

Gregory Wright

Interview [Don] Transcript

September 6, 2024, 4:03PM

<Interviewer 1 started transcription>

Interviewer 1 0:05 OK, welcome **[Don]**. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us in participating in this study. Do you agree to having this interview be recorded and transcribed?

[Don] 0:19 I do.

Interviewer 1 0:20 We are going to begin the interview by asking...What have been your emotional and spiritual challenges in Christian ministry?

[Don] 0:43 Yeah. Yeah. How long do how long does this last? We... I...I could spend all day talking about the, you know, I think the emotional challenges are that you are day in, day out, constantly dealing with human need and there are...you know, I mean, just my day on Monday, you know, I'm dealing with a couple who is, you know, they're marriage is in danger of breaking up. So I'm spending time on the phone talking to him. Then I'm talking to her. Then I'm talking to him again. And then meanwhile, I'm I am in the Presbyterian Church and part of our Uh regional process is when a church tries to join our denomination. There examined uh as to fit for a membership and the person who's joining was accused of sexually abusing one of his pastors. One of his associates, about 15 years ago. So I'm, you know, I'm getting involved in an investigative process around that we've had in the last month, we've had 11 people die in our church. So I'm dealing with families who are grieving. We are in the midst of coming into the fall season in our church, so there's a lot of administrative tasks. There's, there's just a lot of stuff going on and then in addition to that, we're downtown church and I'm on the Commission on homelessness. And so I'm trying to figure out how we shelter and house, you know, about 2500 unsheltered people in our community. And so I'm. I'm down at our local shelter. Yes. So it just it just kind of goes on and on and on like that. And you get to

11/11 Sardis
Rarely uses
"I" in role of a
Pastor
until 1:5

11/11 (You know!!!) →
→ filler or
fragment

1st page

about *I wonder if he is nervous?*

a point where. Even though you know, like my day on Monday was just one thing after another thing after another thing, and none of it was. I other than the marriage, maybe that there was no real crisis, but you're just going from meeting to meeting to meeting, to meeting and all of it's emotionally taxing and demanding. And by the time I get to 6:00, I'm whipped, you know? And I got home. I got home Monday night and my wife says we've got this dinner. We gotta go to at 7 and I'm like I'm. I'm out. I'm. I'm not. I cannot do that. I don't have anymore emotional energy. And then I think so that that's just your your constantly umm required to enter into people's pain, their grief and then on the spiritual side, E you're you're doing the same thing. And unlike a counselor role, when you're the pastor, the people who are in those situations, whether they're, you know, one of my meetings on on Monday with a, with a couple, he's 25, she's 24 and they just, they're pregnant for the first time, and they miscarried at at about seven months. And so they're asking all these deep theological questions about, you know, why us? And why would God allow this to happen? And was there something wrong with our baby? And did we do something wrong? It's got angry at us, all those kinds of larger spiritual questions. You know, most of which don't have a a specific answers. There are answers, but it's hard for them in that moment. Umm, you know, you're trying to comfort them. That's not the time to have a theological lesson. Uh, but in? In any event, you're seeing and, and it's a privilege to help walk with people through their spiritual struggles and questions. But you also realize that you know when you're dealing with the day in, day out, realities of broken human people. There, there aren't easy answers and there are definitely times where it feels like you know God, where are you in this? How are you involved? Why aren't you acting? And and I am I am the person who's trying to keep everyone else's faith strong and secure. When you know a lot of times, I got questions myself and so how am I nurturing my own spiritual life in light of all the spiritual challenges that my people are going through and and when you layer the spiritual on top of the emotional, it's it can be pretty complicated and and I learned pretty early on. I've been

doing this now for 33 years. I learned pretty early on that if I don't take care of myself in, in regard to my own health, mental health, spiritual health, physical health, then I will. I will not last very long #1 and I won't be very much use or help to my people and so I've I've tried to take that very seriously.

Interviewer 1 6:07 So some of what I hear you talking about is, "No breaks" in a day of journeying with people throughout the day, and then not being able to be as present with your family as you had planned....and perhaps something about the expectation that you are able, then, after work, to be connecting and relational with your family.

[Don] 6:50 Mm-hmm.

Interviewer 1 6:51 That that's a difficult piece.

[Don] 6:53 Yeah. And I think there are kind of two dynamics to that. One is the you know, so I I the way the rhythm of my my schedule is I take appointments Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Uh,

Thursdays, my study day, so I don't have any appointments on Thursday. I use all that time to either *write like me on Monday* be writing or studying in sermon preparation. I'm off on Fridays, but I usually work Friday morning.

I'm off on Saturday, but I usually work Saturday morning and then obviously Sunday is a pretty pretty full day. But you know, I think the the challenge, especially Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, early in the week is you're having to emotionally turn on a dime, and the people who are coming to see you, they don't know who was before them and they don't know who's coming after. But you know, there are some days where I go from, you know, here's the marriage that's falling apart. And my next meeting is a meeting with 15 people to discuss the 150th anniversary of our church and how we're gonna celebrate that. And then I go from that to planning a funeral with the family. And then I go from that to a family who's coming in to have their child baptized. And so and then I go from that to try to figure out how much money we can spend to mitigate the flooding in our basement because of all the rain we've had. So you're every meeting I go into. It's a different hat and they don't know that. I've just been rung out in this funeral meeting, but now I have to turn around with the baptism

family and I gotta be I gotta be up and happy & Ohh. You're you're baby is so beautiful. And you know, and, and I genuinely feel that way. And and I I love that [pause]

Interviewer 1 8:32 You love that...

