

CLERGY LEADERSHIP & RESILIENCE

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Relationships Beyond the Church

Cultivating a Life of Connection
in the Wider Community

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CLERGY LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE SERIES

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About the Clergy Resilience Series

Ministry can be deeply life-giving. It can also wear you down.

The work asks us to enter people's grief, conflict, fear, hope, illness, joy, disappointment, and change. We preach and teach, lead organizations, respond to crises, manage conflict, accompany people through suffering, celebrate with them, make decisions, and carry responsibilities few people in our congregations ever fully see.

Sometimes we do all of that while trying to make sense of what is happening in our own lives.

Over time, ministry leaves its mark.

You may notice that you are more tired than you used to be. Criticism stays with you longer. You carry other people's problems home. Saying no produces guilt. Conflict occupies your mind long after the meeting ends. Prayer has become something you do professionally rather than something that nourishes you. Perhaps you feel lonely, spiritually dry, cynical, constantly hurried, or simply beaten up.

These experiences do not necessarily mean you are failing at ministry.

They may mean that something deserves your attention.

Resilience Is More Than Endurance

Clergy resilience is sometimes understood as the ability to withstand the pressures of ministry—to become tougher, develop thicker skin, recover more quickly, and keep going.

But resilience is not simply endurance.

Nor is it another name for self-care.

Resilience is the developing capacity to remain personally healthy, relationally connected, spiritually grounded, and vocationally faithful through the ordinary and extraordinary stresses of ministry.

That capacity develops over time.

Emotional awareness helps us recognize what is happening within us. Differentiation helps us distinguish what belongs to us from what belongs to someone else. Boundaries protect what matters. Relationships keep us from practicing ministry alone. Prayer reconnects us with the source of our vocation. Rest and recreation restore capacities that ministry consumes. Attention to sleep, nutrition, movement, and physical health reminds us that our bodies are not separate from our spiritual and emotional lives. Systems awareness helps us remain grounded when congregations become anxious. Reflection and discernment help us recognize when something needs to change.

These are not techniques for making us invulnerable.

They are practices that help us remain available to God, to others, and to ourselves.

Self-Giving, Not Self-Erasure

Christian ministry involves sacrifice.

There will be nights when someone is dying and sleep will have to wait. There will be seasons when the needs of a congregation require more from us than usual. Love costs something. Vocation costs something. Following Christ has never promised a life protected from sacrifice.

The question is not whether ministry will ask something of us.

It will.

The more important question is what kind of sacrifice faithfulness requires.

Jesus' life was profoundly self-giving, but it was not indiscriminately available. He withdrew to pray. He rested. He received food and hospitality. He lived in relationship with companions. He left places where people were still looking for him. He sometimes moved toward one need while passing by another. The existence of a genuine need did not, by itself, determine what he was called to do.

That matters for pastors.

People may genuinely need us and yet their need may not always be ours to meet. Someone may be disappointed by a boundary we establish without that boundary being unfaithful. Rest may sometimes be more faithful than another meeting. Prayer may take us away from people who want our attention precisely because we need to remember whose ministry this is.

Christian ministry calls us to self-giving, not self-erasure.

Resilience helps us give ourselves faithfully without losing the self God has given us to offer.

The distinction matters because suffering itself is not evidence of faithfulness. Exhaustion is not proof of devotion. Being indispensable is not the same as being called. Allowing ourselves to be consumed by every legitimate need around us does not necessarily make us more Christlike.

Faithful sacrifice is ordered toward life.

Sometimes it asks a great deal of us. Sometimes it stretches capacities we did not know we possessed. But resilience helps us recover, learn, mature, and return. It preserves and develops our capacity to love, serve, discern, and give again.

So one question runs quietly beneath every resource in this series:

Is this helping me become more capable of faithful self-giving, or am I simply being consumed?

Start Where You Are

This series is not a training program to complete.

There is no prescribed sequence. There is no expectation that you work through every resource. You may never need some of them.

Begin instead with what is wearing on you now.

Perhaps you need stronger boundaries. Perhaps you need to understand why a particular situation makes you so angry. Maybe you need relationships in which no one needs you to be their pastor. Perhaps you need a way to recover after demanding weeks, or help sorting out what belongs to you and what you have been carrying for someone else.

