

CLERGY RESILIENCE SERIES

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Identity Beyond the Role

Remembering the Person Who Carries the Vocation

LORNE BOSTWICK



Identity Beyond the Role

Remembering the Person Who Carries the Vocation

Clergy Leadership and Resilience Series

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.

*Returning reader? If you have read this Series Introduction in another booklet, [**skip ahead to Beginning Here.**](#)*

Beginning Here

Something subtle happens when you become a pastor. At some point, pastor stops naming only what you do. It becomes part of who you are.

That is not necessarily a problem. It may be exactly what should happen.

Pastoral ministry is not simply an occupation. For those who experience it as a call from God, recognized and confirmed by the Church, ministry becomes woven into identity. You do not stop being a pastor when you leave the church building. You may still be the pastor at the grocery store, at your child's school, at a neighborhood gathering, or when an old friend turns a conversation toward something painful because they trust you to understand.

Even people who knew you long before ministry may begin to hold that part of you carefully. The call changes us.

This booklet will not tell you that being a pastor is “just a job.” Nor will it suggest that resilience requires separating a “real self” from a pastoral self. For many of us, that would be theologically thin and personally untrue. Pastoral vocation can become a genuine and durable part of who we are.

The difficulty comes when it becomes all we know ourselves to be.

It usually happens by degrees. Relationships become pastoral relationships. Reading becomes sermon preparation. Experiences become illustrations. Weekends become workdays. Vacations include checking email. Hobbies recede because there is never enough time. Friendships grow complicated because we are not sure whether we are a friend, a pastor, a counselor—or all three.

Eventually, a quieter question rises:

■ *Who am I when no one needs me to be their pastor?*

For some clergy, that question is surprisingly difficult to answer. This booklet is an invitation to explore it—not by diminishing pastoral identity, but by making room around it.

The question is not: Who would I be if I were not a pastor?

A better question is:

■ *Who is the person God called to be a pastor?*

That person is still here. The work ahead is a work of reacquaintance.

Identity Beyond the Role

Christians carry different theologies of vocation. Some experience pastoral ministry as a lifelong calling from God. Others understand call more particularly—as God's invitation to particular ministries in particular seasons. Some speak of an inward call confirmed by the outward call of the Church. Traditions differ in how they understand ordination, office, vocation, and ministry.

Those differences matter, and this resource does not need to resolve them. What matters here is taking seriously the experience of those for whom pastoral vocation has become deeply woven into identity.

In the Presbyterian tradition, pastoral ministry is a function entrusted by the Church, as ruling elders and deacons are entrusted with particular forms of service. Yet pastoral ministry often carries a different vocational rhythm. Elders and deacons commonly rotate in and out of active service. Pastors generally do not experience themselves as rotating in and out of being pastors.

Congregational calls begin and end. Positions change. Retirement comes. Ministries take new forms. Yet the sense of vocation may remain.

That is one reason transitions can be so disorienting. When a particular ministry ends, the loss may reach far deeper than employment. A congregation may have been the primary place where a pastor's calling was expressed, recognized, needed, and affirmed. Losing that place can raise questions not only about what comes next, but about who one is now.

Resilience does not require pretending these things do not matter. It asks us to develop an identity spacious enough to hold them.

Christian faith gives us an important place to begin:

Before ordination, there is baptism.

Before professional competence, there is belovedness.

Before anyone called you Pastor, God knew your name.

Your pastoral vocation matters. It may have profoundly shaped your life and your understanding of yourself. But God did not call an abstraction called "a pastor." God called you—a particular person with a history and a body, gifts and limitations, courage and fear. A person who needs friendship, laughter, rest, challenge, beauty, play, intimacy, curiosity, and sometimes absolutely nothing productive to do.

Pastoral resilience depends, in part, on remembering that person—not so you can become less of a pastor, but so the whole person can carry the vocation.

The Practice

The practices that follow move in a simple direction:

Remember → Discern → Cultivate → Integrate

You might spend a week with each practice. You might need a month with one and only a few days with another. Something here may uncover a question you want to carry into prayer, spiritual direction, therapy, coaching, or conversation with a trusted friend.

There is no prize for finishing in four weeks. Move at the pace that helps you notice what is happening. The purpose is not completion. The purpose is recovery.

Practice One — Remember

Remember the Person God Called

Pastors sometimes speak of having “lost themselves” in ministry. Perhaps the self has not disappeared. Perhaps that person has simply gone a long time without attention.

Think about the person who first began sensing a call toward ministry. Who were you then? What delighted you? What made you curious? What did you do when no one expected anything from you? Which friendships mattered? What made you laugh? What did you do badly and enjoy anyway? What did you dream about before every dream had to pass the test of usefulness to the Church?

