

CLERGY RESILIENCE SERIES

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Staying Yourself While Staying Connected

Differentiation for Clergy Resilience

LORNE BOSTWICK



Staying Yourself While Staying Connected

Differentiation for Clergy Resilience

Clergy Leadership and Resilience Series

RETURNING READER?

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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.

Beginning Here

This booklet centers on differentiation: the capacity to remain grounded in who you are, clear about what belongs to you, connected to others, and able to choose faithfully even when the emotional system around you grows anxious.

The governing practice is:

| Ground → Distinguish → Stay → Choose

Differentiation Is Not Detachment

Differentiation is sometimes misunderstood as emotional independence.

It is not.

A highly differentiated person is not someone who says:

I don't care what anybody thinks.

Nor is differentiation simply a matter of strong boundaries, outward calm, emotional distance, or refusing to change your mind.

Those things can sometimes be expressions of differentiation.

They can also be defenses against relationship.

Differentiation asks something harder:

| Can I remain connected to you without surrendering myself to you?

Can I hear your disappointment without immediately making it my job to eliminate it?

Can I listen seriously to your criticism without automatically accepting it or defending myself against it?

Can I disagree with you without needing to defeat you?

Can I allow you to be angry with me without becoming angry simply because you are?

Can I change my mind when you help me see something differently without mistaking that change for weakness?

Can I tell you what I believe when I know you may not like it?

Can I remain present when leaving, appeasing, attacking, fixing, or withdrawing would reduce my anxiety more quickly?

That is differentiation.

It is not distance.

It is **connection without fusion and conviction without cutoff**

Ministry Happens in Emotional Systems

Congregations are theological communities, worshipping communities, organizations, institutions, and networks of relationships.

They are also emotional systems.

When one part of a system becomes anxious, anxiety moves.

A financial shortfall becomes anxiety about leadership.

A pastoral retirement becomes anxiety about the future.

A worship change becomes anxiety about identity.

A staff conflict becomes anxiety throughout the congregation.

A declining membership report becomes an argument about music.

A disagreement between two people recruits a third.

Someone becomes more demanding.

Someone withdraws.

Someone starts fixing.

Someone looks for somebody to blame.

Someone says, "People are saying..."

Someone decides the pastor needs to do something.

Very often, the pastor does.

Not necessarily because it is the right thing to do.

Because doing something relieves the anxiety.

This is one of the central truths about emotional systems:

| Anxiety creates pressure for relief, and relief is not always the same thing as health.

The pastor who understands this begins to ask a different question.

Not simply:

| How can I calm everybody down?

But:

| How can I respond faithfully without allowing anxiety to make the decision for me?

That is the work of differentiation.

When Your Body Gets There Before Your Mind

There is a reason differentiation can be so difficult in the moment.

Anxiety does not arrive first as an intellectual proposition.

It may arrive as a tightening in your chest.

A flush in your face.

A knot in your stomach.

A racing heart.

A sudden urge to explain yourself.

A desire to get out of the room.

An immediate certainty that you need to fix something.

An impulse to send the email now.

By the time you consciously think, I should probably be differentiated here, your body may already be preparing you to fight, flee, appease, defend, withdraw, or take control.

That does not mean reason is useless.

It means that under pressure we need more than good ideas.

We need practices we have rehearsed.

Christian spiritual life has always understood the importance of rehearsal.

We repeat the Lord's Prayer.

We return to familiar Scripture.

We sing hymns we have sung for years.

We confess our faith together.

We return repeatedly to the Lord's Table.

Not because we have forgotten the information.

We rehearse these things because some truths need to live deeply enough within us to remain available when life becomes difficult.

Differentiation works in much the same way.

The goal is not simply to understand:

Ground → Distinguish → Stay → Choose

The goal is to practice it until it becomes increasingly available when anxiety rises.

The Practice

Ground → Distinguish → Stay → Choose

These four movements build upon one another.

Ground — Return to yourself and to God.

Distinguish — Clarify what belongs to you and what belongs to others.

Stay — Remain connected without surrendering yourself.

Choose — Act thoughtfully rather than allowing anxiety to choose for you.

You will learn all four in this booklet.

But you will not be asked to practice all four at once.

