

With COVID-19, Proactive Self-Care More Essential for Ministers

Long before we knew concerns related to the COVID-19 virus would shift churches from in-person gatherings to online communities, those serving in the clergy and other caring vocations were considered more at risk for burnout and depression than other professions.

Recent studies indicate that stress, burnout and mental fatigue have been becoming more intense among clergy for years, leading even some of the most devout ministers to leave ministry.

While no one knows the exact percentage of ministers who experience depression, long before COVID-19 concerns were on the radar, Matthew Stanford, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University suggested, “The likelihood is that one out of every four ministers is depressed.”

Like many other care-giving vocations, ministry is tough on the mind, body and emotions.

Simply put, those who care for the souls of others often find it difficult to work in time to take care of themselves.

But proactive self-care is essential for ministers, especially during times like these.

Self-care includes developing and maintaining healthy practices that promote and preserve good physical, spiritual and mental well-being.

While these three areas of wellness are intertwined and inseparable, in my own life and the experience of many of my colleagues, I recognize prioritizing physical and spiritual health to the exclusion of mental health, usually results in the diminishment of all three.

In his book, “Surviving the Stained-Glass Jungle,” respected pastor (now deceased) Bill Self contended that, “Self-care is not destructive self-indulgence, but rather it is being a steward of some rather special gifts – the human body and soul, along with the capacity to bring joy to others as well as to experience it.”

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been checking in with dozens of other pastors. When I asked, “How are you doing?” their responses have mostly fallen into three categories:

- “I’m doing OK most of the time, but I have my moments.”
- “Some days my anxiety gets the best of me.”
- “Pray for me. I’m not sure how I am going to get through this.”

If you are a minister and you are feeling a little frazzled, you are not alone. It’s no wonder the anxiety of ministers is elevated. Think about it. When the crisis hit, we jumped into ministry overdrive:

- We are ministering to a highly anxious group of people in our congregations and surrounding communities.
- We have been called on to make a large number of pivotal decisions about online worship schedules, campus closures, pastoral visitation, virtual committee meetings, electronic giving initiatives, expense reduction strategies and staff schedules, all in an extremely short time.
- Almost everything in our course of work is transitioning, including the way we connect for worship, the way we communicate with our congregation, the way we do pastoral care, the way we perform weddings, the way we officiate funerals and the way we relate to our colleagues.
- Many of us thrive on personal contact with our parishioners, but now we are temporarily limited to impersonal contact with them.

We don’t know how long this season of elevated concern will last. Although we can hope for a return to smaller in-person gatherings in the near future, it is likely that some of the precautionary guidelines, such as limited physical contact and reduced group sizes, will continue for months, not weeks.

As we navigate the increased stress and uncertainty of these uncharted waters, it is imperative we practice healthy self-care, or our energy and creativity will fizzle when our people need us most.

As we upgrade our commitment to caring for ourselves so we can better care for others, I offer the following suggestions:

- Deepen your devotional life. The further we progress in ministry, the easier it becomes to neglect personal growth.

- If you are married, make your marriage a priority. We can't put our marriage on cruise control or we will likely lose our marriage and our ministry.
- Strengthen connections with your colleagues. The adventure ahead requires we become even more collegial. Though this requires doing so from a distance for the time being, we can use technology to maintain and strengthen relationships.
- Practice Sabbath consistently. Though our "ox" might be in the proverbial ditch for a week or two, it is urgent we return to the practice of Sabbath, taking an off day and temporarily disconnecting from media as soon as possible. Carey Nieuwhof reminds us, "Leaders who never take a break end up breaking."
- Become even more flexible. Ministry has always required a certain amount of elasticity, but this chapter will require outside-the-box thinking and extraordinarily adaptive leadership.
- Upgrade your EQ. I don't think it is realistic for anyone to be a completely non-anxious presence, but healthy emotional intelligence (also referred to as emotional quotient) enables us to be a less anxious presence in highly anxious times.
- Be transparent with your congregation. Let them know you love them and you are honored to lead them. But also let them know we are now pioneers on a new adventure going "where no congregation has gone before."

Life in the stained-glass jungle has unique rewards and challenges. Self-care is absolutely essential.

Bill Self reminded us, "It takes courage to take care of yourself. One of the hallmarks of a professional is the ability to keep healthy - physically, emotionally and spiritually. You must take responsibility for yourself and not expect others to take the initiative to care for you."

Practicing good self-care can empower a pastor to be mentally sharp, emotionally balanced and spiritually perceptive in all seasons, even times like these.