

NURTURING RESILIENCE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

In the book *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*, the authors (Burns, Chapman and Guthrie) uncover five key themes that promote healthy, sustainable ministry that lasts—spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, leadership and management.

Developing the skills and fortitude to be a resilient pastor is one of the great joys of ministry, when the pastor and the congregation are committed to promoting “good enough” health in each other. The idea that pastors and congregations need to be “good enough” – rather than perfect – is foundational. A “good enough” approach focuses upon gratitude rather than critique, sees mistakes as an opportunity to learn and grow, and chooses forgiveness rather than keeping score of wrongs. Good enough pastors and congregations grow together in the skills of resiliency.

But these are complex skills. We all would like to excel in all of them. On the good days, most pastors show their commitment to this kind of ministry. And they take steps forward to grow in ministry. And on the good days, pastors and congregations live with gratitude and humility in their relationships. But not all days are good days. And sometimes the bad days start to become entrenched as a cycle. There is no blueprint for successful ministry in a cultural landscape with such unprecedented changes and challenges. What many churches know how to do no longer seems to work. Seminaries cram a vast amount of coursework into a short time frame. Yet most pastors discover in their first years in ministry that they were not well prepared for most of what they do every day.

A common – and sad – pattern in congregations is that dissatisfactions start to mount up. Expectations on both sides are not met. This sometimes involves realistic expectations that both sides have talked about, agreed upon, and yet someone fails to meet the expectation. This kind of failure of realistic expectation may be because someone messed up – sometimes as a one-time failure and sometimes as a pattern of messing up.

Unmet expectations may be at issue because someone agreed to an expectation with good intentions, but actually does not have the skills or personality type to fulfill the expectation. Either side may be trying to meet and fail.

Many times in churches the expectations that are not being met have never been spoken out loud, never written down, and never agreed to by all sides. There are many reasons why talking about expectations between a pastor and a congregation/session might not happen. This work can feel awkward. It may feel like it stirs up conflict. Oftentimes, churches haven’t learned how to have conversations like these. But unspoken and therefore unmet expectations are a major reason why congregations become dissatisfied with pastors, and the cycle moves to a negotiated dissolution of the pastoral relationship. And unspoken, unmet expectations are a common reason why pastors serve a congregation for a few years, and then quietly start efforts to find a new call.

Honest conversations to name and mutually to own concerns about expectations and disappointments often are not held at all, until frustration has built to a boiling point. In many congregations, there is no personnel committee at all. If there is one, then reviews of “job performance” are either conducted haphazardly, or corporate annual review models are employed that do not fit the work of a pastor. In many cases, no personnel review may have been conducted for years, and is instituted when there is wide dissatisfaction with pastoral job performance as a way to amass data to justify moving to termination of the pastoral relationship.

In the Presbytery of Donegal, we believe in hope. We believe that God is active in even the most challenging relationships, including those between pastor and congregation, and between pastor and pastor in multi-staff congregations. We believe that congregations and pastors can be proactive in setting up good systems for accountability, growth, and support. We believe it is wiser to ask “What would help things get better?” rather than “What is wrong here?” We believe that conflict can transform rather than destroy. We believe that even when things have gotten out of hand and are a genuine mess, that even then the Holy Spirit can act to bring reconciliation, healing, hope and a new beginning.

We believe four things help to maintain, redeem, and transform relationships between pastors and congregations:

- ✚ The pastor’s plan for life-giving growth in ministry
- ✚ The session’s plan for life-giving growth in ministry
- ✚ The implementation of a Coaching/Equipping process focused upon enhancing strengths rather than critiquing deficits (see the Presbytery of Donegal Documents on the Coaching/Equipping Team Process)
- ✚ The adoption of proactive practices of listening, conversation and forbearance as the posture to maintain relationship and address conflict. Expectant Conversations are the opportunity to learn more about the stories that shape the congregation, the pastor, and the congregational leaders, and to name values and expectations. Engaging Conflict Conversations are for the God-given opportunities to stay together in conflict and grow in grace and truth.

THE PLAN OF THE PASTOR FOR LIFE-GIVING GROWTH IN MINISTRY

One of the joys of pastoral leadership is all that all pastors can advance in the craft of ministry. On the good days, pastors will joyfully proclaim that this is the best job on the planet. Ministry is about what truly matters: becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ to witness to God's mercy and grace to a fallen world. For a pastor, the potential for creativity is endless. Relationships are at the center. There is more to learn and more potential for growth than can be realized in a lifetime. Ministry is never dull.

No one is born as a pastor. And no one comes out of seminary knowing how to do everything there is to do. Pastors who have been ordained for forty years don't know how to do everything there is to do, because what there is to do and how to do it are constantly in flux. The complexity of the skillsets that pastors must develop in order to meet the criteria for resiliency -- *spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, leadership and management* – are mind-boggling. Yet, with a plan, a pastor can make concrete, identifiable advances as a pastor. Here in the Presbytery of Donegal, we call this process of advancement “leveling up.”

The term leveling up comes from gamer theory—which is both about how gamers play and also about the games in which they are immersed. Leveling up describes how characters advance in the games, by acquiring experience points through embarking upon adventures, surviving battles, and completing quests.

In the presbytery of Donegal, a core value is that we are committed to the leveling up of pastors. Pastors level up just by being pastors. But the leveling up is more fruitful when the pastor adopts an intentional plan for leveling up, in order to advance in the areas of resiliency. When the plan is shared with the session and congregation, and owned by them, then the entire system becomes encouragers for the pastor as the pastor levels up.

