

## LA Canada

### In Theory: Reflecting on stress facing religious leaders

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*Q. Stress among clergy is a little-noticed but growing problem in the U.S. According to reports, priests and pastors suffer from rates of obesity, diabetes, depression and hypertension at greater levels than the average American, as well as higher usage of antidepressants.*

*Part of the blame for this is being put on the pressure to be successful, such as increasing congregation size, dealing with, and increasing, church finances, and general administration. Studies have also found that clergy don't — or feel they can't — take vacations because of the pressures and duties that come with their role. Rich Teeters, a veteran pastor and speaker who currently serves at Renaissance Church, a non-denominational congregation in Summit, N.J., said, "People's deaths and serious illnesses and troubles and marital problems — they don't take vacations." Teeters has cancelled, or cut short, his own vacations to conduct funerals or help congregants in distress.*

*Clergy can also find themselves isolated within their own congregations, with one pastor saying, "Clergy have been seen as either superhuman who needed no friends, or subhuman who could exist without them — but certainly not human." Many have cited the need to be available 24/7 as reasons for not only stress, but also for cutting down on their time to prepare sermons and deal with day-to-day administration. To research stress among clergy, Duke Divinity School is conducting a Clergy Health Initiative, a seven-year, \$12-million program designed to improve the health of pastors by putting their wellbeing first.*

*Do you find the demands of your roles stressful? If so, how do you cope?*

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It doesn't take a special study to discover that many members of the clergy are prone to more than the average amount of stress. There are weekly sermons to prepare, meetings to facilitate or attend, conversations with congregants in distress, newsletter articles to create, public appearances and presentations to make as representatives of the congregation, classes to teach, newspaper articles (such as this one) to write, rituals to perform and official gatherings to attend. And those are just a few of the duties that come readily to mind.

Now I would be remiss if I presented those activities as providing only stress. They also provide a great deal of fulfillment. But being a member of the clergy can also be a very lonely profession. Although we can have very satisfying relationships in the congregation, they do not have the same qualities as regular friendships. The minister is always the minister, even while thoroughly enjoying a social connection with members of his or her congregation.

With that in mind, the minister, rabbi, imam, or other clergyperson needs to find social connections with those outside the circle of the congregation. She or he needs to have collegial connections and opportunities to participate with other groups in the community where her role as a member of the clergy is not a major focus. Family is also an important aspect of life for religious professionals. If we lose touch with the people who are the closest to us by blood or partnership, other aspects of life may well fail to be satisfying for us or our families.

In addition, we need to discover ways to create our own self-care. We may find reading, participation in sports, attending cultural events, exploring the natural world, traveling or creating art or music very nurturing. And we should find spiritual practices that feed our souls. Meditation, either sitting or walking; various types of prayer; journaling; labyrinth walking; or other activities may provide us with the rejuvenation that we need.

Come to think of it, I think I need to do some of those things right now. I hope that my clergy colleagues will do that too. We will be better leaders for our congregations if we take better care of ourselves.

### **The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford**

Unitarian Universalist Church

Of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

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Top 10 reasons for clergy stress:

1. Being a religious leader in a post-religious era: It's demoralizing.
2. Being held personally accountable for the decline in church attendance (not the end of the Baby Boom, or the post-religious trend, but our lack of charisma).
3. Dwindling resources of money and constant stress about fundraising.
4. Loneliness and pressure from inadequate staffing.
5. Having your source of spiritual renewal become your job. Part one: You either have no source of renewal, or you find one that isn't church.
6. Part two: The hypocrisy of teaching others a source of renewal which no longer renews you.
7. Lack of theological urgency: Without heaven and hell hanging over us, without false superiority over other religions, what is our "exclusive" claim? (Imagine doing a job you can't write boastful ad copy for.)
8. Emotional labor: Being compassionate, deep and inspiring on demand.
9. (For some like me) Being an introvert in an extrovert's job.
10. You can't be friends with church people (boundaries); you don't have energy for friends outside of church; and some day you'll leave this church and cut all personal ties.

Top 10 reasons for clergy health:

1. We know ourselves, we've done our therapy, we're not afraid of depth or pain or honesty.
2. Our work matters.

3. We get to engage deep questions and find larger perspectives.
4. We have weekdays off (errands, movies etc. without the crowds).
5. We set our own hours and can tend to our health and balance.
6. We believe that forgiveness, redemption and renewal are real in our own lives.
7. We pray; we tap into a source of life and love outside ourselves.
8. We spend time both in solitude and in community.
9. We are fed by feeding others, enlarged by works of compassion.
10. We are regularly exposed to birth and death, which remind us of the gift of life.

In other words: we have as much job stress as anyone else. We also have significant means of wellness. Not a bad gig, all in all.