Perhaps ministry has hurt you and you need to tend the wound.

Perhaps you have stopped doing things that give you joy.

Perhaps your body is telling you something you have been too busy to hear.

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder whether something about your vocation needs to change.

Start there.

Each resource in this series focuses on one dimension of clergy resilience. It is designed to be read in about an hour and practiced for approximately a month.

The reading introduces the practice.

The month is where the learning happens.

You will be invited to notice what happens in ordinary ministry, experiment with a few practices, reflect on what you discover, and gradually decide what is useful enough to carry forward.

There is nothing to complete here.

You are practicing, not performing.

If you miss several days, begin again. If a practice doesn't fit, adapt it. If you discover that the issue you started with isn't really the issue, follow what you are learning.

The purpose is not to become proficient at another program. It is to become more attentive to yourself, your relationships, your vocation, and the presence of God within all of them.

You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

Personal practices matter, but clergy resilience is not solely an individual responsibility.

Sometimes pastors become depleted because we have developed unhealthy patterns. Sometimes we are depleted because we are serving within unhealthy systems. Often both are true.

No amount of emotional intelligence can make an abusive situation healthy. Better boundaries cannot eliminate every unreasonable expectation. Prayer cannot substitute for sleep. A vacation cannot repair chronic organizational dysfunction. And resilience should never become an excuse for asking clergy to endure circumstances that need to change.

Healthy resilience includes knowing when we need someone else.

A trusted colleague, friend, clergy cohort, coach, spiritual director, therapist, physician, mentor, or denominational leader may sometimes be part of what faithful resilience requires.

Seeking support is not evidence that resilience has failed.

Relationship is one of the ways resilience develops.

One Practice at a Time

You do not need to become perfectly resilient before you can practice healthy ministry.

Resilience develops as we live.

Notice one thing.

Practice one thing.

Pay attention to what changes.

At the end of the month, you may decide to continue the practice. You may choose another resource because something else now needs attention. Or you may simply return to your life and ministry carrying one new capacity with you.

That is enough.

Read for an hour. Practice for a month. Then ask what you need next.

Beginning Here

Pastors can spend their days surrounded by people and still live within a remarkably narrow social world.

There are worship services and committee meetings, hospital rooms and staff conversations, denominational gatherings, counseling appointments, congregational events, and the steady stream of messages that follows them all. The pastor knows many people. Many people know the pastor. Yet nearly every relationship leads back to the same institution and is shaped, at least in part, by the same role.

The problem is not simply loneliness. A pastor may have trusted people who listen, care, and offer support. Other resources in this series address that essential need.

The deeper problem is that ministry can gradually become the boundary of a pastor's life.

Perhaps the pastor once played in a community orchestra, repaired bicycles with neighbors, joined pickup basketball games, volunteered at the library, took evening classes, or lingered with other parents after school events. Then evening meetings multiplied. Weekends filled. Emergencies interrupted plans. A move to a new call severed old networks. The activities that appeared least essential were the first to be surrendered.

Eventually, almost every person in the pastor's life needs the pastor to be a pastor.

That arrangement costs more than recreation. It removes the pastor from the ordinary places where people form trust, share interests, discover common purpose, and learn to belong to one another.

This booklet is about returning to those places.

It is not primarily about finding someone to take care of you. It is not a strategy for recruiting members, cultivating donors, or creating another church program. It is not permission to neglect pastoral responsibilities in the name of personal freedom.

It is an invitation to inhabit a life wider than the institution you serve.

The central question is:

Where can I participate in the life of my community in a way that contributes to its welfare and enlarges my own capacity for life?

A Social World Larger Than Vocation

Human beings need more than one circle of belonging.

No household, congregation, workplace, friendship, or voluntary association can carry the whole weight of a human life. We need overlapping networks: family and neighbors, work and school, recreation and service, faith and civic life, close friendships and the lighter relationships formed by repeated presence.

Each network offers something different. A choir holds the pleasure and discipline of making music together. A neighborhood garden gathers people around soil, weather, food, and place. A recreational league makes room for movement, play, and friendly competition. A book group opens conversation without an agenda. A volunteer project joins strangers in work that matters.

