You are called to spiritual formation. The heart of every Christian minister’s vocation is being formed and helping others to become formed in the likeness of Christ for the sake of the world. Attention to the spiritual life is the minister’s unique and indispensable task in human society. Though ministers serve under various titles—educator, counselor, pastor, missionary, chaplain, administrator—underneath all these, the core identity is that of one called to nurture the Christian spiritual life personally and corporately. Ministers, regardless of job description, are “holy persons” in their community, whose vocation is interpreter and guide into the mysteries of Christ. This is the difference between called Christian ministers and the equally valid and valuable vocations of others who serve Christ in the world.

Ironically, ministerial calling poses special problems for sustaining a healthy spiritual life. Ministers risk overexposure to the usual means of spiritual formation, such as scripture, worship, and human crises. This familiarity may not breed contempt, but it often creates ambivalence toward sacred matters. Most seminary trained ministers resonate at some level with the pastor who curtly responded to her spouse’s suggestion that they spend more time studying scripture together: “I study the Bible enough at work!” In addition, ministers typically bring mixed motives to sacred activities. Personal devotional reading doubles as grist for sermon preparation, or prayer practices devolve into an impure mixture of genuine piety and evidence of one’s need to appear “spiritual” in the ministerial role. Finally, contemporary Christianity’s admiration for busy-ness and cultural definitions of success drive ministers to become hypocrites who outwardly teach a balanced life, while inwardly excusing themselves with, “My work is my prayer,” or “Later, I don’t have enough time right now.”

Despite these realities, help is at hand. Christian tradition contains valuable resources for ministerial spiritual formation. Borrowing from spiritual leader E. Glenn Hinson, I suggest four areas for continual assessment: intellectual exploration, Christian community, personal experience, and Christian social action. All of these require intention, structure, and practice.

Intellectual exploration of the theology, history, and practical models of Christian spirituality remains one of the most underdeveloped areas of ministerial education. Books read and reasoned over can tap deep reservoirs of Christian spiritual wisdom. Academic expertise in theology or biblical scholarship does not guarantee intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the spirit. Whether one begins with Augustine’s Confessions, C. S. Lewis’s The Screwtape Letters, or Urban T. Holmes III’s Spirituality for Ministry, take and read. There is much to learn.

Spiritual formation is authentic only in community, yet many ministers feel a keen sense of isolation. Ministers need soul friends, but their workplace is seldom fertile ground for spiritual friendships. Try these three suggestions. First, form an ecumenical ministerial peer group with a focus on Christ’s presence in its members’ lives rather than on best practices or the latest theory of ministry. In other words, talk about Christ in your midst. Second, seek a spiritual director. This is a formal one on one relationship focused on awareness of the presence of God.
in your everyday life. Find someone with academic knowledge of and long experience in the spiritual journey. See the Spiritual Directors International website for names in your area. Third, read classic spiritual autobiographies such as those excerpted in Pilgrim Souls: A Collection of Spiritual Autobiographies. You will find in the lives of these ministers comfort and companionship. You are not alone.

Knowing about God is no substitute for personal experience of the Living Christ. Most ministers remember when they had a vital, personal experience of divine encounter. Few took up the ministry without a sense of this reality. If lost, the way forward is clear in Christian tradition: time, intimacy, and attention. In Christian spiritual formation these three translate into retreat, solitude, and silence. Many modern ministers find all three virtually absent from their lives. These are staples of the spiritual life. Like American society, where healthy eating is understood by great swaths of an obese population, Christian ministers know what sustains the soul (Don’t you teach it?), but frequently remain on the brink of spiritual starvation. This spiritual nourishment disorder can be healed only by fasting and prayer. Turn, trust God, and be made new again.

Finally, spiritual formation is linked inextricably to Christian social action. Non-Christian people and dispirited Christians may do good works, of course, but Jesus’ example teaches us that social justice severed from the spiritual sources of compassion is bankrupt. Social justice is fueled by compassion, and compassion originates in the heart of God, and the Christian minister hears that heart beat most often in spiritual practices. A spiritual formation that does not issue in social justice is counterfeit; social justice that does not flow from divine compassion is a cut flower.

Never forget, Christian spiritual formation is your calling.
Spirituality for New Ministers Action Guide

Summary:

In order to provide spiritual guidance for others and the church, a minister should develop and maintain a healthy spiritual life. This module addresses four areas for doing so: intellectual exploration, Christian community, personal experience, Christian social action.

