

Praise for *More Than Fine*

It is difficult for me to be clear enough about the work of John Fehlen. His pastoral expertise, insight, and wisdom gleam as a gem in our chaotic generation. Through slow and painful resilience, he has shown a way forward through the difficulties of pastoring in a way that few have. This book, *More Than Fine*, will encourage and strengthen those in the work of ministry for years to come. And it is an honor to endorse it—and my friend, John.

A.J. Swoboda (Ph.D., University of Birmingham) is the associate professor of Bible and Theology at Bushnell University and the pastor of Faith Center in Eugene, Oregon. He is the author of many books, including *A Teachable Spirit*.

I've had a front-row seat to the story and author behind these pages. This isn't theory—it's hard-won pastoral wisdom, a gracious and hopeful guide for leaders who want more than just being 'okay' and who would dare to thrive.

Tim Clark (DLd., Portland Seminary) is the Lead Pastor of Vision and Voice at The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, CA.

The title is exactly what the reader will encounter when exploring John Fehlen's book: *More Than Fine: The Pastoral Journey from Languishing to Flourishing*. Pastoring has always been challenging. However, in the past decade the stormy nature of leadership has become overwhelming for many in church ministry. Fehlen helps leaders to understand why the headwinds are so strong. And then he offers practical wisdom on how to flourish amid the emotional and spiritual demands. This is a book that every pastor should read.

Morris Dirks (D.Min., Portland Seminary) is the Founder of SoulFormation and author of *Forming The Leader's Soul: An Invitation to Spiritual Direction*.

By blending biblical and historical insights, John Fehlen's *More Than Fine* offers a path to renewal and strength. His empathy and experience remind us we are meant to be abundantly alive. This book isn't just a guide; it's a heart-song—a melody inviting the exhausted soul into a symphony of authentic pastoral well-being. For those seeking renewed strength and unyielding hope, I wholeheartedly commend it.

Dr. Wayne Cordeiro, Founder New Hope International, Pastor and Author of many books, including *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion*.

This refreshing, hopeful guide to whole person flourishing, is a timely, powerful encouragement, offering inspiration to all pastors faced with challenges that diminish their wellbeing. With a pastoral heart and powerful passion, John offers a wise, deeply practical companion with tools for effective, sustainable flourishing in ministry that are theologically sound, validated by convincing, contemporary leadership research and intentionally lived out in his own life. John's compelling invitation is to come alongside as a friend on the important journey of discovering how you can flourish and be more than just fine. I am excited for you to begin!

Catherine Hart Weber, Ph.D., PCC. Therapist, Spiritual Director, ICF Professional Certified Coach. Author of many publications, including *Flourish: Discover Vibrant Living*.

MORE THAN FINE

**The Pastoral Journey from
Languishing to Flourishing**

John Fehlen

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Disclaimer: This book is offered for encouragement, reflection, and spiritual formation. It is not intended to replace professional counseling, medical advice, or mental health care. Readers are encouraged to seek appropriate professional support when needed.

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To Denise—

*We've been on this journey
since we were 19 years old.
I can't wait for what's next.*

"We shake with joy, we shake with grief.

*What a time they have, these two
housed as they are in the same body."*

MARY OLIVER

"This guy's walking down a street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep, he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts, "Hey you, can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down the hole, and moves on. Then, a priest comes along, and the guy shouts, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then, a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me. Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before and know the way out."

CHIEF OF STAFF LEO MCGARRY OF
NBC SERIES, THE WEST WING

*"More than fine, more than bent on getting by
More than fine, more than just okay."*

SWITCHFOOT

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FOREWORD

PASTORAL MINISTRY IS A DIVINE CALLING — ONE THAT ENCOMPASSES INCREDIBLE blessings and opportunities, yet also presents unique challenges and vulnerabilities. In my forty years of full-time ministry, I've discovered that pastors who flourish in their calling and thrive in the face of challenges have several things in common. One of these is that they have a pastor. Pastors do not come out of some magical pool of people; they have limitations, and they are not exempt from the struggles we ask others to endure. Therefore, shepherds also need shepherds.

That is why I am grateful for Pastor John Fehlen's book, *More Than Fine: The Pastoral Journey from Languishing to Flourishing*. John is a seasoned pastor with a tested reputation and proven character, who has faithfully and fruitfully served as a shepherd in Jesus' Church for over thirty years. He knows a great deal about pastoral ministry, and, in particular, he has a deep love for his fellow pastors.

