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Helping rostered ministers avoid burnout
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Study guide

Pastoral care

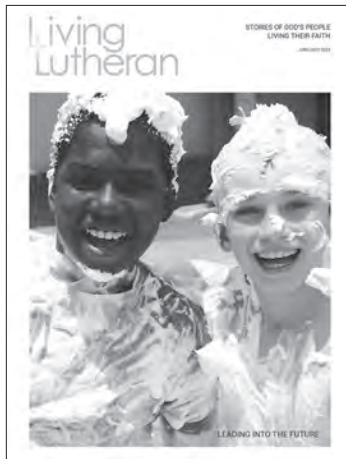
By Robert C. Blezard

Ministry has never been an easy calling. There are long hours, sufficient but not especially great pay, and the responsibility not only for the souls of a congregation but often its everyday running. And with all churches generally in decline across the country, pastors often are unfairly saddled with the blame: “We would be OK if you were doing a better job.” No wonder so many rostered ministers are burning out and considering other work. Fortunately, there are lots of ways to help!

EXERCISE 1: JOB DESCRIPTION

One source of burnout or stress comes when there isn't a complete job description that clearly outlines duties and responsibilities, thereby clearly identifying what is *not* the job of the rostered minister. Trouble arises when deacons and pastors serve without a job description, or with one that is vague, and suffer from “job creep” as church duties pile onto their plates.

- Does your congregation have a job description for rostered ministers? If not, why not?
- Have there been problems in your congregation over the “fuzzy” definition of a rostered minister’s service? Confusion over who is supposed to do what?
- In the absence of a job description, how is the minister and congregation going to know the priorities and limits of the work? How will the minister be evaluated on job performance?
- If your congregation doesn't have a job description, how would your study group help get the ball rolling on formulating one for your rostered minister(s)? Create an action plan and follow through.
- If there is a job description, is it up to date? Clear? Concise? Does it cover everything your leader does, or are there “assumed duties” that the leader has taken on and aren't listed?
- Does your congregation review the job description with the rostered minister in conjunction with a yearly performance evaluation? If not, why not?
- How could the job description be a tool for helping the congregation understand where a rostered minister’s responsibilities end and those of the lay leaders and members begin?



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EXERCISE 2: MUTUAL MINISTRY

Another source of stress and burnout comes from complaints, issues and accusations that arise without a defined channel or process for handling them. This can leave a rostered minister feeling under attack and isolated. In some congregations, a mutual ministry committee serves as a neutral intermediary between congregational members and rostered ministers. The committee serves as a sounding board for rostered ministers, but also as a body where parishioners may raise issues and have them handled in a way that is fair to both sides.

- Does your congregation have a mutual ministry committee? If not, why not?
- In the absence of a mutual ministry committee, how are complaints and issues pertaining to the rostered minister handled? Without such a channel, do complaints and issues fester before they are dealt with?
- Would complaints and issues be better handled by an impartial panel on the mutual ministry committee that had the confidence of both the rostered minister and parishioners?
- How would your study group help get the ball rolling on formulating a mutual ministry committee? Create an action plan and follow through.
- If you have a mutual ministry committee, does it function well? How might it function better? Is its presence well-known to the congregation, as well as the procedures on how to approach it? Explain.
- Does the committee have the trust and confidence of both the rostered minister and congregants?
- Are the responsibilities of the mutual ministry committee, as well as its procedures and protocols, spelled out and readily available to congregants? Explain. Is this something that needs attention?

EXERCISE 3: COMPENSATION

There's a saying that goes around in church circles: "Nobody goes into ministry for the money!" It's true, but then again, many rostered ministers aren't paid commensurate with their education or experience, exacerbating stress and burnout. How about your leaders?

- In your congregation, is your rostered minister generally paid as much as those who attend worship? If not, how might this be or become a problem?
- Given the cost of living in your area, is your rostered minister paid enough to cover adequate housing, automobile expenses, groceries, taxes and other necessities?
- A master's degree is typically required for deacons and pastors. How does your rostered minister's pay compare with other occupations that require master's degrees?
- How does your rostered minister's compensation compare to that of schoolteachers in your community? Librarians? Firefighters? Police officers?

