a preventive strategy against fatigue. The synthesis of these findings yields the Sustainable Leadership model, which emphasizes that a leader's inner balance and self-wholeness are mandatory foundations for Ethical Integrity and successful long-term ministry.

**Keywords** Soul Care, Extreme Fatigue, Sustainable Leadership, Management Strategy, Inner Balance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Burnout in Indonesian is referred to as extreme fatigue or chronic mental and emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress, particularly due to work pressure. This term can also be defined as a condition where an individual feels a lack of energy or interest in activities typically pursued, stemming from excessive stress and workload. Burnout is a state of exhaustion or frustration caused by the non-fulfillment of expected achievements when an individual starts their career, until they are depleted of self-resources and experience a state of exhaustion or frustration (Freudenberger, 1974). The meaning of burnout is a form of exhaustion that occurs when an individual must fulfill the calling to provide care and devotion to others, which involves emotional investment (Thomas & Michelle, 2000). Burnout can occur in any setting or profession when engaging in excessive activity that exceeds physical or mental capacity. It is not just the body that is drained of energy when working; the psyche or mental state also experiences frustration when forced to operate beyond its capability.

Based on KBBI (2016), the word layanan (service) means the matter or manner of serving. Thus, Church service refers to the matter of church ministry or the way the church serves the congregation. In the New Testament, many expressions are used to describe the Church. One word used to refer to the Church is “kuriakos,” meaning “belonging to or property of the Lord.” This explains that the church is an asset of the Kingdom of God, with God as its owner or supreme leader. Another term commonly used is “Ekklesia”—a term frequently employed by

Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. The literal meaning of this word is “to call out” (Gidion, 2017). Within the scope of ministry of the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa (GMIM), service means carrying out the unchanging mandate of Jesus Christ to renew, build, and unite the church; to proclaim the Gospel to all creatures; and to serve for justice, peace, and the integrity of God's creation (Tata Gereja GMIM). Those who perform church ministry are called Special Servants (Pelayan Khusus). Special Servants include Deacons, Elders, Religious Teachers, and Pastors (Tata Gereja GMIM). "Leadership in the church also requires sound and systematic management. The church consists of individuals with different opinions, backgrounds, and personalities. When integrated into an organization, organized organizational management is necessary. Church leaders are therefore demanded to possess these capabilities. Some Church leaders believe that professionalism is a corporate mentality and secular knowledge that should not be brought into the church institution, arguing that the early church did not recognize professionalism (Charles R. Swidoll, 2013). However, many historical realities show that the destruction of a church organization is also inseparable from weak leadership managerial skills. What is important in leadership is not just the technique of being a leader, but the spirit or soul of a leader, which aims to serve others towards improvement or development. In his book *Reflections On Leadership*, Spears highlights the distinguishing characteristics of Servant Leadership from other leadership models, stating that the difference in Servant Leadership lies in the desire to serve being present before the desire to lead. Subsequently, those who possess leadership qualities become leaders because that is the most effective way to serve (Donald Lantu, 2007). Nevertheless, long-term ministry success also requires nurtured soul balance and spirituality; without this foundation, a leader will easily fall into crisis.

The burnout crisis has been designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an occupational phenomenon (WHO, 2019) and poses a real threat to the sustainability of church leadership. Spiritual leaders, who face dual demands (pastoral, administrative, and social), experience work stress and extreme fatigue characterized by depersonalization and reduced efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Prasetijo Putri, 2024). This risk not only threatens the individual's health but also undermines sustainable leadership and the stability of the church organization (Setiabudi & Hidayati, 2024). The failure to manage these internal conditions indicates that soul care—defined as self-stewardship rooted in Sabbath spirituality—is often neglected as a prerequisite for integrated and long-lasting leadership. In fact, the principle of Soul Care is the main defense against burnout situations. Therefore, this article aims to examine, from a theological-pastoral perspective, how Soul Care can be formulated as the foundation for Sustainable Leadership, implemented as a leadership management strategy through the establishment of work boundaries, and yield a healthy and integrated leadership

model. This research is expected to strengthen the church's pastoral ministry by providing a theological and practical framework for addressing the complex reality of burnout."