[Don] 8:33 But it's it's not. It's not easy and and to just kind of be emotionally whipping around all day. Uh, and I don't think, I don't think most people have an appreciation for what that's like in pastoral ministry. And then as it relates to my family and you know, we have, we have three kids who are all in their early 30s and obviously up and out of the House. Umm, my wife has a full time job and I think in our marriage, you know, one of the things that we talk about is it's it's easy to spend all of your best emotional energy on other people during the day. So that when you get home, you're emotional tank is pretty low and you're giving them the bottom of your emotional tank. Not the not the top of it. Not the best of it. And and when all you've got is a little bit you, you tend to have a brief conversation and then you sort of, you know, fall into bed and read a book and go to sleep and start all over. And so we've had to make adjustments in our calendar and kind of in the rhythm of our life to be sure that we are saving some of that emotional energy for each other because, you know, one of my mentors said. *How does his wife feel about this* The church is an exacting mistress, and she will take every hour that you're willing to give her and will and will and will never will never say no. And so you, you just have to be careful and and it's hard too because you know, I'm not sure every pastor might say this, but I love what I do. I love my job. I love most of the dynamics of it, and so it's not. Umm it's it's, you know, ministry. Is life and so there's not a real clear line like, you know, if I was a banker, you know, I come home from the bank at 5:00 and I'd see my family and those would be two very distinct worlds. But I mean, in the church, who I, you know, all of our friends and all of the work I do, and all the people that I'm in contact with in the community, it's just kind of one big BLOB that rolls all together. And so you know how to how to create a clear boundaries. Umm for family, for church? For personal life

and you know, so I'm. I'm off today and have that done a few things and I I got a call from the OR. I got a text message from the husband of this in this marriage. That's kind of coming apart and he was like, can you talk today? And and I'm. I'm generally the kind of person who would who would go. Sure. You know I'm. I've got an hour this afternoon. I can figure that out, but I but last night my wife and I had had conversation about, you know, my kind of my anxiety level. My my level of stress is, you know, if you're looking at a thermometer or a tire, and so she said, you just need to be careful how much you're taking on and give yourself some breaks and she's real good at at helping me see those. So I texted the guy back. I said, you know what? I I'm I am. I'm booked all weekend, but I've got I've got Monday at 10 open. How about that? And he said that's fine. So you know, there's almost a sense of guilt that if I don't respond right away, then I'm a bad pastor. And if this wasn't an emergency, clearly, and. And so he was fined to meet on Monday. So that's just, you know, those those boundaries and things are hard. So I'm I know I'm rambling, kind of a a little bit, so I'll I'll stop.

Just coping

struggle

struggle

Interviewer 1 12:35 There's a lot to talk about...and the "emotionally whipping around " that happens for you, moment by moment.

[Don] 12:45 Yeah.

Interviewer 1 12:48 Then there is the need to learn how to set boundaries. Umm. And then the other next piece that you talked about in your initial discussion was about no having answers for people. Sitting with people in their grief, or sitting with people in their loss, or in their crisis, and uh having no maybe earthly answers, can you say a little bit more about that?

[Don] 13:29 Sure. You know, I I think there are. They're kind of default mechanisms and not in the back of our head. Umm, I think as you know and I'm coming at this from a a Christian perspective, it this may be true in other faith traditions I don't know but. But I think sometimes people have a preconceived idea that if I love God and I'm trying to do the right thing and most of the time I do and I haven't fouled up in any major ways, I haven't had an affair. I haven't. I don't abuse my kids, you know, I I tried to say in the lines. Umm and I go to church and I read my Bible on occasion and I

pray before I go to bed. Umm. But if I kind of do the things I think I'm supposed to, then God will kind of put a protective bubble over me and will not let bad things happen to me. And it's it's a shock when that notion gets kind of blown out of the water and they do have something bad happen to them and and then then they feel like wait, A did I do something wrong? Bead has gotten out. Love me the way I thought and see was God kind of sleeping on the job. Like did he? Did you not see this in like he wasn't aware of what was happening to me? So it it that one event and it can happen to people at any juncture in life, some people have less, you know, personal suffering than others. But when it does happen, it challenges a lot of their notions of who God is and what our relationship.

Umm. With God is all about and so, but the challenge is let's say they have. They've they've just lost a parent at an early age, so this person's 30 & Mom dies at 58 just out of nowhere and they come in and they're like, you know, my mom was so faithful and loved the Lord and all those kind of things. And and why? How could this happen? I don't understand. And they're they're so emotional and grief stricken that they're not ready to hear me say that, you know, God actually never promised that these kinds of things wouldn't happen. In fact, he kind of said the opposite. You know it. Go read up on what happened to Paul and Peter and you know. And go read up on all 12 disciples. You know their lives didn't end well, and they arguably love God the most & and so there's there's nothing in Scripture that would suggest that if you keep your nose clean and live right, that bad things don't happen it it's actually, you know, bad things will happen in this world. You will have trouble, but God's overcome the world, so God doesn't promise us a lack of trouble. He does promise us his presence, and so how do we experience his presence and how do we lean into that? So when I'm in a meeting with someone who's grieving, then that's what I'm trying to lean into is, you know, passages like John 11, when Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, that the Old Testament passage that God keeps our tears in heaven and none are forgotten, that God is with us in our grief, that God has lost a son, that God knows the pain of loss. Umm. And so I talked