### **The Rev. Amy Pringle**

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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Yes, ministry is stressful. It's not the 9-to-5-grind kind of stress, it's the never-clock-out, always-something-to-get-finished-by yesterday, plan-for-tomorrow, and not-forget-to-call-everyone-who-needed-calling-to-tell-them-you-missed-them-on-a-given Sunday kind of stress.

Then there's the, "Will-I-have-a-job-tomorrow?" kind of stress. The average American minister survives only three years in a given pastorate. Currently I'm going into my fifth year, so I feel somewhat blessed. In my denomination, the churches have all the authority, so when a congregation or its board decides it's time for a change, a hard-working pastor can easily find himself hard at work for the next several months trying to find another job.

It's quite a wake up from the perception that peace and tranquility, days of reflection, and God's ever-felt presence comprise the man of God's life — which seemed to be what we all thought was the case when we considered our childhood pastors.

Today, most American churches have less than a hundred parishioners. Try moving forward, having the best to offer a consumer constituency, and paying your pastor a contemporary wage with such a situation. Everything depends on the group's felt obligation to the mission of Christ in general, but even a very generous congregation can only give so much. With this in mind, does the pastor risk speaking on controversial topics? Does he display his own proclivities and open his personality freely, or does he not show his hand and give the people less to subjectively find fault with, thereby keeping the lights on and the pews semi-filled?

Vacations are difficult to come by, but taking a weekend here or there for a father/son-daughter retreat can pay off big. Surely the church will grant such time. And denominational conferences, though work-related, can feel like vacation sometimes, as the pastor gets out of town and sets his regular responsibilities aside for a moment.

It's a strange occupation, but there are rewards. Just keep in mind, pastors are people like everyone else.

### **The Rev. Bryan Griem**

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

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What I'm about to say may sound as though I'm trying to kiss-up to my congregation, but I really do believe that I serve a generous and understanding church. I have taken vacations every year since I started here in September of 2002, and never have I felt that anyone resented the fact that I went away for a couple of weeks. It could be that since my job as a minister is a second career for me, I am grateful for an understanding employer. (Before I was a minister, I was in broadcasting; and while I loved being on the air, lots of management types in broadcasting can be absolute slave-drivers and harassers. Not so at this church.)

Also, I get a couple of days off every week, and my congregants try not to ask me to do stuff that would interfere with my "weekend." True, if somebody dies or has a crisis, I don't say, "Sorry, but it's my day off. Find somebody else to bury your loved one."

This next bit is for my fellow clergy. I was at a seminar one time, and one of the instructors made the great point that you cannot save the world if you are not healthy yourself. So for the love of your congregation, you make sure you take time off so that you don't get burned out.

Remember on airplanes when the announcements are made before you take off? If there is a need for oxygen, oxygen masks will drop down in front of you. Now here's the point: You are told to put on your own mask before you try to help a child put on his/her mask. Get it? If you're gasping for air, how are you going to help someone else get his/her mask on?

So take care of yourself first before you try to help somebody else. You'll last longer, and you'll be able to help even more people if you yourself are in good shape.

Well, I see that Mrs. Van Lootbag wants to talk to me, but hey, it's time for my nap.

### **The Rev. Skip Lindeman**

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada

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One of the reasons I left the full time pastorate was my passion to counteract the negative effects of ministry on minister's lives by starting a para-church ministry that spoke to the importance of clergy's family and individual health. Pastors' jobs are taken home with them. They have a hard time with the very thing that could save their health, marriages, and families: boundaries.

Not setting up boundaries is our own fault. That is a fact. A pastor can very easily schedule appointments on his

or her calendar that are no one's business but his own or his family's: dates with spouse, workouts at the gym, doctors appointments and vacations. Because if pastors are ill or dead, they are not able to minister to the congregations needs, now are they? This is why I started Holy House Ministries, to break the stigma that pastors cannot take time for themselves.

On the contrary, pastors must take time for themselves. How can one possibly minister to marriages when his/her own marriage is failing? How can one pray for the health of others when he/she has stressed and eaten himself/herself into serious issues?

I believe it is paramount for pastors to create the time for self-care. As psychotherapists, another potentially draining job in the helping professions, we are trained to create boundaries, because patients can easily take time away from self-care, if we allow it. But it is our responsibility to create these boundaries, not our patient's. It is the pastor's responsibility to create his or her boundaries as well. It will only make them more effective and last, long-term, in the ministry.

### **The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT**

Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy, Inc.

Montrose

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We do talk about this stuff amongst ourselves, but I have always presumed that other professions had similar conversations about stressors that eat away at health and sanity. Unless we live completely off the grid of American life, aren't the lives of all of us warped by unrealistic benchmarks, stiff competition, cranky co-workers, and supervisors who are, shall we say, still maturing in grace and wisdom? So I will share some of my experience, but not with any sense of specialness about it.

First let me give a shout-out to my CV Methodist congregation. I've been there five years now, and they have had consistently reasonable expectations of me, which we evaluate in a healthy way at our annual review process. They would be more likely to complain (with a knowing smile) that my expectations of them have been a little on the high side.