Not every relationship must become intimate to matter. The person who greets you at the pool, the neighbor who lends a tool, the people who expect you at rehearsal, and the volunteer working beside you all help create a world in which you are located, recognized, and connected.

Pastors need this social ecology as much as anyone else.

Yet pastoral work can quietly consume this wider world. Because ministry is relational, the loss is easy to miss. The pastor is rarely alone; the calendar is crowded with people. But professional contact is not the same as participation in a shared life.

In pastoral relationships, the role remains present. Even warm and mutual congregational relationships carry questions of authority, confidentiality, expectation, and responsibility. Beyond the church, the pastor can enter communities organized around something other than the pastor's care, leadership, or spiritual competence.

There, the pastor can be one singer in the section, one student learning the language, one gardener pulling weeds, one neighbor carrying a table, one beginner trying to keep up.

That ordinariness is not a retreat from vocation. It is part of a whole vocation.

Why Wider Networks Matter

Belonging is not created only through intimate friendship. It also grows through the modest ties that locate us within a community: people who recognize us, expect us, exchange small favors, share local knowledge, and join us in activities that matter.

These relationships are especially important in a time when many people have retreated into households, private entertainment, political identities, and tightly bounded affinity groups. A loving family is a gift, but no family can provide every form of companionship, recreation, learning, challenge, service, and public belonging a person needs. Nor can a congregation carry the whole social life of its members without becoming enclosed and overburdened.

Wider networks place us among people we did not select because they already agree with us. They expose us to different generations, occupations, histories, convictions, and forms of wisdom. They create opportunities for cooperation before agreement and familiarity before intimacy.

For pastors, this is a practice of resilience because it multiplies the places from which life can be received. A difficult season in the congregation need not determine the emotional climate of every room the pastor enters. The pastor remains accountable to the call while also belonging to a neighborhood, a team, a class, a civic effort, or a community of makers.

The Institution and the Loaf

Churches need institutional forms. Institutions preserve memory, gather resources, coordinate work, establish accountability, maintain places, and sustain commitments beyond the energy of any one person.

The problem is not that the church takes institutional form. The problem begins when maintaining that form consumes the people it was meant to equip for life in the world.

Pastors can become so occupied with meetings, buildings, budgets, conflict, communication, governance, and program survival that they lose contact with the community beyond congregational concerns. They tend the container while growing distant from the world it exists to serve.

Jesus compared the reign of God to yeast worked into flour (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20–21). The yeast does not remain protected in one corner of the dough. It disappears into the loaf and becomes part of a transformation larger than itself.

Christian presence belongs in the loaf.

This does not require pastors to turn every hobby into outreach or every acquaintance into a prospect. Yeast is present by being genuinely mixed into the dough. The pastor joins the community choir to sing, the running group to run, the neighborhood project to work, and the class to learn.

Faith travels with the person who carries it. People may discover that their fellow gardener is a pastor. Conversation may deepen. Spiritual curiosity may awaken. Someone may visit worship, join a service project, or recover a desire to contribute to the common good.

When this grows from truthful presence and genuine relationship, it is relational evangelism.

It becomes instrumentalization when the pastor begins to evaluate the relationship by what it might produce for the church.

The question is not whether the relationship ever touches the congregation. The question is whether the relationship is allowed to possess value apart from its usefulness to the church.

Let vocation be present without making it the purpose of every relationship.

Seek the Welfare of the Community

Jeremiah wrote to people living far from the life they had known. They might have withdrawn into a guarded religious enclave or waited passively for circumstances to change. Instead, God told them to build houses, plant gardens, form households, and seek the welfare of the city where they had been sent (Jeremiah 29:4–7).

“In its welfare,” Jeremiah told them, “you will find your welfare.”

The promise binds the well-being of God's people to the well-being of the wider community.

Pastors sometimes imagine community involvement as one more act of service they must provide. But Jeremiah offers a more reciprocal vision. We contribute to the health of the places where we live, and their life helps sustain our own.

