



# minister

## MAGAZINE

A Journal of the American Baptist Ministers Council • Speaking to the Practice of Ministry

Volume XXXIII, No. 2

Published Periodically at Valley Forge, PA

Summer, 2010

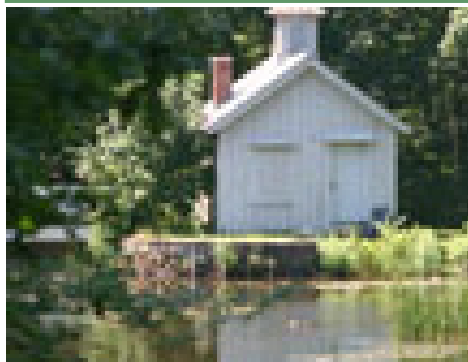


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

## Remember the Sabbath or Let Your Heart Sing or ...???

Heather Entrekin



My first acquaintance with serious depression came well into mid-life. I was almost 50, a new pastor of a busy, vigorous church dealing with the complexities and emotions of transition, high expectations, conflict, and the relentless, daily responsibilities of ministry when disabling depression struck. Emotionally, I sensed myself moving toward the edge of an abyss. Physically, it was a struggle to eat or to sleep. I had no

## Self-care

sense of humor or curiosity. Every ounce of energy went toward appearing normal and continuing to function, adding isolation and loneliness to the

burden. Long after it was over, I referred to this experience in a sermon to which the church moderator responded, “I had no idea.” I had put so much effort into hiding the symptoms that even my husband commented, “I had no idea.”

Having told this story to clergy groups a few times, I know that my experience is not an anomaly. Clergy often fall short of the mental and physical health we teach and preach. First of all, it is a reality of our culture. Studies show that about one-third of American adults are obese and about one in four suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. A recent telling headline in *The Kansas City Star* read, “Study: Misery Rules Midlife.”

But for clergy, the statistics are even more ominous. National research has found that mainline Protestant ministers tend to be more overweight, stressed and depressed than the general population, a finding that conversation and observation at the average clergy conference would confirm.

There are multiple causes. A success-driven church culture that would have us “grow spiritual redwoods,” “transform church boards” and advance from “good to great” promotes a chronic, uneasy sense of “not enoughness.” Phyllis Tickle describes the era in which we live as a “semi-millennial eruption,” a shift of seismic proportions of which drowning in information overload, correspondence, and endless “to-do” lists are signs. One pastor, Larry Loughhead, who kept a firm grasp on his own sense of humor while confronting the vicissitudes of ministry, warned, “Life can never be so complicated that it can’t be more so.” In the race to do more and better, we forget Gandhi’s wisdom: “There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

The dangers of our unbalanced, overstressed, fragmented lives are not only personal but ecclesial as well. The Los Angeles diocese is settling a sexual abuse lawsuit in excess of \$660 million. Protestants may have fewer headlines but one does not have to look far to find Baptist colleagues, with unhappy marriages and unhealthy lifestyles, who have harmed those they were called to shepherd, nurture and serve.

Parker J. Palmer identifies the problem as losing touch with oneself. Confronted with demands of adulthood, the pastorate, and the times, we are in danger of losing the ability to be fully ourselves. We “stifle the imagination that journey [of the soul] requires...because imagining other possibilities for our lives would remind us of the painful gap between who we most truly are and the role we play in the so-called real world.” (*A Hidden Wholeness*, 15) We get obsessed with succeeding, or at least surviving, at considerable cost to self, others and the world at large.

The Body of Christ is ill served by leaders who absorb the destructive ways of the world. As Thomas Merton states in “Conjectures of a Busy Bystander,”

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns,  
to surrender to too many demands,  
to commit oneself to too many projects,  
to want to help everyone in everything,  
is to succumb to the violence of our times.

All of this, along with a perfect storm of ministry events and a family history of depression, contributed to my own disabling experience. Recovery from depression and associated physical symptoms involved professional help. Overcoming the stigma of therapy prolonged my distress, but once the call for an appointment had been made and my need shared with another human being, the cloud began to lift. In addition to self-understanding, she offered the simplest of prescriptions: healthy food and regular exercise. Instead of potato chips, choose an apple. Walk every day. Step by step, apple by apple, I got well.

But the challenge to love and care for oneself in order to love others continues. I discovered that I was further from the abundant life than I thought upon application to the Lilly Foundation for a clergy renewal sabbatical grant. The question posed to applicants was, “What will make your heart sing?” It was a difficult question to answer. In fact, it brought tears. When I shared it with others, it often tripped tears in them as well. One friend commented, “Who ever asks that question?”

It was as if I could only dare to consider it with a Lilly grant dangling over my head. But why? Am I not created in the image of God? Am I not God’s own beloved daughter? Would I not want this for the ones I love? For the church? For the world?

The genius of the question is its ability to remind us that caring for oneself is one of God’s commandments and the beginning point for care of others. As Joan Chittister writes, “What we do not nourish within ourselves cannot exist in the world around us because we are its micro-cosm.” Palmer reminds us that the world does not need better pastors, teachers, presidents as much as it needs human beings fully alive (**Let Your Life Speak**).

In the end, it was my husband who best answered the question of how to be healthy and whole. He, who sees pastoral over-functioning from the inside and bears some of the consequences, said simply, “Keep Sabbath.” Again, a commandment.

To make a spacious place within for the presence of God, the one true source of abundant life, requires Sabbath. Excellent guides and resources abound, many

written by clergy who came to true Sabbath-keeping via heart attack, cancer or mental breakdown. The command is given by God, who does not live as if the world were a place of endless productivity, ambition and worry. God is not a workaholic and does not need to be more secure, more in control or more noticed (**The New Interpreter’s Bible**). The letting go, stepping aside, and playfulness of Sabbath forms us in this beautiful image.

Recently, I had a difficult meeting to prepare for. It demanded time-consuming study and preparation on top of an impossibly full week. The only available day was Friday, my scheduled day off, so I plunged in that morning, reading and taking notes with a sense of mild desperation. At noon, I closed the books and began Sabbath, a half day of letting the world move on without my effort and remembering my appropriate place within it. My breathing relaxed, my heart began to hum a little. The next day, trusting more in God than myself, having rested, having watched a dragonfly in the garden, the meeting went well.

Wholeness is a choice and our faith teaches us that its seed is within us. Our loving God provides the commandment that leads a heart to sing.

#### Notes:

**The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. I.** (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999)

Palmer, Parker J., **A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life.** San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Palmer, Parker J., **Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation.** San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Tickle, Phyllis, **The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why.** Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

*Heather Entrekin has served as Senior Pastor at Prairie Baptist Church in Prairie Village, Kansas since 1999. She is a daughter and great granddaughter of Baptist pastors. Contact her at [entrekin@prairiebaptist.org](mailto:entrekin@prairiebaptist.org).*



Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore



# minister MAGAZINE

Published periodically as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

Editor: Michael Saylor

Associate Editor: Sue Sechrist

Publisher: Joe Kutter and the

Ministers Council Communications Committee

Contact:

The Ministers Council

PO Box 851

Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

Phone: 1 • 800 • 222-3872 ext 2333, 2334

Fax: 610 • 768-2066

Signed letters and comments are welcome, and may be used for publication. Send to [www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org](mailto:www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org). Please include your return and email addresses in any correspondence.

# ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

- ordained
- commissioned • a lay professional or
- a student in seminary
- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org) under the "Who We Are" link.

# mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling



Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore