

“It's not burnout”: Moral Injury as a Lens to Understand and Address

Church Decline in Europe and North America

Introduction

In 2021, the Slovak and Hungarian governments conducted their decennial national census. Church organizations in both countries anxiously awaited the release of the data, which included citizens' religious affiliations. Among them were the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia (ECAV) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary (ELCH)¹. The results showed significant declines.² From 2011 to 2021, the ECAV experienced a 9.3% decrease, and the ELCH experienced an 18% decrease in membership. Over the same period, each census also showed a sharp increase in those choosing no religious affiliation. Slovakia's percentage rose from 13.4% to 23.8%, and Hungary's 27.2% to 40.1%. Both Lutheran churches reported similar trends for individuals pursuing schooling to become clergy. From 2014 to 2014, the ECAV experienced a 47.7% decrease in seminary enrollment, and the ELCH reported a 38.9% decrease in seminary students enrolled in preparatory degree programs.³

Churches in Slovakia and Hungary often attribute these declining trends to the lingering effects of communism⁴, secularization⁵, or the rise of the “spiritual but not

¹ According to their respective censuses, the ECAV is 5.8% of all Slovak citizens and the ELCH is 1.8% of all Hungarian citizens. Both countries are predominantly Roman & Greek Catholic, with 59.8% in Slovakia and 29.2% in Hungary of all citizens, respectively.

² Overall, Christian affiliation across all institutional bodies decreased by 6.7% in Slovakia and 11.7% in Hungary between 2011 and 2021/22 censuses. See census data in Slovakia: [Population and housing census \(statistics.sk\)](https://statistics.sk) and Hungary: [Census database – Central Statistical Office \(ksh.hu\)](https://ksh.hu)

³ Eva Guldanová, Office of the General Bishop, ECAV, email to author, February 23, 2024 and Ádám Nagy, Office of the General Bishop, ELH, email to author, March 3, 2024.

⁴ Jonathan Luxmoore, “Eastern Europe 1996: A review of religious life in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland,” *The Keston Journal*, (1997).

⁵ Loek Halman and Erik van Ingan, “Secularization and Changing Moral Views: European Trends in Church Attendance and Views on Homosexuality, Divorce, Abortion, and Euthanasia,” *European Sociological Review* vol. 31, no. 5, (June 27, 2015), 616-627.

religious.”⁶ This “church decline” has left some feeling resigned and cynical. However, many continue looking for a cause, hoping to reverse it. Experiencing similar decreases,⁷ the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) now emphasizes layperson and clergy “burnout” as a cause for church decline due to stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization defines burnout as “a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” It is characterized by, but not limited to, feelings of exhaustion, cynicism or indifference to one’s job, and reduced professional effectiveness. While not explicitly calling it burnout, leadership in the ELH and ECAV have increased their attention to clergy and layperson mental health and stress that mirror those characterized as such. Thus, an emphasis on burnout would seem to be the correct response. However, considering these trends and a deeper reflection of people’s experiences with these church organizations raises the question: *is burnout really the root cause of church decline?*

Burnout & Institutional Avoidance

Within the church, burnout can be summarized as the stress of doing ministry with less. Fewer laypersons, clergy, and financial resources have increased stress within all levels of church bodies, prompting a response. Institutional leaders in the ELCH, ECAV, and ELCA have embraced approaches that reduce the causes and effects of burnout. Faith-based organizations offer programs and training opportunities to equip church leaders with skills

⁶ Report. “’Nones’ on the rise”, *Pew Research Center*; (October 9, 2012), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

⁷ The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) conducts collection of and records data on membership and participation annually. From 2012-2022, the ELCA has experienced decreases of 26.5% in baptized membership and a 37.0% in active participants. See [Congregation and Synod Data - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(elca.org\)](#). Recently, the Bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod, ELCA wrote that from 50.3% decrease in enrollment across its seminaries from 2008-2022. See [Called by God ... and a Sunday school teacher - Mpls Area Synod ELCA \(mpls-synod.org\)](#)

and tools to "renew broken [faith] communities."⁸ A free, one-day mental health summit invited clergy to cultivate faith-based self-care practices such as prayer, spiritual direction, and meditation.⁹ In the ELCH, clergy are offered financial support to attend an advanced post-graduate mental health and organizational development course.¹⁰ On its social media account, the Bishop's Office of the ECAV recently announced that it held a workshop led by the Stress Institute, teaching their staff better techniques to communicate "effectively, positively, and motivationally."¹¹