In the practice that follows, you will begin with Ground. As it becomes more familiar, you will add Distinguish, then Stay. Finally, in Choose, you will bring the whole movement together.

Think of it as learning any complex physical skill.

You practice the movements slowly before expecting yourself to perform them instinctively under pressure.

1. Ground

Remember Who You Are and Whose You Are

Anxiety pulls us outward.

What are they thinking?

What are they going to do?

Who have they talked to?

Will this become a problem?

What if they leave?

What if Session gets upset?

What if I disappoint them?

What if I lose my job?

Before long, we are living inside other people's possible reactions.

Grounding brings us home.

It asks:

| What is happening in me right now?

Notice your body.

Your shoulders may tighten.

Your heart may accelerate.

Your breathing may become shallow.

Your jaw may clench.

You may begin mentally composing your defense while the other person is still speaking.

You may feel an immediate need to answer.

These are signals.

They do not tell you what to do.

They tell you that something important is happening.

Grounding begins with noticing, then remembering.

Who am I?

Whose am I?

What do I value?

What kind of person do I want to be in this moment?

Before you are someone's pastor, employee, supervisor, preacher, conflict manager, or disappointment, you belong to God.

Your worth is not being decided in this meeting.

Your identity is not determined by the emotional temperature of the room.

Your vocation does not require universal approval.

You do not have to earn your belonging by successfully regulating everyone else's feelings.

Sometimes the most differentiated thing you can do is remember who you are.

A Grounding Prayer

When anxiety is high, you may not be able to summon a thoughtful theological reflection.

That is why it helps to have words already available.

Try this prayer:

God, I belong to you.
I am loved, called, and held by your grace.
I do not have to defend my worth
or prove myself in this moment.

Help me be the person you have called me to be:
loving without surrendering myself,
kind without appeasing,
patient without avoiding,
courageous without attacking,
compassionate without taking responsibility
for what is not mine.

Slow me down.
Help me listen.
Help me remain present.

Remind me who I am
and whose I am.

Amen.

You do not need to pray every word in the middle of a tense meeting.

Perhaps all you can remember is:

I belong to God. I do not have to react yet.

That may be enough to begin.

Your Body Is Part of Grounding

Before speaking, check:

Feet. Breath. Shoulders. Face. Voice.

Feel your feet on the floor.

Breathe.

Release your shoulders.

Notice your face.

Then listen to your voice.

This is not about performing artificial calm.

It is about noticing what your body may be communicating before you have decided what you want to communicate.

Your body is in the conversation too.

2. Distinguish

What Is Mine, and What Is Not Mine?

One of ministry's most difficult questions is also one of its simplest:

What belongs to me?

A church member's disappointment may matter deeply to you.

But their disappointment belongs to them.

Your behavior belongs to you.

Their interpretation belongs to them.

Your responsibility to listen belongs to you.

Their demand that you agree belongs to them.

Your mistake belongs to you.

Their decision whether to forgive it belongs to them.

Your pastoral responsibilities belong to you.

Every expectation someone has of "the pastor" does not.

This is not an excuse for avoiding accountability.

Differentiation makes genuine accountability possible: we can take responsibility for what is ours without taking responsibility for everything.

Imagine someone tells you:

“You really hurt me when you didn't visit me before my surgery.”

You did not know the surgery had been scheduled.

You could become defensive:

“Nobody told me you were having surgery.”

You could absorb responsibility:

“I'm so sorry. I should have known. I promise it won't happen again.”

Or you could distinguish:

“I'm sorry you went into surgery feeling that I wasn't there for you. I didn't know the surgery had been scheduled, and I wish I had known. Tell me what that experience was like for you.”

You did not accept responsibility for knowing something you could not have known.

You also did not use that fact to escape the person's hurt.

You remained yourself, and you remained in relationship.

That is differentiation.

The Seduction of Overfunctioning

Clergy are particularly vulnerable to overfunctioning.

We see something that needs doing.

We know how to do it.

Someone is anxious about it.

So we do it.

Eventually, people learn:

| If we become anxious enough, the pastor will take responsibility.

Meanwhile, the pastor learns:

| If I take responsibility, everybody becomes less anxious.

A pattern forms.

The congregation underfunctions.

The pastor overfunctions.

Then the pastor becomes resentful that no one else is taking responsibility.