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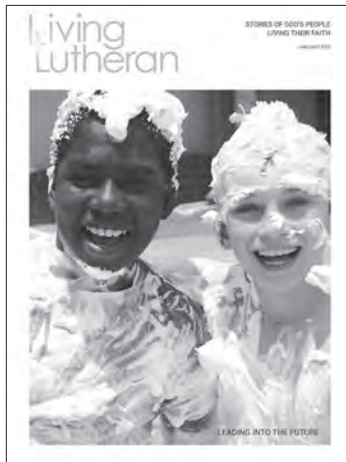
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EXERCISE 4: VACATION

The standard vacation package for rostered ministers starts at four weeks away per year, including Sundays. This is partly in consideration for being on call 24/7 and generally having only one day off per week—when they take it. Burnout occurs when leaders aren't given sufficient time off—or they fail to take it.

- What is the vacation package for the rostered minister(s) serving your congregation? Is it sufficient for rest and renewal?
- Does your rostered minister actually take the time off? If not, why not? Could the congregation do more to encourage it? If so, does the leader actually get away and enjoy time apart?
- Is your rostered minister's compensation sufficient to allow for an annual family vacation to a nice place? Explain. If not, what can your study group do about it?
- How could your congregation encourage and support your leader to take a "real" vacation for rest and renewal?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- A sabbatical is extended time away—up to three months every seven years—for a leader to totally relax and renew. Standard for tenured faculty in colleges and universities, it is catching on in church circles. How would a sabbatical every seven years help a rostered minister avoid burnout? Does your congregation have a sabbatical policy? If so, is it adequate? If not, how could your study group help spearhead the formulation and adoption of one?
- What are the stresses that ministry professionals experience that are unique to church work?
- In most areas of work, employees work 40 hours a week over five days. Ministers' schedules have a different standard—50 hours over six days. This means most rostered ministers count on one day off. What is a typical workweek for your rostered minister(s)? How does your congregation encourage and support them to take a day off?
- There's an old joke about a minister's work schedule: "They only work on Sunday!" Unfortunately, many parishioners may believe this because they are unaware of how much time their rostered minister(s) spend on planning, visitation, community engagement and other duties. Is your congregation generally aware of how much time your leader spends working every week? How can your study group help dispel the myth that your minister(s) work less than most people?
- Have you witnessed a rostered minister under stress and in danger of burning out? Or who has burned out? Explain. How could the congregation have helped prevent that?

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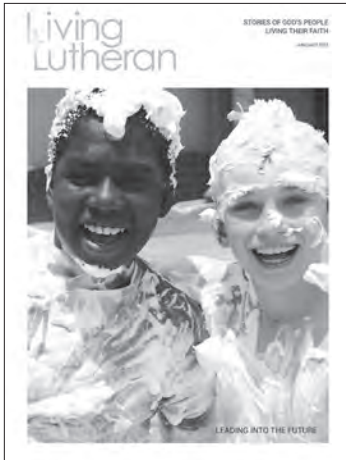
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- Across the country, churches of all types have been experiencing decline. It has been notable in mainline denominations such as the ELCA. When things are going poorly in your church, does your congregation tend to blame the rostered minister(s)? When most churches are in decline, is that blame fairly placed? Is blame a constructive response to a crisis? What would be a better response?
- How does your congregation honor and support your rostered minister(s)? What occasions during the year does the congregation acknowledge leadership for hard work and contributions?

