

---

## REVALUING “SELF-CARE” AS A PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

MARK MILLER-MCLEMORE

**Abstract:** This article for teachers of ministry, ministers, and ministry students considers the demands of pastoral life in relation to assumptions about the understandings and language of “self-care” as they relate to pastoral ministry and finds inadequacies. It suggests that congregational ministry is different enough from other ministries or helping professions that we must think and talk about this concern in appropriately different ways, and it makes proposals for alternative language and understandings.

### Introduction

Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Leaving Church* is a memoir of ministry that bothers many pastors who are in it for the long haul. In an editorial in *Theology Today*, James Kay talks about “the fashionable genre of ‘theo-biography’” and places Taylor’s book there: describing a self-defined quest for a generalized “spirituality” rather than “the particularities of a people, the Bible, or a *Book of Common Prayer*.”

Kay writes: “In the driver’s seat from the get-go, candidates often select the participants in the service of ordination..., shape the rite, ... and, like brides planning their weddings, determine the time and place....Since elaborate invitations are often sent out and over-the-top vestments make their first appearance, one of my former teachers finds contemporary Protestant ordinations reminiscent of 1950s debutante presentations.”<sup>1</sup>

*Mark Miller-McLemore is assistant professor of the practice of ministry, Vanderbilt Divinity School, and dean, Disciples Divinity House, at Vanderbilt, Nashville, Tennessee.*

---

<sup>1</sup> James F. Kay, “Recalled,” *Theology Today*, 64 (2008): 417-418. Another church leader of my acquaintance refers to ordinations as “coronations.”

Kay correctly notes that many candidates get through the ordination process without an “ecclesiastical reality check” until it “ultimately ... is administered by congregations who are not as eager to celebrate and endlessly fund a pastor’s ‘pilgrimage’ to self-fulfillment.”<sup>2</sup>

Finding a curmudgeonly comment like this is great fun. But I think Kay is onto an attitude, an expectation that is common among many young people exploring a call to ministry. They are searching, with legitimate questions about the life of faith. They aren’t sure about the Church or about their place in it. They are influenced by a culture that is consumerist, market-driven, celebrity-oriented, and self-centered. They are accustomed to institutions that attend to them, rather than to being responsible for an institution that attends to others. Certainly, there are pastors who are workaholics still, and others who pay no attention to their own inner lives. But a powerful contemporary North American ethos provides a surrounding scaffolding that gives meaning and context and horizon to the idea and practices of “self-care” in the culture. I suspect it also shapes the understanding of “self-care” in congregational ministry for many unthinking, naive young ministers in potentially destructive ways.

Kay warns: “Trying to challenge this version of latitudinarianism is difficult without sounding mean-spirited or narrowly Puritan.”<sup>3</sup> I fear I, too, may sound that way. But this form of practical latitudinarianism is an important distortion for those of us who teach ministry and leadership to consider more carefully. To send ministers out into congregations with an attitude toward their work and calling that may have been adopted from a different vocational arena without critical and theologically-centered assessment is to set students up for potential disappointment, if not disaster.

So I will here depart a bit from the usual format of the *Journal* to analyze and critique a common pastoral

---

<sup>2</sup> Kay, 418.

<sup>3</sup> Kay, 417.

practice and the embedded understanding that supports it, in the hope that we might tentatively reconstruct both the practice and our teaching of and about it in a more theologically adequate and appropriate way. For this purpose, “theology” will function less to offer confessional content and more as a methodological guide. Therefore, rather than addressing a specific text or texts as conversation partner, I’ve taken a path beginning with a description of the situation of ministry in relation to boundaries and self-care; then raised theological questions of the common understanding of self-care and its impact on ministry practices; then looked at some possible alternatives that might be more theologically coherent. In keeping with the *Journal’s* aim, I conclude with a section of implications and proposals intentionally tentative and open. I hope that bringing a theological set of questions to a widespread understanding of a practice of ministry and leadership will help ministers and teachers of ministry to do their work better.

### **Part 1: Ministry Is Grinding**

This is when I knew that self-care was beyond me. My wife was out of town at a professional meeting. My three boys (under the age of six) were sick with the flu. I had the normal heavy load of a minister in an under-resourced church trying to survive in the inner city. Sick kids at home meant less time than usual to get it done. So there was a sermon to write on Saturday night, with little sleep—and Easter (not Jesus) was coming soon, like a train on a schedule the station master was having a hard time keeping.

Ministry is uncontrolled, unpredictable, and sometimes demonic. There have been times when I thought my theme scripture was, “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long,” (Psalm 44:22, Rom. 8:36, RSV). I’m not alone.