about all those things, but it it also is. So I've I've I've been in the church that I serve right now. I've been there for 20 years, so the emotionally hard part for me is now almost everybody who comes in my office, I know well and have known them for a long time and it's one thing when someone you don't know comes in and and they're in a painful experience of some kind and and you can work with that and and that's all fine. And and it's it's somewhat, it's somewhat tiring, but when you know the person and you're emotionally invested with them and you love and care for them and they're hurting, that's a whole different ball of wax. And I you know, when I was, when I was 40 and doing funerals, you know, I would do a funeral in the morning, and I would have a a full afternoon of appointments and things that was doing in the community. I'd go from one to the other. No sweat. And now if I have a funeral in the morning, I the rest of the day is blocked because I am. I am so drained by the time I've met with the family beforehand. Done. The burial done, the service. Gone to the reception. Talked to the people & and invariably at the reception after a funeral, there are people I've never met before coming up to me asking me questions. So you're still kind of, there's the outpouring. There's the giving away of self in all that, and so it. And so now I, you know and and you you have to. I've learned you have to build. You have to be skilled at compartmentalization and I have to be able to take my feelings about a particular situation and put them in a box and put it on the shelf and go back and deal with that later. Because if I'm in a funeral and I'm talking about someone, you know, I've done, you know, way too many funerals for children. Then you know teenagers killed in car accidents and you know, died of overdose deaths and things that are just tragic and awful. And as sad as I am in those moments, if when I'm leading the service, I go to pieces, well, now the focus is on me and everybody's worried about me. So and I'm of no use to them, I'm not comforting them. So I I can't let my emotions get the best of me when I'm leading, so I have to compartmentalize that and and there is many a day many a time when I get through all that and when I when I'm done and I go upstairs, I close the door to my office and that's when I sit down

and have a good cry, you know or I call a friend on the phone and say, man, can I just can I just unpack this with you and what I've been through this afternoon and so. You know, I I'm doing that tomorrow. I've gotta do a A and again, you know, people don't die on your schedule. And when they do, you have to, you know, they they wanted to have the service on a Saturday. Well, normally I'm not working on Saturday, but I am tomorrow, so I'll go do the burial and then we'll do the service. And and this the woman who died, she was. She's like my second mother. I mean, she she is, you know, 25 years older than me. But I mean, just nurtured me and took care of me and took care of my family. And you know, so tomorrow's gonna be a rough day. And then I've gotta, you know, tomorrow afternoon to recover and then Sunday morning. I gotta show up with something, you know, encouraging to say that everybody who comes to worship on Sunday. So yeah, yeah, there's just a lot to it.

Howling to really recover

Interviewer 1 20:42 Yeah, there is a lot to it, and I hear you incorporating boundaries in order to ensure you have Saturday afternoon free. You've created this for yourself. Nothing scheduled in order to manage your own grief and loss and process whatever you need to or want to and nurture yourself and have what we call self care and then be ready for Sunday morning.

[Don] 21:14 Yep.

Interviewer 1 21:20 And another thing that you were talking about earlier was, uh, the idea of where God is during those times. Where is God for them?

[Don] 21:35 Umm.

Interviewer 1 21:41 And then where is God for you?

[Don] 21:48 And and that's. Yeah, that's uh. You know you're you're. You're dealing with abstract and spiritual concepts. Which? Which in times of crisis, umm for people many times don't feel because they are abstract, they don't feel particularly. Helpful. It's like, well, God is with you. Well, I don't see him and I can't feel him. And if he loved me, then why did he let this happen? And and I I think that you know that's part of the good news of Christianity is that I I think you know we we forget

what God has already done. Umm. And that the the grief that we feel and the pain that we experience, those feelings are there are the reason the guy came and Christ to defeat those things. So that those things are are not the final word, and so you you have to gently bring people to those places. But I think that oftentimes in my role it is, it is first, the Ministry of Presence, UMM, that communicates, it's, you know, they see me as God's representative. And so my presence and and and my prayers, you know, that's what they want, is for me to pray over them. Pray over their loved one who's in the bed. Who's about to die? They want that spiritual engagement and then, you know, I, you know, I I think in my in my 33 years, you know, in my own spiritual life, I'm not. There are. There are things that I don't understand, but I think I've come to a peaceful place in realizing I'll never understand them, but that doesn't change my view of God, and that part of life. You know, if you read through the scriptures, got often uses the word mystery. I tell you a mystery. There is there is mystery to things. They're just gonna be things that finite human beings are never gonna grasp about an infinite God and nor are we supposed to. And so I I think I'm a little more uncomfortable with the grey. I think when you're younger, you want things to be a whole lot more black and white. And but I'm I am I'm I'm more comfortable with some of the the Gray areas and I'm not. I'm not demanding and don't don't really feel the need to know why. Umm I. But I do know the God is is faithful in it and and it's, you know, it's it's interesting to live that out. So you know in in the last year. Umm my. My wife had breast cancer and went through the whole process of uh, you know, lumpectomy surgery, double mastectomy, umm, all the diagnostic things. They're in umm, reconstructive surgery. It was a whole nine month process, a lot of days in the hospital, a lot of time at doctor's office and and while she was going through, in fact, she was on the operating table the first time in December for the double mastectomy, my 31 year old son called me to say that the swollen lymph node that he had in his neck actually wasn't a slow, swollen lymph node. It was a malignant tumor, and in his parotid gland. And so, two weeks after my wife has surgery, my son has

