

Clergy self-care

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 22, 2015

The creative wise-woman, [Rachel Hackenberg](#), and I have been engaging in back-end twitter discussions about clergy self-care, each of us expressing a certain appreciation and irritation with the subject. Since it's difficult to hash out the nuances in 140 characters, we decided to step from behind the curtain and talk about it on our blogs.

Rachel kicked off our discussion by addressing privilege, and the hope that we could separate our theological understandings with the marketing forces. I say, "Amen." Please, [read her post](#) (and Crimson Rambler's comments are hilarious too).

Then, Rachel asked me, "**Carol, from your perspective what's useful about the phrase 'clergy self-care' and what's not?**"

First, what is useful.

Sixteen years ago, I kept a journal of my first year in ministry. At the end, I remember pasting an illustration of a man who was white and naked, and was being pulled apart by different hands. It was almost as if he were on a medieval torture rack, except fingers stretched him. The drawing, I felt, perfectly illustrated my first year as a pastor.

Then, I was startled, realizing that I would not last long if I didn't change some things. So I did. I began to write (stream of consciousness) each morning. I walked each evening. And I became a vegetarian. These things, in turn, gave my work more meaning

As I wrote, I sorted out my feelings and became clearer about my vocation. As I walked, I nurtured my connection with God and nature around me. As I cut meat out of my diet, I quit eating like a hung-over frat boy and started understanding how much better my body worked when fueled by vegetables. Through all of it, I realize that I was measuring my worth by how much people needed me.

I still experience the pulling. This week, in fact. I needed to speak, preach, consult, preside over a wedding, interview a church planter, write three articles and a foreword, and go to meetings. Plus there were the regular things that crowd my days, like cleaning, cooking, folding laundry, doing the lawn work, parenting, and driving everyone to their events.

In the midst of this, a very important last minute thing came up that I needed to be at, but it was when I was supposed to get my haircut. And I was pulled. Stretched. I was angry at myself that I would miss something important to go to the salon, but I also knew that I didn't want to get back on that torture rack. So, I thought, *Clergy self care. This is basic hygiene. You cannot take care of others if you don't take care of yourself.* So it's a useful reminder, if we tend to feel guilty about saying no, if we don't like asking to be fairly paid for work, if we have a tendency to medieval torture, or if we have difficulty taking care of basic hygiene.

What's not useful

Let's be honest for a moment. Most of us have been to clergy meetings where everyone talks about how hard they're working, but some of the pastors who talk the loudest actually work the least. If my house was on fire, and they were holding the hose, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't lift the nozzle to help me out.

We all know pastors like this. All that talking about how much we work can be a smoke screen, a ruse to inflate our worth. Then people can continue the empty bragging about how much we need to take care of ourselves.

I know sometimes we need to talk about how much we work, because people don't understand our job any longer. But then we can lose sight of how the rest of the world lives too.

Many denominational ministers who serve full-time positions (and I realize that's a dwindling number) get four weeks of vacation and two weeks of study leave, from the first year of service. Then some pastors get a sabbatical on top of that. I have known pastors who get an additional week off after a number of years. In our economy, this amount of time off is stunning and we should be grateful.

As we talk about self-care, can we keep it in context of how most people work now—the families who juggle multiple jobs in order to get food on the table, the people who haven't had a vacation in *years*? Yes, the work of the pastor is stressful and demanding. We burn out. But work, in general, has become difficult. People in

all professions burn out. Look around, we're all anxious messes. So can we use our anxiety as a bridge to understand people in our communities, rather than separating ourselves out as special cases?