It’s no surprise that we ministers love to read the Psalms. They are so accurate in giving voice to our situations and how they make us feel, especially as we

toss and turn on our beds at night. Look at Psalm 59: 1-4a, 6-7 (NRSV):

*Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;  
protect me from those who rise up against me.  
Deliver me from those who work evil;  
from the bloodthirsty save me.  
Even now they lie in wait for my life;  
The mighty stir up strife against me.  
For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord,  
For no fault of mine, they run and make ready.  
Each evening they come back,  
howling like dogs  
and prowling about the city.  
There they are, bellowing with their mouths,  
With sharp words on their lips—  
For “Who,” they think, “will hear us?”*

Now consider these situations.

A close ministry colleague tells about starting at his second church. He arrived and moved into the office. In his desk drawer, he found his contract. He was surprised to see it reduced his annual salary by two thousand dollars and his yearly vacation by two weeks from what he had bargained. He contacted the pulpit committee chair and asked what had happened. “We must have forgotten to send that to you.” How do you refuse, after you’ve left a job and a home for a new place? Needless to say, things soon did not go well.

A former student went through a first-call meat-grinder. He and his wife packed their belongings in a U-Haul and drove three days, full of hope and promise, to a church in Montana. His wife found a job, and they bought a house and settled in. His ministry there lasted ten hellish months. The unhealthy relationships and longstanding politics of the congregation conspired to undercut his best efforts. The custodian did poor quality work but was best friends with the church secretary. The secretary, an alcoholic, was also chair of the Personnel Committee. Whenever the local hospital would tell the church of the need for a pastoral visit, the secretary would call a former pastor, and then complain to

everyone that the current minister never made calls. The new minister got no support from local lay leaders or from judicatory staff, stretched thin and far away. As people pulled away, he felt increasingly traumatized by the bullying. Things fell apart, and after a small severance agreement, he resigned and entered counseling. To pay the mortgage, he worked for six months at Subway, till he and his wife could move. He left ministry altogether, unwilling to take work that would leave him so vulnerable. I received a box in the mail several months later with his robe and stoles—they had been ordination gifts. He asked me to pass them on to “someone else who could use them.”

A respected former academic colleague went to a parish after thirty years of teaching and leading in a seminary. Five years in, he said, he was with a group of laypeople gathered for dinner and a meeting at a restaurant. The conversation turned political, and he made a few comments apparently not to the liking of one lay leader. The man became so angry that he stood up and grabbed the minister’s necktie, choking him as he said, “I told you to shut up!” People were shocked, but there was little reprimand. In fact, the pastor knew it was time to retire when that layman was later chosen chair-elect of the congregation.

It’s tough out there. These cases sound—and are—abusive. But even in the routine of pastoral life, it isn’t easy. Giving care to the grieving parents of stillborn infants; burying murder victims, or victims of cancer who die too young, or the saints of the church in maturity; counseling and caring for families as marriages you’ve performed break down; making tough decisions about how to allocate scarce resources and cutting staff; navigating the thickets of cultures and interlocking family relationships to which you are foreign; trying to guide and shape young people who are pulled away from church; saying “hello” and “goodbye” to good people to whom you have become attached; trying to stay alive spiritually and intellectually; seeking to make a public case for the life of faith in a world that doesn’t much care—

these sap energy and drag down the spirit. Even in normal times, ministry is a wearisome profession—as a capable, smart, and successful colleague put it, “grinding, exceptionally difficult, and demanding.”<sup>4</sup>

A recent *New York Times* article noted studies confirming ministerial stress and ill health (obesity, hypertension, and depression, plus falling life expectancy, as well as denominational wellness campaigns).<sup>5</sup> An Op-Ed piece by a pastor described how he sometimes felt like “the spiritual equivalent of [a] concierge.”

[T]he advisory committee of my small congregation in Massachusetts told me to keep my sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories and leave people feeling great about themselves. The unspoken message in such instructions is clear: give us the comforting, amusing fare we want or we’ll get our spiritual leadership from someone else.<sup>6</sup>

In a blog on “God’s Politics,” Eugene Cho paints a disturbing statistical picture and then quotes another pastor’s remarks:

At the first church I served we had an insurance agent who was a member of the congregation. When I went to see him about some auto insurance needs, he said ‘Hey, wanna see something that will scare the crap out of you?’.... He pulled out a form that had various professions rated for their risk of giving life insurance policies to.... Anyway, to make a lengthening story shorter, he showed me that clergy members were in the same category as Deep Sea Welders and Loggers as the second highest risk

---

<sup>4</sup> Neill Grimes, “Reflections on ‘The Pastoral Life’: ‘I Am a Stranger and Foreigner on the Earth,’” unpublished essay for the Association of Disciple Pastors for Theological Discussion, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Vitello, “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2010, accessed 8/20/2010 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>6</sup> G. Jeffrey McDonald, “Congregations Gone Wild,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2010; accessed 8/20/2010 at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html?_r=1)

group.... We were behind crab fishermen but ahead of munitions workers. It was a little disturbing to know that statistically I was gonna die due to my profession before someone who builds explosives.<sup>7</sup>

Ten years ago, I led workshops on self-care for senior seminarians from my denomination. I still have my notes. There's some good counsel: Realize that transitions aren't easy. Read scripture and pray. Pay attention to your marriage and to your children. Get priorities straight. Find ways to limit administration and condense meetings. Take part in colleague groups. Remember, it's grace, not works—you aren't the Savior.