Overfunctioning and underfunctioning often sustain each other.

Differentiation interrupts the pattern.

Before stepping in, ask:

| Is this actually mine to do?

And sometimes:

| What might happen if I don't rescue this?

Someone may become disappointed.

A task may not be completed.

A committee may have to solve its own problem.

Someone may complain that you are not as helpful as you used to be.

The system may become more anxious.

That does not necessarily mean your choice was wrong.

It may mean the system has noticed that something has changed.

3. Stay

Remain Connected Without Surrendering Yourself

This may be the hardest movement.

When anxiety rises, we reach for predictable responses.

We fight.

We flee.

We appease.

We fix.

We withdraw.

We recruit allies.

We explain.

We defend.

We become silent.

Each may be an attempt to escape the discomfort of remaining present.

Differentiation asks us to **stay**.

Staying does not mean remaining in abusive or unsafe situations.

It does not mean tolerating misconduct.

It does not mean that every relationship must continue indefinitely.

It means that when relationship is possible and appropriate, we resist making emotional distance our primary way of managing anxiety.

You can disagree and stay.

You can say no and stay.

You can disappoint someone and stay.

You can hear anger and stay.

You can be misunderstood and stay.

You can maintain a boundary and stay.

You can say:

“I don't think I can agree to that, but I want to keep talking.”

There is a self:

I don't think I can agree.

And there is relationship:

I want to keep talking.

That is differentiation.

“People Are Saying...”

Few phrases activate clergy anxiety faster than:

“People are saying...”

Immediately we want to know:

Who?

How many?

What exactly did they say?

How long has this been going on?

Our anxiety begins filling the gaps.

A reactive pastor may say:

“Who exactly is saying that?”

A defensive pastor may say:

“Well, nobody has said anything to me.”

An appeasing pastor may say:

“I’ll take care of it.”

A differentiated pastor might say:

“I’d like to understand the concern. When you say ‘people are saying,’ can we slow down and talk about what they are actually experiencing?”

If appropriate:

“If someone has a concern about me, I would welcome a direct conversation with them.”

The pastor does not attack the messenger.

The pastor does not accept an anonymous consensus as established fact.

The pastor does not enter the triangle.

The pastor stays.

Your Tone Is Part of the Message

Consider this sentence:

“I understand that you're disappointed with my decision.”

The words can communicate genuine presence.

They can also communicate:

I've heard enough from you.

Tone matters.

Pace matters.

Volume matters.

Facial expression matters.

Posture matters.

The same words can sound differentiated, defensive, dismissive, frightened, or contemptuous.

Even a calm voice is not necessarily differentiated.

Clergy sometimes develop a polished pastoral voice that sounds calm while communicating distance or condescension.

Differentiation does not require emotional flatness.

You may sound sad.

Concerned.

Firm.

Passionate.

Even angry.

The question is not whether emotion is present.

The question is:

| Is the emotion serving the communication or controlling it?

4. Choose

Do Not Let Anxiety Make the Decision

Differentiation eventually requires action.

This is where the work becomes especially difficult.

You can Ground.

You can Distinguish.

You can Stay.

And still make a poor choice.

Sometimes we speak too quickly.

Sometimes we become overly forceful because we are determined to resist control.

Sometimes a legitimate boundary is communicated in a way that unnecessarily increases anxiety.

Sometimes we mistake bluntness for differentiation.

Sometimes we become so intent on proving that we are not anxious that we stop listening.

Differentiation does not mean:

I know who I am, so everybody else can deal with it.

It asks:

What is the wisest faithful action available to me now?

Slow the Choice Down

Not everything requires an immediate answer.

“I want to think about that.”

“Let me sit with this overnight.”

“I don't think I'm ready to answer that yet.”

“Could we come back to this tomorrow?”

Used responsibly, these are not evasions.

They are ways of refusing to let emotional urgency dictate the timing of a decision.

Before choosing, ask:

Purpose — What am I trying to accomplish?

Source — Am I acting from conviction or am I trying to make anxiety disappear?

Proportion — Is my response larger than the situation requires?

Prediction — What response is this likely to evoke?

Presence — Does this action allow me to remain appropriately connected?

Principle — Can I stand behind this decision tomorrow when the emotional temperature is lower?

