

CLERGY RESILIENCE SERIES

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Staying Present in Conflict

Staying Present to Conflict
Without Letting It Take Over

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CLERGY LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE SERIES

Returning reader? [Skip the Series Introduction and go directly to Beginning Here.](#)

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

The meeting ended three hours ago.

You are home now. Dinner is finished. Someone you love is telling you about their day.

But part of you is still sitting at the meeting table.

You replay what someone said. You think of the response you wish you had made. You wonder who else agrees with them. You imagine conversations taking place without you. You begin preparing for a meeting that has not even been scheduled.

Later, while brushing your teeth, another response comes to you.

At 2:17 in the morning, you wake.

The meeting is waiting for you.

Nothing about the conflict has changed since you went to bed. But your body is alert. Your mind is working. The conversation has resumed without any of the other participants being present.

Pastoral conflict has a remarkable capacity to follow us.

It follows us out of meetings and into cars. It follows us home. It accompanies us into prayer. It sits beside us on our day off. It enters conversations that have nothing to do with church. Sometimes it enters our sleep and wakes us from it.

We may know perfectly well that there is nothing useful we can do about the situation tonight.

Our minds and bodies do not always cooperate.

This resource is not primarily about resolving conflict. Conflict resolution is its own substantial discipline.

This resource is about what happens when conflict continues **inside us** after there is nothing useful we can do about it at the moment.

Its central question is:

How can I remain faithfully engaged in conflict without allowing the conflict to consume my attention, relationships, spiritual life, and sense of self?

Conflict may require your attention.

It does not deserve unlimited access to you.

Why Pastoral Conflict Can Be So Consuming

Pastoral conflict is rarely only about the issue being discussed.

A disagreement about worship may also touch authority. A dispute over a decision may raise questions about trust. Criticism from an elder may awaken fears about whether others share the criticism. A tense meeting may leave us wondering whether we are still wanted.

And because pastoral vocation is unusually intertwined with identity, disagreement with something we have done can begin to feel like a verdict on who we are.

Someone says:

“I disagree with this decision.”

Inside us it becomes:

I am failing as their pastor.

Someone says:

“I don’t think you handled that well.”

Inside us it becomes:

They no longer trust my leadership.

A relationship deteriorates.

Inside us it becomes:

Perhaps I misunderstood my call.

A pastoral decision may need examination. A relationship may need repair. Leadership may need correction.

But those questions become much harder to discern once every criticism has become a judgment on our worth, our vocation, or the authenticity of our call.

Pastoral conflict can also threaten things that genuinely matter.

Relationships may fracture. Reputations may be damaged. Employment may become uncertain. Congregations sometimes divide. People occasionally behave cruelly or destructively.

The goal, then, is not to convince ourselves that conflict does not matter.

It matters.

The practice is learning to give conflict the attention it requires without allowing it to determine the shape of our whole interior life.

Processing Is Not the Same as Rumination

Pastors need to think about conflict.

We need to reflect. We may need to examine our own behavior, reconstruct what happened, prepare for a conversation, consult someone we trust, document events, pray, discern, or decide what action is required.

That kind of thinking can be useful.

But there is another kind of thinking that feels productive because the mind is busy even though nothing is actually moving.

We replay the conversation.

We compose a better answer.

We imagine what the other person will say next.

We prepare our response to the imagined response.

Then we revisit the original conversation and begin again.

This is rumination.

The distinction is not whether you are still thinking about the conflict.

The better question is:

Is this thinking helping me understand, discern, prepare, or act—or am I traveling the same ground again?

Useful processing produces something.

Perhaps greater understanding.

A question.

A decision.

A next step.

Recognition that you were wrong.

Recognition that you need help.

Recognition that nothing can be done yet.

Rumination circles.

The mind remains active because it hopes that continued thinking will somehow create control.

Often it creates only exhaustion.

Sometimes you can interrupt that cycle simply by noticing:

I am not learning anything new now.

That realization is not a command to stop caring.

It is permission to stop circling.

Sometimes the Meeting Ends Before Your Body Knows It

Conflict does not live only in our thoughts.

The body participates.

Your jaw may tighten. Your breathing may become shallow. Your shoulders may rise. Your stomach may change. Your heart may race. You may feel restless, exhausted, shaky, hot, numb, or unusually alert.

You may understand perfectly well that the meeting is over while your body remains prepared for the next threat.

Sometimes the meeting ends before your body knows it has ended.

