

CLERGY LEADERSHIP & RESILIENCE
A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Embodied Resilience

Moving, Nourishing, and
Caring for the Body You Have

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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

Ministry is lived through a body.

You stand to preach, sit through meetings, drive to hospitals, carry supplies, eat between appointments, lose sleep during crises, and hold tension long after difficult conversations end. The body is present in every act of ministry, even when it receives little attention until pain, illness, fatigue, or limitation makes it impossible to ignore.

Pastors can become skilled at overriding bodily information. Hunger can wait. Movement can wait. The appointment can wait. Exercise can begin when the calendar settles. A hurried meal, another cup of coffee, or one more evening on the couch keeps the day moving—until the body can no longer be postponed.

This booklet is not a diet, fitness challenge, or weight-loss program. It cannot determine what food, exercise, medical care, or physical goals are appropriate for you. Bodies differ in age, ability, health, medication use, culture, history, access, and need. What strengthens one person may be unsafe or unsustainable for another.

It offers a month of practice in listening to the body you have, moving in life-giving ways, nourishing yourself within the life you actually live, and building enough support for bodily care to continue.

The central question is:

What does my body need in order to participate faithfully and sustainably in the life I am living?

The Body Is Not Ministry Equipment

Even Christian care for the body can become another form of usefulness: sleep so you can work harder, exercise so you can endure more, eat well so you will miss fewer Sundays. These may be practical benefits, but they are not the theological center.

God creates embodied life and calls it good. The Word becomes flesh. Jesus eats, sleeps, walks, touches, grows tired, receives care, suffers, dies, and is raised bodily. Christian hope is not escape from creatureliness but its redemption.

Your body is not a machine carrying the “real” spiritual person through ministry. Nor is it a project through which you prove discipline or worth. It is part of the person God created, called, and loves.

Embodied resilience is the developing capacity to inhabit the body truthfully, move it regularly, nourish it adequately, receive appropriate care, and honor the physical limits through which a sustainable vocation is lived.

Health Is Not a Moral Achievement

Bodies bear genetics, illness, disability, injury, aging, stress, poverty, trauma, medication effects, unequal access to care, and histories we did not choose. Health practices matter, but they do not give one person complete control over health or make another person responsible for every condition they carry.

Congregations may comment freely on a pastor's weight, appearance, food, energy, pregnancy, disability, or aging. Fitness and diet cultures can add the suggestion that a visibly lean or athletic body reveals superior discipline.

It does not.

A smaller body is not necessarily a healthier body. A larger body is not evidence of moral or spiritual failure. Visible fitness does not reveal pain, blood pressure, nutrition, endurance, illness, or emotional well-being.

Weight may be medically relevant for some people, but it will not be the controlling measure in this resource. More useful signs may include strength, balance, stamina, comfortable movement, steadier energy, improved sleep, reduced pain, greater enjoyment, clinical measures interpreted by a professional, and increased confidence in caring for the body.

Movement Is Larger Than Exercise

Exercise is planned physical activity intended to develop or maintain capacity. Movement is larger. It includes walking, carrying, gardening, dancing, stretching, playing, climbing stairs, cleaning, cycling, swimming, and the ordinary ways a body participates in life.

Both matter. A pastor may exercise several times a week and still spend long hours sitting while driving, studying, counseling, writing sermons, and attending meetings. Brief interruptions to sitting do not replace exercise, but they help the body remain present throughout the day.

A balanced movement life may include:

- **Aerobic activity** for heart, lungs, stamina, and circulation
- **Strength work** for muscles, bones, carrying, mobility, and aging
- **Mobility and flexibility** for range of motion and ease
- **Balance and coordination** for stability and confidence
- **Recovery** so the body can adapt rather than merely accumulate strain

No single activity must provide everything. Walking may support stamina but offer limited upper-body strengthening. Yoga may develop mobility and balance without supplying every person's aerobic needs. Variety can be assembled gradually.

Recreation Can Be Exercise

Many people hear “exercise” and imagine a gym, machines, competition, body comparison, or a program they have already failed to sustain. But physical activity may also be hiking, dancing, gardening, swimming, cycling, recreational sports, paddling, active play, trail work, or walking with a friend.

The most effective movement is not simply the activity that looks ideal on paper. It is safe enough to begin, appropriate to the body, possible within real constraints, and meaningful or enjoyable enough to repeat.

Yoga, tai chi, and qigong combine physical movement with attention, breath, balance, and meditative elements. They may help some people experience exercise not as escape from the body but as deeper presence within it. These practices vary in intensity and are not automatically safe for every condition. Qualified instruction, adaptation, and medical guidance may be needed.

Nourishment Is Not Dietary Perfection

Nutrition advice often arrives as competing rules. Pastors have different medical needs, allergies, cultures, household patterns, finances, medications, activity levels, and relationships with food. This resource will not prescribe a diet.