John's book is a practical outworking of what he has learned in ministry and is a gift to any pastor needing encouragement, edification, and equipping in their calling. John is an accomplished academic and lifelong student of the Bible, yet he writes as a practitioner — a fellow pastor who has been there and who lives the very message he is preaching.

I appreciate John's transparency and integrity, which are evident in his writing, as well as his friendship and partnership in ministry. I've had the privilege of observing John's life up close over the past thirty-five years, and I wholeheartedly recommend him as a friend and brother, but also as one who embodies the priorities of seeking and following Jesus first, discipling and loving his family, and humbly leading the church he serves as pastor.

Randy Remington

President | The Foursquare Church

CHIT-CHAT AND SMALL TALK

HELLO, PASTOR FRIEND.

I'm intentionally referring to you as both pastor and friend for two reasons: If you're reading this book, having glanced at the title and the table of contents, there is a high probability that you are a pastor. I put the term "pastor" in the title, which was my way of shooing away those who don't fall into that category.

They just won't get it.

And, I hope you don't mind that I've taken the liberty of calling you a friend. I want this resource to feel like we are two friends sitting together in a coffee shop, bantering about life and ministry, including both the highs *and* the lows. In case you're wondering, my usual drink is a Cold Brew, but I take you for a single-origin, pour-over kind of person. I'll text you the address. I know just the place. I'm a regular.

Honestly, I can't wait to hang out and swap ministry stories. But first, we'll do the obligatory chit-chat and small talk. Conversations of this nature usually begin with the question, "How are you doing?"* The most common response is, "I'm doing fine."

* Speaking of "Friends." The question, "How you doing?" always makes me think of Joey Tribbiani, the character on the hit 90's show *Friends*. My wife and I just finished binge-watching all ten seasons and giggled the entire time.

Fine. Classic.

Fine. It's what we say when we have more to say, yet we secretly hope others will recognize it for the seething smokescreen it tends to be.

Fine. It's a maligned and mangled reply for deep-seated emotions and resentments waiting to burst forth with just the right amount of pressure and prodding.

Fine. It's a quick and glib response when the honest answer is too painful, too long for that moment, or most frequently, too honest for the listener to handle.

It takes some time to dig deeper to find the right words and some trust to authentically express what's really going on in life and ministry. I don't recommend pouring all that out on anyone and everyone. I've done it, and it was a bit of a mess. Most people can't handle that level of truth* and vulnerability, nor should they have to. Frankly, it can be a lot.

But you and I already know that.

You see, this isn't our first rodeo. As pastors, we have been called, anointed, and equipped to constantly listen to and respond to the hurts and hang-ups of others. Sure, it's an immense privilege, but also a job. It's part and parcel of the calling, and we knew it would be difficult when we signed up. Or did we...really?

* "You can't handle the truth!" Yes, that's from *A Few Good Men*. Buckle up, because I am going pepper a bunch of pop culture quotes throughout. Pay attention!

Here is the deal: pastoring IS hard, especially when you are the lead pastor. Sure, I know there are unique blessings and benefits to the role. I have a private bathroom, for goodness' sake. It's not *all* bad, but it sure is challenging and is becoming more so as the stories and statistics confirm increasing numbers of lead pastors who are struggling with depression, anxiety, and burnout.

In a word, pastors are a mess.

That's what this book is about, and so much more, because there is more to life and ministry than teetering on the emotional edge of just being "fine."

Pastors can flourish. Pastors can be more than fine.

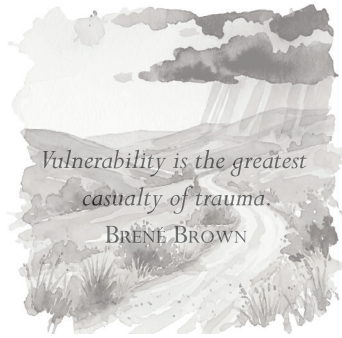
So, I hope you find this book hopeful and helpful.

But to be completely honest with you...

...I wrote it for myself.

ONE

BREAKDOWN OR BREAKTHROUGH?



IT WAS JUST A SHOP-VAC.

It was just a simple Shop-Vac, but for all I knew, it might as well have been a nuclear submarine with a cold fusion reactor, all driven by artificial intelligence.

Bottom line: I could *not* figure it out.

I was at a loss for more than just my mental faculties. I was emotionally, physically, and spiritually rundown and undone. Absolutely, utterly depleted. I was hanging by a very thin and fragile thread, **both** personally and pastorally.

