

The privilege of ministry

Demoralization among clergy is high—and with good reason. But we need another narrative besides burnout.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

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I'd hate to venture a guess as to how many pages in the century have been devoted to the topic of clergy burnout in recent decades. But we've certainly done our part to draw attention to the subject. One cover design (November 18, 2020) featured the words "clergy burnout" depicted with flames. An article in the January 2023 issue bore the stark title, "The clergy are not OK." We've also covered the self-care industry that has sprung up around dispirited pastors and others.

I know the level of demoralization in some clergy circles is high—and with good reason. Pastors often witness extensive human suffering and bear the emotional stress of its impact. Some congregations have a peculiar habit of disrespecting and underpaying talent. The pandemic brutalized practically every form of communal life we consider precious. Managing institutional decline isn't fun. And for way too many women, people of color, and LGBTQ people, the absence of valuable support structures and the presence of painful discrimination are disheartening and, at times, disgusting.

Congregational ministry is demanding. I know this firsthand, having given this calling everything I had for 39 years. Conversing through tears at the bedsides of hundreds of dying friends. Showing up at murder scenes, fatal car crash sites, and households reeling from suicide. Shepherding a few parishioners who enjoyed tearing at the fabric of the congregation and undermining my leadership. Speaking hard truth to individuals in wretchedly difficult personal situations. Letting staff colleagues go who weren't a good fit. Navigating lonely moments. Loving people who were more fascinated by politics than by faith. Enduring more 16-hour days than I can calculate.

But you know what? I count everything I got to do, maybe especially the toughest responsibilities, as true privilege. The challenge of every new pastoral situation fed my joy far more than my exhaustion. Just ask everybody I got to love and everyone with whom I served.

We clergy ought to be careful not to act as if ministry is a uniquely demanding profession. A single parent struggling to put food on the table generally can't apply for a sabbatical or even a vacation. Aid workers picking up body parts of bomb victims don't receive affirmation from lines of people waiting to shake their hands. Sanitation workers can't just skip a route to attend an event at their kid's school.

We need another narrative for ministry, a different one to balance the burnout one. Clergy burnout talk can be as exhausting as some pastors are tired. It's a kind of rhetoric that can obscure the joy that deserves to be at the heart of this human-facing vocation. I've seen plenty of physical and mental exhaustion among friends I know who felt depleted enough to leave the pastorate. Burnout is one name for their exit, though I wonder if a crisis of spirit isn't the larger issue. A loss of meaning. An absence of what Howard Thurman calls "an aliveness within." "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in yourself," says Thurman, "you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching."

The day I was ordained, a mentor thrust a small, worn book into my hand. "Keep and use this forever," he said of this *Minister's Prayer Book*, (edited by John Doberstein). One letter within it became the permanent setting for my inner gyroscope. Pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1821-1910) wrote to his son, who was pastoring his first parish: "I beg you, do not look upon [your congregation] as a steppingstone. . . . Look upon every child, every member of the congregation as if you will have to give account for every soul on the day of the Lord Jesus. Every day commit all these souls from the worst and weakest of hands, namely, your own, into the best and strongest of hands. Then, you will be able to carry on your ministry not only without care but also with joy overflowing and joyful hope."