Pastoral Care

HELPING ROSTERED MINISTERS AVOID BURNOUT

By Michael Cooper-White

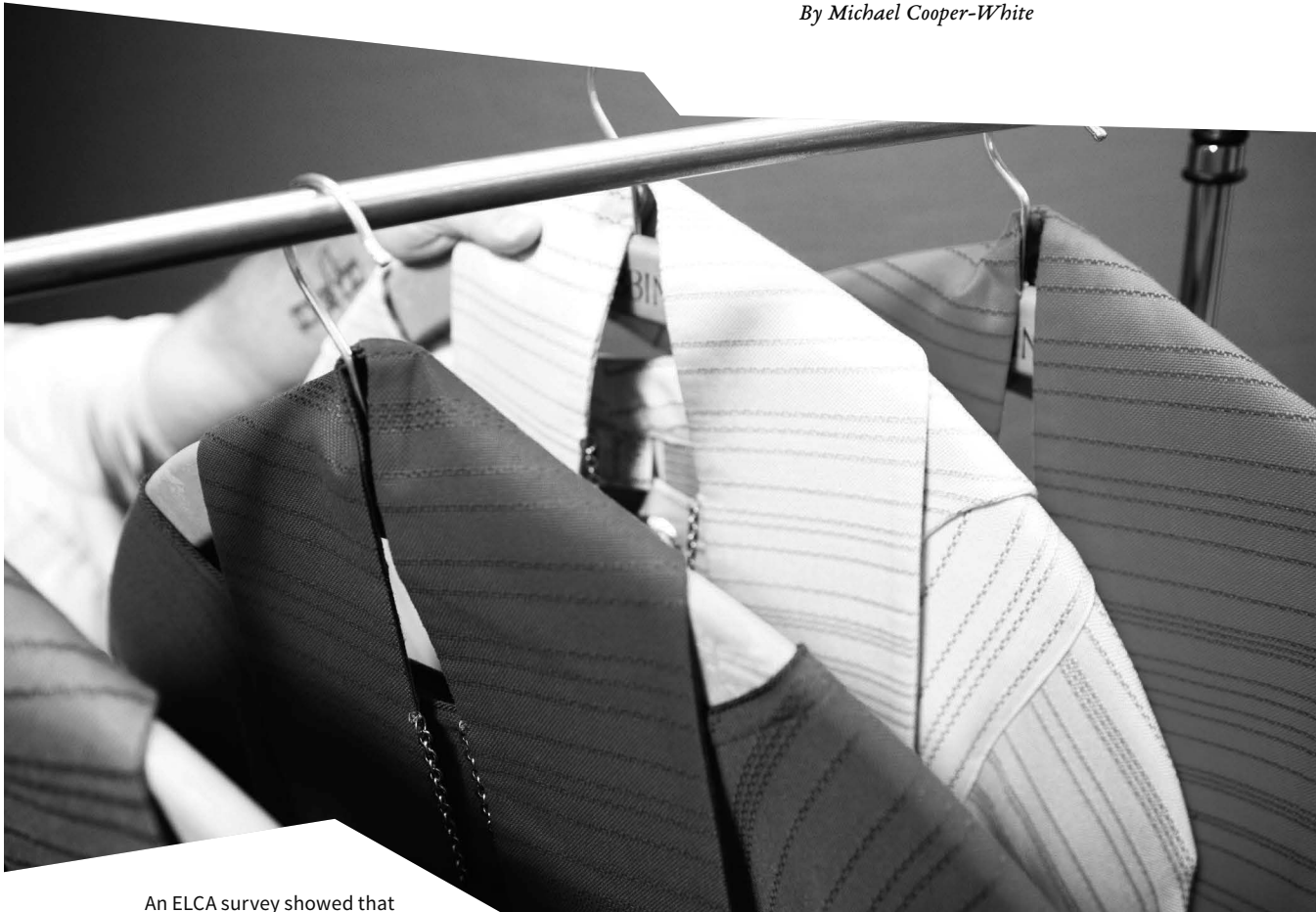


Photo: Will Nunnally/ELCA

An ELCA survey showed that one-third of pastors had considered leaving the ministry due to feelings of burnout. While few younger pastors have left full-time ministry, retirements have spiked.

When an ELCA pastor or deacon is installed, the congregation promises to pray for, help and honor its leader and “in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*).

But ELCA and ecumenical surveys show that many clergy feel a lack of sufficient support and commitment to unity on the part of their parishioners. This sense of being unsupported has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some considering

joining millions of others in the societal trend known as the “Great Resignation.”

Nationwide research conducted by the Barna Group reveals that 38% of pastors in all denominations “thought about quitting full-time ministry” after the first year of the pandemic. Nearly half of pastors under age 45 said they were considering leaving their calling.