Here's the sad story: my wife had given me some **seemingly** simple tasks before our small group came to our house to "watch church." During the pandemic, I had been pre-recording my weekend teachings and having them uploaded to YouTube for our "scattered" congregation to watch as they "gathered" in House Churches. I was asked to straighten up the living room and clean out the ashes from the fireplace before people arrived. No sweat. Easy peasy. I'm a man, and men should be able to do things like this.

'Nuff said.

Now, granted, I don't own many power tools, and those that we do have in the garage, I'm slightly embarrassed to say, my wife primarily uses. She is the handy one. I'm a preacher and would have to resort to begging on a street corner if I was not actively employed by a church!

But I do know how to operate a Shop-Vac. Come on, it can't be *that* complicated...or so I thought.

After flipping on the large ON/OFF switch, I proceeded to vacuum up the ashes. However, to my shock, I soon realized that the ash had been blowing out the back of the Shop-Vac into the living room. I quickly shut it off, switched the hose to a different spot, and continued the work. This time, **as** the ash blew out another hole, I began to blow my top. I muttered through my clenched jaw and bitten lips. I felt myself getting flush with anger. After ripping the hose out and putting it back into the original slot, I turned the machine on again, and [shocker] it continued to blow ash all around the room.

It was at this point that I completely lost it. My body started to shake, and my head began to throb. I screamed directly at the Shop-Vac as if it **could** hear me and fix itself. I then yelled at myself for my incompetence and inability to complete a simple task involving a tool other than a Bible commentary. I felt emotions that were buried deep within me, now bubbling up hot and fast. While shaking, I yelled for my wife for help, but she was outside working in the yard and couldn't hear me.

Then I erupted.

With ash all over the living room, church folks coming over soon to watch me preach about the peace of God, and my heart fractured in multiple directions, I kicked the Shop-Vac so hard that it flipped over and launched across the room with ash and debris floating and descending everywhere. With guttural tears running down my face, barely able to speak, I implored my wife to come inside quickly. From my reaction, she thought someone was dying or had died.

She wasn't too far off. I was dying inside.

My wife found me in the fetal position on our bed, heaving, weeping, and unable to control the waves of grief.

I was having a breakdown.

Or was it a breakthrough?

I don't believe I'm alone, nor crazy, when I say that the last few years have been difficult for many: First responders, essential workers, or, frankly, anyone breathing air could feel the effects of the messy cultural milieu.

Pastors could feel it, too. I know I sure did.

Pastoral leaders had a lot on their plates and were forced to lead in ways that were foreign to most. Did you experience a challenging season that brought grief to the surface? Perhaps you had a Shop-Vac moment. Maybe it revealed that which was lying dormant deep within your heart and soul. Have you moved on from that bewildering season only to realize you're still hurting? Has the pandemic passed, but the pain has not?

So how *are* you doing? I know we're new to the friendship, and just a few sips into our coffee, but can we be honest with each other? Again, how are *you* doing?

My specific ministry and denominational context is that I have been a Foursquare lead pastor for almost thirty years. **Primarily**, I am writing to other Foursquare lead pastors in this book. However, if you are not a lead pastor or even a member of the Foursquare family of churches, then I wholeheartedly believe this will still be a valuable resource to you.

However, context matters.

As a Foursquare pastor, we are part of a family, a community, or a cohort of sorts. We operate in similar contexts and have similar DNA. I will address this specific DNA shortly, but first, let me humbly offer what I believe to be a pervading challenge in the Foursquare family specifically, and in pastoral ministry in general.

I want to establish and address how Foursquare pastors may be struggling personally and professionally due to, but certainly not limited to, waning self-care, diminishing joy, and an anemic view of biblical suffering. Each of these claims contributes to the challenges pastoral leaders in general may be facing.

It's been said that you can't fully appreciate the solution until you fully appreciate the problem.¹ Together, in this book, we will get solutions, but first, we must recognize the problem.

The problem is **languishing**. More on that to come.

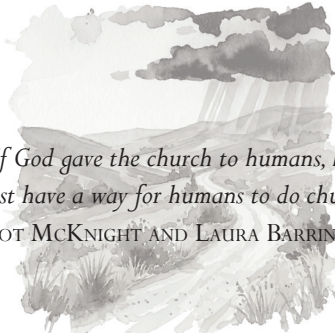
For Personal Reflection or Group Interaction

Take a few moments to reflect upon what you have just read. The following questions may prompt you to pray, journal, or engage in a small group or retreat setting.

1. Can you recall a story from your life of a breakdown that led to a breakthrough? Would you be willing to share that story with a trusted person?
2. How connected do you feel to your brokenness? Is it something you are open with or try to hide?
3. What difference do you notice within because of experiencing pain in your life?