A pastor who coaches alongside other adults, participates in a neighborhood association, learns with local artists, or volunteers in a community project is not merely giving something away. The pastor is also receiving place, companionship, competence, perspective, delight, and a share in work that does not depend on pastoral authority.

This is neither self-care disguised as mission nor mission disguised as recreation. It is participation in a common life.

The congregation also needs pastors who participate in that life. A pastor whose entire social world is ecclesial can begin to see the community mainly through institutional needs. A pastor who shares ordinary spaces with neighbors encounters different questions, capacities, wounds, celebrations, and forms of wisdom.

The church is healthier when its leaders know the community as participants rather than only as religious professionals.

When the Network Moves Toward the Church

Social networks are porous. A friend from a cycling group may attend a Christmas service. A neighbor may volunteer at the congregation's food pantry. Someone from the pottery studio may ask the pastor to officiate a wedding. A community group may request meeting space. Shared friendships may gradually connect several people to the congregation.

This movement is not necessarily a failure of boundaries. Relationships naturally create new relationships. People who encounter a pastor's faith may become curious about its source. People who care about the common good may recognize that the church offers a place to serve it.

The challenge is to notice what changes when the network moves closer to the church.

Does the pastor begin treating friends as potential volunteers? Does ordinary conversation become pastoral counseling? Does the hobby group become dependent on church space, money, or leadership? Do people who have no interest in congregational participation begin to feel peripheral? Does the pastor lose the one place where no one expected them to organize or caretake?

The answer is not to keep social networks spiritually sterile or institutionally quarantined. It is to honor the integrity of the life already present there.

A person may join the church. Another may support a community project connected with it. Another may ask spiritual questions and never attend worship. Another may remain a trusted tennis partner or fellow gardener. None of these relationships is a failed version of another.

Healthy porosity makes room for connection without annexation.

Different Contexts, Different Possibilities

Not every pastor can enter community life with the same freedom or anonymity.

In a small town, the pastor may already be recognized almost everywhere. The choir director, pharmacist, school principal, and softball coach may all have some connection to the congregation. In a rural setting, the available networks may be few and highly interconnected. A bivocational pastor may already participate in the wider community through another workplace but have little discretionary time. A pastor from a marginalized community may need to consider whether a particular setting is genuinely safe. A pastor serving after conflict or public controversy may find that ordinary participation carries unusual visibility.

The aim is not to find a place where no one knows you are a pastor. It is to find a place whose life does not depend upon your being one.

That place may be in a neighboring community, an online learning group with appropriate safeguards, a regional recreational activity, a recurring volunteer project, or an ordinary local network in which people know your vocation but relate to you around shared work.

The practice must also respect household realities. A spouse or family should not be required to supply the pastor's entire social life, nor should community participation create another pattern in which the pastor's needs determine the household schedule. Where possible, talk openly about time, caregiving, cost, transportation, and the forms of participation available to everyone.

The Congregation Must Make Room

A pastor cannot create a life beyond the church through personal discipline alone if the congregation treats every unclaimed hour as institutionally available.

Sessions, boards, personnel committees, staff teams, and denominational leaders share responsibility for making community participation possible. They can examine the number of evening meetings, clarify what truly requires pastoral presence, distribute emergency coverage, protect time away, and ask whether the church's internal calendar leaves anyone—pastor or members—available to know their neighbors.

This is not a private perk granted to the pastor. A congregation benefits when its leaders encounter the wider community as participants. The practice also embodies something the whole church needs: Christian life gathered for worship and formation, then dispersed into neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, associations, and shared public life. A church cannot become leaven in the community if all its time is spent maintaining the yeast container.

Practicing Relationships Beyond the Church

The next four weeks build one cumulative practice:

Look Beyond the Walls → Enter the Life Around You → Become Part of the Loaf → Seek the Community's Welfare

During Week One, you will map the social world your vocation has created—and notice the parts of life that have disappeared from view.

During Week Two, you will choose one existing community and enter it as a participant rather than its pastor.

During Week Three, you will practice the repeated presence through which familiarity becomes belonging.

During Week Four, you will contribute to the community's welfare while resisting the impulse to turn the network into a ministry strategy.