It will ask a more basic question:

Is your body receiving dependable nourishment within the life you actually live?

Some pastors skip breakfast, work through lunch, eat heavily after evening meetings, or rely on caffeine to extend depleted capacity. Others know what they would like to eat but lack the time and energy to plan, shop, prepare, and clean up. The barrier is not always information. It may be schedule, decision fatigue, access, pain, caregiving, or the assumption that bodily needs should wait.

Adequate nourishment may require professional guidance. A registered dietitian or other qualified clinician can help address medical conditions, dietary restrictions, gastrointestinal concerns, changing nutritional needs, or a difficult relationship with food. The right guidance is individualized rather than universal.

Nourishment also includes enough fluid for the conditions of the day. Speaking, travel, heat, exercise, medication, illness, and long stretches without a break can alter what a body needs. This resource will not prescribe a universal amount. It will ask whether water or another appropriate drink is reasonably available before thirst becomes one more signal to override.

Food in ministry is relational as well as nutritional. Church meals, hospitality, funerals, celebrations, and visits may carry culture, affection, and memory. Embodied resilience does not require turning every shared table into a dietary calculation. It asks for enough awareness and agency to receive hospitality without allowing unpredictable ministry eating to become the body's only plan.

Use the Support You Already Have

Pastors may have access to services they have never investigated. Health insurance benefits vary, but a member portal, member services representative, employer, or denominational benefits office may help answer:

- Does the plan cover consultation with a registered dietitian?
- Is a referral or diagnosis required?
- Are telehealth nutrition appointments available?
- Are preventive-care or chronic-condition programs included?
- Does the plan include wellness coaching?
- Is a gym membership, fitness network, community center discount, or reimbursement available?
- Is physical therapy covered when pain or injury interferes with movement?
- Does the plan cover or discount massage therapy, and are a referral, diagnosis, or in-network practitioner required?

Do not assume that a benefit is available—or that it is not. Ask what the particular plan provides, what conditions apply, and what costs remain.

Community recreation centers, denominational wellness programs, hospitals, universities, parks departments, and local organizations may offer additional classes or reduced fees. Support is not a failure of discipline. It is part of building conditions in which care can continue.

Massage and Supportive Body Care

Massage therapy may help some people with muscular tension, relaxation, recovery, or certain kinds of pain. For pastors accustomed to offering care, it may also provide a rare and important experience of receiving care without having to produce anything in return.

Massage is not exercise, strength training, physical therapy, or a substitute for medical assessment. Persistent or unexplained pain, injury, numbness, weakness, swelling, or other concerning symptoms require appropriate evaluation. A qualified massage therapist should know about relevant health conditions, medications, injuries, recent procedures, and the level of pressure that feels safe.

Used wisely, massage can belong within a broader pattern of embodied care—not as a luxury to justify or a cure-all to trust, but as one form of support fitted to the body's actual needs.

Convenience Can Be Faithful

Meal kits, prepared-meal services, grocery delivery, store pickup, frozen meals, batch cooking, and simple foods kept at the office can reduce the planning burden of nourishment.

Some services provide meals designed around allergies, vegetarian eating, medical recommendations, or other dietary preferences. Cost varies. A service may cost somewhat more than groceries while costing less than repeated takeout, unused ingredients, or the depletion that makes preparation impossible.

A meal does not become less nourishing because someone else planned, gathered, or prepared it.

The question is not whether convenience is virtuous. It is whether a particular form of help makes dependable nourishment more possible without creating financial strain.

When the Body Needs Professional Attention

Exercise and nutrition do not explain or repair every symptom. Persistent pain, unrefreshing sleep, unusual fatigue, shortness of breath, dizziness, changes in appetite or weight, recurrent injury, reduced mobility, or changes in strength and balance deserve appropriate assessment.

Routine medical and dental care, age- and risk-appropriate screening, medication review, vision and hearing care, physical therapy, and other professional services are part of embodied resilience. Listening to the body is not diagnosing yourself. It is recognizing when bodily information should be brought to someone qualified to interpret it.

If you have a chronic condition, disability, significant pain, pregnancy, a history of disordered eating, or have been inactive for a long period, seek appropriate guidance before making substantial changes. Adapted movement is real movement. Care fitted to your body is not a lesser practice.

A Month of Embodied Resilience

The next four weeks develop four cumulative capacities:

Listen to Your Body → Move for Life → Nourish for Capacity → Build a Sustainable Rhythm

During Week One, you will attend to bodily information and investigate available support.

During Week Two, you will build a varied and repeatable pattern of movement.

During Week Three, you will make nourishment more dependable within real ministry conditions.

During Week Four, you will integrate movement and nutrition into a flexible rhythm supported by other people and systems.

The aim is not to become healthy in a month. It is to become more skillful in caring for the body through which your life and vocation are lived.