TWO

THE LANGUISHING PASTOR



*If God gave the church to humans, he
must have a way for humans to do church.*

SCOT MCKNIGHT AND LAURA BARRINGER

PASTOR AND AUTHOR MARK BATTERSON SAYS:

“In psychology, mental health is measured from depression to flourishing. Flourishing is evidenced by optimism, empathy, and authenticity...It’s a strong sense of purpose. On the other side of the spectrum is depression, which is evidenced by hopelessness and helplessness. It’s feeling like the best is behind you. Between depression and flourishing, there is languishing.”¹

Batterson calls languishing “the neglected middle child of mental health.”²

Have you felt this before? Are you feeling it now³? Are you languishing personally and pastorally? If so, you're not alone.

As of 2019, the United States Census Bureau estimates that there are 348,811 clergy members in America, with Protestant pastors representing approximately 60% of this total (209,287 clergy).⁴ Numerous studies and surveys paint a grim picture of pastoral health and well-being. One survey indicates that as many as 76% of pastors have experienced burnout, including the following: general lethargy, lack of motivation, and feelings of malaise—not strictly mental *illness*, but also not mental *wholeness*. It's that persistent feeling of **blah**.

In April 2021, best-selling author Adam Grant posted a New York Times article entitled, “There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing.”⁵ At the time, it was one of the most downloaded articles in the history of the NYT. Why? Because so many people could resonate. They could feel it. They just didn’t know what to call it.

How about you, pastor? How are you feeling? Kinda blah?

In a study of evangelical pastors, 54% agreed their role was “frequently overwhelming,” and 48% said “the demands of ministry are more than they can handle.”⁶ In 2021, those numbers increased to 63% and 50%, respectively.⁷ In November 2021, The Barna Group confirmed that 38% of surveyed pastors have considered quitting full-time ministry in the last year. That was up from 29% since that same group of pastors responded to the question at the beginning of 2021.⁸

Sure, a few years have passed since the thick of the pandemic and all the social, civil, and racial unrest. But how are we doing **now**?

Better question: how are *you* doing now?

Pastors still seem to be struggling physically, emotionally, and spiritually.⁹ There continues to be a decline in mental health since 2015. This includes a concerning fact that nearly one in five Protestant senior pastors in the U.S. (18%) say they have contemplated self-harm or suicide within the past year. This is a sobering reality that must be taken seriously.

It is not hyperbole to say that my Shop-Vac season was dark. Transparently, I had passing thoughts of self-harm. I say this not to raise concern (I am OK now) but to wave a white flag of honesty and surrender to Jesus *and* to one another. Transparency is the flourishing path forward. It helps no one to bury pain and hurt in the guise of leadership bravado and trite Christianese. Protestant pastors, which includes Foursquare pastors, seem to have a practical theology that contributes to languishing and burnout. Despite deep struggles, there is a subtle inclination to keep “pressing on” for the Kingdom.

I contend that many Foursquare pastors may be languishing personally and professionally...and the challenge is not new. We have been wrestling with languishing for over one hundred years.

It Ain’t Nothing but a Family Thing

In season 3 of the hit NBC show *The West Wing*, Chief of Staff Leo McGarry referred to himself as being an alcoholic, just like his father

and his father before him. In one episode, a lawyer questioned Leo about his family history, commenting, “It ain’t nothing but a family thing.” To that, Leo replied, “That’s right.”

It ain’t nothing but a family thing.

McPherson, the founder of The Foursquare Church in 1924, was a revivalist, evangelist, and senior pastor who reportedly faced seasons of struggle, pain, conflict, depression, and anxiety, having experienced several nervous breakdowns, deep weariness, marital unhappiness, and a variety of illnesses.

No stranger to a frenetic pace, McPherson often preached 22 sermons per week. After addressing 10,000 people in the Oakland Auditorium, McPherson died the following day at the age of 54, reportedly of a heart attack, kidney failure, and the effects of the mixture of prescription drugs¹⁰ and a documented overdose of sleeping medication.¹¹ This is in the DNA of The Foursquare Church, and sadly, I believe a measure of generational sin may still be a lingering within the Foursquare ministry one hundred years later.

McPherson was a complex, flawed, and broken person who ministered to many by the grace of God. Borrowing a term popularized by Henri Nouwen, Aimee was a “wounded healer.”¹² One of the primary ministries of a pastor, such as McPherson, is to guide people toward a life of healing and wholeness. Yet, pastors may be experiencing a degree of cognitive dissonance, with inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes relating to personal behaviors and decisions.¹³

Within The Foursquare Church, this is not limited to its founder, Aimee Semple McPherson. Foursquare seems to have a pervading ethos that was established early in its 100-year history and embodies the oft-quoted, “I’d rather burn out than rust out in the service of the Lord.”¹⁴ In hearing this phrase from its source, James Berkeley said, “I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burnouts and the almost burnouts who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. Is there not a third alternative?”¹⁵

I am asking the same question.

