



THE LANDSCAPE OF LOSS: COVID-19 & CLERGY WELL-BEING

GREATER NEW JERSEY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

REGIONAL RETREAT 2021

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“WINTERING”

- *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*
- Katherine May
- Riverhead Books, New York, 2020
- *“An occasional sharp wintering would do us good...we may never choose to winter, but we can choose how.” (Page 13)*

“LOVE YOURSELF”

- 2003: Protestant clergy said they were satisfied with their work but many said they had increasing stress and difficulties in family life.
- 2003: In the same study a common response was, “The stress is killing me.”
- 2007: In a study of United Methodist Clergy 10% of clergy said they were depressed and 40% said they were depressed at times or worn out “some of most of the time”.

DO YOU GO GET HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT?

- 2007: A study on United Methodist clergy reported that clergy “are a *highly stressed group*.” It reported the single highest prescription for all UM clergy on the UM health plan at the time was for psychotropic drugs, specifically anti-depressants. Prescriptions/claims for this kind of medication accounted for 30% of all prescriptions during the year that was studied. Of the 30% who were taking anti-depressants, only 12% of those people saw a therapist.

LET'S TALK THEOLOGY: THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

- “Jesus died for our sins.”
- “We are reconciled with God through Christ’s sacrifice.”
- “We are reconciled with God through...sacrifice...”
- How might we mis-appropriate this doctrine?
- What would our daily lives be like if we did?
- “Do you know the problem with you, Ginny?”

HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY RELATIONAL*

- *Our connections with one another:*
- *Are vital to human mental and physical health and well-being across the lifespan*
- *Are powerfully protective, promoting resilience and helping to mitigate the impact of adverse life experiences and trauma.*

RELATIONSHIPS, CONT'D.

- *Foster hope, healing and recovery during illness.*
- *Help prevent relapse.*
- * Mental Health Ministry 101; Compassion, Peace & Justice Ministry;
- Presbyterian Mission Agency
- Updated November 2020

WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES CLERGY SURVEY, JULY 2020

- 434 respondents out of which 427 were clergy
- 10% of all clergy surveyed had their employment threatened due to Covid-related ministry decisions
- 25% had seriously considered retiring or resigning due to the stresses of ministry during Covi-19 times

“HARD TIMES CALL FOR SOFT PEOPLE...”

- *“Hard times call for soft people. There is softness in stillness, in staying home, in distractions deleted, in a togetherness that stretches great distances.” **
- *If the Trees Can Keep Dancing, So Can I* Nancy Cross Dunham, crowdsourced poem arranged by Kwame Alexander for PBS’ Morning Edition

WCC SURVEY, CONT'D.

- *“An abundance of personal stories offered – mostly anonymously – illustrated the strain on clergy personally, on their family relationships, and on the relationship between the pastor and parish.” (Member of WCC survey conclusion.)*
- *“If we do not attend to changes in our ministry models, we risk a profound leadership crisis.” (WCC Survey Conclusion)*

WCC CONCLUSIONS

- *“How can we best:*
- *support local churches in focusing ministries to meet the deepest need;*
- *foster regular collaboration between parish clergy so they are less isolated;*
- *offer clergy and their families generous community-wide care so rest and respite is not seen as a deficiency.”* (Cf “Wintering” and our aversion to it.)

ANECDOTAL WCC CLERGY RESPONSES: ADAPTING

- *“It takes twice as long to do half as much in parish ministry. We have to change our expectations or we will all be exhausted.”*
- *“I think that the anxiety that I feel related to the pandemic has made me a workaholic. I feel a great responsibility to provide all sorts of high quality resources to our congregation when we cannot be together. I have worked harder than I ever have before and I am getting burned out. While the congregation has been and thoughtful I know that I am ‘crispy’.”*

WCC RESPONSES: SAFETY CHOICES

- *“I feel damned if I do and damned if I don’t mask, open and respond to the needs of our community members...I visited one elderly member, who has been self-distancing since March, to bring her some things she needed. I leave them in her garage. One day she came out and stood there open armed and said, ‘I really need a hug.’ What was I to do? I hugged her, prayed neither of us were contagious and felt so sad that I can’t offer the presence people need at this time.”*