That having been said, I have, in the course of my ministry, come to realize that as God's local ambassador, people are not shy about coming at me with unresolved God issues — concerns that are not about me, but are directed at me. I get it. A person is a more tangible target for the wounded soul and the cynical disparagement of Jesus-followers.

I am also a convenient hook on which to hang personal issues. "I don't like the pastor" often means "she/he named something difficult I need to deal with."

Coping has involved the practice of centering myself, figuring out when things are, and are not, about me, and looking forward to opportunities to really talk about what is going on at a soul level. I also look forward to serious conversations about the future of the planet and the role of faith communities in healing the world.

The irregularity of our schedules leads many pastors to skip exercise — always to our peril. Hold me accountable. If I am not at yoga, I deserve your admonishment. You cannot pursue the world's wellbeing without seeking your own.

### **The Rev. Paige Eaves**

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

Montrose

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Over my 30-plus years of ministry, I first made the mistake of working too hard, especially during a building project. During that building project, I rarely took a day off during the week and worked for four years without taking a vacation. What was the result of skipping days off and vacation time? Burnout. I was exhausted on every level and decided to take a sabbatical from ministry.

When I returned to ministry, I took better care of myself. I started taking two days off each week and I scheduled vacations with family or friends. It made a great difference in my attitude, energy level and in my health.

Now, I feel blessed to be in a small congregation that has a strong desire to grow in numbers, activities and community outreach. Yet, even with a supportive congregation, there are Sunday lessons to prepare, mid-week classes, counseling, home and hospital visitations, administrative duties, property management and building and property improvement projects. There is a certain amount of stress.

To manage the stress level, I take two days off during the week and as I write this article, I am packed and ready to fly to Hawaii for a few days' vacation (a gift trip from one of the members of my congregation).

To my colleagues in ministry, I would suggest that first, in your own mind and commitment to your congregation, realize how important the art of self-care is for your health and well-being and for the success of your congregation. How can you nurture others if the well is dry?

**The Rev. Jeri Linn**

Unity Church of the Valley

La Crescenta

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It's certainly true that the position of a rabbi — or any other clerical role — can be very stressful, but so can being the CEO of a construction company or the dean of a university. In the end, every job has both positive and not-so-positive elements. Statistics do indicate that work-associated pressures are often greater on a religious leader than on someone holding a similar position in a corporate environment, but I also believe that a clergy member often has a more rewarding experience than people in other vocations. Statistics show that many religious leaders have higher overall satisfaction levels with their lives, which is something directly associated with their line of work.

Helping people to find meaning in life, assisting to heal those who are hurting, and providing spiritual direction to those who seek it are all extremely positive ideals. Serving others in this manner ultimately provides a very wholesome and satisfying life experience that, in my experience, can act as a strong motivator and counterweight to the inordinate amount of pressure associated with being a rabbi, minister, priest or imam.

Since so many people rely heavily on their religious leaders for purpose in life and often even for basic sustenance, I feel that it is increasingly important for members of the clergy to be extra careful with their health

and cognizant of their own well-being. We must find the time to take it easy and relax — and whenever our burdens reach a level where they feel unbearable, we must learn to reach out to members of the community and ask for help. After all, our ability to effectively help others in need is only undermined when we ourselves are struggling with illness or exhaustion.

Of equal importance is the need for community members who are in leadership positions to pay close attention to their clergy and their needs. If you are a congregant who feels that something is wrong, you should speak up. In a respectful, discreet and caring manner, you can inquire if everything is OK, and see what you can do to help. Often these small gestures of concern and offers of assistance can make a big difference in the welfare of those who are committed heart and soul to building a better community and caring for others.

### **Rabbi Simcha Backman**

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale

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Yes, I often find the demands of being a pastor stressful. But these demands are neither new nor uncommon. Paul the apostle reflected on his experience: “Apart from such external things [as hardship, lack of finances, sleep deprivation, etc], there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.” (2 Corinthians 11:27-30). Trials on the outside and struggles on the inside have been consistent experiences during my 21 years of ministry.

In ministry there are many challenges for which seminary doesn't prepare us, many demands that are outside of our areas of giftedness and many people who totally perplex us. This is true for big-church pastors and for little-church pastors. But please don't think I'm whining or portraying pastors as having things much harder than most others. Ministry regularly puts me in contact with people in circumstances that are much more dire than mine, and it makes me grateful for how good I have things and for the opportunity to help someone else in Jesus' name.

How do I cope? I acknowledge my absolute dependence upon Jesus Christ for any lasting results. I spend time with the Lord in prayer, casting my burdens on him and sometimes even complaining about what's going on. I am encouraged by biblical examples of God faithfully sustaining his people. I talk things over with my beautiful and completely supportive wife, who is my God-given and faithful ministry companion.

### **Pastor Jon Barta**

Valley Baptist Church