Each movement remains in use as the next is added. By the end of the month, the aim is not to have constructed a complete social life. It is to have begun inhabiting one place beyond the church with enough consistency for genuine participation to grow.

These are not four separate assignments. Week Two continues the calendar awareness of Week One. Week Three depends on returning to the place entered in Week Two. Week Four adds contribution only after listening and participation have begun.

Week One — Look Beyond the Walls

Notice Where Your Life Is Located

Begin with your calendar.

Look back over the previous four weeks. Mark every gathering, activity, meal, appointment, and informal encounter according to its primary setting:

- Congregational work
- Denominational or clergy relationships
- Household and family life
- Close personal friendship
- Recreation, creativity, or learning
- Neighborhood and civic participation
- Community service not organized by the church
- Unstructured public life

Do not judge the calendar. Let it show you where your life is currently located.

Ask:

If the congregation disappeared from this calendar, what social world would remain?

For some pastors, the answer will be family and one or two distant friends. For others, almost nothing remains. This is not evidence of personal failure. Pastoral schedules, relocation, confidentiality, public visibility, and the unpredictable demands of ministry all make social participation difficult.

Even so, what has disappeared deserves attention.

Remember What Gave You Life

Think about periods before or beyond your present call.

What did you enjoy doing with other people? Where did you experience curiosity, play, movement, creativity, competition, or shared purpose? What activity made time pass differently? Where were you willing to be a beginner?

Do not ask first whether you were good at it. Ask whether you came alive within it.

Complete these sentences:

- I used to enjoy...
- I have often wanted to learn...
- I miss being part of...
- I feel most playful when...
- I feel connected to my neighborhood when...
- A concern for the wider community that matters to me is...

Notice Institutional Gravity

Institutional gravity is the tendency of congregational needs to pull available time, attention, and relationships into their orbit.

You intend to attend a class, but a committee chooses the same evening. You join a community organization and are soon asked to represent the church. You mention a hobby, and someone suggests creating a congregational version. You meet interesting people and immediately imagine how their gifts might strengthen a ministry.

None of these movements is necessarily wrong. The task is to notice the pull before it quietly determines the purpose of the activity.

Keep a brief record this week:

- When did a congregational demand displace nonchurch participation?
- When did I interpret a person primarily through what they might contribute?
- When did I feel guilty for doing something with no institutional outcome?
- When did I call recreation “unproductive”?
- What part of community life stirred genuine interest in me?

Ask What Must Be Released

Making room usually requires more than adding one more activity to an already crowded calendar.

What meeting, task, or expectation would need to change? Which responsibility could be shared? What internal activity persists mainly because “we have always done it”? Who needs to understand that participation in the community is part of faithful ministry rather than time taken away from it?

Do not promise yourself a social life while leaving every institutional commitment untouched. Identify one concrete conversation about time or expectations that may be necessary.

Practice Scenario

You discover a Saturday woodworking cooperative that welcomes beginners. The schedule is possible, and the work appeals to you. Within minutes, however, you begin imagining shelves for the church nursery, a youth mentoring partnership, and several members who might join.

The ideas may be good. Before pursuing them, however, ask what it would mean simply to learn woodworking alongside the people already there.

What makes unproductive participation uncomfortable? What would be lost if the cooperative immediately became connected to congregational work?

At the End of Week One

Identify one missing dimension of your social life:

- Recreation
- Creativity
- Learning
- Civic participation
- Neighborhood connection
- Service in the wider community
- Casual companionship through repeated presence

Then write:

- The dimension I want to recover is...
- One place where it is already happening is...

- The institutional demand most likely to displace it is...
- The guilt or anxiety I may need to tolerate is...
- One small opening I can protect is...

Carry that opening into Week Two.

Week One has done its work when you can name both the kind of community life you want to enter and the institutional pattern most likely to crowd it out.

Week Two — Enter the Life Around You

Join Something That Already Exists

Pastors are accustomed to creating programs. This week, resist creating one.

Find a community, activity, or place that already gathers people around something you genuinely value. It might be a walking group, community ensemble, adult class, makerspace, volunteer team, recreational league, neighborhood garden, local history society, parent network, conservation project, or library program.