However, burnout does not adequately explain the experiences of laypersons, clergy, or those seeking the church's ministry, nor do burnout recovery strategies seem to alleviate their distress.¹² In Slovakia, an ECAV pastor was dismissed from his teaching post on the theological faculty for remarks made at an LGBTI Pride event, speaking "...in the name of Christians who disagree with the hostile approach of the Church to the LGBTI community." The Bishopric of the ECAV asserted his dismissal was due to "abusing his position...to implant attitudes...that are at odds with the ECAV," and "many believers were outraged by his comments."¹³ Several clergy in all three church organizations have experienced exclusion and threats of dismissal because of their ministry with marginalized communities of race and sexual orientation. Their distress is compounded by the same voices praising their ministry

⁸ See <https://faithlead.org/about/>.

⁹ Giovanna Dell'orto, "Clergy burnout is a growing concern in polarized churches. A summit offers coping strategies," *AP News*, (October 9, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/clergy-burnout-church-mental-health-summit-570e71ec96575abc92865ad5baf491e6>.

¹⁰ See <https://semmelweis.hu/mental/en/specialist-training-courses/mental-health-and-organization-development/>.

¹¹ ECAV s vami, "David Kalman from the Stress Institute..." (posted March 5, 2024), https://www.facebook.com/ecavsvami/posts/833213058841880?ref=embed_post.

¹² Identities, names, titles, locations, and affiliations are omitted to protect individuals from reprisal and preserve confidentiality.

¹³ Staff. "Theologian who attended Pride prevented from teaching," *The Slovak Spectator*, (6 September 2017), <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20643290/theologian-who-attended-pride-prevented-from-teaching.html>.

when the attention of potential donors and the media presents an opportunity to portray the church organization positively in the public domain.

Church organizations enact strategies to attract younger members who can take over the volunteer ministries so that aging members can “finally retire.” At the same time, “... the younger generation just doesn’t feel like they’re being accepted in a church environment or some of their choices aren’t being accepted by those at church.”¹⁴ Strategies to attract newcomers to the church organizations also bring the potential of increased revenue as additional “giving units,” whether by making personal donations or through government funding.¹⁵ Clergy shortages have prompted aggressive recruiting and incentives to attract individuals to pursue seminary.¹⁶ Fewer financial resources have prompted decisions by church body leaders that increase individuals’ workloads and further increase the inequities between smaller, less-resourced faith communities and larger, well-resourced ones.

Drawing from a personal experience in 2022, I attended my Synod clergy conference. It was the first in-person gathering after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Racial tensions also remained high after the murder of George Floyd, an African American man, by city police officers.¹⁷ Synod leadership hired a professional certified coach and retired pastor to lead training on burnout and self-care. During the training, those in attendance shared feelings of helplessness and sadness as they described deep divisions in their congregations

¹⁴ Adam Gabatt, “Losing their religion: Why U.S churches are on the decline,” *The Guardian*, (22 Jan 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity>.

¹⁵ Office of International Religious Freedom, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom,- Hungary and Slovakia,” *U.S. Department of State*, (May 15, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>.

¹⁶ Elizabeth E. Evans, “As churches shrink and pastors retire, creative workarounds are redefining ministry,” *Religious News Service*, (July 28, 2023), <https://religionnews.com/2023/07/28/as-churches-shrink-and-pastors-retire-creative-workarounds-are-redefining-ministry/>.

¹⁷ RNS Staff. “One year after George Floyd’s murder, faith leaders continue the call for racial reckoning,” *Religious News Service*, (May 25, 2021), <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/25/one-year-after-george-floyds-murder-faith-leaders-continue-the-call-for-racial-reckoning/>.

and communities over issues of race and COVID-19 policies. Others also shared resentment from attacks on their character and that sermons on compassion, justice, and mercy were judged as “too political,” “divisive,” and “shaming.” The presenters could only respond by suggesting clergy make more time for self-care, including regular exercise, improving their diet, and taking time to pray.

