Self-Care of the Minister: A Team Effort

Let me share two vignettes with you. There is one issue very much at the heart of both. In the first, a young minister graduates seminary and begins serving a growing church. The job is “fulltime,” which means anything but the mythical 9-5 schedule. Among the church’s personnel practices, pastoral staff is given Fridays “off.” However, this new minister wants to be sure she delivers on her responsibilities. She wants to be sure no one can question her effort. The need to prove oneself can be powerful in a first church especially. With a husband also working fulltime, she feels a bit guilty about the idea of having Fridays off when he will not. Her tenure there lasts three years before a larger church calls them away. Mission accomplished; she proved herself by some measures, but with one exception. In those years at that initial church, she took a grand total of three of her days off. And, two of those were as she was preparing to move on.

In the second scenario, a veteran minister is invited to speak—yet again—at a divinity school. He will talk with students about what serving a church is really like. And, he will field a significant number of open Q&A-style matters. A friend asks, “What have they specifically asked you to speak on?” His response? “It really doesn’t matter. All these divinity students want you to do is open up the Q&A so they can ask you about ministerial self-care. Most of them haven’t done a thing yet, and all they are curious about is self-care. Boundaries. Days off. No wonder a lot of them aren’t lasting these days when they get out in churches.”

Like so much of life, health lies somewhere in-between with extreme stories like that. Both are true—and instructive—for the church’s schedule is anything but regular. Lines blur very quickly as to what is one’s personal time and what belongs to the church. Questions arise: How does one figure out what is fair to their family (if married) and to their self? What is reasonable for the church to expect? How will boundaries be practiced and communicated? What does the church owe the minister—and what does the minister owe the church?

There are still other issues that speak of the need for attentive self-care. Studies regularly indicate that clergy are at higher risk than the general population for obesity, hypertension and depression. Cell phones and email are among the entrees that render ministers seemingly into a perpetual on-call status. Clergy often do not feel the permission to say “no” to church members. Aspects of our lives are lived in an open-book style. Some describe the lifestyle as a fishbowl. We are constantly surrounded by people—and often by large numbers of people. Yet, many clergy also report feeling isolated and unknown.

A tension is set in place between minister and congregation: too little production from the minister—both the church and minister will pay the price. Conversely, too little self-care—both the church and the minister will pay the price as well. Working together to set in place clear, written personnel practices will be important. Ministers and church also need to be somewhat creative in their practice of these. The world of ministry is full of people who work extended hours and never “make up for them” if one is keeping score. Well-intentioned, the church will take every hour and day you can give her. In fact, one veteran says “Your pastoral ministry will never be possible until you make peace with the impossibility of the task.” He is deadly accurate. We will walk away from each day with phone calls that needed to have been returned and visits that needed to have been made. His wisdom is not a blessing for us to shirk our responsibilities. Instead, his words remind us that the job will never be finished.

But we clergy can short the church, too. Ministry happens in the interruptions. This popular saying is true. However annoying interruptions may be, they can produce some of the most meaningful times of service. Let’s notice one assumption then: in order to be interrupted one has to be at work. In an age of
telecommuting, ministry remains a primarily relational work. Church and minister need to be more up-front than ever in their agreements as to the standards of showing up for work. In one larger, multi-staff setting there is a division growing about why some ministers work mostly from home. Meanwhile, others continue to keep more traditional office hours. When the homeless or church member interruptions walk in, relatively the same team members have to deal with them. Day after day. Others are not bearing what appears to be a fair amount of the work that simply does not show up in the written position descriptions. Fairness to colleagues, and church, needs to be taken into consideration in a unique work setting like ministry.

Let’s be sure we name some specific dimensions that comprise good self-care. You might add some others of your own. But be sure you pay attention to:

**Spiritual growth and development**- We can be fooled easily into believing that our Bible study, writing or sermon preparation involves so much “scripture” that we don’t need to worry about spiritual discipline. Throw in all of the many prayers a minister ends up leading in public settings, and one can also begin to think they are all “prayed-up.” If our work-related study and praying is all we are doing, we might need to reconsider our investment in this part of who we are. You need to plan for spiritual discipline. And, your church needs to grant you this grace as a valid part of your work.

**Rest for the soul**- Let’s be honest. Most ministers aren’t exactly digging ditches for a living. Perhaps a demanding schedule could leave one sleep-deprived. But, rest for most clergy has more to do with emotional and spiritual rest than with physical. Many of us need to be intentional at the point of getting away from our work on a regular basis. The ministry setting will receive a better and more dedicated minister when that individual has more in his/her life than just the church. We also need to be sure we are somehow connected with the real world that the parishioners are always mentioning. Take the day off. Use your vacation allotment. Be a part of the community where you serve. Be on call for emergencies, but work the rest of the week to protect this luxury that ends up not really being a luxury.