This is sound advice. But lately, I have become concerned. The language of self-care feels less adequate to me, as I seem to hear it more and more. It's a regular refrain in our teaching and among our students and graduates: "you have to take care of yourself if you want to take care of others." "You have to fill your cup before you can pour it out." "You have to keep your boundaries." And, "You must pay attention to your self-care."

These sayings sound sensible, even obvious. I think I know what we mean, and for a time I find myself nodding in agreement. But the stories I hear raise questions, and I feel less than confident that we are being helpful to students and to the churches where they serve. I think it is time to reconsider the language of the practices of self-care and the understandings behind them. This seemingly sensible approach may be more complex than we have thought. Therefore I'd like to offer a "colloquial theological reflection" on this ministerial practice and how we think about it.

## Part 2: The Inner Struggle

*A housing story*—I began a fifteen-year tenure as pastor less than intentionally. I was a graduate student and part-

---

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Cho, "Death By Ministry: Why Is Being a Pastor So Unhealthy?" August 12, 2010; accessed 8/20/2010 at [http://blog.sojo.net/author/eugene\\_cho/](http://blog.sojo.net/author/eugene_cho/)

time youth minister, poor and recently married. When the senior pastor left, the congregation turned to me. I heard a call to minister more than to write a dissertation. Fool that I was, I thought I could do what they and God asked of me.

So I went. Part of the bargain promised was support to help fund a house from a “parsonage fund” the congregation held. The first year we rented and did not need the support. But when the time came to buy a home, some leaders were less than eager to come forth with what had been promised. I remember well a very difficult dinner conversation with two leaders I respected and liked, businessmen my father’s age, as they tried to talk me out of borrowing the funds. Young, poor, inexperienced, and my first pastorate—it took all the gumption I could muster to continue to press the point, especially since it was for my self-interest. It seemed inappropriate to me as a pastor to be speaking up for my own benefit. Weren’t we to be servant leaders, selfless and giving? I was grateful for their eventual agreement, and the house we purchased helped keep us anchored in that community for a long time. But it was an effort of will.

At Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt, we run a “Transition into Ministry” program called the “Congregational Immersion Project.” A big part of these “pastoral residencies” is the formation of identity as a minister with the care and oversight of an excellent pastor-mentor in a healthy congregational setting. Five years ago, as we shaped this program, we invited recent graduates now in churches to return. We asked them to write case studies about their transitions. We needed them to help identify the most difficult challenges they faced in going from school back into the church as leaders. Four of their “top ten” challenges had to do with the interior tasks of forming a pastoral identity and understanding their new role:

- How do I negotiate the role identity crisis for the new pastor in relation to the congregation? Who am I and

who are they? What's my role? What's theirs? How is being a pastor different from being a member or a student?

- How do I figure out power and authority and trust in this place, with these people?
- How do I balance my personal, spiritual, family, intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and professional life?
- How do I receive helpful feedback for making my work better in this complex web of mixed relationships—where I am called to serve and lead and teach and admonish and comfort the same people who pay my salary?

All these are internal vocational questions. They might be eased by a few specific skills and tricks of the trade (such as time management, a day off, and so forth), but much more they involve a growing sense of a complex and multi-faceted self-in-place-and-relationship. The pastoral ministry is not simple and it is not solitary; it is complex and communal. That's part of what makes it so challenging and so much fun, as well as so confounding and exhausting.

It is no surprise, then, that concerns for the formation of one's identity as a minister are always present, but especially in the first five years. One is constantly negotiating—and negotiation is a difficult matter of “me and you” or “me and them” or (in regards to family) “us and them.” Negotiations are wearing, requiring self and role definition and redefinition over and against others. “They” do not know what is appropriate or good in their relationship with an accessible professional who wants to help, and sometimes they make requests that are unthinking or inappropriate. “We” find it hard to say “no” to a person in need. We aren't sure how we can say “no” without seeming to risk relationships or becoming a cause of harm. We fear we are not living out our call to care and love.

These questions haunt and disturb us. Too much in one direction and “our” people may love us but our

families resent our time away. Too much in the other direction, people feel as if their pastors never connect. Sometimes it touches the outward aspects of our work, too. If we seem unavailable, people complain that our sermons don't meet their needs, or that we don't visit enough. We shy away from formal evaluation because we don't want to hear those difficult concerns. Church and family always feel in competition for the pastor's attention.