You cannot control how others respond.

But you can consider what your action is likely to invite.

Escalate, Appease, or Differentiate?

Not every response that reduces anxiety is differentiated.

Appeasement often reduces anxiety very effectively.

That is why it is tempting.

And not every differentiated response immediately reduces anxiety.

Sometimes differentiation initially increases it.

Instead of asking only whether a response escalates or de-escalates, consider three possibilities:

Escalate

Appease

Differentiate

An Angry Late-Night Email

At 10:30 p.m., a member emails:

“I have tried to reach you twice. Apparently some members of this church matter more than others.”

Escalate: You immediately write a long response documenting your attempts to return the call and explaining why the accusation is unfair.

Your facts may be correct.

Your response is still participating in the anxiety.

Appease: You immediately apologize, promise to call first thing in the morning, and assure the person that you will be more responsive.

The anxiety may decrease.

But you have accepted responsibility before determining whether you actually did something wrong.

Differentiate: You wait until morning.

Then:

“I can tell you're upset, and I want to understand what happened. I don't think email is the best way for us to work through it. Could we talk today?”

You neither counterattack nor capitulate.

You stay.

“You're Never Around”

During a Session meeting, an elder says:

“People are saying you're never around.”

Escalate: “Who exactly is saying that? I work more than fifty hours most weeks.”

Appease: “I didn't realize people felt that way. I'll start spending more time in the office.”

Differentiate: “I'd like to understand that concern. What are people experiencing that leads them to see me as unavailable?”

The differentiated response turns accusation into inquiry.

It does not concede the conclusion.

It responds with curiosity.

The Committee That Wants You to Fix It

A ministry team has failed to recruit volunteers for an event.

Three days before the event, the chair calls:

“Pastor, we're in trouble. Can you find six people?”

Escalate: “This is exactly why committees need to plan ahead. I can't keep rescuing everybody.”

Perhaps true.

Probably unhelpful.

Appease: You spend the afternoon calling people and find six volunteers.

The event succeeds.

The system learns:

When we fail to plan, the pastor will rescue us.

Differentiate: “I understand why you're worried. I can't take over volunteer recruitment, but I'm happy to help you think through who the committee might contact and what options you have if you don't get six people.”

You remain helpful without taking over responsibility.

When Differentiation Makes Things Worse—At First

Suppose you have routinely answered messages at all hours.

Then you stop.

People may become irritated.

Suppose you have always solved staff conflicts.

Then you ask the staff members to speak directly to one another.

They may become frustrated with you.

Suppose you have regularly rescued committees.

Then you stop.

Someone may say you are not supportive.

The system is not necessarily telling you:

This is wrong.

It may be telling you:

We noticed that the old arrangement changed.

This is where clergy often retreat.

The new behavior creates anxiety.

We interpret the anxiety as evidence that we have done something wrong.

So we restore the old pattern.

Everyone relaxes.

And nothing changes.

Remember:

Do not confuse increased anxiety with failure. But do not confuse being differentiated with having permission to increase anxiety unnecessarily.

The task is neither to eliminate anxiety nor to provoke it.

The task is to act faithfully within it.

Differentiation Is Not Stubbornness

There is another danger.

Once clergy learn about differentiation, it can become a sophisticated defense against being influenced.

“I know what I believe.”

“This is their anxiety.”

“That's not mine.”

“They need to deal with their feelings.”

None of those statements necessarily indicates differentiation.

A differentiated person remains **open to influence**.

You can listen and discover that you were wrong.

You can apologize.

You can reconsider a decision.

You can recognize that someone else's anger contains information you need.

You can change direction.

The question is not whether someone influenced you.

The question is whether you remained grounded enough to decide thoughtfully what to do with their influence.

Changing your mind because you are afraid someone will be angry is fusion.

Changing your mind because you listened carefully and discovered they were right is differentiation.

A Theological Practice of Self and Relationship

Christian faith does not call us to self-erasure.

Jesus' command to love our neighbor **as ourselves** assumes both neighbor and self.

Christian community is not the disappearance of individual identity into the group.

Paul's image of the body depends upon distinction.

The eye remains an eye.

The hand remains a hand.

Difference makes relationship possible.