**Physical health**- Exercise and good nutrition seem like flex points to many clergy. Meals are often served to us as a part of a meeting or program we are participating in. Hospital visits just naturally seem to find us in our cars around breakfast or lunch times. So, fast-food diets are an ironic solution today. If you leave seminary at around the age of 25 and retire between the ages of 65 and 70, your body really needs to last for the long haul. Yet, clergy seem to neglect the commitments and disciplines that can build better health. Proper diet and exercise are not mere options.

**Broadened and balanced pursuit of hobbies or interests**- I know ministers whose hobby appears to be “church.” They are very dedicated. I admire (envy actually) their attachment to their churches. However, I do not relate to them for a minute. And, I often find them to be the likeliest candidates to violate their colleagues’ most appropriate boundaries. I am convinced that we need hobbies, interests and passions that are not directly tied to our work with the church. For the sake of personal, emotional and intellectual balance. For the sake of health. For the sanity of our families and friends. These outside worlds tend to push our figurative “reset” buttons. They refresh our souls and lend a more whole perspective to life. That is my conviction. I hope you will ponder this and see if it is yours, too.

Now, let’s explore the issue of comp-time. My views on this will not be popular. But, let’s talk honestly. Ministry done well involves some long hours in all but the most unique settings. If you will allow, many is the week I have flown past 40 hours by the time I go home on a Wednesday night. We will not be able
to comp out every extended day or every special intrusion on our weekends. I see a lot of newer ministers try to track and trade out every hour they work. Which means that a lot are absent during significant (and reasonable) office hours. Strict practices of comp-time are popular with students and professors to muse on. But for the long run, you may find the beneficial rest to come better in structured and regular time away that is agreed upon with the church. The people who seem to get in trouble are taking their weekly days off AND are adding massive blocks of time off “...because I took the youth to the lake Saturday.” I want to say, “That’s why they gave you the weekly day off to begin with.” Don’t cheat the church in the interest of self-care. Consider that being in trouble, or unemployed, is not good for your self-care either.

So, what do we do with all of this? How might this conversation about Ministerial Self-Care be put to work between the church and their staff? Here are a few areas that both parties ought to give attention to:

As staff is hired, will the expectations and practices that impact self-care be agreed upon and clearly stated? Vacation, days off, comp-time (if applicable) and any other flexible practices? This is vital information for all parties.

When beginning (translate: entry-level or young) ministers are hired, is someone acting on the church’s behalf to oversee at least the early phases of their service? To act as a liaison between church and minister, so that they navigate fairly the issues of self-care?

Is there an ongoing body (staff, personnel committee or other group that acts as a sounding board) for each minister to meet with on some periodic basis?

Who is evaluating periodically to see that policies and practices are relevant and fair to both ministers and to the church?

Since most committee-style groups do not always truly represent the larger church body, are these policies and practices available (and advertised once-in-a-blue-moon or better) so that church members at least have the opportunity to understand the arrangement?

Is the church helping, in a reasonable way, with the clergy’s self-care through resource budgets, adequate time off, vacation, continuing education or sabbatic leave?

In more extreme need, will clergy have provision for mental health resources that can help them to maintain or rebuild emotional health?

For further reading:

- “Taking a Break From the Lord’s Work,” By Paul Vitello, Published: August 1, 2010 found at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?pagewanted=all
- Center for Congregational Health website- http://www.healthychurch.org/
- Pastoral Institute website- http://www.pilink.org/home.aspx
Self-Care of the Minister Action Guide

Summary:

The self-care module emphasizes collaborative, responsible action by both the new minister and the church for achieving a healthy balance for the new minister. Church schedules are anything but regular; therefore, clarifying boundaries in work life and personal life are stressed for addressing self-care at all levels – physically, emotionally, spiritually, and professionally.

Focus:

The focus of this module is to introduce and build a foundation for an understanding of mutual accountability between the minister and the committee for establishing good habits for self-care.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of the Self-Care of the Minister.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and given to the group members.

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee:

The essay suggests that a mutual accountability exists for the minister and the congregation related to the self-care of the minister. Two questions will be posed during the session to focus a discussion on this mutual accountability. In preparation for the next session reflect on these two questions:

1. What does the church owe the minister?
2. What does the minister owe the church?

Assignment for the individual members of the new minister:

In preparation for the next session on Self-Care of the Minister you will initiate a discussion on the realities of the tension in setting time boundaries in ministry. You will be asked to describe a time when, in spite of your planning, the week’s schedule “went bust.” You will also be asked to describe a time when your week went essentially as planned. Use the following statements and questions to guide you in your preparation.

1. Describe a time when a planned week “went bust.”
   - What were your initial thoughts and feelings?
   - How did you adjust your schedule?
   - What, if anything, did you cut out of your week?
   - Did having a plan make it easier to change and adapt?