I want to emphasize that I am not discounting the significance of burnout. The exhaustion, worry, and stress laypersons and clergy feel are real. However, burnout, like secularization or a rising spirituality untethered from institutional religious traditions, tends to blame people for a lack of motivation and what Wendy Dean describes as “a failure of resourcefulness and resilience.”¹⁸ Characterizing these experiences as burnout is a form of institutional avoidance. It ignores that the problem may lie within an institutional culture where what occurs contradicts God’s ethical mandates and people’s moral expectations for the church. Moral injury, not burnout, describes these experiences more accurately. Therefore, moral injury becomes the correct lens to identify internal issues within the church that create a culture of harm and lead to church decline.

Moral Injury as Mechanistic Dehumanization

Moral injury has primarily followed a psycho-spiritual trajectory where clinical approaches are aimed at alleviating people’s personal suffering. However, Wiinikka-Lydon and others point to the need for strategies that address moral injury’s social, political, and cultural dimensions.¹⁹ Reinforcing this point, I believe that foundational definitions by

¹⁸ Simon G. Talbot, Wendy Dean, “Physicians aren’t ‘burning out.’ They’re suffering from moral injury,” *STAT*, (July 26, 2018), <https://www.statnews.com/2018/07/26/physicians-not-burning-out-they-are-suffering-moral-injury/>.

¹⁹ Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, “Moral Injury as Inherent Political Critique: The Prophetic Possibilities of a New Term,” *Political Theology*, 18:3, (2017), 219-232.

Jonathan Shay²⁰, Brett Litz, and others²¹ were formed in the knowledge that moral injury is not simply a clinical issue but also one of systemic and structural injustice. Taking one step further, I advocate for the turn Wendy Dean and others have made with moral injury and repair: it must lead to a critique and reform of institutional culture from an ethic of harm to one of care.

Christianity is grounded in the fundamental understanding of the relationship between a compassionate God and human beings who bear the image of God (Imago Dei).²² God cares deeply for human life, a quality that liberation theologians describe as a concern for human dignity.²³ In contrast, harm occurs through dehumanization, which is a violation of God's desire to preserve the dignity of all human beings. Psychologist Nick Haslem developed the concept of *mechanistic dehumanization*, or the process of stripping people of their dignity by objectification and exploitation.²⁴ Theologian Brian Konkol summarizes, "Whereas the animalistic brand of dehumanization depends on an intentional comparison of humans and animals, the mechanistic brand compares humans more closely to machines."²⁵

Recalling the narratives earlier in this presentation, mechanistic dehumanization appears in two ways. The first is explained by social psychologist Erich Fromm's concept of a "marketing character," where one's identity and purpose are expressed in terms of economic,

²⁰ Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (April 2014): 183.

²¹ Brett Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William Nash, Caroline Silva, & Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 700.

²² M.Kopacz, C. Ducharme, D. Ani, A. Atlig, "Towards a faith-based understanding of moral injury," *J Pastoral Care Counsel*, 71(4), (December 2017), 217-219.

²³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (New York: Orbis, 2003), 1.

²⁴ Nick Haslem, "Dehumanization: An Integrative View," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no 3 (2006): 262.

²⁵ Brian Konkol, *Mission as Accompaniment: A Response to Mechanistic Dehumanization* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 52.

political, and social worth, and people are viewed as commodities.²⁶ Recalling the narratives of those engaged in ministry with marginalized persons and groups, moral injury occurs when their value is determined by placing the church's reputation and status above the dignity of those connected to the ministry. People are reduced to commodities that can advance the church's "brand." Or they are discarded due to pressure imposed by forces such as religious nationalism.²⁷

The second type of mechanistic dehumanization is the exploitation of laypersons and clergy to ensure the prosperity and survival of the institutional church body.²⁸ Recall earlier narratives where welcome and hospitality towards newcomers, especially younger persons, are motivated by the desire to replace "worn-out" people to continue the church's work and their potential as revenue-generating units. Then there are the narratives where people are asked to continue the church's work in a culture that looks and operates no differently than a corporation operating under the rules of market capitalism.

To summarize, moral injury occurs when God's virtues of compassion, justice, and love are no longer recognizable in the institutional culture of the church. In its place, mechanistic dehumanization makes it impossible for humans to realize their dignity beyond their usefulness and what they can produce for the church. When these moral expectations are violated, people have a choice: continue to serve in an unchanged institutional culture where they risk further moral injury or leave the church. As the narratives in this

²⁶ Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 121. First published in 1997 by Continuum.

²⁷ Dániel Vékony, Egđunas Račius, "Governance of religious diversity in Central Europe: A religious nationalism inspired illiberal turn in Hungary and Slovakia?", *Ethnicities*, vol. 0, (2023), 1-20.

