

# Clergy Self-care During a Pandemic

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A couple of weeks ago, I e-mailed my pastor to ask how he was doing. He wrote back, “I’m good – just trying to figure out the most effective way to ‘be church’ in the midst of this time.” My pastor’s words capture well what I’ve heard from so many clergy colleagues over the last few weeks: how do we do this sacred, embodied work when we can’t be together in the same room?

The fact that “normal ministry” can’t take place right now is difficult for many reasons, but it doesn’t mean that clergy suddenly have more time on their hands. In fact, planning worship may take additional time and energy because clergy must learn and deploy new technology for a dispersed congregation. Ministers may also feel that they should be in more frequent contact with their

parishioners; conversely, fearful and anxious parishioners may reach out to their spiritual leaders more often, seeking comfort and hope. In these circumstances, ministers could potentially work many hours every day and still feel that they are falling short.

| In the midst of a crisis, it can be tempting for clergy to forego self-care practices because everything else feels like an emergency.

But right now, self-care for clergy is more important than ever because this crisis will last a long time—weeks or months, at least.

Intense work patterns simply will not be sustainable in the long term and will likely lead to burnout. So, what might good self-care for clergy look like in these very unusual times? Here are a few suggestions:

## **Don't forget the basics.**

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These days, there are lots of tips on the Internet for practicing good self-care in the midst of a pandemic: Establish a routine. Limit your intake of news and social media. Eat well and exercise. Take time to play and create. This is all good advice, for everyone (not just clergy) – follow it, as much as you can.

## **Conserve energy for what is most important for you and your congregation right now.**

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In the early phase of this crisis, many pastoral leaders have (understandably) focused on figuring out how to facilitate remote worship and educational experiences. This is important work – but in the coming weeks, pastoral care demands will likely increase as more people in our communities contract the virus and fall ill. (Check out these guidelines about how to provide pastoral care during this crisis.)

This will mean that clergy will have even less energy to devote to the usual tasks of ministry. If you are feeling especially stretched by the pastoral care needs in your community, consider the following:

*Don't reinvent the wheel.*

This may not be the time to produce an original set of daily devotions for your congregation when there are so many other resources available online. Consider sharing outside resources with your congregation rather than trying to create them all yourself.

*Leverage partnerships to share the load.*

If your community is experiencing increasingly intense pastoral care needs and you are feeling overwhelmed by trying to facilitate weekly worship or Bible study, consider partnering with a neighboring church to share leadership. This might also help your faith community to connect with another congregation in the neighborhood.

*Ask, “What is most important right now for the people I am caring for?” and, “Am I the best person to provide that?”*

Use the first question to help you discern where to focus your limited energy and time. Use the second question to help you figure out when to activate your network of resources, especially if referral is indicated (for serious mental health needs, for example).

## **Recognize that some boundaries may need to change for a while – but boundaries are still important.**

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Right now, you may feel it is important to be available to congregants via phone, e-mail, or text message more often than you typically would. However, this doesn't mean that you can't set any boundaries at all. It's OK to stop working at a certain time of day; after that time, only respond to communications if there is a true emergency. And taking regular time off will be even more important than usual to give yourself a break from the intensity of ministry during this period. Give yourself some time each week, even if it is only part of a day, to rest and renew yourself spiritually.

## **Practice self-compassion.**

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No one really knows how to do ministry well in these circumstances. We can certainly learn from those who have ministered in the midst of other communal traumas, but we are all trying to figure this out as we go. Be gentle and compassionate with yourself. Offer yourself the grace that you typically offer to others.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that what your congregation most needs from you right now is not a new virtual Bible study or seamless online worship—what they most need is *you*, as healthy and whole as you can be. Self-care practices are vital for keeping us all grounded during a very stressful time; ignoring self-care at a time like this will likely only hurt us and our ministries in the long run. As the Rev. Matthew Crebbin put it in a recent blog post about ministering during disasters, “Do not surrender to the temptation of believing that God needs your own personal destruction to

save the world. It's not only bad personal self-care, it is bad public theology." Let's resist that temptation, and instead remind ourselves and those we are in ministry with that each of us is a beloved child of God, worthy of respect and care.

*A graduate of Vanderbilt University (Ph.D.), Vanderbilt Divinity School (M.Div.), and Furman University (B.A.), the Rev. Dr. Leanna Fuller is in her element when teaching about caring ministry. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, her most recent book is titled When Christ's Body is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations (Wipf and Stock, 2016). Fuller has earned numerous fellowships, awards, and honors. She concerns herself with church conflict, and her book uses two case studies to examine the issue toward constructive outcomes. Fuller advises pastors to develop an intentional plan for dealing with congregational conflict—before the conflict arises! Some of the first steps, she says, include acknowledging that anxiety will be present in such circumstances and that the more serious the conflict the more time it will take to resolve it constructively.*