The movements are cumulative. During Week Two, continue the Week One bodily inventory. During Week Three, keep listening and moving while adding dependable nourishment. During Week Four, carry all three capacities into a supported rhythm. The month should become simpler as patterns emerge, not more crowded with assignments.

Week One — Listen to the Body You Have

Begin with the body you have today, not the body you remember, envy, fear, or believe you ought to possess.

Practice: A Bodily Inventory

Once each day, notice without grading:

- Energy and fatigue
- Hunger, fullness, and thirst
- Pain, tension, stiffness, or ease
- Breath
- Strength and steadiness
- Digestion
- Sleepiness and alertness
- Desire for movement or stillness
- Recovery after exertion

Add one sentence: “My body may be asking for...”

You may not know the answer. The practice is attention, not diagnosis.

Map the Ministry Week

Review a typical week and mark:

- Long periods of sitting or driving
- Meals regularly missed or delayed
- Evening meetings that disrupt eating or movement
- Days with sustained standing or speaking
- Predictable high-intensity periods
- Times when pain or fatigue increases
- Openings when movement or preparation is realistic

Do not design a new life yet. See the life your body is already living.

Conduct a Benefits Check

Use the questions in “Use the Support You Already Have.” Record the phone number, portal, referral requirement, cost, and next action for any useful benefit. Information becomes support only when the next step is clear.

Choose One Professional Next Step

If something needs attention, make one appointment or inquiry: primary care, dental care, a dietitian, physical therapy, massage therapy, a qualified trainer, an adapted exercise program, or another appropriate service. Choose the kind of care that fits the concern; no single practitioner addresses every bodily need.

Review the Week

- What bodily signal have I been overriding?
- Where does the ministry schedule work against physical care?
- What capacity remains available?
- What support already exists?
- What requires professional assessment?

Week Two — Move for Life

This week is not a test of athletic discipline. It is an experiment in finding movement that strengthens life.

Choose a Starting Pattern

Select small, appropriate forms of:

- Aerobic movement
- Strength
- Mobility or flexibility
- Balance or coordination

You may already receive several through one activity. Begin below the level that makes repetition unlikely. Increase gradually and seek guidance when needed.

Build One Real Week

Place movement into the coming week before the calendar fills. Choose specific days, times, places, and activities. Include transition time, clothing, transportation, and recovery.

Then make the plan smaller. Ask what remains realistic if a meeting runs late, the weather changes, or energy is lower than expected. A repeatable twenty-minute walk may build more capacity than an ideal workout that rarely happens.

Do not use movement to override illness, pain, or exhaustion. Exercise can strengthen capacity; it cannot make an unsustainable workload harmless.

Let Recreation Count

Choose one activity you would value even if it were not called exercise. Walk with a friend. Dance. Garden. Swim. Ride a bicycle. Play a game. Explore a trail. Join a beginner class.

Ask afterward:

- Did I enjoy any part of this?
- Did I feel more present in my body?
- What was uncomfortable or unsafe?
- Would company, instruction, adaptation, or equipment help?

Try Meditative Movement

Experiment with a short, appropriately taught practice of yoga, tai chi, qigong, stretching, mindful walking, or labyrinth walking. A labyrinth can offer a simple path for unhurried movement, prayer, reflection, or silence without requiring you to arrive at a particular insight. Notice breath, balance, attention, and the internal pace of movement.

Meditative movement is not superior to other exercise. It is one way physical activity may also create space for attention, prayer, or release.

Interrupt Sitting

Choose two reliable transitions—after a meeting, before lunch, upon arriving home, or after driving—and add several minutes of standing, walking, or gentle movement.

Measure More Than Performance

Notice changes in energy, mood, sleep, stiffness, confidence, pleasure, concentration, and recovery. Distance, speed, repetitions, or weight lifted may be useful, but they are not the only evidence of benefit.

Review the Week

- What movement felt life-giving?
- What did my body tolerate well?
- Which capacity needs more attention?
- What obstacle is practical rather than motivational?
- What would make repetition easier?

Week Three — Nourish for Capacity

This week does not ask you to perfect your diet. It asks you to make nourishment dependable enough to support the life you are living.

Identify the Vulnerable Meals

Which two or three meals are most often missed, delayed, improvised, or replaced by caffeine? What is happening around them?

Choose one practical response for each:

- Prepare something in advance
- Keep a simple option at the office
- Use grocery delivery or pickup
- Order prepared meals or a meal kit
- Ask another household member to share planning
- Move a meeting away from a meal hour
- Plan what to order when eating out

Add water or another appropriate drink to the plan when access is routinely difficult.

Build One Real Week of Nourishment

Look at the actual calendar. Identify where food will come from for the most demanding days—not every meal forever, only the coming week.