an operation to take out a tumor. That was about four centimeters. It was not small out of his neck that was wrapped around his facial nerve. And so we're, we have no idea how that's going to turn out. And then you know the next week I'm supposed to preach a sermon. And so, you know, as a pastor who's personal life is now in in, you know, has been turned upside down. Umm, how much of that do you share with the congregation? How much do you let them in? And I'm not. You know, I've. I've never been a. Of you know I'm. I'm kind of a what you see is what you get kind of. Guy, I'm not gonna stand up on a Sunday and &, you know, tired and and, you know, emotionally spent and and act otherwise. I'll. I'll usually say the congregation. Yeah, I've had a rough week, but here's. Here's what the Lord is has been teaching me, and so even though all those things were going on, you know I E. God was faithful to me at every turn and seeing me through that, and I I think that didn't. That doesn't mean that it all got taken away. And so for me to be able to say to the congregation. And and I and I I even told him this. I would get all these cards that would say that essentially would have variations on this this theme, which was. I can't believe this happened to you. Meaning, will your you're a good person and you're taking care of other people. Why? Why? You know, I can't believe God let this happen to you. And I I stood up on Sunday and I was like people. I'm not any different than any of y'all. I mean I'm. I'm as broken and sinful and flawed as the next guy, and so it's not why me? It's why not me. I mean I'm. I'm living my human life just as much as you all are & and there are there are no protective bubbles for anybody, and we're all gonna run into the consequences of living in a broken fallen world. And so I think that was an opportunity to live out what I've been talking to them about in individual settings. Umm. And and but it was. You know, it was, it was not easy. And and there were, you know normally on. On Sunday mornings, you know, before the service starts, I'm in the corrugation. I'm walking the aisles. I'm talking to people. I'm with them, chatting, visiting, you know, for four or five weeks there, I would. My associates would do the first part of the service. I would walk in. I preached the sermon. I walked back out and that was it,

and I wouldn't talk to people before. It wouldn't talk to people after because that was just all I had the energy for and. And so you, you know, kind of to your point, I was drawing boundaries as I saw necessary to just be able to get me through it so. So you know it, you know my. The things that I've been through and and the congregation knows that my, the, the son that had the tumor in his jaw, he had already had cancer once before when he was in his early 20s. And so this was the 2nd go around for that. And so, you know, we'd already been through the whole of chemotherapy, you know, no hair, violent illness, all that stuff. And so the congregation had seen me in that place before. So my umm, I just trust and got faithfulness and so my spiritual questions aren't as great. You know I'm I've. I feel a greater sense of peace at 61 that I did at 40, but how I communicate that and help other people mature to that place instead of kind of feeling abandoned and umm, that that's I think that's a challenge. You know that you just they have to learn over time.

Interviewer 1 30:08 I'm curious about how you were able to build the capacity to, umm, visit with people before, then do the sermon, and then spend time with people after, as you do now?

[Don] 30:36 Umm. How did I build the capacity? I think some of it is that I know that my my wife is through all her things and is 100% my son is actually has a good prognosis and his was only stage two and he has a good prognosis. He's. I feel like he's in a good place. Umm, you know, all three of my kids live here. I've got 3 grandkids. All of whom are healthy and live nearby. And I'm very happily married. So you know you you come through a difficult season. And you're like, I don't ever want to do it again. But I'm actually grateful for the things that got taught me in it. And I'm I'm back to a place where I'm I feel like I'm healthy and good & optimistic. I just. I'm an optimistic person. I I'm. So I'm gonna, and I'm also a. You know when the chips are down, I'm gonna. I'm gonna dig my foot in the ground and, you know, put my head down and I'm gonna. I'm gonna get through it. And and that's to my detriment as I umm, I will often try to do that without anybody else. I'm just gonna do it. And so I again in my old age, I've learned that's not healthy. And I, you know, so I've. I've had a

counselor for 30 years, you know, not the same counselor, but no matter where I've been, I just know that there are some seasons where I just need to go process. And then you know the other challenge in marriage is, you know, Lee, my wife is not. She can't be my sole processor. It's not fair to her for me to come just emotionally vomit on her everyday. And then expect her to carry it around. So I have to to to be careful with what I say to her and how much. And so then I have to cultivate other avenues, other friendships where I have people who care about me. And so I've got.

Challenge marriage

I'm in a group with three or four other pastors. We do a every six weeks, we do a 2 hour phone call and there's there's nobody else in the world who understands you as well as someone else who sits in that chair. And so, you know, it's and you speak the same language. You have the same experiences and and so that is, those are invaluable conversations and allow all of us, you know and and they're you know we don't have any agenda. And usually the person who has the greatest need will just start talking and and we'll all rally around that guy and. But it there, I know they're there when I need them, so that's A and and that gives me capacity in these other situations.

Interviewer 1 34:01 One of the things that you also talked about was, it seems that, uh, maybe right now you identified that you your anxiety was high, or... I don't know if that was the exact word that you used, but umm you identified for yourself that right now anxiety is what you're experiencing. And can you talk more about that feeling throughout your career or what that looks like for you or say more about that?