In the Los Angeles home that Aimee Semple McPherson occupied (now a historical museum), above her bed, there is a photograph of the revivalist preacher sitting on that very bed with one typewriter on her lap and another beside her. One cannot help but picture the modern-day pastor surrounded by a laptop, tablet, and smartphone. Perhaps McPherson has given rise to the mentality of a leader who would rather “burn out than rust out.” One could make a reasonable case that, indeed, McPherson burned out.

McPherson founded a movement of churches that today is comprised of thousands of pastoral leaders and millions of congregants worldwide. Times may have changed, but the ongoing pressures seem only to have gotten consistently stronger and faster. The ministry description of a pastor is varied and often incredibly complex.

Clergy roles have frequently been grouped into six categories: preacher, deliverer of rituals and sacraments, pastor/caregiver, teacher, organizer, and administrator. These roles, particularly when

combined, involve diverse competencies and numerous stressors. Pastors must frequently transition between roles, often multiple times during a single day.¹⁶ This can result in overload, burnout, and personal and professional languishing.

Several notable Foursquare pastors have addressed the realities of ministerial stress and struggle. In his book, *God Works the Night Shift*, the late Foursquare pastor Ron Mehl admitted to being so focused on his ministry work that he neglected to take care of himself and his health, eventually leading to a heart attack.¹⁷ In another one of his books, *The Tender Commandments*, Mehl disclosed that he had not properly observed a Sabbath for many years.¹⁸

In a personal interview with the late Foursquare pastor Jack Hayford, he admitted to being a chronic workaholic, as well as feeling acute regret for extended seasons of limited attention given to his family. Wayne Cordeiro, pastor and founder of New Hope International, wrote *Leading on Empty*, focusing entirely on his storied burnout in pastoral ministry. In his book, Cordeiro says, “When we see things dimly, we invite depression, which can be defined as a perceived inability to reconstruct your future.” Cordeiro is spot on, and my hope is that this resource can serve as an extension to what Cordeiro sought to address in his important book.

These are but only a few individuals, and highly esteemed ones at that, who struggled in areas of work/life balance. Thankfully, each continue to “finish the race” with faith and family intact. This, sadly, is not the reality for many others. From observation and personal conversations with pastoral peers, I have identified a struggle among Four-

square pastors to sustain joy in their ministry calling and assignments. A growing number are leaving the ministry altogether; others that remain are finding it difficult to recover from adversity; still others are experiencing a decline in well-being and optimism, as well as an increase in depression and anxiety. While many pastors remain resilient in their assignments, there seems to be a growing number that are struggling physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This has been a prevailing theme in my interactions with Foursquare pastors. One large church pastor said, “The past few years have been challenging. I find myself grieving the news that a couple more of my friends are being benched or burned out.”

Yet another pastor admitted, “These last two years have been some of the hardest for me, yet paradoxically, the best years of my life because the development of perseverance has led to a deeper connection to Jesus.” This paradox and the importance of perseverance will be examined in depth in a later chapter.

Conversations such as these with Foursquare pastors have been numerous over the last thirty years of pastoral ministry, but more intense in the last few years, as we minister in the wake of political polarization, racial inequality, physical isolation, and mounting opposition to churches and Christian leaders. Emotions seem to be wearing thin, and joy seems to be diminishing, notwithstanding a remnant of renewal and courage in the face of these overt challenges.

Yes, some pastors are rising to the moment. That is cause for rejoicing. My hope and prayer are for more of that! However, others appear to be falling and failing in growing numbers, whether to moral failure,

quitting, or sadly, resigning themselves to a joyless existence in ministry. What might be contributing to these realities? Are there particular vulnerabilities that pastoral leaders may have that heighten their propensity to feel overwhelmed within their calling?

And if so, who can help us make sense of it?

Enter: the prophet Elijah.

For Personal Reflection or Group Interaction

Take a few moments to reflect upon what you have just read. The following questions may prompt you to pray, journal, or engage in a small group or retreat setting.

1. Take a current inventory of your life and ministry. Where are you now? (languishing, thriving, depressed, etc.).
2. What has your specific evangelical/Pentecostal culture taught you that doesn't seem to be working?
3. What drives you as a pastor? What do you think God wants you to understand when acknowledging this?

