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PROFESSOR LEANNA FULLER WRITES ABOUT CLERGY AND SELF-CARE

For some time, the Rev. Dr. Leanna Fuller, associate professor of pastoral care, has been taking note of popular culture's pushback on the idea of self-care—and wondering why. “Religious writings and blogs have also been resisting this idea and characterizing it as self-indulgence—which it can be, of course, but I think the greater problem lies elsewhere,” she says. So last spring, in the *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, she published her analysis of the trend particularly as it relates to self-care by members of the clergy. Her article “In Defense of Self-Care” substantiates the practice as vital for sustained and thriving ministry.

“We’ve been talking about self-care for two or three decades,” Leanna notes, “but both my own, anecdotal pastoral experience and the research on the subject bear out that clergy aren’t doing much of it. Detractors criticize self-care as an easy excuse for pastors not to fulfill their responsibilities in ministry, but I don’t know anyone in ministry who, for example, refuses to conduct a funeral for a parishioner, or to do some other important pastoral task. The greater problem for most clergy is finding time to take a day off!”

So in her article Leanna explores where the idea of self-care as “selfish” is coming from—she wonders why there is discomfort with inward-looking thinking. One answer is that people seem to have different expectations of pastors than of other professionals. “It’s one thing to call your pastor at 11:00 p.m. to say that your spouse has just been hospitalized with a life-threatening condition. It’s another thing to call late at night to ask what time the special program at church begins tomorrow—an answer they can get from the church’s newsletter. But some parishioners do that, though they wouldn’t call their accountant with a simple question at 11:00 p.m.” So Leanna points out the importance for pastors of setting appropriate boundaries—an element of proper self-care.

And with her students at Pittsburgh Seminary, she cultivates an understanding of self-care not as a means of pampering oneself, but as a rhythm of work and rest designed to keep a person vibrant in ministry—a rhythm that makes ministry feel rewarding and sustainable. “Self-care should be approached like a spiritual discipline, with the goal of developing a flourishing ministry. Pastors should not drive themselves till they just can’t go any more, then rest, then start back up till they get exhausted again and actually have to take time off. That’s not sustainable ministry,” she notes.

Leanna also recognizes, however, that “balance” is sometimes difficult to achieve on a week-by-week basis, since there are ebbs and flows in ministry. “Sometimes a pastor will need to work 50 hours during a particular week. When that happens, during the following week he or she should try to work fewer than the normal 40 hours—and not feel guilty about it! There is nothing wrong with tending to self-care—in fact, doing so gives you more energy for giving to others, rather than taking time away from ministry or signifying some sort of weakness.” The latter observation is a particularly important point for societal groups who haven’t been given “permission” to do self-care. Those groups include women in addition to pastors, whom we generally expect always to be “on call.”

“Our communities can be a big part of encouraging clergy to engage in self-care,” Leanna notes. “We don’t always see ourselves as clearly as others do. It might take a friend to tell you that you need to get more rest, or take more time off, for example. Pastors are more likely to do that if they are encouraged to by their community.” Since some people think the term “self-care” is too individualistic for such practices, they may prefer to use the term “soul-tending.” “But self-care literature doesn’t really talk about it as being individualistic,” says Leanna. “The goal of self-care is thriving in ministry. Constantly trying to fulfill every need all the time is what causes burnout. And the situations that require such concentrated effort are not as numerous as they may seem to be.”

“Think about what boundaries you’ll set before you start your ministry,” Leanna tells her students, “so that from the beginning you form proper expectations of you by your congregation. If you make your parishioners too reliant on you, you do them a disservice by not encouraging them to use their own gifts to figure out problems,” she advises. “It’s important for you to have a life outside your work. It’s important for your congregation to develop independence in ministry. Both are important expectations to set for the sake of the person who succeeds you. It’s okay to say ‘no’ sometimes.”

[Listen to a recent radio interview of the Rev. Dr. Fuller on Pittsburgh’s WORD FM.](#)

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