[Don] 34:39 It's. Yeah, that's a. That's actually a a big part of my story. Umm, so I was. I was raised in a very was brought up Roman Catholic, raised in a very well. My dad's mother is my mom's Catholic, but raising a very happy household. Umm, I had two sisters. We lived in a great neighborhood. We had great friends. You know, we, you know, I my wife calls my family, you know, my family is apple pie and her family is mincemeat pie. So, uh, that's our little running gym, but I had a very happy childhood. But when I got to be about. Late teens, early, early 20s. I my my family is also very especially my dad was very protective so if anything ever happened, Dad took care of it. So Paula, flat tire, I just call my dad and the next thing I knew, the record be there and it would just

be handled or you know if there was something wrong with me. Well, you know, Mom or dad would take me the doctor and I knew they were gonna fix it. And I didn't, you know, and and I, but I never had a job. Never had to work. Never really had much responsibility. I played high school sports, which I loved, but that was fun. That wasn't work. Didn't take a lot of responsibility in that sense, so I go to college and my junior year of college. All of a sudden, like adulthood is staring me in the face and I started having some real severe anxiety, and which eventually developed into panic disorder. And I had terrible panic attacks. And you know, to the point that I was, you know, when I was 2324, I was almost agoraphobic. I mean I would struggle to go anywhere and you know, I I was kind of if I was in my living room, I could kind of be at peace and but at at that time when it was getting so bad. I'm I'm dating my wife. I'm I have felt this call to ministry and I'm supposed to go to seminary in the fall and I'm. I'm kind of telling God, you know, you've you've called the wrong guy. Like you know, I I picked up the phone, but you had the wrong number. Because I can't. I can't do this like the thought of me standing up in front of a group of people and talking was like I like, that is never going to happen. And yeah, and so I I remember having a moment. And I, you know, God did not speak to me in an audible voice. I'm not saying that, but I was sitting in a rocking chair it in my parents house in Dallas. Umm and I had my own apartment, but I had gone over there in the middle of the day. They were gone and I remember just distinctly in my spirit. I was reading the Bible. I I felt like God was saying, do you trust me? Do you trust me? And and I sat in that chair for a long time, thinking. And I and I just, I couldn't. I could not get around the fact that I E truly deeply 100% believe in the veracity of the evidence for the empty tomb and you know, Jesus was a real guy in human history. You know they & those things happened. And so at the at the end of that, I had to say I I do. And so if I trusted God, then I needed to. I needed to be obedient to what he was calling me to do, so I told him that day. I said alright. I do trust you, but here's the deal. I'm. I'm gonna if you if you open the doors, I'll walk through them. But if I fall flat on my face, that's on you because I showed up and I said you're

*Lesson
for
struggles?*

you're gonna have to be true to your word. I'm a I'm I'll keep up my end of the bargain, so I go to seminary and and I'm. I'm struggling & but I'm getting through it. I'm going to class. My wife has a full time job. We're doing our thing and the second year I'm reading the uh University of Texas student newspaper because I was at the University of Texas Theology School, so. I'm reading it and there's an. There's an ad for a A, A psychiatrist who is doing work on panic disorder, and it said you have painted disorder. You know, I'm doing a study on uh, you know, the effects, the physiological effects of panic disorder and that, you know, and I'm like, I've got nothing to lose. I'll call the guy. So I called him and went over and, you know, panic is so much about the physiological things that happen to you that make you feel like you're losing your mind. I'm gonna pass out. I'm out of control. All those things. So he he did this thing where in his office he would artificially create the physiological symptoms of panic. So I would take caffeine pills to make my heart race. I would breathe on a CO2 canister to throw off my oxygen levels and make my hands and my feet tingle. Umm. And then I'd have those feelings. And then he'd be like, alright, let's get in the car and go drive over a bridge. You know, and and as we're doing that he'd be like, how do you feel? I take terrible I hate this and you'd be like, but are you? Is there anything bad happening now? Can you drive the car? Yes. Is that, you know, we'd go to a mall and you'd be like, do you feel like anyone looking at you weird or you gonna be in Barrett and no, you know, and it it just took all the power out of those physiological things. And so I started to like, I perspire like nobody's business, like, 10 minutes into a sermon. And I mean the sweats coming off of me. And and yeah, but but that used to make me feel anxious. Now I'm like the ask just part of who I am and and when when I would start to feel that way, I would cut in my head. Or can I go on? I know what that is and and I know why that's happening and so EI, just it, it took away the fear of the fear. So I got over the panic disorder pretty quickly, not quickly. I mean, it's probably four or five years, but I got over that in seminary, but that doesn't mean you know my my dad has OCD issues. My grandmother had anxiety issues. I mean, we have a history in our family of