A comprehensive pastoral plan usually includes:

- 🧩 **Pastor cohorts:** Ministry is not a solo enterprise. Pastors who commit to a learning community have colleagues for support as they experience the joys and challenges of their pastorate. One such cohort in Donegal is NewLead, which is a learning community for emerging leaders who are newer to ministry, and interested in innovative leadership. NewLead meets monthly for learning and fellowship.
- 🧩 **Coach, spiritual director, and counselor/therapist:** Ministry is not a solo enterprise. Pastoral advancement into resiliency usually is far more robust through engagement with a wise and neutral guide. This can take many forms. The presbytery supports the value of these various modes of support. The Connecting our Ministry Commission provides grants to help with copays or part of the fee. While we do not presume to know which mode would be most helpful, we believe pastors should be working with at least one professional who is not a peer, not a member of the congregation, and who is contracted for focused support.
- 🧩 **Self-care:** All pastors need to have a plan for their self-care. Congregations who want to support the health and longevity in ministry of their pastors should rigorously support their pastors in living out their plan. This means the congregation needs to know what the plan is. Elements of a self-care plan include:

- **Clarity about Work hours:** The presbytery of Donegal defines full-time work as 40-45 hours per week, plus 5 hours for prayer and reflection. Although some weeks may have intensive pastoral care issues, and some seasons will require more time, pastoral effectiveness goes down when the work week hours chronically climb above these limits. When a pastor works a very intense week, there should be encouragement to balance with more time off soon after.
 - **Regular time off:** Pastors need at least one full day and one partial day off per week. (This is in concert with the members of churches who spend part of the weekend at church.) Because of the intensity of pastoral work, a healthy model is to provide for the equivalent of two full days off per week. This might be a week day and a Saturday. It might be a week day, half of Saturday, and Sunday afternoon and evening. Once the time off is selected, pastors and the congregation should protect the time except for life and death emergencies. If the pastor is out more than two nights per week, the time off balance should increase.
 - **Time to pray and reflect:** Service as a pastor requires time for prayer and time to “noodle” and reflect. The Donegal definition of full time mandates at least 5 hours per week for prayer and reflection as the ungirding of produced work.
 - **Time for family:** The pastoral plan should include caring for family. The plan might limit the number of evenings out on behalf of the church.
 - **Wellness and exercise and physical health initiatives:** In addition to the plan to care for family, the pastoral plan should include time for exercise and other ways to practice wellness and health.
- ✚ **Plan to develop leadership and pastoral skills.** Leadership is complicated. It is a matter of learning how to lead in terms of actions. It also involves the development of the soul of a leader. Although the mandated continuing education amount in Donegal is \$750, COM encourages a figure of \$2000 in order to allow the pastor meaningful time for engagement in advancing learning. In addition to scheduled events, many pastors long for regular time to read and, for some, to write. Many pastors benefit from joining online learning communities for continual leveling-up. Since many of the old ways of leading a church no longer are effective, all pastors need support in learning new ways to lead. Pastors learn wisdom and mature on the job. Pastors level up faster with intentional learning.
- ✚ **Coaching/Equipping team for the pastor:** The major way that pastors level up is through a regular cycle known as action-reflection upon their ministry in their congregation. The pastor leads as the pastor. The pastor then reflects upon that leadership with a small, trusted team who provide feedback and coaching for the pastor in implementing goals. This regular, ongoing process is designed to build strength, to encourage, and to address deficits in performance or “personhood” in a hopeful manner. The team meets regularly, so the goal-setting/feedback cycle is always in play, as opposed to yearly reviews, which have too much time in between meetings to be constructive.
- ✚ **Reading and Reflecting upon the Book *Sleeping with Bread*:** This book, by Matthew and Dennis Linn, and Sheila Fabricant, introduces the practice of the Examen to discern what is life-giving and what is life-draining in one’s life. It is useful for individuals and for groups. We recommend it to all pastors and sessions. It may fruitfully be used for solitary reflection. It is even better with a group.

THE PLAN OF THE SESSION FOR LIFE-GIVING GROWTH IN MINISTRY

The role of the Session is to lead the congregation into ever-increasing “wellness.” A congregation that is growing in wellness is one that feels alive. The congregation experiences itself following God’s call to faithful mission and ministry. How does a congregation develop vision and a plan for life-giving growth?

- ✚ **Assessment:** The development of a mission/ministry plan begins with assessment. What do the people of the congregation feel/think about the church? What is going well? What assets are available—those that are recognized and those that are hidden? What is getting in the way of health and growth? There are a number of ways to arrive at a pretty good picture of the state of the church. Some include:
 - External Consulting Groups such as Holy Cow Consulting, Healthy Churches, Healthy Congregations and TAG are a few. These range in cost from a few thousand dollars to twenty thousand or more.
 - Narrative Surveys for church members to fill out and share their thoughts and hopes
 - Listening groups for church members to share their perspectives on the congregation
 - Twelve Keys Assessment and Action-Planning – Offered by The Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk with partnership with other Connecting Our Ministry Commission members. This process involves church members in identifying the key strengths and biggest challenges for the congregation based on *Twelve Keys for Effective Churches* by Kennon Callahan.
- ✚ **Development of an Action Plan:** Once the Session has a clear picture of the key strengths of the congregation, and where the greatest energy and investment are leading, the session develops Key Objectives and Action Steps as the strategic plan for the congregation.
- ✚ **Addressing Conflict:** The Session adopts a plan involving direct conversation, listening, forbearance and forgiveness to identify and address conflict. This may involve engaging external mediators to help guide the process forward.
- ✚ **Self-Care of Leaders:** The same factors for self-care listed in the above section on the pastoral plan are important for the other leaders and staff of a congregation.