Because pastors already spend much of their lives helping, consider beginning with recreation, creativity, physical activity, or learning rather than another service role. Service can create belonging, but it can also reproduce the familiar pattern in which your place depends on what you provide.

The best choice has three qualities:

- You are interested in the activity itself.
- Other people would continue it if you never arrived.
- You can participate without becoming its leader.

Ask:

Where can I enter as a participant rather than as the person responsible for the experience?

Let Yourself Be New

Entering an established community can feel awkward. Other people know the customs, language, and relationships. You may not know where equipment belongs, when to speak, or how decisions are made.

Pastoral competence can make beginnerhood particularly uncomfortable. In the church, you are expected to orient others. Here, someone else may need to show you how things work.

Let that vulnerability become part of the practice.

Ask ordinary questions. Accept instruction. Make a modest mistake. Learn names slowly. Resist compensating for uncertainty by becoming unusually helpful or impressive.

You do not have to earn your place through usefulness.

Introduce Yourself Truthfully

You do not need to conceal that you are a pastor. Neither must you lead with the role as though it explains everything important about you.

If someone asks what you do, answer simply. Then remain in the shared conversation.

“I pastor a church nearby. I joined because I have wanted to learn printmaking for years.”

“I am a minister. On Tuesday evenings, I am mostly trying not to miss the ball.”

The aim is not to perform ordinariness. It is to let vocation remain one true part of you without allowing it to organize the gathering.

Protect the First Purpose

Name why you entered this community.

Perhaps you came to move your body, make music, learn a skill, contribute to a neighborhood, or share concern for the environment. Write that purpose down.

When institutional possibilities appear, return to it:

I came here first to participate in this activity and share life with these people.

That sentence does not prohibit future connections with the church. It protects the relationship from beginning as a strategy.

Practice Scenario

You volunteer for a river cleanup organized by a neighborhood coalition. During the morning, another volunteer learns that you are a pastor and begins describing disappointment with a former church. You listen with interest. At the end, the person asks whether your congregation participates in environmental work.

How can you answer truthfully without turning the conversation into recruitment? How can you remain available to the spiritual opening while honoring the shared work that brought you together?

At the End of Week Two

After entering one community, reflect:

- What drew me there?
- What felt awkward?
- When did I feel pressure to prove my value?
- Did I allow someone else to teach, organize, or lead me?
- How did I describe my vocation?
- What did I learn about the people or the community?
- Do I want to return?

If the answer is no, that is information rather than failure. Choose another place. The goal is not to force belonging but to find a social world you can honestly inhabit.

Carry the place you chose into Week Three. The next movement is not to deepen every relationship quickly. It is to return often enough for recognition and trust to ripen in their own time.

Week Three — Become Part of the Loaf

Practice Repeated Presence

Belonging often begins long before intimacy.

It begins when people become familiar: the same faces at rehearsal, the same walkers at dawn, the same volunteers setting up tables, the same neighbors tending adjacent plots.

Repeated presence allows trust to grow without being forced. People learn that you return. You begin to learn the texture of their lives. Conversation moves gradually from the activity at hand toward stories, concerns, humor, and shared memory.

Ask:

What would it mean to keep showing up without trying to determine what these relationships become?

Pastors often know how to accelerate connection through attentive questions. This can be a genuine gift. It can also move an ordinary acquaintance into pastoral depth before a reciprocal relationship has had time to form.

Let some conversations remain light. Talk about the trail, the recipe, the book, the weather, the game, or the stubborn piece of wood. A relationship need not be hurried into depth in order to matter.

Participate Reciprocally

In ministry, pastors are frequently the listeners, interpreters, and steady presences. Beyond the church, practice a wider range of participation.

- Offer an opinion that is not professionally polished.
- Tell a story from your own life without turning it into an illustration.
- Ask for practical help.
- Receive encouragement without redirecting attention.
- Let someone else choose the plan.
- Laugh, compete, experiment, and be surprised.
- Contribute to shared work without taking charge of it.

Reciprocity does not require immediate vulnerability. It means allowing other people to have agency and consequence in the relationship.

Stay a Participant When the Pastoral Role Appears

Once people know that you are a pastor, they may bring spiritual questions, grief, or conflict. You do not need to become cold or unavailable. Compassion remains part of who you are.

