

Dear Friends in Ministry,

This has been an Easter, Holy Week, and Lent like no other. Ash Wednesday seems like a million years ago. Many times, I remember reaching Easter Sunday afternoon, and dropping down into my recliner after what felt like a marathon. Some years I finished the year stronger than others, but I felt good on Easter Sunday afternoon knowing that I had earned a good rest. But this year is different, there is no vacation to fly off too, no week of quiet gardening, no...and it doesn't matter if you are serving in a parish, a clinical setting, or even if you are a minister without a setting because COVID-19 changed everything. There is no rest this year; the marathon is just continuing with no finish line in view. The needs, the demands, the hurt just keep coming.

I write to you today as a Sibling who is scared-to-death not only about the pandemic that is ripping our lives, our congregations, and our world apart but also about what could come next for myself and my friends in ministry. I am not an authority on infectious diseases nor on COVID-19, but over the last decade I have invested thousands and thousands of hours in studying clergy burnout and clergy theologies of work, and I can speak on that.

I have studied clergy burnout from both social science and theological perspectives including clergy stress, workloads, congregational conflict, boundaries, role conflict, secondary trauma exposure, compassion fatigue, over functioning, role ambiguity, depression, toxic congregations, and deformation in light of scripture, prayer, spirituality, tradition, theology, and social science research. In my PhD Dissertation, I worked with a group of United Church of Christ clergy, who had experienced burnout and returned to successful ministry, to articulate a practical contextual theology of mundane work to provide a resource for other clergy who are in a state of burnout and to reach out with a life-line to those heading toward burnout.

Now I have returned to my dissertation work because what wakes me up in the middle of night is fear of the pandemic that could come after COVID-19; a pandemic of clergy burnout, early exits from ministry, addiction (or relapses into addiction), moral failings, health crises, broken boundaries that cannot be repaired, spiritually dry and barren lives, damaged marriages and relationships, and even premature death including suicide and from other stress related conditions.

This pandemic is a perfect storm of burnout inducing stressors for those in ministry: social isolation, work-overload, rapid change, excessive exposure to

trauma (day after day after day), congregational conflicts over how to do it best, role ambiguity, financial strains on congregations and clergy....and on and on.

As I watch and listen to all that you are doing for the Church and for all of God's creation, I am awed by the creativity and love that you are bringing to this hurting world. Surfing Facebook and YouTube on Sundays and getting to hear so many of you lead worship, teach, and preach is incredible. I am amazed by the huge impact these ministries that many of you launched in the blink of an eye.

DON'T STOP! Rather I am asking you to reflect upon your PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to prevent a pandemic of clergy burnout and stress related disorders. First responders, nurses, and doctors need PPE and so do we! The clergy, who worked with me to discern this theology of work in my dissertation, articulated a theology rooted in a healthy sense of call / vocation, understanding our spiritual gifts, our participation in the priesthood of all believers, our participation in cosmology as co-creators, grace, and justice. But today, I just want to share three of the pillars that can be the foundation of a useful PPE: God centeredness, holistic self-care, and a self-reflective sense of our role in God's great cosmology.

- First, the clergy I worked with strongly emphasized the need to be theocentric in every aspect of our work to prevent burnout. This includes a daily recommended 20 to 60 minutes of dedicated prayer practice as well as having a daily devotional time for reading scripture and making time to read those spiritual mentors / authors who renew us.
- Secondly, the scholarly literature and the clergy I worked with highlighted the need for holistic self-care that empowers each of us to express our spiritual gifts and refill our emotional and intellectual fuel tanks: walking, dancing, photography, music, exercise, cooking, saying "no"...whatever refills each of us must be a top priority every day. Embrace the activities that will care for your body, mind, and spirit and don't let them drop to the bottom of your to do lists.
- Finally, the clergy that I worked with stressed the need to make time to reflect upon our understanding of God's cosmology in our individual ministries. I know that I am not called to be a Messiah that role has already been filled. We can't do it all nor is doing it all expected of us. As we form and strengthen our self-understanding and awareness of what it means to be a co-creator, we lay many unachievable expectations down. This reflection

can be done in a variety of mediums from journaling to dance to talk with a friend, but it can be vital.

There is not a one size fits all recipe to prevent clergy burnout. Each of our ministry settings and each of us is unique. Experiment and discern what will work for you at this time and in your current setting.

As we continue our ministries, I want to encourage all of us to watch out for these warning signs. Burnout is always preceded by prolonged periods of Emotional Exhaustion. It can often be treated with dedicated R&R. But when it becomes chronic, our emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual methods of coping with it will no longer be enough.

Another warning sign comes when the emotional exhaustion is coupled with a sense of depersonalization. In other words: we start to feel a sense of bitterness, anger, or resentment towards those we are ministering to. If you recognize that you have emotional exhaustion and are experiencing depersonalization then you will need to reach out for help, join a healthy clergy support group, and develop a treatment plan sooner rather than later.

Finally, if these first two symptoms are present with feelings of a lack of personal or professional accomplishments or feelings that it is all meaningless then you need immediate help (today) for prolonged care.

If you are seeking treatment from burnout the following have been shown to work:

- Spiritual Retreats (on a regular basis)
- CPE
- Spiritual Disciplines (regularly practiced)
- Healthy Clergy Groups (where you feel listened to and affirmed)
- Have Someone to Listen (therapist, counselor, mentor)
- Spiritual Friendships and Mentors
- Thinking in Systems
- Artistic Expression
- Increasing Self-Awareness
- Sabbaticals
- Spiritual Companions (Spiritual Direction)
- Movement Therapies
- Journaling

- Prayer and Mediation

If anyone wants to read to my entire dissertation, it is free online at <https://www.jonathanandestherroach.net/> but I don't expect that of anyone right now. If you want to talk to about burnout or want to catch up, feel free to call me or drop me an e-mail.

If you do want to read some addition resources, I recommend:

- Roy Oswald's "Clergy Self-Care"
- Bruce and Katherine Epperly's "Feed the Fire: Avoiding Clergy Burnout"
- Dorothee Soelle and Shirley Cloyes' "To Work and To Love"
- Thich Nhat Hanh's "Work"
- Bruce and Katherine Epperly's "Tending the Holy" or "A Center in the Cyclone: Twenty-first Century Clergy Self-Care" or "Four Seasons of Ministry: Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness"

Peace and Blessings,

Jonathan