Focus:

This module serves a multi-purpose. The primary emphasis is recognizing the importance of continued personal spiritual development separate from the disciplines and responsibilities of the minister’s role and function. A secondary purpose is to equip the committee to encourage and advocate in the larger church for the new minister, as well as the existing ministers on staff, to be allowed time for engaging in these practices. Finally, it allows for the new minister to draw from his or her recent course work and learning, and serve as the teacher at this point opening up some new vistas for the committee members.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

• Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of Spirituality for New Ministers.
• 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 a handout copy given to the group members.

Assignment for the Minister Support Committee: Have the members use the following questions related to the essay in preparation for the engaging session with this module.

1. What of this particular essay surprises you?
2. Four areas are named in this essay. Have you previously considered all four of these together as a means of spiritual development? If one, or more, of these is a new concept or approach to you, which one? What questions are raised?
3. How important is it to you that your ministers, new and existing, take time for personal reflection, reading, growth, and experiences in the Christian practices? Is this important enough for you then to advocate for your ministers to have time for these?
4. Does your church have a sabbatical policy for all its ministers to have time away, after a set period of years of service?

Assignment for the New Minister: Have the new minister be prepared to address the following questions related to the four areas of spiritual formation identified in the essay.

1. Which of these four areas of Christian practice is the most natural, and the easiest for you to engage?
2. Which of these four is the most unnatural for you, the most difficult for you to engage?
3. Which of these have you had no experience at all?
Engaging the Module: *(Approximately 40 Minutes)*

**Phase 1**
Begin this session with a general discussion among the group regarding their personal responses to the content of this particular essay. Consider the following as a guide this discussion:

- Take the opportunity to explore responses and questions related to each of the four areas identified. It may be important to listen for and allow for the group to clarify their interpretations and understanding of these areas.
- Have the committee members discuss their responses related to the expectations they have as addressed in question #3 of the Ministry Support Committee assignment.
- Following some discussion here, ask the group to speculate how others in the church would respond to question #3 of the Ministry Support Committee assignment.

**Phase 2**
Following a good and healthy discussion of the article and everyone’s reflections on it, turn your attention to ways you as a committee can be helpful to the new minister to adhere to the goals that are laid out in this article. Here it will be appropriate for the new minister to have the opportunity to explore which of the four areas come naturally to him or her, and which ones are less familiar or utilized.

**Phase 3**
Based on your discussions and the input from the new minister, it may be appropriate to identify a target or a goal for setting aside time for engaging in at least one of these avenues of spiritual development during the next few months. Be sure and reach this decision in collaboration with the new minister.

**Additional Comments:**

One option for the new minister and the Minister Support Committee to pursue would be to select one of the books identified in the essay for discussion. The book could be selected and assigned during the introductory session. Participants could then read the book prior to the engaging session. During the engaging session the group could discuss this book and its impact upon them.

Another consideration is to have the committee members and the new minister to take opportunity to lead in a Wednesday evening (or other church wide time) to share about these four areas and give a presentation for the congregation with resources, examples, and reasons for giving attention to these areas of our Christian practice and spiritual development. Be sure and include emphasis on the importance of these for everyone, and explain to the congregation at large that time for the minister to engage in these opportunities, separate from his or her other preparations, is of great importance. This could be a joint project for the committee and the new minister to take on together.
Member Support Committee Assignment

Use the following questions related to the essay in preparation for your next meeting related to this module.

1. What of this particular essay surprises you?

2. Four areas are named in this essay. Have you previously considered all four of these together as a means of spiritual development? If one, or more, of these is a new concept or approach to you, which one? What questions are raised?

3. How important is it to you that your ministers, new and existing, take time for personal reflection, reading, growth, and experiences in the Christian practices? Is this important enough for you then to advocate for your ministers to have time for these?

4. Does your church have a sabbatical policy for all its ministers to have time away, after a set period of years of service?
New Minister Assignment

Use the following questions related to the four areas of spiritual formation identified in the essay in preparation for your next meeting related to this module.

1. Which of these four areas of Christian practice is the most natural, and the easiest for you to engage?

2. Which of these four is the most unnatural for you, the most difficult for you to engage?

3. Which of these have you had no experience at all?