But notice when the group's relationship with you begins to organize itself around your pastoral function.

Are you becoming the person who opens every gathering with prayer? Are private crises displacing the activity that brought you together? Are you expected to resolve tension because you are “good with people”? Have you stopped being a participant and become the unofficial chaplain?

Sometimes a pastoral response is appropriate. The practice is to offer it without surrendering the wider relationship altogether.

You might say:

“I am glad to talk with you about that. I also want to make sure we return to the group as fellow musicians rather than turning rehearsal into my pastoral office.”

Or:

“I can help think about where you might find support, but I cannot become the counselor for this group.”

Allow Friendship to Cross Boundaries Carefully

A person from the network may attend worship or join a church project. Welcome genuine interest. Then consider what the new connection changes.

Can the original activity remain a place where the relationship is not governed by church participation? Can people who never approach the congregation still belong fully? Can the pastor refrain from discussing a friend's spiritual life in the setting where the friendship began?

Porous boundaries require more attention, not less.

Practice Scenario

After several months in a community choir, two singers visit worship. One becomes enthusiastic and begins inviting other choir members. The director jokes that the choir is becoming your congregation's “farm team.” Some members laugh; others look uncomfortable.

What would protect the choir's integrity? How might you welcome the visitors while making clear that no one's place in the choir depends on interest in your church?

At the End of Week Three

Reflect on your participation:

- Where am I becoming a familiar presence?
- What relationships remain pleasantly light?
- Where has reciprocity begun to develop?
- When did I become pastoral by reflex?
- What role did the group actually ask me to play?
- What would help preserve the activity's original purpose?
- What makes me want to return?

Week Three has done its work when you can remain genuinely pastoral when the moment calls for it without allowing pastoral function to become the only basis of your place in the group.

Week Four — Seek the Community's Welfare

Contribute as a Neighbor

In time, participation includes contribution.

You may take a turn bringing supplies, help welcome a newcomer, serve on a short-term project, share a skill, or join others in addressing a community need. Contribution deepens belonging because you have accepted some responsibility for the life you share.

The question is not simply whether you contribute, but how.

Ask:

Can I offer something useful without taking ownership of the whole community?

The pastor's organizational competence may be valuable. Use it proportionately. Do not assume that the most faithful contribution is leadership. Sometimes the community needs your hands, your vote, your presence, your payment of dues, or your willingness to complete an ordinary assignment.

Contribution is not the price of admission. If Week Four immediately becomes another demanding service commitment, return to the earlier movements. Recreation, delight, learning, and unhurried presence also enrich communal life. A healthy network includes people who sometimes lead, sometimes help, sometimes receive, and sometimes simply participate.

Learn the Community's Definition of Welfare

To seek the community's welfare, begin by listening to the community.

The neighborhood may be concerned about safe crossings, isolation among older residents, access to food, public green space, youth activities, or the disappearance of local gathering places. The recreational group may need affordable access. The arts organization may be trying to welcome people previously excluded.

Do not begin with what the church wants to offer. Begin with what people already know about the life they share.

The congregation may eventually become a partner. If so, partnership should strengthen community agency rather than replace it.

Welcome Spiritual Awakening

Relational evangelism is not the absence of spiritual intention. It is trust that the Spirit is already at work in human lives and shared concerns.

When someone asks why service matters to you, speak truthfully. When a conversation opens toward grief, hope, God, or meaning, do not retreat behind an artificial boundary. When someone wants to explore faith, receive the interest without embarrassment.

But leave the person free.

Do not make church attendance the proof that the conversation mattered. Do not treat service as incomplete until it becomes explicitly religious. Do not convert trust into pressure.

The yeast works within the loaf. It does not demand that the loaf become its container.

Notice What You Receive

Jeremiah's promise is reciprocal: in the community's welfare, you will find your welfare.

What have you received through participation?

- A renewed capacity for play
- Knowledge of your neighborhood
- Friendship across differences
- A skill unrelated to ministry
- Physical movement
- Creative pleasure
- Perspective on congregational concerns
- Hope generated by people working together
- A place where your presence matters but your office does not

Receiving these gifts is not selfish. They become part of the life from which faithful ministry grows.