## 2. METHODS

This article employs a theological-pastoral qualitative approach. This approach aims to deeply explore the normative (theological) and applicative (pastoral) understanding and meaning of Soul Care as a preventive solution to burnout within the context of church leadership. This research is a literature review, relying on reflective and narrative analysis from primary sources:

**Theological-Normative Sources:** A critical study of the principles of the Sabbath (rest), biblical teachings on self-stewardship, and pastoral theology to formulate the mandatory foundation for Soul Care.

**Scientific-Applicative Sources:** A review of pastoral psychology and management science literature to formulate strategies for implementing Soul Care in daily leadership practice, particularly concerning boundary setting. This method is expected to present a strong synthesis between faith concepts and practical application to generate a Sustainable Leadership Model..

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Soul Care as a Normative Foundation: Sabbath Theology and the Acknowledgment of Limitation

The phenomenon of burnout, mentioned in the Introduction as a leadership crisis, is a terminology first introduced by psychoanalyst Herbert J. Freudenberger in 1974 to describe the breakdown occurring among social service staff. Etymologically, burnout is defined as "extreme exhaustion" that occurs when an individual's physical, mental, and emotional energy resources are completely depleted (Freudemberger, 1974).

However, the most widely accepted contemporary study, especially in the context of management and psychology, defines burnout through three primary, interconnected dimensions, as proposed by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (1997):

- Emotional Exhaustion: A feeling of depleted inner energy and resources.
- Cynicism/Depersonalization: A negative, indifferent, or detached attitude towards work and others.
- Reduced Professional Efficacy: A negative self-assessment of performance and a feeling of inability to achieve accomplishment.

The burnout crisis is particularly acute among spiritual leaders due to extensive ministry demands and often boundless congregational expectations. This situation leads to a core

theological-pastoral issue: often, the root of burnout is not a lack of dedication, but a misinterpretation of the call to sacrifice, especially within the concept of Servant Leadership. The notion that a leader must constantly give without ever receiving or resting has become a misconception that systematically erodes the leader's healthy boundaries, and this must be critiqued before the principle of Soul Care can be established.

As mentioned in the Introduction regarding boundless sacrifice, such an understanding is generally common in ministry. A Servant, particularly a Pastor, is demanded to do everything. A Pastor must possess multitasking skills, especially when they hold additional organizational duties, such as Head of the Local Congregation Council (Ketua BPMJ). Regarding working hours, a servant leader is expected to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 30 days a month. In ministry experience, a Servant is expected to be able to address any complaint or question from the congregation. In the middle of the night, when a congregant requires an urgent service, the presence of the Servant is considered a normal duty. Neglecting such a duty would be seen as a professional shortcoming. Naturally, this understanding must be critiqued. The limitations of a Pastor, who is also a human being requiring quality time for their body and soul, cannot be underestimated. The quality of ministry is also determined by physical and psychological well-being. Physical fatigue can lead to medical illness. However, psychological exhaustion can also diminish the quality of service. This is referred to as limitation as a creature.

This limitation is acknowledged and instituted by God through the command of the Sabbath (Holy Rest). The concept of the Sabbath establishes rest as a divine command, not merely a personal preference. Recky Pengumbahas and Pieter Anggiat Napitupulu (2021), in their study on the theology of work, affirm that the Sabbath has a direct correlation with mental health. Everyone needs to observe the Sabbath as part of mental health recovery, where the Sabbath becomes a guide for the people to meet with God and withdraw from their busyness and work."

This statement indicates that the Sabbath functions as a mandatory directive for the servant to: 1) Renew mental health and, 2) Withdraw from busyness and work to meet with God. Consequently, Soul Care is no longer merely a psychological tool, but an act of theological obedience to God the Creator, acknowledging that He is the source of all energy and success. Through the Sabbath, the leader affirms that their self-worth is not determined by the quantity of ministry output, but by their status as a creature beloved by God. A leader who manages ministry is in vital need of rest to recover both physically and psychologically, but also as an act of obedience to the Owner of the Ministry.