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 not final
 things

anxiety. My son has dealt with it and so, you know, I would go on a. Uh, in, in particularly rough seasons, which, you know, maybe twice, I would go on medication for a season. An anti anxiety drug like. Wow. Effects her, I think, was the name of it. Something like that and and and so that helped but but through all that, you know, I was with a counselor. Who? You know, we worked on breathing. We worked on, you know, kind of getting to the core of what really is causing the anxiety and most of it was irrational. And to begin with, and so it you know, I just have enough tools in my tool belt to know how to deal with it. And my son has learned that as well, so I don't. But from a capacity standpoint now that's all backdrop to your question. You know, when I am in, you know, I'm doing all these funerals and counseling. This one couple, you know, I've got responsibility in our denomination. We've got a big fall. Come. I mean, there's a lot that I'm carrying and when that when that happening, I can kind of feel myself getting a little more wound up, a little more anxious about what's gonna happen and and when that happens. I know. OK, I've got to open up a pressure relief valve somewhere. You know, I've gotta let some steam out because I feel the the, I I'm feeling the pressure and the weight of this in an unhealthy way and so usually that means, you know, all exercise a little bit more on my get an appointment to go see my counselor. I might be sure my wife and I are gonna go out. Umm, you know, things like that and and and I need to be careful about my sleep. I need to you know what? I'm not gonna go in tomorrow until 10. I'm gonna sleep in a little bit. So, uh, I used to. I used to be very it was a spiritual crisis in my 20s because I didn't understand why I was dealing with that when so many of my peers were not & God, why did you give me this and knock them? But I I realize now that that was a very it was enormously humbling. It made me far more empathic as a human being to other persons, mental and emotional health crises. These and and just mental and emotional health issues. What they're going through at any given time and so and and again, I'm I'm an open book. I mean, I've I've told our congregation that whole story. They know all that and and every time I allude to it or mention it, I get two or three phone calls that week

*Always
Guilt's
Lead*

from someone who's wrestling with anxiety. Umm, you know, some kind? Can I come talk? Talk to you about that. And I'm like absolutely. And you know the the best thing I've my the first psychiatrist I went to when I was in seminary. I walked into her office and she said the first thing I want to tell you is you will not always feel this way. And I'm like it was like handing a big old glass of water to some guy in the desert, you know? And I'm like that was the greatest news that ever. I mean, I thought I was doomed. You know this is gonna be it for the rest of my life. And and she said. I I drink treat bank executives, I treat doctors. I treat pastors just like you wanna be, she said. This is not unusual. Tons of people in the US have this, and you're gonna be OK. And I'm like and so that's I'll never forget that. And I try to say to other people, you're not weird. You know you're you're not lesser because you struggle with this, you know, and you're not always gonna feel this way. Let's get you the help you need. Let's help you find things. They're gonna help you. Let's get some tools in your tool belt, and so it's like I said, it's made me a better pasture. It's made me more attentive to boundaries, you know, and I instead of making it my enemy, I've made it my friend. And now I look at it when I start feeling anxious. That's just my body's way of sending up a flare going. Hey, you need to pay attention to some stuff and so I do.

bound
boundaries
-made like a friend
p. 16

Interviewer 1 46:24 Thank you. [Interviewer 2], do you have any questions?

[Don] 46:25 Yeah.

Interviewer 2 46:29 I I was thinking as you were talking there, [[Don]], I I wonder if you could talk a little bit about you know the experience you just talked about and how you've learned to kind of address the anxiety. How do you think that impacts some of the emotional challenges that you face in how you approach those in your ministry and your life?

[Don] 46:52 Umm, absolutely. I I know that, uh, I've had to learn the hard way. You know, and the the phrase I use is I I have to always remember where mine knows ends and the other persons begins. Meaning that I I can't enter into another person's pain too deeply. I I wanna be empathic. I I

↓
** made me feel some way - one of my thoughts*
Agree

wanna I wanna be with them in the puddle that they're in, but I can't take on the burden of it as if I am their salvation and savior because they already have one of those. I'm trying to point them towards towards that person, but if I if I take that on too much then then my anxiety level is gonna go up because I'll be worried about them. And then 10 minutes later, I've got somebody else I'm worried about. And then I'm worried about the one after that. And you know what about the Church's budget? And I've got to hire this person and I don't have that job filled. And what are we gonna do about this problem? And and it starts piling up. And then I become nonfunctional because I'm anxious. And it's like, you know, when you're anxious, you're not thinking clearly. You're not creative. You're you. You you lose some of the important things that you need in order to be effective. And so I have again over time. Umm, learned. You know, I I need 15 minutes in between appointments to take some notes, to take a breath, maybe walk around the block. What? Whatever it is, sometimes I have that luxury. Sometimes I don't. You know, it depends on just how things unfold, but and I know if I have a day like Monday then I know that I I need to look at the rest of the week and go alright. If I'm gonna do that, then on Tuesday, I gotta have a I need a an afternoon. I need a block somewhere where I can breathe and it's kind of like the.

*Aware
self-aware of anxiety triggers*

Interviewer 2 48:59 Yeah.

[Don] 49:06 You know the old analogy of you know, how does? How does an elephant eat a block of cheese? And the answer is one bite at a time. You know my my counselor said to me one time a year. You're someone who tries to pick up the whole block and eat it all at once, and he said you just have to eat a little bit at a time. And as you do that, you know in two or three weeks that block becomes very manageable and and so I've I've tried to say, you know, each day if I can just all these things that are spinning in front of me, if I can just find a couple of handles to hold on to then then my anxiety comes way down and and so that's what I try to do in these gaps is usually I can kind of

see a path towards how I'm gonna solve particular things or me particular needs and kind of once I have. A plan that all the anxiety goes away and I'm much more effective. And so like I said, & anxiety is A is I look at it as a gift because it just tells me, alright, there's too much going on. You need to pull back and come up with a plan and how you're gonna deal with these things, and. And then I I think it it also helps me umm in terms of being a a present and empathic listener and counselor to those people who are in the situations, because I, you know, when again the the funeral I have tomorrow the daughter of the of the deceased woman. I mean she her E every everything in her world is spinning like this and and she & and it's it's paralyzing because she didn't know what to do. She's never been through it. Who do I call? You know her dad died 10 years ago. So she she's got no other help. And so in that situation, I'm able to go. Hey, Cara. Let's sit down. Let's take a breath. We're. We're gonna. We will walk with you through this. You don't need to worry about all the decisions. We're gonna tell you. Here's what we need to do next, and and so I think that has helped me be a much more non anxious presence when other people get that way because I know what that is. I know what that feels like. And you just need to for someone to say it's not always gonna be this way. And you know, let's take a breath and we'll figure our way out through it so.