Our theological tradition also reminds us that our deepest identity is received, not negotiated.

We belong to God.

That changes the emotional equation.

If my worth depends on your approval, I will eventually need to manage you.

If my security depends on the congregation's happiness, its anxiety will govern me.

If my identity depends on being a good pastor, I may need everyone else to confirm it.

But if I am grounded in grace, I can risk disappointing you.

I can also risk discovering that you are right.

Grace makes differentiation possible because I do not have to defend a perfect version of myself.

I can be responsible without being responsible for everything.

I can be wrong without becoming worthless.

I can be criticized without disappearing.

I can be loved without controlling the one who loves me.

And I can love without controlling them.

Practicing Differentiation

Practice Before Progress

The next section is organized into four weeks:

Week One — Ground
Week Two — Distinguish
Week Three — Stay
Week Four — Choose

But these are not deadlines.

They are a sequence for learning.

Differentiation can be difficult, especially for clergy who have spent years anticipating other people's needs, absorbing anxiety, maintaining harmony, solving problems, and responding quickly when someone is distressed.

If Ground takes longer than a week, stay with Ground.

If you begin Distinguish and discover that you still lose your grounding when anxiety rises, return to Ground.

If Stay takes several weeks because your instinct is to defend, withdraw, appease, fix, or explain, keep practicing.

There is no prize for getting to Week Four quickly.

The goal is not to finish the practice.

The goal is for the practice to become gradually available when you need it.

At first, you may remember what you wanted to do only after a difficult conversation is over:

I wish I had grounded myself before I responded.

That is progress.

You noticed.

Later, you may recognize what is happening during the conversation:

I'm getting anxious. I need to slow down.

More progress.

Eventually, as anxiety rises, you may almost instinctively feel your feet, breathe, remember who you are and whose you are, and resist the urge to react.

The practice is becoming part of you.

Move through these practices at a pace that allows you to learn them.

Practice before progress.

Week One

Ground — Remember Who You Are and Whose You Are

For this week, do not try to master differentiation.

Do not worry yet about determining what belongs to whom.

Do not try to find the perfect differentiated response.

Practice only this:

When anxiety rises, find your footing.

Notice what happens in your body.

Feel your feet.

Breathe.

Release your shoulders.

Notice your face.

Remember:

I belong to God.

I do not have to defend my worth.

I want to be loving and truthful.

I can be compassionate without taking over.

I do not have to react yet.

Use the grounding prayer often enough that some of its language becomes familiar.

You are rehearsing identity and values before you need them.

Practice Scenario

You are walking into worship when an elder stops you.

“We need to talk after church. Several people are really upset about what you said last Sunday.”

You have three minutes before worship begins.

Stop.

Do not solve the problem.

Do not decide what you will tell the elder.

Your only assignment is to **Ground**.

What happened in your body when you read the elder's words?

What emotion appeared?

What were you tempted to do?

What do you need to remember about yourself?

What values do you want available when the conversation occurs?

Pray your grounding prayer.

Looking Back

After an interaction this week in which anxiety rose, write briefly:

What happened?

What did I notice in my body?

What emotion appeared?

What did I do?

Where did I find my footing?

Where did I lose it?

What do I wish I had done differently?

If I could enter that moment again, what would I practice?

Looking back is not about judging yourself. It is about training yourself.

"I did this, and I wish I had done that" is useful information for practice.

At the End of Week One: Write Your Grounding Prayer

The prayer in this booklet is a starting place.

Now write one that sounds like you.

Ask:

What do I most need to remember about who I am?

What do I need to remember about whose I am?

Which values do I want available when I am anxious?

Love?

Kindness?

Truthfulness?

Patience?

Courage?

Compassion?

Justice?

Humility?

Curiosity?

Where am I particularly vulnerable?

What do I need to tell myself when I am criticized, frightened, angry, or pressured?

Include whatever helps you return to yourself and to God.

Keep the prayer somewhere accessible.

You will keep using it.

And if Ground still feels difficult, stay here.

Week Two can wait.

Week Two

Distinguish — Learn What Is Yours to Carry

Continue grounding.

Use your prayer.

Then add one question:

What is mine, and what is not mine?

During emotionally charged interactions, notice what you begin picking up.

Someone else's disappointment?