WCC RESPONSES: SAFETY CONCERNS

- *“I wish that pastors could have some sort of organization modeled on a union. Such an organization could have individuals who would be advocates for pastors and resources for help in difficult situations. Or perhaps there needs to be a clear policy on work environment safety and health that churches agree to provide for their members and their staff.”*

WCC RESPONSES: POLITICIZATION

- *“It is a very difficult time to be a pastor in such a divided society. Preaching and teaching compassion, care and concern, observing safety and health protocols are so politicized. Treating each other decently and with respect is often met with vitriol.”*
- *“There is no consistency on how and when churches are reopening and that makes it hard as some believe people will switch churches or not ever come back.”*

WCC RESPONSES

- *“Without clear guidance from local/state authorities on gathering for worship, I have had to spend far too much time learning about metrics, searching for data, figuring out how to interpret them, and trying to have a context/basis for making decisions. I am uncomfortable being an epidemiologist for my congregation, whose lives I care about deeply. The time it takes away from being able to provide direct pastoral care, leadership, staff interface and the like is significant.”*

HOW ARE YOU DOING?

- “Pastors are holistically ministering to their flock, and so they have to holistically minister to themselves.” (Jeremy Keeton, Senior Director of Counseling, Focus on the Family; quoted in *Pastors Face Mental Health Challenges Amid Covid-19 Pandemic*; Baptist Press, April 16, 2020)
- “I am more conscientious than I’ve every been in my ministry with regards to praying through crisis, and so I’m staying close to the spiritual disciplines I’ve used for 40 years now.” (Rev. Frank Lewis, Pastor, 1st Baptist Church, Nashville)

WCC RESPONSES

- *“We lack feedback for the work we are doing – the sermons, the on-line work, the pastoral care. I think now more than ever, clergy are hungry for supportive, appreciative feedback, and time off – respite care. Fortunately I have had time off recently. This is my 2nd week back and the stress level is immediately really high.”*

WCC RESPONSES

- *“The psychological strength and physical fortitude needed to provide balanced leadership when it comes to shouldering the burdens of ministry tasks, public health information, the ethical/moral spectrum of beliefs, the gospel vs economic values, unsolicited political pressure from the legislature and president, and providing regular risk assessment based on literal life and death decisions had been hard to sustain. Daily I ponder my calling to serve the church.”*

WCC PASTOR'S RESPONSE CONT'D.

- *“In the last three months I have applied to academic programs and looked at job postings. I am thankful to be in a faith community that was healthy and supporting pre-Covid and yet we are still feeling this pull us apart. Maybe this is what it feels like to be ‘the body of Christ...broken’.”*
- A Central Wisconsin Pastor

SMALL GROUPS: SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- *“Isolation and loneliness are enemies of mental health.”* (May Is Mental Health Month, Presbyterian Mission Mental Health Ministry) Thoughts?
- How are you feeling tonight?
- What do you think about the statistics shared?
- How have you been shaped and/or changed by the pandemic?
- What do you long for now that we are 11 months into the pandemic?
- Where is God for you in all of this?

BACK TOGETHER:

- What common themes or phrases did you hear in your small group?
- What do you think is the biggest challenge or threat to the wellbeing of our clergy in GNJ?
- What do you want your congregation and/or GNJ to know about you and the impact of the pandemic on you as a individual and as a clergyperson?
- What do you want God to know about you?

WINTERING: WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- *“In the Wisdom of Insecurity, Watts makes a case that always convinces me, but which I always seem to forget: that life is, by its very nature, uncontrollable. That we should stop trying to finalize our comfort and security, and instead find a radical acceptance of the endless, unpredictable change that is the very essence of this life.” Wintering, Katherine May, pp.232-233*
- *“Behold, I make all things new. Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Revelations21:5*

OUR BROTHER, JOHN O'DONOHUE

- “May you recognize in your life the presence, power and light of your soul... May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.”

OUR BROTHER, JOHN

- *“May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful and eternal happening.”*

OUR BROTHER, JOHN

- *“May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.” Amen & amen & amen & amen!*
- *To Bless the Space Between Us, “Soliltude”, (Doubleday, 2008)*