Pastoral relationships are complex, hard to sort out, and hard to keep clear. More, when pastors move to a new pastorate, they must negotiate relationships all over again.

These difficult complexities are powerful and present even when things are going well. Pastors need to attend to the movements and currents of the Spirit within, as well as the tugs and pulls from beyond. They are at the heart of the call to serve as a pastor. But what is the best way to approach them? How best to talk about these feelings and drives and impulses?

### **Part 3: Questions and Challenges to Current Understandings**

When I talk with students and colleagues about these important negotiations and dynamics, the language of self-care is prevalent and problematic. It seems less than adequate as pastors live and move in relationship with themselves, their families, their callings, their congregations, their communities, their world, and their God. I will note here six problems and reflect on them from a pastoral theological point of view.

***1. The language of “self-care” and “boundaries” is less appropriate to ministry in congregational settings than to the “helping professions” or other forms of ministry.*** Helping professionals, chaplains, teachers, and pastoral counselors are often supported by structures and processes that shield them from over-the-line demands. Time, money, and specialized responsibilities create clearer, more defined boundaries.

The fifty-minute counseling appointment, the class period, designated hours of work (shifts), shared or designated on-call responsibilities, fees for services, and specialization all function to limit client demands and serve to clarify the helping role. Congregational pastors find it almost impossible to maintain those same boundaries.

**Time:** Others' sabbaths are pastors' most public time for work, which anyone is free to evaluate (and they frequently do). Our weekend Saturdays are often used for weddings or retreats. We attend meetings or visit in homes after dinner. Our work, as we say, means we are on call 24/7. When there is a crisis, we are called, no matter our schedule. We return from family vacations to lead funerals. If a member or a transient drops by the office and needs to talk or seeks money for a meal, our schedule is subject to change.

**Money:** Fees for service may be offered but are not usually asked (a nice ambiguity); fees can undermine pastoral relationships. Our compensation is usually available for all to see. More, we are expected to give ten percent of it back to the church.

**Specialization:** Most pastors do not work in multi-staff environments that allow for specialization. We are often called "the last generalists." We move from the study to the hospital to the classroom to the meeting room to the pulpit to the Table to the community center to the homeless shelter. We work with Scripture and with the dying and with furnaces.

**Role:** We are more a public than a private self. Parishioners call us at home. There are many things we are not free to do. Our marriages are scrutinized. The behaviors of our children reflect in people's minds on *our* work. We are disclosive in our sermons. We are granted intimate access to people's lives and are expected to share that same access to our own lives with almost anyone.

**Multiple Constituencies:** Pastors work with multiple constituencies simultaneously and take on multiple roles. Talking with an individual after worship might mean also talking indirectly with an extended

family member who has great influence over the pastor's employment. Or it might entail communicating at the same time with a committee of which the individual is a member, or the older women's fellowship group. It is a conversation with and within a religious tradition as well. I've noted here numerous layers that could be touched in one conversation between a pastor and a person, and each could call forth different, even competing, responses.

One Sunday I stood as an elder behind the communion table with our pastor, who was celebrating the Lord's Supper. On the other side of the table was a deacon, who was also the congregation's president. She had told me a few days before that she had gone to the pastor to tell him, in the midst of ongoing conflict, that she thought it was time for him to leave. I was acutely aware of the strange dynamics, especially over the Lord's Table, as together we served this feast of reconciliation to the congregation. A leader and supervisor who is also a follower. A settled pastor who is also an employee to be released. A feast of reconciliation shadowed by a time of conflict and estrangement.

Like a flood, congregational ministry overwhelms boundaries and muddies clarity. It pulls us into multiple simultaneous roles that demand but resist clarification. It is not possible to maintain boundaries around and role clarity within the complexities of ministry in the same way as in other helping professions and ministries. Trying to do so is futile, and it can lead to frustration, resentment, and bitterness.

## ***2. The idea of self-care seems most appropriate to an affluent culture.***

Who has time or resources for self-care in the developing world or the inner city? Do ministers in Haiti talk about their provisions for self-care? How about when everyone is giving all they can to keep a congregationally-based ministry of feeding or sheltering the poor alive?

This claim will feel harsh to many of us, and I make it without aim of passing judgment except on myself. Certainly, I am complicit. I minister now in a seminary context that is less than self-sacrificial. I've been in pastoral situations that were stressed, but I was aware even then that some ministers in my depressed community weren't free to attend the daytime ministerial association meetings where I found collegiality and support. They were working a day job to pay the bills that pastoring did not. So, I'm no martyr. But I am also aware that many contexts for ministry are grueling enough to make self-care an outlandish concept.

Barbara Blaisdell talks about the power of affluent culture to bend us to "a lie."

