

Getting Physical: Clergy Self-Care

By Warren Lynn

Vocational ministry can be an incredibly stressful endeavor. Long hours, unwieldy expectations, unhealthy habits and more can conspire to undo the well-being of any minister. Truthfully, one of the first things to go is often physical health. In many circumstances, such debilitation is often due to preventable realities. In fact, recent reports from the Pension Fund notes that the largest collective medical claims currently made by Disciples' clergy are for diabetes and hypertension (high blood pressure) related concerns. These observations reinforce the importance of the connection between body and Spirit.

One of the sacred gifts God has bestowed upon each of us is our physical and incarnated body. It is through our physical being we are mostly able to reach out and care for others, do things for each other, be present with each other ... in each touch and little task and late night hospital visit. A finite and vulnerable body is the primary means through which we are each able to share in God's ministry to this world.

To honor the human body as a gift from God, we each must become actively involved in the care of our bodily gift. As stewards of all God's gifts, such care needs to be foundational for how we live in every moment. Each physical activity becomes an opportunity to say "thank you" to God who has given us life. Mindful attention to what we do with our bodies can open us up in intimate relationship with the Giver of all life. Everything we do -- from hobbies to personal hygiene, meals to household chores, vocational responsibilities to community participation -- holds potential to be more about faithful stewardship than selfish indulgence, more holy consecration than secular hobby.

A few places to begin thinking of physical activity in terms of spiritual practice are in the areas of nutrition, exercise and rest. Note, you may need to talk with your doctor about these matters of diet, exercise and rest if you have extenuating physical challenges which put your health at risk. However, such matters are at the heart of our physical wholeness.

In looking at the first area mentioned, though, it is also true that eating healthy often seems easier said than done. Yet, while God is providing nourishment for the soul, we need to provide nourishment for the body and mind. How and what we eat can either be a significant element in our spiritual practice or a devastating liability. Being mindful of what we eat rather than eating out of habit or as an emotional response, smaller portions, balanced meals, less snacking, care about what gets prepared for, and put on, plates at church functions are all important to this process.

Exercise is another important spiritual practice. This doesn't have to be too-rigorous. Start modestly. Don't let unrealistic efforts throw everything else out of balance. Perhaps, just start walking a quarter of a mile on a daily basis, as part of lunch time, or between daytime responsibilities and evening meetings. Get out and walk around the block before or after an intense meeting or rigorous session with a parishioner. Take some personal time in the gym or on the sidewalk as an opportunity to enjoy God's encouraging care, and to listen for what God may be trying to say. In other words, take this opportunity to pray. Consider taking up a regular meditative exercise program such as yoga, qui gong or tai chi. It can work wonders for finding one's center, helping the body relax and making room for prayer -- even in the midst of a stressful life.

Finally, consider how rest can be a spiritual practice. While sitting at your desk, roll your shoulders and neck in a circular motion to stretch the muscles. Close your eyes, then tighten and relax each set of muscles, one at a time, from your feet up to your head; while each set of muscles is tightened count slowly to five, then release. Feel your body let go of any tension. Regularly look up and out the window to God's creation beyond the office desk. Also remember, the amount of sleep you get each night has a profound ability to either empower or debilitate your ministry; consider whether you are getting enough sleep. Schedule regular time off. Even if it's only one day a week, you'll see instant results. Put it on your calendar and protect that time. Think in terms of "Sabbath-keeping," refocusing your time away from the work of ministry into an experience that is more sacred than merely another "day off."

While you're at it, check out Wayne Muller's book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, and Stephanie Paulsell's book, *Honoring the Body*. Consider just how God may be calling you to bring connection and balance back into the relationship between your spiritual practice, your vocational ministry, and the physical realities of your life.

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