*Gifts
Anxieties
Anxiety*

Interviewer 2 51:45 Thank you. I think I just have one more thing. I'm curious about.

[Don] 51:50 Yeah.

Interviewer 2 51:51 Thorough challenges spiritually as you're helping other people. Uh. And their walk and their journeys, think about yourself in your ministry and your role. Any personal spiritual challenges that you've experienced? You talked about you, the journey with your healthier life, those things. But what do you think about that on a personal level?

[Don] 52:15 Yeah, you know, I think my struggle from childhood has been that I never feel good enough. I never feel. You know, my spiritual struggle has always been why would God love a guy like me? Like I know my thoughts. I know you know the things I struggle with. I know you know when I

Could this be a reason for his struggles in other areas of his life

swear at other drivers and traffic. I you know, I know. I know what I'm capable of. And then, umm, you know, I just feel like ohh I could have handled that better. I should have said this instead of that, umm. And so my. Now I would stand up on Sunday and tell people how lovely are & God's grace is sufficient. You're forgiven and all those kind of things, but I have always struggled to receive that myself. And so I think all of us, there's a, there's a great book about it's called. The seven something questions the seven primary questions or something like that, but it basically says that all of us operate out of one of these seven questions and or statements and mine is, am I good enough? You know, so I, you know my, my, my currency is competence and so I. And so when I'm trying to tell other people about God's love and I haven't really internalized that myself, that's always been a little bit of my of my spiritual struggle. & But I've learned spiritual disciplines like silent retreats and periods and seasons of solitude, where I've gone to retreat, centers and monasteries and things like that, where you just sit quietly and no agenda. And I read Scripture and I listen and pretty much what I hear most every time is that God is very fond of me and that I'm his beloved &. And so I come out of it again, reminded of the fact that, you know, Zapf, and I have 317 got actually delights in me and and things over me at different points. And so uh, that's been a place where I've had to grow and I'm real good at helping other people see that I haven't. I haven't been as good at helping myself see that, and so there was a guy that I hired on to our staff, he's our assistant pastor for family life, but he's become a spiritual director in the last 10 years. And so I've had him spiritually directing me on that issue and he's been tremendous. And so I think I've had some growth in in that sense. But yeah, it's again, we're all you know, I think pastors get into trouble when they try to stand up in front of everybody and be all things to all people and act like they're perfect. I find it much easier for me to stand up and everyone and tell people decidedly that I'm not perfect. And I got just as many issues as you do. I did that. Maybe I've studied, you know, the scriptures a little more than you have & here's some good news. I'll tell you about, but don't put me on any pedestals and I think that that

*Coping
strategies*

growth

Great!

Great!

has made me more relatable and more understandable to a a body of people. That and in in that sense it's served me well, so.

Interviewer 2 55:59 Thank you.

[Don] 56:00 Yeah.

Interviewer 1 56:02 Yeah. Thank you very much. Do you have any other questions?

[Don] 56:29 I would. I would just throw in that I think the the spiritual challenge in ministry that often gets overlooked is that. Uh, many pastors do spiritual things in order to be productive. They read the scriptures. Umm. In order to prepare Bible study less in order to prepare a sermon in order to plan a funeral, they're in the word of God to be to produce something, not to be in it, to feed themselves. And I think there's a, there's a real and that's where pastors become spiritually dry or spiritually exhausted is when they only are in uh in prayer or in God's word for a work related I have to produce this kind of reason. Umm, you've got to carve out time in which you're in the word of God for you. You're in the scriptures. You're praying to be in communion with God for you in your relationship, and if you don't do that, umm, you know my old youth pastor used to say if you're output exceeds your intake, your upkeep will be your downfall. So if your output exceeds your intake, your upkeep but you're downfall, and I think that's the I have remembered that ever since. And that's true, spiritually and emotionally. So that's the be the last thing I want you to know. I think my other question is kind of where does this go now and like what is? What is your you're hoping to produce? What, at the end of this?

Interviewer 1 58:09 This is a qualitative study. So what we are going to do is take the transcripts and then code them. And identify themes among the participants. The goal is to produce a report of the themes that we find within this interview process. Logistically what we're going to do is then come back around if there's any follow up questions after all of the interviews have been completed. If there's follow up questions that we we've heard maybe from other participants that

we want to ask you about to ask, does this resonate with you? Then that will be a second interview and then after that second interview, once we have the themes, we're going to give you those themes and say, do they resonate with you? Do they fit for you? Do they not fit for you? What's missing? Kind of vetting if this captures the essence of your experiences?

[Don] 59:20 Got it. That's great. Well, I look forward to that and you know, one of my uh, one of my heartbeats is to help nurture and grow up the next generation of pastoral leaders and how I try to equip and prepare them for what it is to sit in this chair and how to take care of themselves because so many pastors are washing out of ministry. These days that we got, we got to prepare a pastor's better. So I'm grateful for your study and look forward to hearing the results.