How do you know how much self-care is enough? The aroma therapy "experts" will tell you that the forty-dollar candle is twice as good as the twenty-dollar candle. And your massage therapist and your psychotherapist and your spiritual therapist will tell you that the more often you come in and the more money you spend, the faster you'll see improvement. Is the more expensive gym the better gym? Of course it is—the experts will tell you so! How do you know? And what if I've practiced such good self-care this week that there is no money left for Week of Compassion, no matter what tsunami, tornado, hurricane, or flood? Do you see how fruitless it is to try to be the prescriber of what we need? We do not know what we need because we don't even know our disease.<sup>8</sup>

In some churches, committed people give up job and house and home to move where they sense God is calling them to invest everything in something new. A hundred years ago, young people answered a call to overseas mission, often spending a lifetime, even dying far from

---

<sup>8</sup> Barbara S. Blaisdell, "This Broken Body: An Address to the Ministers' Breakfast," General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), July 2005; published by the Pension Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 2005, 10-11.

friends and home. I met a workman/former pastor this week who invested twelve thousand dollars of his own funds to start a radio show on faith and patriotism.

How do these ministers think about self-care, if at all? Can they afford it? If it seems so important to our teaching and practice about good ministry, is that a function of our ample resources, an affluent culture coloring our theological judgment, or something to which less affluent cultures should aspire?

Ministry needn't require constant suffering. But it is a calling, often demanding, always different from other callings. We know that sin bends us in toward ourselves. In an affluent culture, can we trust our self's desire for care to show us the way to good ministry?

### ***3. Self-care is unrealistic for congregational ministry, especially in the mainline churches today.***

Many of my ministry colleagues in the mainline churches tell me they feel they have worked their entire careers in a time of decline and a crisis of survival.

The church in which I grew up was strong and thriving in 1975. Today it is no more, its beautiful building sold to a private school. A former student serves as senior pastor in an old downtown church with a sanctuary that seats 1500. The attendance now averages less than 50 and the church lives off its endowment.

Here is how a friend describes his career:

In four pastorates across 28 years, I have not entered a pastoral setting that was not in severe need of redemptive work. I followed clergy problems, entered spiritually and emotionally bankrupt lay populations, moved among grave arguments about programming, faced power blocks older than my age, danced my way through issues of gender and sexuality, along with any number of other maladies that might plague a community of faith in the past three decades. These pastorates were all set into a greater context of decline and conflict. The mainline was becoming the sideline and the Disciples were declining faster than most.

... Our numbers are shrinking and our presence is greatly diminished and continuing to decline.

People, lay and clergy, are working diligently but the decline continues. Imaginations and faithfulness have been harnessed for new work and dreams, but the decline continues. My fear is whether there will be a Disciple church for my grandchildren.

It is difficult to be one of the many who by the dice roll of history are presiding over this decline. We can do wonderful analyses and point out all sorts of reasons from culture wars to paradigm shifts, but it is still not fun to be in the captain's seat at this point in time.<sup>9</sup>

The routine stories of emotionally draining pastoral work and the extraordinary stories of abuse become more prevalent in a time of loss, shortage, and increasing scarcity. Normal forces are accentuated. And yet these are the same established churches in which "establishment" expectations regarding pastoral work and compensation are common. Being a pastor once meant having a credential that opened the door to a certain style of life: health insurance and a pension, four weeks' vacation and study leave, a respected place in the community. Increasing institutional weakness makes these badges of the good life harder to provide.

Denial tends to rule. Pastors are overworked. Fewer congregations can afford a full-time, seminary-trained pastor, especially with soaring costs for health insurance. Older pastors hold on to their positions in order to maintain their benefits. Younger ministers increasingly will hold second jobs outside their church, or serve multiple congregations, or live on a much smaller salary, while watching their ability to help their own children be less than their parents' ability to help them.

It is hard to think how to manage self-care in these circumstances. And a question of justice arises within denominations: when even basic care may be increasingly

---

<sup>9</sup> Grimes, 7.

unrealistic for many, how will the question of fair allocation of resources between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in ministry be adjudicated?

***4. The language of self-care from a pastor is not well understood or received by parishioners in need.***

“I can’t do the funeral Friday; it’s my day off.” Church people don’t really like that kind of response. It doesn’t fit their expectations for a pastor who is called to serve in the name of Jesus. It’s not that they expect their pastors to be at their beck and call. But there are certain special times that are meaningful, powerful, and trust-building. To dash those expectations is to work against the larger direction in which most pastors want to lead: toward deeper relationships with God and neighbor, toward communities and institutions that make for greater justice and shalom.

Church members usually aren’t crass about their expectations. They don’t often push a sense that pastors are their employees in a service industry, although that happens in some very unhealthy situations or when relationships have deteriorated. They also do not necessarily agree that clergy jobs are the most stressful, even when we tell them how hard we work.

Like it or not, pastors are screens on which people project their expectations of us and of the life of discipleship. We can’t simply refuse, reject, or deny their expectations without consequence. The usual consequence is surprise and truncated relationships. If we wish to be a pastor to a community of people, there are very few reasons to set inflexible boundaries. We will disappoint expectations enough in the normal course of affairs.