²⁸ Joerg Rieger, "The (Im)possibility of deep solidarity," *Theology in the Capitalocene*, (August 30, 2022). Advance copy provided by author ahead of publication.

presentation show, church decline is people's way of protecting themselves from an institutional culture that causes moral injury through mechanistic dehumanization.

Solidarity and Accompaniment: A Theological Response

What is the church's response to moral injury? It has been my experience that when moral injury occurs, there is a demand for fairness and accountability. Perpetrators and victims of moral injury then look to institutional structures to enact solutions. Innovation, policy reform, organizational restructuring, and legal processes are examples in which the church aims to "do better." Yet, such approaches perpetuate struggles for power and privilege and often harm and dehumanize people further in the process. It is akin to Jesus' parable of rebuilding a house on a foundation of sand. Moral repair and healing call for the empowerment of all people, not the preservation and transfer of power to a few.

Solidarity and accompaniment, as theological concepts, express God's desire for a relationship founded on mutuality and interdependence. Pope Francis writes, "The word 'solidarity' is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all..."²⁹ Pope Francis goes on to describe "the art of accompaniment:" a spiritual journey practiced alongside others and God that draws us into a closer, cooperative relationship with the same.³⁰ Solidarity and accompaniment assert human dignity is the foundation upon which the church must build its structures. Solidarity and accompaniment are not merely aspirational but effectual, spiritual processes leading to real healing and transformation.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel-Evangelii Gaudium* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), 95.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 85-87.

Paul Dordal, a United States board-certified chaplain, offers a solidarity process of spiritual care in which others willingly enter into and seek to understand the context of one's suffering, leading to communion with their situation and assisting the suffering through a community-based approach.³¹ Konkol asserts a specific direction for accompaniment, grounded in the belief people can act and build communities that do not conform to powers and structures that cause moral injury. Embodying accompaniment as advocacy and resistance, people engage each other to transform the institution rather than completely dismantle it.³² These models should not be viewed as programs to be implemented but rather as ways to recognize patterns and behaviors that lead to cultures that mitigate moral injury. They enable people to co-create reparative action, leading to healing and transformation.

Conclusion

I intended to offer recommendations for transforming the church. However, such an effort would dishonor the uniqueness of God's people and the contexts they serve in. The church is already being transformed by ministries that embody daily solidarity and accompaniment. Amazing and talented clergy lead them, collaborating with the people in their faith community and the larger community to build and preserve the dignity of all people. Across Slovakia and Hungary, laypersons and clergy are working through Diakonia (service) ministries and giving pastoral care to people of marginalized communities – Roma, LGBTQIA+, refugees, and immigrants. They are intelligent, drawing from community development principles and organizing and crafting sustainable partnerships to share resources. I would love to highlight these people and their ministries by name, but unfortunately, they prefer to remain in relative obscurity rather than risk further moral injury.

³¹ Paul Dordal, "Culturally Responsive Spiritual Care," (lecture), recorded video Fall 2021, Vanderbilt Divinity School. Due to intellectual restrictions, the recording is not available for public viewing.

³² Brian Konkol, *Mission as Accompaniment*, 244-245.

Yet, it would be enough for the church organizations they serve if its leaders honored and supported their contributions without exception.

American author and journalist Sebastian Junger reflects, “Humans don’t mind hardship; in fact, they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary.”³³ In a time of scarcity, competition, and waning societal influence, fear has caused institutional church bodies to lose sight of their greatest resource and mission: God’s people. Laypersons and clergy accept that a life in service to God and the church is neither easy nor glamorous. Most outside the church understand that the way of Christ is not easy and requires a degree of self-sacrifice. Yet, they cannot and should not accept being used as machines to serve ends that promote institutional recognition, status, and relevance above the theological and ethical foundations that raise human dignity. When this happens, moral injury, not burnout, results. If left unattended, church decline will continue as people reject a church that no longer bears any semblance to God’s desire to give dignity to the suffering and marginalized of this world through the gift of ministry. Only through solidarity and accompaniment with its laypersons, clergy, and those seeking the church’s ministry will institutional church bodies recover what is best about it: the community where all people live in the goodness of God’s justice, kindness, and humility - together.³⁴

³³ Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (New York: Hatchette Books, 2016), xvii.

³⁴ Reference to Micah 6:8, Christian Bible.