Practice Scenario

Your neighborhood association is organizing a weekly meal for families displaced by an apartment fire. Several neighbors know that your church has a commercial kitchen and volunteers. The connection could help greatly, but you have also come to value the association as a community effort not dependent on your pastoral leadership.

How might the congregation become a partner without taking over? What decisions should remain with the neighborhood? What role can you play as both pastor and neighbor? What would success look like if none of the participating families joined the church?

At the End of Week Four

Review the month:

- What part of life beyond the church did I recover?
- Where did I enter as a participant?
- What helped me return?
- What did I contribute?
- What did I receive?
- When did vocation become naturally present?
- When did institutional gravity appear?
- What connection with the church strengthened the wider community?
- What needs to remain free from congregational ownership?
- What will I continue for the next three months?

The month has done its work when you have begun one sustainable pattern of community participation and can name both what you offer there and what you receive.

When Ministry Interrupts Participation

Ministry will sometimes interrupt the social life you are building. A death, crisis, emergency, or significant pastoral responsibility may require you to miss the game, rehearsal, meeting, or class.

The problem is not an occasional interruption. It is the assumption that nonchurch participation must always be the most expendable part of the calendar.

When you miss, return. Explain simply. Do not treat inconsistency as evidence that you do not belong. Communities often make room for real lives when people communicate and keep coming back.

Also examine the institutional patterns behind repeated interruption. Does every committee need to meet in the evening? Must the pastor attend every congregational activity? Can emergencies be shared among leaders? Is the church's schedule preventing its leaders—and perhaps its members—from participating in the wider community?

Getting the church beyond its walls may require more than encouraging outreach. It may require relinquishing some of the internal activity that keeps everyone inside.

A Coach's Reflection

What Kind of Community Member Are You Becoming?

Pastors often ask what the community needs from the church.

It is also worth asking what kind of community member the pastor is becoming.

Are you known only when you are leading a public prayer, responding to a tragedy, advocating for a cause, or representing the congregation? Or are you also known as the person who comes to rehearsal, helps stack chairs, learns slowly, keeps a garden plot, walks the trail, and remembers a neighbor's name?

These ordinary forms of presence may appear less significant than institutional leadership. Yet they weave the relational fabric in which trust becomes possible.

Ask:

Where am I willing to belong before I know what the belonging will accomplish?

You may discover that the community does not need another program from you. It may need your participation in work already underway. You may discover that faith becomes most visible when it is not being performed. You may discover that delight, recreation, and neighborhood life restore capacities that institutional ministry has consumed.

The pastor needs the community. The community may also need the pastor—not only as a religious professional, but as a neighbor who shares its life and seeks its welfare.

Carry This With You

When institutional life begins to become the boundary of your life:

Look Beyond the Walls

What social world remains when I am not functioning as pastor? What dimension of life has disappeared?

Enter the Life Around You

Where can I join something that already exists as a participant rather than its leader?

Become Part of the Loaf

Where can repeated, reciprocal presence grow without my determining what the relationships must become?

Seek the Community's Welfare

What can I contribute as a neighbor, and what life might I receive through the community's flourishing?

And remember:

The church needs institutions to support its life, but the life of God is not confined to the institution. Go into the loaf. Seek the community's welfare. Receive the life you find there.

Closing Prayer

God of every neighborhood and nation,

you are present before we arrive and at work beyond the walls we know.

Free us from lives narrowed by the demands of the institutions we serve.

Teach us to build and plant, to learn and play, to make and repair, to listen and contribute, and to seek the welfare of the places where you have sent us.

Give us courage to enter as neighbors, patience to become familiar, humility to be beginners, and grace to receive what others have to give.

Let our faith be present without pressure, our service generous without control, and our relationships free from the need to produce an outcome.

When spiritual curiosity awakens, make us truthful and hospitable.

When the institution pulls every relationship into its orbit, help us protect the wider life you are creating.

Work your grace through the whole loaf, including us.

And as we seek the welfare of our communities, let us discover there the health, delight, belonging, and hope you intend for us too.

Amen.