Pastors can negotiate with congregations over their projected expectations, but we need to consider the larger aim. Will we disappoint expectations on behalf of our own self-care, or for the sake of a demanding larger good? If we are to expend trust, for what do we want to spend it?

Ministers talk about “picking their battles,” or “losing the battle to win the war.” In 1990, I was serving in a small church in a blue-collar context, when my wife and I awaited the birth of our third son. She worked, but in a seminary context with a maternity leave policy. For the sake of balance, we thought, I would ask for a similar benefit from the church. It took quite an expenditure of accumulated trust even to bring the question of paternity leave to the table. Many men in the church were astounded that a pastor could ask for such a thing. I didn’t get it. But a year later, I received a sabbatical leave—the first ever in that congregation. It was a great gift that allowed me time with my young children as well as renewal in my ministry. Even then, it had to be delayed a couple of weeks to lead two important funerals.

***5. Self-care is not the only biblical way to talk about these important matters.***

I meet every year for three days with a group of twelve to fifteen experienced ministers. Inevitably, they smile about the tone that self-care language takes in new Masters of Divinity graduates. Following a crucified Lord in “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction” (as Eugene Peterson puts it)<sup>10</sup> through the vocation of congregational ministry is not to them a matter of self-actualization.

On the one hand, as ministry students remind me, Jesus told his disciples,

*“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. (Mark 6:30-52, NRSV)*

And, shortly, after that opportunity had been frustrated by crowds running ahead and needing food,

---

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, IVP Books, 2000.

*“After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.”<sup>11</sup>*

On the other hand, do I need to cite these important texts (all NRSV)?

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 16:24-25)*

*“So the last will be first and the first will be last.” (Matt. 20:16)*

*“The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matt. 23: 11-12)*

*“After he had washed their feet, ...he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do what I have done to you.’ (John 13:12-15)*

Certainly the Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed and tried to withdraw for a time from the demands of his life and work. Just as clearly, they point toward engagement in humble, *self-less*, ongoing service. How are we to make sense of the mixture of witness? How can we talk about it in a more nuanced way?

### ***6. Self-care is not the most appropriate theological language for congregational ministry.***

Theologically, what do we want to lift up about ministry in congregations?

Traditional ways of speaking about the role of ministry include priest and mediator, pastor and shepherd, preacher and prophet, teacher and guide, leader or king. Congregational ministry engages and involves all these roles, as it models the life of Christian discipleship in community.

---

<sup>11</sup> I do not intend a detailed exegesis or extensive biblical analysis in this article, but it is interesting in the context of this reflection that both attempts by Jesus at solitude and rest were interrupted by the needs of people.

*Minister as model:* In some way and to some degree, every pastor shares through her life the presence of Christ, revealing God, with a particular people in a particular place and time. Pastors know that we enter into situations in which we are acutely aware of our own inadequacy. All we can bring is the “ministry of presence” that, we hope, allows Christ to be present in love where we ourselves have little to offer. But the ministry of presence is not limited to the hospital or the deathbed. The sharing of presence, the modeling, the “fishbowl,” is an integral part of the pastoral relationship in its entirety. It is something with which those who are not called to pastoral ministry, and those contemplating it, and those new to it, and those who are long accustomed, all struggle: must we always show the presence of Christ?

Built into such open, transparent public *imitatio Christi* is the movement of *kenosis*, emptying, that is hard for us to comprehend and practice. Theologian Sallie McFague has taught for decades a class in “spiritual autobiography” out of which grew a wonderful sermon on *kenosis*.

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:3-8, NRSV)*

McFague: “What an inversion this is of triumphal, imperialistic views of Christianity!” She looks at the examples of John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day—Christians who gave up themselves for the sake of the other and for God, but without invoking “an ascetic call for self-denial.” Instead, to avoid the excesses of a consumerist, “‘cannibalistic,’ voracious, lustful desire to have it all for oneself,” these three centered their lives on imitating God’s self-giving, so that others and the world

might live. The kenotic life finds fulfillment and joy through a willing openness to God and the willing gift of one's energies so the needs of neighbors are met.<sup>12</sup>

This understanding stands over and against the notion of success-seeking, consumer-driven ministry. It clearly opposes a ministry of personal gratification. It also pushes against an understanding of ministry as personal spiritual quest.

It is not that we are called inevitably to sacrifice, annihilation, or mortification. But ask: what would a kenotic, self-emptying understanding of congregational ministry look like? In light of the present and powerful sense of being always in view as the model of Christ, we might look for more adequate descriptions of the pastoral life than “self-fulfillment” or “spiritual quest” provide. The kenotic dynamic, a self-giving pouring out of our best energies and work for the sake of God, Creation, and neighbor is a powerful alternative.