Decide what will be prepared, purchased, delivered, packed, or eaten with others. If a meal kit or prepared-meal service would help, compare the full cost with groceries likely to be used, takeout likely to be ordered, delivery charges, and the time and energy the service would save. Convenience is useful only when it fits both bodily and financial realities.

Reduce Decision Fatigue

Create a short list of meals and snacks that fit your needs and require little thought. Repetition is not failure. A dependable option may be more supportive than an ambitious plan that collapses during a busy week.

Notice Compensation

Observe caffeine, alcohol, sugar, takeout, or skipped meals without judgment. Ask:

What am I asking this pattern to do for me?

It may provide comfort, alertness, convenience, transition, or relief. Understanding the function makes a more fitting response possible.

Seek Individual Guidance

If nutrition is affected by a medical condition, medication, allergy, gastrointestinal concern, significant change in appetite or weight, or a difficult relationship with food, consult an appropriate professional rather than assembling advice from competing public claims.

Review the Week

- When was nourishment most reliable?
- Which barrier was time, cost, access, energy, or planning?
- What convenience genuinely helped?
- What pattern is compensating for another unmet need?
- What support should continue?

Week Four — Build a Sustainable Rhythm

Sustainability requires more than good intentions. It requires a pattern supple enough for ordinary weeks, difficult seasons, and changing bodies.

The goal is not to preserve the exact practices of Weeks Two and Three. It is to preserve their function: regular movement, dependable nourishment, and truthful response to bodily information.

Create Three Versions

For movement and nourishment, design:

- ****Minimum:**** What can continue during crisis, travel, or illness?
- ****Ordinary:**** What supports a typical ministry week?
- ****Spacious:**** What becomes possible with more time and energy?

The minimum is not failure. It keeps care from disappearing when life contracts.

Put Support on the Calendar

Schedule movement, grocery ordering, meal preparation, appointments, and recovery with the same realism used for other responsibilities. Include travel time and transition.

Match Exertion with Recovery

More exercise is not always better. Strength develops through exertion and recovery. Pain, illness, poor sleep, and unusual fatigue may require adaptation. Learn the difference between the discomfort of appropriate effort and a signal that should not be ignored.

Name Shared Responsibility

Household members, staff, governing boards, and denominational leaders influence the conditions of pastoral health. Meeting schedules, meal expectations, workload, leave, insurance, and access to facilities are not merely personal choices.

Hold one concrete conversation about a condition that would make bodily care more sustainable.

Examples may include ending a meeting on time so dinner remains possible, protecting a regular exercise period, clarifying that the pastor is not responsible for every setup task, improving food options at recurring events, or using a benefit already funded through compensation.

Make a Continuation Plan

Choose:

- The movement pattern you will continue
- The nourishment support you will retain
- The appointment or benefit you will use
- The person who will encourage or accompany you
- The date when you will review the plan

Review the Week

- What belongs in my minimum, ordinary, and spacious patterns?
- What support reduces reliance on willpower?
- What expectation needs to change?
- What is my body asking me to continue?
- When will I reassess rather than abandon the practice?

Beyond the Month

Bodies change. A sustainable practice must be revisable.

Return regularly to four questions:

- What is my body communicating?
- What movement supports life now?
- What nourishment is needed within present conditions?
- What structure and support will help care continue?

There will be interrupted weeks. Travel, illness, Holy Week, caregiving, injury, weather, finances, and emergencies will alter what is possible. Resume with the body and circumstances you have, not with shame about the plan you lost.

Sleep and recovery remain essential to embodied health, but they are developed more fully in **Rest and Recovery**. This booklet's particular work is to help movement and nourishment become ordinary parts of a sustainable life rather than emergency responses to declining health.

A Pastoral Word

Your body has carried more of your ministry than anyone else can fully see.

It has entered rooms before you found the words. It has stood beside graves, driven home after conflict, held other people's grief, and continued through seasons when care for it was repeatedly postponed.

Your body is not betraying you when it becomes hungry, tired, injured, ill, older, or limited. These are not interruptions to being human. They belong to the creaturely life in which God meets you.

You do not need to punish the body into resilience. Listen to it. Move it with respect. Nourish it without moral drama. Bring it to people who can help. Let pleasure and recreation become part of health. Let limits tell the truth before collapse tells it for you.

Care for the body is not retreat from vocation. It is consent to live the vocation as a whole person.

A Closing Practice

Stand, sit, or lie down in a position your body can receive without strain.

Notice where your body is supported. Notice one place holding effort. Without forcing it to change, breathe gently and ask:

What would it mean to care for the body I have today?

Then pray:

**God of flesh and breath,
thank you for the body through which I receive this life.
Teach me to hear its wisdom without fear,
to move with strength and delight,
to receive nourishment without shame,
and to seek help without apology.
Give me grace to honor my limits
and freedom to inhabit my creaturely life with love. Amen.**