James Dunlop, bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod, represents the ELCA Conference of Bishops on the church’s pension



Beth and Alex Martini, pastors in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, took a family respite retreat at Camp Kirchenwald in Lebanon, Pa. The synod partnered with the Lutheran Camping Corp. to make accommodations available for pastors to take short-term respite retreats.

and health plan board. He said a survey of ELCA pastors shows similar results, with at least one-third indicating they had considered stepping out of ministry.

Dunlop said the experience in his synod corroborates the statistical data, with many pastors suffering “from fatigue, constantly changing circumstances and conflict with people” during the pandemic. Pastors who aren’t tech-savvy have struggled to master the skills required for virtual worship, Bible studies and other activities. “Some say, ‘I’m just exhausted; I can’t keep doing this,’” Dunlop said.

Reimagining and reshaping

Though many younger pastors may be threatening to leave ministry, few have actually done so thus far. Other ELCA bishops confirm Dunlop’s assessment that, despite the fatigue and self-questioning, there is no grand clergy exodus in the ELCA.

Paul Egensteiner, bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod, said he is seeing the typical rate of resignations and retirements. In the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, Bishop Dee Pederson and her staff report that more pastors appear to be open to new calls but aren’t planning to leave rostered ministry.

Convinced that “the pandemic has caused everyone to rethink how they work, where and why they work,” Pederson sees many pastors “reimagining and reshaping ministry in new and

“The most important thing is collegiality; they need each other.”

vital ways.” Some may seek a new parish after deciding that significant changes may not be possible in their current calls.

The picture is somewhat different for older clergy. During the first year of the pandemic, retirements fell below the normal average because many pastors felt they couldn’t abandon their congregations amid the crisis. But as time has passed—and pension funds have performed well—retirements have spiked. Bishops indicate that fewer retired pastors are eager to serve in interim or part-time ministries, of which there are growing numbers.

Bolstering support

Pastors and deacons who are persevering after two years of pandemic challenges, in addition to the normal stressors, have doubled down on their commitments and are also leaning more on each other.

A panel of six New York City pastors was asked to address a gathering of ELCA seminarians studying at Harvard and Yale divinity schools and Princeton and Union seminaries in the northeast. Asked by students why they keep doing ministry in these challenging times, one pastor after another pointed to their faith and the importance of community.

“There have been very hard days, but I’ve never wished to be doing anything else,” said Heidi Neumark, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan, who has been ordained for 40 years. “No matter how bad things are, I always see signs of Jesus in people who are going through hell.”

At the opposite end of the career cycle is Kelsey Brown, a recently ordained pastor who serves as mission developer of Jehu's Table in Brooklyn. "I show up because I love the people, not just those who walk in the doors Sunday morning," she said, adding that she's committed to serving everyone who approaches her.

During difficult times, these pastors said, leaders need to encourage one another, practice self-care and let go of perfectionism. "We never become fully competent at this," Neumark said.

Despite the ongoing challenges of the past two years, the majority of ELCA rostered ministers, even those who have considered leaving the ministry, will keep going. They recognize the unique role they carry out in the church and world.

Samuel Cruz, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Brooklyn and a professor at Union Theological Seminary, said he's always understood himself to be called as a community activist as well as a "servant leader" pastor. "You can do things in the church that are more difficult elsewhere," he added.

Decades of congregational studies have concluded that healthy, well-supported leaders

are essential for vital and faithful congregations. The future of the church hinges on finding ways to support rostered ministers.

Recognizing that many pandemic-forced changes, such as online worship and educational offerings, will meet the ongoing needs of older people and others, many pastors and deacons are eager to upgrade their technological skills. Seminaries, colleges and universities are stepping up to offer training and coaching for new modes of ministry.

The front line of support happens in the congregation or other ministry context, but synods are providing more care for their clergy too. Dunlop said his synod's camps have offered free accommodation to pastors in need of short-term spiritual retreat; the synod also offers grants for clergy events that may include speakers, counselors or more creative activities.

"One group is taking dancing lessons together," he said. "The most important thing is collegiality; they need each other." †

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