Some of those things have changed, as they should. We grow. Others may have been buried beneath the accumulated responsibilities of pastoral life.

The accumulation of ministry

Pastoral identity rarely consumes the rest of life in one dramatic moment. It happens by accumulation.

Someone needs you. Then someone else does. A meeting is added. A crisis interrupts dinner. A sermon follows you home. A day off becomes the easiest day for someone else to schedule something. You read a novel and think, That would preach. You visit somewhere beautiful and begin taking photographs for the church website. You meet someone interesting and wonder whether they might serve on a committee.

The vocational question begins to accompany you everywhere:

| *How might this be useful to ministry?*

That instinct can be creative and life-giving. It can also become relentless. Eventually, even experiences that belong to you are recruited for ministry.

A remembering exercise

Set aside some uninterrupted time and make a simple timeline of your life. Do not begin with seminary. Begin earlier.

Mark the people, experiences, interests, places, activities, challenges, and discoveries that shaped you. Notice especially what existed before pastoral ministry became central. Then carry the timeline through your years of ministry.

Ask:

- What has remained?
- What has grown?
- What disappeared?
- What did I stop doing because I genuinely changed?
- What did I stop doing because ministry crowded it out?
- What part of myself would I enjoy meeting again?

Do not turn your answers immediately into a self-improvement plan. Just notice. You are remembering the person God called.

Practice out loud

Complete these sentences aloud:

- I am a pastor, and I am also someone who...
- I feel most like myself when...
- Something I once loved that I miss is...
- Something I would enjoy exploring now is...
- Something about me that has nothing to do with being useful is...

Listen to your own answers. There may be more life there than you expected.

Practice Two — Discern

Discern Call from Expectation

Pastoral vocation carries legitimate responsibilities. People should be able to expect integrity, preparation, confidentiality, theological seriousness, responsible leadership, compassion, accountability, and faithful attention to the work entrusted to their pastor.

Around those responsibilities, however, other expectations gather:

- A good pastor is always available.
- A good pastor attends everything.
- A good pastor never disappoints anyone.
- A good pastor's children behave.
- A good pastor answers messages quickly.
- A good pastor always knows what to say at the hospital.
- A good pastor never tires of people.
- A good pastor does not need much.
- A good pastor puts the congregation first.

Some expectations come from congregations, colleagues, denominational culture, or family. Some of the harshest come from pastors themselves. After carrying them long enough, it becomes difficult to tell which belong to the call and which have merely attached themselves to it. Everything begins to feel sacred.

Ask a different question

When you feel the familiar internal pressure—I should, I have to, a good pastor would—pause. Ask:

- Is this actually part of my call?
- Whose expectation is this?
- What would faithfulness look like here—not perfection or approval, but faithfulness?

Those questions create room for discernment.

Notice the “pastor should”

For several days, keep a small record. Whenever you hear yourself thinking some version of A pastor should..., write it down. Do not argue with it yet. After several days, review the list.

For each expectation, ask:

- Where did I learn this?
- Is it theological or ethical?
- Is it part of my actual responsibility?
- Is it congregational culture—or anxiety?
- Is it my desire to be liked or my fear of disappointing people?
- Was it once appropriate but no longer so?
- Would I expect this of another pastor I respect?

That last question can be especially revealing. We often extend to colleagues the grace we refuse to extend to ourselves.

A word about faithfulness

This practice is not an invitation to make pastoral vocation smaller. It is an invitation to make it clearer. When everything is ministry, nothing can receive sustained attention. When every request carries the weight of divine calling, discernment becomes nearly impossible.

You do not honor your call by attaching God's authority to every expectation placed upon you. Sometimes faithfulness means saying yes. Sometimes it means saying no. Sometimes it means saying, "That matters, but I am not the person who needs to carry it." Knowing the difference is part of pastoral maturity.

Practice Three — Cultivate

Cultivate the Rest of Your Life

Some things are worth doing even when they accomplish nothing for your ministry.

Read that sentence again if you need to.

Pastors can become remarkably skilled at turning ordinary life into vocational productivity. Exercise becomes self-care so we can sustain ministry. Vacation becomes renewal so we can return refreshed. Reading becomes continuing education. Friendship becomes collegial support. Prayer becomes sermon preparation. Even Sabbath can become another discipline at which we are supposed to succeed.

What if some things needed no ministry justification? What if you walked because you liked walking, learned something because it fascinated you, cooked because you enjoyed feeding people you love, or played music badly? What if you traveled somewhere and never used the experience in a sermon? What if you spent an afternoon doing something that made you happy and produced absolutely nothing?

That is not wasted time. It is a human life.

