



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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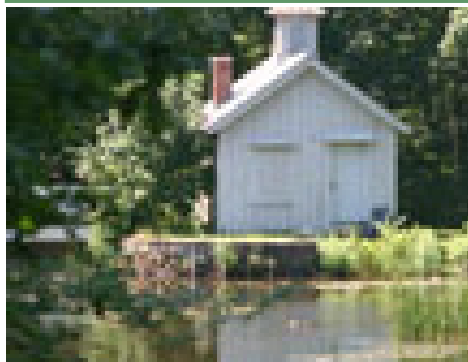


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

## Self-care

## Changing Habits

Margaret J. Marcuson



How can we live healthier, happier lives as clergy leaders? Sometimes that vision seems like nothing more than a pipe dream. Ministry is a stressful line of work. The constant pressure of a Sunday sermon, endless pastoral needs, church conflicts both big and small, community obligations – all can conspire to keep us from taking care of ourselves, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Working hard is not a bad thing at all. Ministry is hard work. But if it's compulsive, then it's a spiritual problem. If

you can never let go, you will not be able to sustain yourself over time.

So what are some ways we can find greater health in our lives? You'll see some examples described by our colleagues in this issue. This is also a matter that the Spiritual and Personal Wholeness Committee of the national Ministers Council is committed to engaging. The ABC General Executive Committee (GEC), comprised of executive leaders from the national, regional and affiliated organizations of ABCUSA, likewise has taken an interest, and invited the Ministers Council to work together with them.

Larry Greenfield, Executive Minister of ABC Metro Chicago, has taken leadership on the GEC initiative. He talks about his own journey elsewhere in this issue. Greenfield says, "We don't take very good care of ourselves in any of the essential ways of self-care. We don't eat right, we don't exercise, and we don't sleep enough. We are irregular in the task of spiritual self-care." And he suggests that we lead institutions that aren't too good at it, either. "Look at the church suppers we pray over, or what we serve in the fellowship hour." We could start with any number of areas: diet, exercise, prayer, Bible study we don't undertake as part of sermon preparation, spending time with family.

My own experience and that of the many clergy with whom I coach and consult suggest most clergy are overfunctioners – we take too much responsibility for others and for the life of the church. This can lead to burnout, and to not enough time for family and for self-care. Asking clear questions such as, "Whose responsibility is this? Is it really mine? When do I need to let go?" help create time and energy for the rest of life.

I love the passage from Mark where Jesus and the disciples "had no leisure even to eat," and he takes them away from everything (Mark 7:31-32). Of course they immediately get sucked in when people follow after Jesus. But it says that Jesus at least made the effort to get away when the workload was overwhelming. To me a great deal of this has to do with personal boundaries: setting boundaries around our time so we can get enough prayer, rest and exercise.

We will never find greater health and wellness if we only think we "should" do it. More and more I'm working on receiving God's love and acceptance for myself just as I am. It is out of that place of living in love that I am able to make incremental changes. I'm starting to think of the voices of judgment and self-criticism and self-hatred as demonic. Can we take care of ourselves without making "self-care" yet another weapon to use to beat ourselves up? Remember, God loves us more than we can imagine, and has compassion for us, more than we often have for ourselves. Change comes

slowly! What would a grace-filled approach to self-care and fitness look like? Perhaps some baby steps, a five minute walk, one minute of prayer.

I'm always interested in how our family story impacts our functioning in ministry. We might look at who in our family know how to take care of themselves. Many clergy are oldest children which often results in being highly responsible, even over-responsible. Perhaps a younger brother or sister can be a resource for learning how to have a good time!

Here are some areas I'm working on:

*Turning off electronic access as a spiritual discipline.* I typically don't check email on Sundays (that's possible in the work I do, coaching and consulting, since I don't always work on those days). But I notice that I do access the Internet on Sundays. Completely fasting from electronic connections is a practice I want to experiment with more.

*Paying attention to my hunger.* I'm trying to learn to ask more questions of myself. Am I hungry? Am I full? Or am I simply tired or bored? It's so easy to get caught up in a conversation over a meal that I don't even notice that I'm full and so I keep eating. Or I'm writing something and to avoid working on it I get a snack. Or I come home at night, and I'm really tired, but instead of resting I eat something. For some people (not me!) they get so busy they forget to eat.

