

Having A Prayer: Clergy Self-Care

By Warren Lynn

The life of a pastor can be filled with ongoing and significant stress. Too often, the ever-present focus to provide care for others is maintained at the expense of one's own needs. As a recent e-newsletter from Clergy Financial Services in Colorado (www.clergysupport.com) pointed out, pastors "are constantly on the go, in demand, and juggling to balance a stressful workload with some semblance of a personal life. When it gets to be too much, something's got to give, and usually its [the pastor's] emotional and/or physical health." Others have recognized the heavy toll such ongoing stress takes on a pastor's family. Left unchecked, these disabling effects can undermine the pastor's ability to care for God's church.

While clergy never completely escape stress, experts tell us they can learn to recognize when there's too much, avoid specific stressors when possible, and manage their overall lives with greater balance. Such mindful self-care can become a preventative tool that keeps those in pastoral ministry from spiraling out of control into emotional, professional, and family burnout. It can also become a foundation upon which to bring about healing for a life of leadership previously lived out of balance. In every case, the ongoing integrity and effect of a minister is dependent upon the minister's ability to live with such balance.

So, what can a person do to prevent or heal such trauma in their lives? For chronic stress or burnout, seek professional help from a doctor and/or counselor before anything else. Within the Christian tradition, there are also a variety of invaluable spiritual practices essential to maintaining balance. In future editions of the Advocate, you will find articles that focus on a variety of these helpful spiritual activities. Central to our body of spiritual practice, though, is **prayer**.

There is certainly no lack of people who've experienced how prayer makes a difference. And yet, even ministers forget occasionally that the kind of prayer most transforming for our lives is about more than announcing a personal wish list *to* God. Prayer is more the cumulative activity of our lives and God's presence that comes together to form our relationship *with* God. It is an eternal dance with the divine to which we initially say "yes," and into which we are then led. Some of the most powerful examples of prayer within our Christian tradition have been about such willingness to be intimate with God. From folks like Ruth and Moses within the Hebrew scriptures, to so many others, such visions of prayer have come out of the imperfect lives of people who were willing to be utterly committed to God's caring grace; a desire to hear as much as be heard, even to just be present to God when there was nothing more to be said.

Being utterly in love with a lifelong human partner, especially after all the infatuation is over with, is a little like this notion of prayer; we worry less about the kiss we might get at the end of the date, and simply celebrate the informed hope that we will forever be together. In such a love as this we find ourselves "praying" through the way we encounter each and every moment: how we treat others and their ideas at a congregational board meeting, in the undivided attention we offer to a young child, noting the touchstones of God's love for us in every mundane experience of our lives as much as in the pious acts of our pastoral vocation. Prayer in this sense becomes an active, unceasing, relationship with God, rather than some momentary spiritual collect call asking for one more thing. It begins by ceasing the chatter of our desires and simply breathing, quietly, calmly into God's presence; relaxing into the embrace of God. It continues with a willingness to be present and honest with this One who loves us more than any fulfilled wish list could ever affirm.

Praying in this way, without our first desire always being what our effort might get us, we still can't help but notice we are forever enriched. We are better able to handle the hard work of caring for

Christ's flock. We are more empowered to keep ourselves healthy. Certainly, we are better able to recover from, and often even avoid, the personal foibles and vocational turmoil that can easily unsettle even the best of us who seek to offer ministry amidst the people of God in this world.

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