Someone else's work?

Someone else's expectations?

Someone else's conflict?

Someone else's interpretation of your motives?

Someone else's need for immediate resolution?

Ask:

What is actually my responsibility here?

What belongs to the other person?

Am I avoiding something that genuinely belongs to me?

Am I accepting responsibility for something that does not?

Practice Scenario

A member tells you:

“My husband has stopped coming to church because of you. I hope you're happy.”

First:

| Ground.

Notice your body.

Breathe.

Remember who you are and whose you are.

Then:

| Distinguish.

What belongs to the pastor?

What belongs to the member?

What belongs to the husband?

What might the pastor be tempted to take responsibility for?

What responsibility genuinely does belong to the pastor?

Do not worry yet about crafting the perfect response.

Practice seeing the responsibilities clearly.

Looking Back

Choose one emotionally significant interaction.

Write:

Where did I Ground?

What belonged to me?

What belonged to someone else?

Did I pick up something that wasn't mine?

Did I leave something with someone else that actually was mine?

What do I wish I had done differently?

If the situation happened again, what would I want to recognize sooner?

Stay with this practice until the difference between responsibilities becomes easier to see.

Week Three

Stay — Remain in Relationship

Continue:

| Ground.

Then:

| Distinguish.

Now add:

| Stay.

Notice what you do when relational anxiety becomes uncomfortable.

Do you explain?

Defend?

Fix?

Appease?

Withdraw?

Become cold?

Attack?

Recruit someone else?

Change the subject?

End the conversation?

Your task this week is not to become endlessly available.

It is to notice your habitual exits and practice remaining appropriately present.

Practice Scenario

A longtime elder tells you:

“If you go through with this change, I don't know whether I can continue supporting your ministry.”

The pastor responds:

“I'm sorry you feel that way, but I have to do what I believe is right.”

The words sound strong.

But are they differentiated?

Did the pastor remain connected?

Where might the pastor have emotionally left the relationship?

What could the pastor say that preserves both conviction and connection?

Write an alternative.

Then:

Practice It Out Loud

Do not merely read your response silently.

Say it.

Listen to your voice.

Now say it defensively.

Say it impatiently.

Say it as though you want the conversation to end.

Then say it again while genuinely trying to remain connected to the elder.

What changed?

Notice:

Feet. Breath. Shoulders. Face. Voice.

Did your words change?

Did your tone?

Your pace?

Your emphasis?

Your posture?

Which version communicates:

“I am still myself, and I am still here with you.”

Looking Back

Think about one difficult interaction.

Where did I Ground?

What did I Distinguish?

Where did I Stay?

Where did I leave emotionally?

What did my voice or body communicate?

What do I wish I had done differently?

Write the response you wish you had made.

Then say it aloud.

Practice until it sounds like you—and like the person you want to be in relationship.

Week Four

Choose — Practice Faithful Response

Now bring the movements together:

Ground → Distinguish → Stay → Choose

You are not looking for the response that makes everybody happy.

You are not looking for the response that proves you are strong.

You are not looking for the fastest way to reduce anxiety.

You are asking:

| What is the wisest faithful action available to me?

Before acting, consider:

Purpose — What am I trying to accomplish?

Source — Am I acting from conviction or seeking relief from anxiety?

Proportion — Is my response larger than the situation requires?

Prediction — What is this response likely to invite?

Presence — Can I remain appropriately connected after making it?

Principle — Can I stand behind this response tomorrow?

Then consider three possibilities:

| What would escalate?

| What would appease?

| What might differentiate?

Practice Scenario

During a Session meeting, an elder says:

“I’ve heard from quite a few people that they don’t trust your leadership anymore.”

The pastor responds:

“Well, if people have something to say about my leadership, they can come talk to me instead of complaining behind my back.”

Stop.

What happened?

Where did the pastor fail to Ground?

What needs to be Distinguished?

How could the pastor Stay?

Now write three responses.

One that **escalates**.

One that **appeases**.

One that **differentiates**.

Then say each one aloud.

Listen not only to the words.

Listen to the person speaking through them.

Finally, say the differentiated response until you can communicate it with conviction **and** connection.

Use Your Own Story

Now take something from your journal.

Choose an actual interaction that did not go quite as you wished.