John Berntsen describes the theme at the heart of a kenotic understanding of ministry as “downward mobility,” or (as he quotes Simone Weil) “the freely accepted movement toward the bottom”:

Death and resurrection is not only the subject of preaching, the heart of liturgy, and the spirit of pastoral care, but also the unseen influence shaping the leader's daily professional functioning. The leader is humbled by the very work of ministry: by not always having the answers, by lack of giftedness for important ministries, by the need to apologize for insensitive remarks, by failure to keep commitments, by cowardice, by laxity in prayer, by anger and resentment toward “problem” people, and by disillusionment with the once-held ideal of the church. James Barrie, the sentimental

---

<sup>12</sup> Sallie McFague, “Sermon for Epiphany Chapel,” Vancouver School of Theology, November 20, 1008, unpublished. McFague makes a great case in this sermon for a more general Christian kenotic alternative to a consumer culture that is killing people and the earth.

author of *Peter Pan*, said, “Life is one long lesson in humility.” So, too, is the practice of ministry.<sup>13</sup>

We may not like that we are called to model self-giving. But I think we must admit its force and value.

*Ministry as relational:* As with the church and the world, a pastor is “in but not of” the congregation she serves. Ministry in a congregation is relational. We can’t escape this; it is essential to the role. A pastor is apart, but not separate, always in relation. Years after they have moved on, pastors can still visualize the people they faced each Sunday in their pews.

A pastor must connect with a congregation enough to love and be loved, to earn trust and to receive trust and to be able to trust. A pastor must remain apart from the congregation enough to remember different ways and to innovate with love and tenderness and to lead from here and now to someplace other.

An adequate pastoral approach will seek to avoid setting up a divide between “me” and “them,” a “self” that needs care or protection and “others” from whom we need to be shielded. Instead of asking questions about building walls (“healthy boundaries”), theologically more adequate questions for pastors will be: How can we love the congregation without being subsumed by them? How can we sustain integrity without divorce? What is appropriate and inappropriate love? What is adequate and appropriate distance? To be a pastor is to have “a people.”

#### **Part 4: A Better Way?**

I hope it is clear that I don’t think congregational ministers must be martyrs. I do think, though, that pastoral ministry is different enough from other ministries and helping professions that we must think and talk about this concern in different ways. This conversation is theological and should therefore meet

---

<sup>13</sup> John A. Berntsen, “Downward Mobility,” *Alban Weekly*, 290 (February 15, 2010), accessed at <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=8942>, December 3, 2010.

theological criteria. Our language should be both theologically appropriate and adequate to ministry in congregational settings. Practices and understandings should cohere.

Understandings should reflect congregational ministry's inherent setting in relationship and in community, its relatively weak boundaries, its multiple roles (including example), and its multiple constituencies. Language should reflect nuanced and credible theological grounding and faithfulness. It should not be primarily reflective of affluent cultures. It should also be realistic to current demands on pastors and churches and make sense to church people.

My wife, who teaches pastoral care, correctly reminds me that some ministers are notoriously bad at receiving care. She tells how some students in her classes seem to think of themselves as invulnerable, never in need, always the helper ready to offer wisdom and strength and healing. After all, they have been gifted, called, and consecrated. They think they *need* not attend to their own needs. On the other hand, others think that they *must* never think of themselves, but give their lives in self-effacing service. They give and give and give, governed by a sense that everyone else must come first, and that this is the way of the cross. Still others, possibly from fearsome backgrounds, cannot bear to face their inner demons and *will* not turn inward. In each case, students give insufficient attention to and resist developing appropriate insight about their own inner dynamics.

She fears this lack of knowledge will finally be destructive. There are good reasons for ministers to give attention to their interiority and needs and hopes and dreams and desires: at the least, to know our gifts and our limits; to feel satisfied about what we do and to be appreciated for it when we do it well; to avoid the traps of seeking to fill appropriate needs in inappropriate and destructive ways.

We make choices about the language we use, the questions we ponder, and the metaphors that guide us. For example, do we call our inner-ness "self" or "soul"?

Can we call congregational ministers “helping professionals”? Does that language adequately describe the multifaceted role that places in one person priest, healer and support, prophet and critic and goad to individuals and institutions and communities, leader and change agent, teacher and model? How can we capture the multifaceted relationships that are entailed—person to person, pastor to congregation, religious leader to wider publics?

Metaphors, questions, and language frame our practices with meaning, order our priorities for action, and communicate our highest values. When understanding and practice cohere and are appropriate and adequate to ministry, doing the right things in the right way for the right reasons with the right outcome “can turn exhaustion into exhilaration,” to use a lovely phrase I came across but cannot find to credit.

So let me try to offer some alternatives.<sup>14</sup> I do not claim these words or ideas are new. But I suggest that they might be more adequate and appropriate to pastoral ministry than the current language of self-care.