Relationships where you do not have to perform

Pastoral ministry creates unusual relational complexity. Clergy can be surrounded by people and still be profoundly lonely. There are conversations in which the pastor listens but cannot fully speak, congregational friendships that require appropriate care, and denominational relationships shaped partly by professional roles. Even longtime friends may approach the pastor differently because the pastoral identity is real and visible.

The goal, then, is not necessarily to find relationships in which no one knows you are a pastor. The deeper need is for relationships in which you do not have to perform being one.

People with whom you can be uncertain. People who do not need you to have the answer. People who can hear you complain without becoming frightened about the state of the Church. People who can disagree with you without turning it into a theological crisis. People who know your vocation—and also know you.

Those relationships usually require cultivation.

Choose one thing

Do not attempt to rebuild an entire non-ministry life this week. Choose one small thing.

- Return to an old interest.
- Call someone you miss.
- Try something you have wondered about.
- Cook something complicated.
- Visit a museum or sit outside.
- Read fiction.
- Join a community activity where you are not in charge.
- Learn something badly.
- Do something your younger self might recognize.

When the pastoral mind asks how the experience might become useful, answer gently: It does not have to be useful.

Journal afterward

- What did I notice?
- Did I enjoy it?
- Did I feel guilty or restless?
- Did I try to turn it into work?
- Did I feel like myself?
- What would it mean to make room for this part of my life again?

You are not constructing a second identity. You are giving neglected dimensions of yourself room to breathe.

Practice Four — Integrate

Hold the Call Without Letting It Hold Everything

Here is the paradox at the heart of this booklet: we are not trying to become less pastoral. We are learning to become more fully human while carrying a pastoral vocation. Those are not competing goals. They may depend upon one another.

A pastor who knows there is a self beyond usefulness may be less desperate to be needed. A pastor with relationships beyond the congregation may be freer to disappoint the congregation when faithfulness requires it. A pastor who can play may be less likely to turn every moment into productivity. A pastor who knows their worth need not depend entirely on attendance, budgets, praise, successful programs, or congregational approval to know who they are.

And a pastor who knows that vocation is larger than one particular position may be better able to face transition when it comes.

When the place of ministry changes

Pastoral service changes. A call to a congregation may end. A position may disappear. Conflict may make leaving necessary. A pastor may retire. Health may alter what is possible. Family circumstances may require another season of life. Vocation may find expression through chaplaincy, teaching, counseling, coaching, specialized ministry, community leadership, or forms not yet imagined.

Sometimes there is a painful season with no obvious institutional place in which to exercise the vocation. That can produce genuine grief.

The answer is not: “It was only a job.” It was not. Something sacred may have ended.

Yet the ending of a particular ministry does not erase the person who served there. Nor does it erase God’s relationship with that person. A resilient pastoral identity grows spacious enough to hold both truths:

I am genuinely called.

I am more than any particular expression of that call.

An integration practice

Take a blank page. In the center, write your name. Around it, begin naming dimensions of yourself. Pastor may be one. So might spouse, parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, neighbor, citizen, learner, teacher, musician, gardener, traveler, reader, cook, athlete, introvert, storyteller, advocate, mentor, artist, tinkerer, companion, child of God.

Use your words, not these. Do not rank them or decide which are productive. Simply notice the life represented there.

Now ask:

- Which parts of this person are flourishing?
- Which have been neglected?
- Which have I sacrificed unnecessarily to ministry?
- Which parts enrich my ministry because I have allowed them to live?
- What part of myself is asking for attention now?

Choose one answer. Let that be enough for now.

Carrying This Forward

You do not need to solve your identity. Identity is not a project to complete. It is something we continue to inhabit, discover, receive, and offer throughout our lives.

Pastoral vocation will continue to shape you. Years of entering hospital rooms, standing beside graves, baptizing children, listening to marriages in trouble, studying Scripture, preaching, praying, sitting through meetings, celebrating new life, carrying secrets, confronting injustice, blessing departures, and watching communities change cannot help but leave their mark.

Some of those marks are beautiful. Some are wounds. Most are probably both.

You do not need to scrape the pastoral identity away to find the “real you” underneath. The pastor is real. So are the friend, the spouse, the neighbor, and the person who laughs at ridiculous things. The person who needs solitude is real, too. So are the person who wants to learn something new and the person who sometimes has absolutely nothing wise to say.

Beneath every function you perform, every title you carry, every success you celebrate, and every failure you remember is something ministry neither created nor can take away:

■ *You belong to God.*

Before the Church entrusted you with ministry, God knew you. Before anyone called you Pastor, God called you by name.

The work of resilience is not to leave your vocation behind. It is to remember the whole person who carries it.

■ *I am a pastor.
And I am a whole human being whom God has called, whom God loves, and whom God continues to form.*