### **Biblical Case Study: Elijah the Prophet and the Crisis of Exhaustion**

The need for Soul Care is dramatically illustrated in the story of the Prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4-8. After a great victory, Elijah instead fell into extreme exhaustion. He ran away, requested

death, and lay down, showing severe symptoms of emotional burnout. God's response to Elijah's crisis was a comprehensive act of Soul Care:

- **Prioritizing Rest:** The angel commanded Elijah to sleep (1 Kgs. 19:5), affirming physical rest as the first step toward recovery.
- **Provision of Physical Resources:** Elijah was served baked bread and water (1 Kgs. 19:6), teaching that healthy spirituality includes the fulfillment of basic physical needs.
- **Support for the Journey:** Elijah only resumed his journey after gaining strength from food and rest (1 Kgs. 19:8). Divine recovery always begins with healthy self-stewardship."

"This story serves as a strong biblical basis for the practice of self-stewardship. This theological foundation is reinforced by the promise in Psalm 23:3—"He restores my soul"—and Christ's invitation in Matthew 11:28—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." These verses demonstrate that restoration is an intrinsic part of God's plan, making it a theological practice that must be prioritized.

### **The Example of Christ**

This theological foundation is strengthened by the example of Jesus Christ Himself. Amidst intensive ministry and the demands of the crowds, Jesus consciously established boundaries for rest and recovery, which is the core of Soul Care practice:

Mark 6:31 records that after the disciples returned from their mission, Jesus said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." This command shows that rest is not merely an accidental pause but a strategic decision that must be proactively made by the leader, for the sake of restoring the physical and mental energy of the servants.

Luke 5:16 specifically records His personal practice: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." The act of withdrawing to a secluded place (retreat or withdrawal) for prayer indicates that Soul Care for Jesus was a spiritual priority for recharging His relationship with the Father, not merely an escape from duty.

## **2. Leadership Management Strategy: Implementing Soul Care Through Self-Boundaries**

The theological foundation outlined in the previous sub-chapter—that Soul Care is a command mandated by God through the Sabbath and exemplified by Christ—demands tangible manifestation in leadership management practice. This implementation is centered on Boundary Management, which is the leader's ability to establish and maintain healthy limits between the private realm, family, and the demands of ministry.

Boundaries function as a crucial guard for the leader's inner energy and resources. When

these boundaries are chronically blurred or neglected, extreme exhaustion becomes inevitable. Christian counselors and psychological experts Henry Cloud and John Townsend assert that the greatest failure in self-stewardship is the inability to set boundaries and firmly say "no" to excessive demands and to strictly schedule rest time (Cloud & Townsend, 1992, 15). This failure not only leads to exhaustion but also potentially damages the leader's wholeness. Theologian Cynthia Hess adds that genuine self-restoration requires leaders to reclaim their "voice" and their right to set boundaries, which is an act of non-violence toward the self and essential for restoring wholeness (Hess, 2009, 27).

**Holistic Boundary Management is applied in three main dimensions.**

First, Temporal Boundary is the most fundamental dimension. This actualizes the Sabbath command, where a leader must intentionally designate a weekly day off that is completely free from church affairs. A leader who imitates Jesus (Luke 5:16) must initiate time for withdrawal, ensuring consistent sleeping and eating times.

Second, Physical and Spatial Boundary, especially for leaders residing in the church complex (parsonage). Church ministry within the GMIM context, for instance, shows the narrow boundary between space and professional life. The parsonage, physically integrated with the church building, is often associated with ministry duties that are without limits—ready whenever needed. Separating the ministry space from the private space protects family privacy and intimacy, preventing 24-hour ministry interruptions.