***Discernment:*** In a vocation that puts persons in multiple roles, in relation with multiple constituencies, it is important to discern and clarify which role and constituency is primary at a given moment, in a given situation.

- When we preach on the importance and sanctity of marriage, we will fill a different role than when we are counseling and supporting a couple whose marriage has come apart or a young person who becomes pregnant.

---

<sup>14</sup> In making these comments, I am aware of the limits of my own social location as well as the gifts it brings. I am Anglo, male, mainline Protestant. I have been for an equal time pastor in a congregation and a seminary teacher of ministry. I offer these reflections and proposals in a tentative spirit, aware that they may not be comprehensive or fully adequate even to my own criteria. I hope, however, to suggest that we need to re-think our common usage and begin the process of moving toward coherent theological understandings of these practices of pastoral ministry that are more appropriate to the vocation and more adequate to the demands. I trust in others' assistance.

What is our role: pastoral caregiver, teacher, gentle forgiver, upholder of moral standards?

- When a member of the congregation is accused of sexual misconduct with a neighborhood child, what is our role? We are called to establish congregational safety, to provide pastoral care to the accused as well as to his wife and family, to communicate with confused friends who want to stand with the man, to care for others who themselves might have been abused, and to pray for the child and her family. Which takes priority, and in what moments?
- When we help lead our church to begin a shelter for the homeless that is challenged by the city, is our primary role to be a citizen and civic leader, or to be in service of the most vulnerable? When we are asked to pray at the city council meeting or the dedication of a park, how does our role change?

Clarity about our roles is crucial. Discernment is the discipline we practice that leads to clarity. Often, the best we can do is to be aware of, attend to, ponder, take into account, and try to negotiate the complexities. We will ask: what is my *primary* role here and now? What other roles are secondary but present? To whom and what am I most importantly obligated in this moment? Who else needs my attention? If we are wise, we will learn from our inevitable mistakes and miscalculations. And we'll try to resist oversimplification, or losing our sense of the whole picture.

**Balance:** In a situation of multiple roles and constituencies, we are pulled and tugged in many competing directions. It is easy to go too far in one direction or another. In fact, it is impossible not to get out of balance in seasons of heavy demand. How will we regain balance at another time?

Paying attention to balance is a basic spiritual discipline that teaches and models the life of discipleship for laypeople, especially when we find ways to communicate about the internal struggles, compromises, successes, and failures balance entails. It requires

introspection and examination against a wider range of counsel than merely our own. With whom do we talk? Does our congregation offer us accountability? Do we meet regularly with trusted colleagues for feedback? Can we be honest with another when we get out of balance?

**Negotiation:** Another critical practice is our ability to negotiate with our communities and relationships different paths to the same end. How can we do what we think is necessary and also remain in balance with those around us? Negotiation requires several gifts: transparency, flexibility, persistence, creativity, commitment to various public and private others, and a longer focus on hoped for ends.

**The telos, or aim, of ministry:** As parents, we sometimes give up our own desires for the larger aim of raising children. It isn't simply a case of delayed gratification; we can't get back the time we spend coaching or watching sports we've never played, or attending elementary school parent's days, or sitting in the cold as the marching band performs. But parents do it willingly, for good reason, for a time, for persons we love and over whom we have stewardship.

Likewise in ministry, though churches are not children, we are given stewardship of a people, a community, an organization, and the individuals that make it up. There are times when we are called to give up that which we might desire or even need so that these "others" might live, and so that our stewardship might be faithful. When we are called to pastoral ministry, this stewardship is not in competition with our own calling. There are distinctive rhythms, tensions, and resolutions, but fundamentally they should aim toward the same end—the reign of God. We never step outside the telos toward which all are work points. The larger aim governs the penultimate choices.

**Sabbath:** It's clear that one of the challenges of being a pastor is finding and keeping time for Sabbath. If we do not practice Sabbath, to fit the unique demands of our position, we ignore a basic rhythm of the life of the spirit, reflected in the fourth commandment as much as in self-

help literature. We must lie fallow for a time and season, but our reason primarily is to spend time with God, as much or more than for ourselves or for restoring a personal resource to be expended in work. Our Sabbath-keeping also serves as an example. There are as many ways for us to practice the Sabbath as there are situations and persons in them. But we are called to attend to the Sabbath. Of course, Sabbath is practiced daily as well, when we stay in touch with the God we serve in many ways—through prayer, Scripture, worship, study, love of neighbor and other spiritual practices.

***Humility, integrity, awareness, righteousness:***

Holding it all together is our sense of vocation, a knowledge that we are called and, in responding, despite the many directions we are pulled, remain one and the same person. Humility teaches us not to take ourselves too seriously. Integrity teaches us to take ourselves seriously enough. Awareness is a path to humility and integrity. Righteousness is the hoped-for, but never fully attained, outcome.