Interviewer 1 59:54 OK

Interviewer 2 59:55 All right.

Interviewer 1 59:56 Well, thank you so much for your time and we appreciate it.

Interviewer 2 59:57 Yeah. Thank you.

[Don] 59:59 You're welcome.

Interviewer 2 59:59 We appreciate your graciousness.

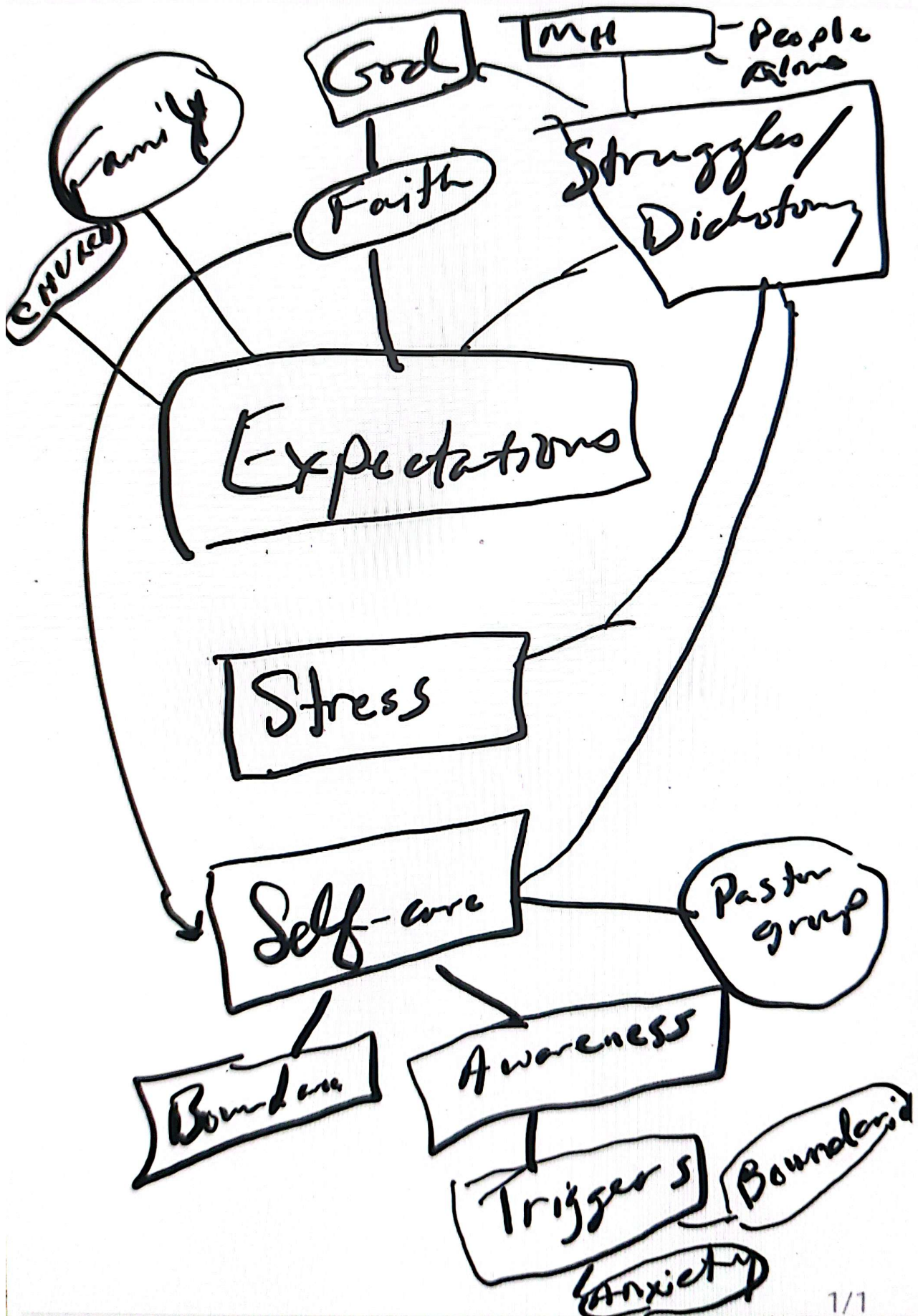
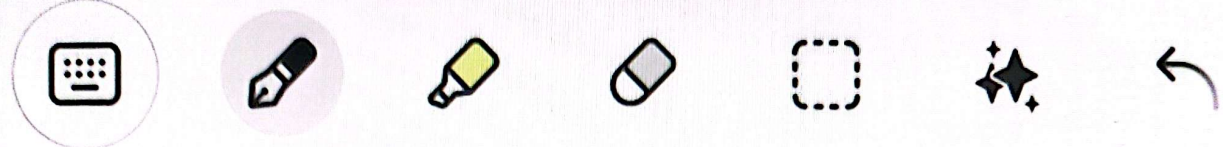
[Don] 1:00:00 You bet. I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Interviewer 1 1:00:01 OK. All right.

Interviewer 2 1:00:03 Alright.

[Don] 1:00:04 Bye.

Interviewer 1 1:00:05 Bye. I'm going to stop the recording.



<Interviewer 1 stopped transcription>