2. Describe a time when your planned week went as, or close to how it was planned.
   - How did you feel about your productivity?
   - How did you feel at the end of the week, physically?
   - What contributed to the week being a successful and effective week?
Secondly, the essay suggests that a mutual accountability exists for the minister and the congregation related to the self-care of the minister. Two questions will be posed during the session to focus a discussion on this mutual accountability. In preparation for the next session reflect on these two questions:
1. What does the church owe the minister?
2. What does the minister owe the church?

**Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)**

**Phase 1: Planning and Flexibility**
Engage the committee and the new minister in a discussion exploring the realities in the tension of setting time boundaries. The new minister will be responsible for providing the initial responses to the information asked for with each of these questions. Address only one question at a time, allowing for the committee members to ask for further information, give responses, and interact with the new minister to the information that is shared.

Questions for initiating the discussion:
1. Describe a time when a planned week “went bust.”
   - What were your initial thoughts and feelings?
   - How did you adjust your schedule?
   - What, if anything, did you cut out of your week?
   - Did having a plan make it easier to change and adapt?
2. Describe a time when your planned week went as, or close to how it was planned.
   - How did you feel about your productivity?
   - How did you feel at the end of the week, physically?
   - What contributed to the week being a successful and effective week?

**Phase 2: Mutual Accountability**
The essay suggests that a mutual accountability exists for the minister and the congregation related to the self-care of the minister. Two questions are posed in the essay. Invite the committee and new minister to engage in a discussion about their views and responses to these two questions. Take the questions one at a time, allowing for a free-flowing, honest sharing of the views and perspectives of the group. (Committee members and a new minister had opportunity to prepare responses ahead of time. This time for reflection and preparation will allow for an open and honest exploration of views, and diminish the tendency to get side-tracked into defending particular positions).

1. What does the church owe the minister? (After a time of discussion, invite or offer a synthesis of what people shared).
2. What does the minister owe the church? (After a time of discussion, invite or offer a synthesis of what people shared).

These two questions speak to the issue of how each can support one another, rather than squeeze out something from each other. Where these are unclear, and unstated, and misunderstood there can be resentment, bitterness, and misunderstandings.
The following question allows for further reflection for the group on the previous discussion.

Ask: What are the implications emerging from our discussion? (Consider implications for the church, implications for the new minister, and implications for larger staff)

Additional Comments

If you have scheduled the use of this module as recommended in the user guide, the new minister and the Minister Support Committee are near the second half of the second year of working together. Initial work habits have begun to form by now, and the new minister is growing into a working familiarity of the job, the role, and many expectations. Your discussion on this topic can be well-informed, practical, and beneficial for the group and the new minister.

Consider making a reference to the previously done time audit. Review this material to see what it may indicate about self-care. Acknowledge any changes in behavior from then to now. Compare these changes with the material presented in this module concerning the self-care of the minister. Do these changes reflect habits and behaviors that contribute to self-care? Are there any changes that reflect habits and behaviors that may lead to unhealthy self-care?

Having the personnel policies and the agreed upon arrangements related to time off, working hours, and the comp-time principle in front of you for this session may be helpful.

The essay identifies four dimensions of self-care. Lead a discussion using the following questions with the group regarding their reactions to these.

1. How do you respond to what has been suggested?
2. What questions do these paragraphs raise for you?
3. With what do you agree?
4. With what do you disagree?

A possible exploration would be to focus a discussion on hobbies. Ask the new minister what his or her hobbies and outside interests are, and how he or she engages in them. These questions could be used to generate a discussion:

- If you were to take the time to pursue something that you would find enjoyable, interesting, and/or relaxing, what might that be?
- What is something, if you had the time, or training, that you have you always wanted to try or do?

The essay identifies some resources. A member of the Minister Support Committee could be assigned to review these resources and be prepared to share information to the group. The article from the New York Times web site could be assigned to the whole group. This article gives deeper insight to this issue as it spreads across denominational and generational lines.
Member Support Committee Assignment

The essay suggests that a mutual accountability exists for the minister and the congregation related to the self-care of the minister. Two questions will be posed during the session to focus a discussion on this mutual accountability. In preparation for the next session reflect on these two questions:

1. What does the church owe the minister?

2. What does the minister owe the church?
New Minister Assignment

In preparation for the next session on Self-Care of the Minister you will initiate a discussion on the realities of the tension in setting time boundaries in ministry. You will be asked to describe a time when, in spite of your planning, the week’s schedule “went bust.” You will also be asked to describe a time when your week went essentially as planned. Use the following statements and questions to guide you in your preparation.

1. Describe a time when a planned week “went bust.”
   • What were your initial thoughts and feelings?
   • How did you adjust your schedule?
   • What, if anything, did you cut out of your week?
   • Did having a plan make it easier to change and adapt?

2. Describe a time when your planned week went as, or close to how it was planned.
   • How did you feel about your productivity?
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1. What does the church owe the minister?

2. What does the minister owe the church?