Change names or details if that helps you create some emotional distance.

Write:

What happened?

What did I do?

What did I do well?

Where did I lose my footing?

What belonged to me?

What did I pick up that wasn't mine?

Did I remain connected?

What did my choice invite?

Then replay it:

Ground.

Distinguish.

Stay.

Choose.

Write what you wish you had said or done.

Then practice it aloud.

You cannot redo the conversation.

But you can use it to rehearse with your mind and body for the next one.

That is how practice begins to become instinct.

When You Get It Wrong

You will.

You will send the email you should have slept on.

You will defend yourself.

You will take over something that wasn't yours.

You will say yes because disappointing someone felt unbearable.

You will withdraw.

You will become sharper than necessary.

You will mistake stubbornness for conviction.

You will discover two days later what you wish you had said.

That does not mean the practice has failed.

It means you found another moment to practice.

Sometimes differentiation sounds like:

“I’ve thought about our conversation, and I was more defensive than I wanted to be. I’d like to try again.”

Or:

“I said yes too quickly. After thinking about it, I need to reconsider.”

Or:

“I was trying so hard not to take responsibility for something that wasn’t mine that I failed to take responsibility for the part that was.”

Repair can itself be differentiated behavior.

You do not have to perform resilience perfectly; you practice it.

And when you are unsure where to begin again:

Go back to Ground.

A Coach's Reflection

What Would You Do If Reducing Everyone's Anxiety Were Not Your Job?

Clergy are often rewarded for absorbing anxiety.

We calm the room.

We reassure the worried.

We reconcile the conflicted.

We make the extra phone call.

We stay late.

We fill the vacancy.

We find the volunteer.

We soften the disagreement.

We carry messages between people who will not speak directly to one another.

Much of this can look like excellent ministry.

Some of it is.

But sometimes we are not caring for the system.

We are helping it avoid the work it needs to do.

That raises a difficult question:

| What would I do here if reducing everyone's anxiety were not my primary job?

You might listen instead of fix.

You might ask a question instead of providing an answer.

You might allow a committee to experience the consequences of its choices.

You might encourage two people to speak directly to each other.

You might say, "I don't know."

You might say, "No."

You might say, "I need time to think."

You might say, "I understand that you're disappointed."

And then resist adding:

"so I'll change my decision."

The goal is not to become less caring.

It is to care deeply enough that you no longer need to control another person's emotional experience in order to remain present with them.

You can love people without managing them.

You can lead people without controlling them.

You can hear people without obeying them.

You can disagree without abandoning them.

You can be responsible without becoming responsible for everything.

You can remain yourself.

And you can stay.

Carry This With You

When anxiety rises:

Ground

| Return to yourself and to God.

Feel your feet.

Breathe.

Remember who you are.

Remember whose you are.

You do not have to react yet.

Distinguish

| Know what belongs to you.

What is mine?

What is theirs?

What is actually my responsibility?

Stay

| Remain connected without surrendering yourself.

Can I remain present?

Can I listen without disappearing?

Can I disagree without withdrawing or attacking?

What are my body, face, and voice communicating?

Choose

| Act thoughtfully rather than anxiously.

What am I trying to accomplish?

Am I seeking faithfulness or simply relief?

Will this response escalate, appease, or differentiate?

Can I say it in a way that communicates both conviction and connection?

And remember:

You are not responsible for eliminating the anxiety around you. You are responsible for the way you participate in it.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

when anxiety rises around us
and within us,
help us remember who we are
and whose we are.

Ground us in your grace
so that we do not need the approval of others
to know that we belong.

Give us wisdom to recognize
what is ours to carry
and humility to release
what belongs to another.

Give us courage to stay present
when withdrawing would be easier,
to listen when defending ourselves would be quicker,
and to remain connected
without surrendering the selves you have called us to be.

When we must act,
slow us enough to choose wisely.

Keep us from words that unnecessarily wound,
from promises made only to relieve anxiety,
from rescuing that prevents growth,
and from confusing stubbornness with faithfulness.

Teach us to love without controlling,
to lead without possessing,
to serve without disappearing,
and to remain open to being changed
without being governed by fear.

Ground us.

Help us distinguish.

Give us courage to stay.

Teach us to choose faithfully. Amen.