Third, Emotional and Relational Boundary requires leaders to realize that they are not responsible for all the emotional needs of the congregation. The principle of delegation and seeking professional support (such as counselors or mentors) needs to be applied to process emotional difficulties, rather than internalizing them alone. There are specific talents that must be performed by different professionals. A leader, especially a pastor, cannot possibly do everything, as the congregation often assumes. For example, prayer for the sick does not mean medical attention is no longer needed. Cloud and Townsend refer to this as personal responsibility for emotional burden, where the leader must clearly define what is their responsibility and what belongs to others (Cloud & Townsend, 1992, 45).

In summary, Boundary Management is a practice of leadership ethics that channels energy wisely, not completely depleting it. The inner balance resulting from this disciplined self-stewardship is the unwavering foundation for achieving Sustainable Leadership. The church must dedicate special attention to programs like this. The understanding of self-boundaries should not be viewed as a loss simply because leaders' time is allocated for rest or vacation, for example. Instead, this understanding should be followed up with a clear program to systematically arrange opportunities for church servants to have quality time for physical, and certainly psychological, recovery, for the sake of this sustainable leadership.

Sustainable Leadership is a model that rejects the old assumption of Servant Leadership which demands limitless sacrifice (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Instead, this model focuses on the sustainability of the leader's internal resources—soul health, spirituality, and character—as the primary prerequisite for long-term ministry effectiveness. Sustainable Leadership does not focus solely on the quantity of output (activities, programs, membership numbers), but on the quality and wholeness of the serving leader's character.

### **Soul Care as the Foundation for Sustainability**

Within the Sustainable Leadership framework, Soul Care becomes the foundation of strategic management. Rest (Sabbath) is no longer viewed as a luxury or a permissible break, but as a divine command and a mandatory preventive strategy (Pengumbahas & Napitupulu, 2021). The implementation of Soul Care practices is realized through disciplined and holistic Boundary Management (Cloud & Townsend, 1992). When leaders consciously apply Temporal and Emotional Boundaries, they indirectly restore the wholeness that is often eroded by boundless demands (Hess, 2009). The inner balance resulting from this disciplined self-stewardship has two crucial impacts:

**Ministry Stability:** Leaders can serve from a place of fullness, not from a place of emptiness. This stability prevents the cycle of exhaustion and moral crisis that often affects unsustainable ministries.

**Ethical Integrity:** Emotional health (inner balance) is a direct prerequisite for Ethical Integrity. Leaders suffering from extreme exhaustion tend to be vulnerable to moral deviations, conflict, and poor decision-making. Conversely, leaders who regularly practice Soul Care, emulating Christ (Mark 6:31), possess a stable character, which is the unwavering foundation for true leadership ethics.

Sustainable Leadership is therefore defined as a leadership model rooted in Sabbath theology and implemented through boundary management to ensure that leaders can fulfill God's mission without sacrificing their calling to be whole and healthy human beings (Psalm 23:3). Thus, Soul Care is not merely an option, but the primary ethic of Sustainable Leadership.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The high incidence of extreme exhaustion (burnout) among church leaders is rooted in theological and managerial weaknesses that interpret Servant Leadership as a demand for boundless sacrifice. This crisis is evidence of a failure in self-stewardship, specifically the failure to acknowledge limitation as a creature. This research concludes that Soul Care is not a private option or a secondary pause, but a divine command strongly rooted in Sabbath Theology. This command to rest is exemplified by Christ, who consciously withdrew from the

crowds of ministry, and affirmed by God's restorative intervention toward the exhausted Prophet Elijah.

The practical implementation of Soul Care is realized through disciplined and comprehensive Self-Boundary Management, encompassing temporal, physical, and emotional dimensions. Failure to establish these boundaries has the potential to damage the leader's wholeness and precipitate chronic exhaustion. The synthesis of these findings yields a Sustainable Leadership Model. This model defines sustainability not based on the volume of ministry outcomes, but on the quality and inner stability of the leader. Disciplined and consistent Soul Care is the fundamental ethical prerequisite for Ethical Integrity and long-term ministry effectiveness. Thus, soul restoration is the primary ethic for any leader who wishes to serve God and His congregation enduringly and healthily.

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