*Starting up exercise (yet again...).* I do love to walk and have for years, but I have been less regular in recent months. I also started using free weights a couple of times a week. I hate the weights, but I feel and look better when I can keep that up. I remind myself that just because I've stopped exercising doesn't mean I can't start again.

People are very different in this regard. I do really well with steady daily habits. One mentor of mine would spend several hours in prayer once a week rather than every day. I don't think there's one right way to do it. People have different levels of tolerance for workload. Balance may be unachievable, but life with a certain rhythm over time is better. Living with the tension of work undone, or work unfinished, is an inevitable part of ministry. If you have small children, life has a different quality than if you have no children or an empty nest. Here's how I'm inclined to think about self-care: learn to know yourself better and do what works best for you. and see if you can develop your repertoire and include some areas that are a stretch.

Larry Greenfield suggests we together develop a covenant approach to this area of our ministerial life, just as we've done with the Together in Ministry approach. We frequently try to work on these areas alone, often not very successfully. It might make a difference, he says, if we had a partner who would say, "How are you doing?" Here's an

example: I know of two pastors who lift weights together regularly. They are exercise partners as well as spiritual partners. And there is mutual accountability for showing up at the gym.

My spiritual director suggests addressing one habit at a time. Don't try to take on everything at once. But what might God be calling you to do right now? Walk for ten minutes? Pray for five minutes? Eat one more vegetable a day? Eat one more meal with your family this week? Pick one, and see what God might do with small steps.

*Margaret J. Marcuson is Vice President for Spiritual and Personal Wholeness. She works with churches who want to create a ministry that lasts and clergy who want to have more impact on the people they serve best. She is the author of Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry. Get her free mini-course, "Five Ways to Avoid Burnout in Ministry" at [www.margaretmarcuson.com](http://www.margaretmarcuson.com).*

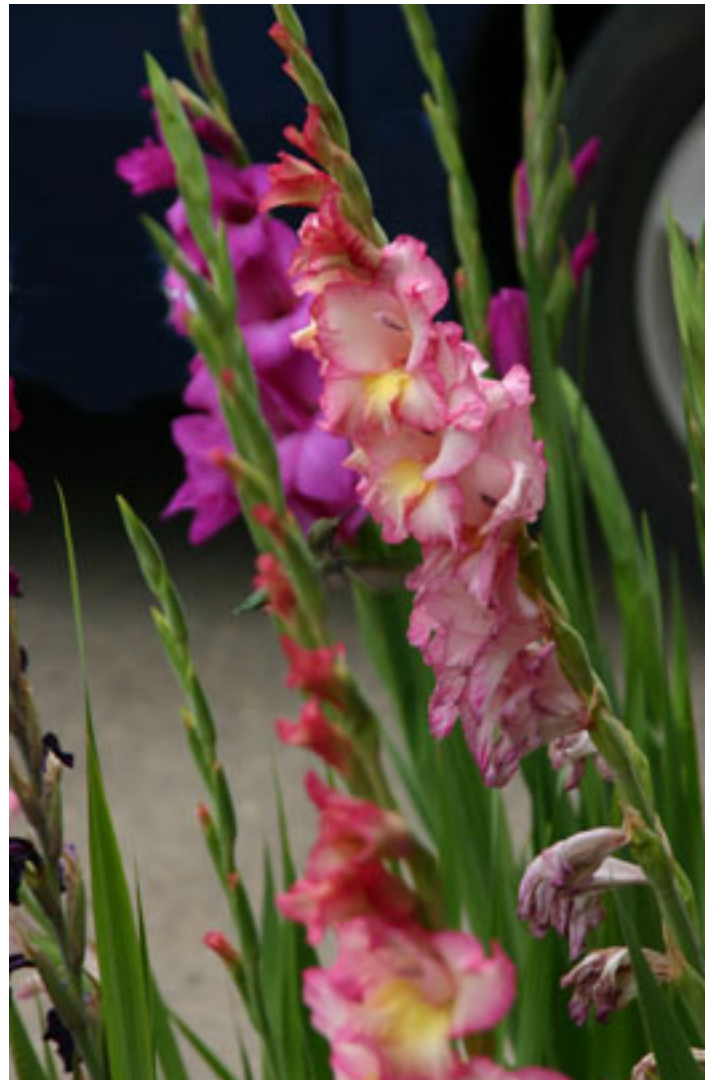


Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore



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## 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

## 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.



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