That matters because release cannot always be accomplished by telling yourself to stop thinking.

Your body may need help making the transition.

A walk may help. So may slower breathing, stretching, exercise, a shower, changing clothes, sitting outside, music, prayer, or simply moving from the physical place where you have been working.

There is no single correct technique.

The question is:

What helps my body recognize that I am no longer in the room where the conflict occurred?

That, too, is part of the practice.

Practicing When Conflict Consumes Me

The next four movements develop one cumulative practice:

Recognize → Contain → Engage → Release

During the first movement, you will learn to recognize when conflict is occupying more of you than the situation presently requires.

During the second, you will create containers that give conflict appropriate attention without giving it every place.

During the third, you will distinguish rumination from purposeful engagement and identify the next faithful action.

During the fourth, you will practice releasing what remains unfinished—including what may need to be grieved.

These movements offer a learning rhythm, not a rigid schedule.

You may spend approximately a week with each one. You may need longer. A difficult conflict may require you to move through all four in a single day and begin again the next morning.

You are practicing, not performing.

The aim is not to become unaffected by conflict.

It is to become increasingly capable of saying:

This conflict matters. I will give it the attention faithfulness requires. I do not have to give it everything else.

Week One — Recognize

Notice When Conflict Has Taken Up Residence

For this first movement, do not try to solve anything.

Study what happens.

Ask:

How do I know when conflict has begun occupying me?

Notice your thoughts.

Do you replay conversations? Construct arguments? Imagine future confrontations? Search for evidence that you were right? Wonder who is talking to whom? Prepare responses to accusations no one has made? Mentally recruit people who would agree with you?

Notice your body.

Do you lean forward when you read the email? Hold your breath? Tighten your jaw? Reach repeatedly for your phone? Lose your appetite? Eat when you are not hungry? Have difficulty falling asleep? Wake early with the conflict already present?

Notice where the conflict travels.

Are you distracted while someone you love is talking? More irritable with people who have nothing to do with the conflict? Unable to enjoy something you ordinarily enjoy? Checking church email during Sabbath? Talking about the conflict again even though there is nothing new to say?

Do not use these observations to build a case against yourself.

Treat them as information.

Something in you believes this situation requires continued vigilance.

The task is to become curious about why.

Separate What Happened from What You Fear It Means

When conflict becomes consuming, the event and our interpretation can quickly merge.

Someone criticized your decision.

That happened.

Everyone is losing confidence in me is an interpretation.

Someone was visibly angry at the meeting.

That happened.

They are organizing against me may or may not be true.

A session member has stopped speaking warmly to you.

That happened.

My pastorate is unraveling is a conclusion.

Ask two questions:

What actually happened?

Then:

What am I afraid this means?

Do not dismiss the fear. Sometimes it contains important information.

But do not confuse the fear with established fact.

The space between those two questions is often where discernment begins.

Notice When Conflict Touches Identity

Pay particular attention when your thoughts move from something you did to who you are.

From:

I may have handled that poorly.

To:

I am a poor pastor.

From:

Some people disagree with me.

To:

I no longer belong here.

From:

This relationship is strained.

To:

My ministry is failing.

Conflict becomes much harder to contain when the entire self has entered the dispute.

When you notice that movement, ask:

What is actually being questioned here?

Perhaps a decision.

A communication.

A boundary.

A leadership judgment.

A relationship.

Let the question remain as specific as possible.

Your whole vocation does not need to stand trial every time someone is angry.

Keep a Conflict Consumption Log

For several days, briefly record moments when the conflict returns.

Write:

- What triggered it?
- What happened in my body?
- What thought began repeating?
- What am I afraid this means?

- Was I processing something useful or traveling familiar ground?
- Did anything new become clear?
- Is there something I actually need to do?

You are looking for patterns, not building a case against yourself.

Practice Scenario

A member sends a strongly critical email late in the evening.

You read it.

Then you read it again.

You begin writing a response.

You delete it.

You write another.

You check whether anyone else received the message.

You remember three previous interactions with this person.

You begin imagining what they may say to others.

Stop.

Do not answer yet.

Ask:

What happened?

What am I afraid this means?

What is happening in my body?

Am I learning anything new?

Does anything actually require action tonight?

Perhaps something does.

Perhaps nothing does.

The practice is learning to know the difference.

At the End of Week One

Complete these sentences:

Conflict consumes me most when...

The physical signal I notice first is...

The thought I replay most often is...

What I most fear the conflict means is...

Conflict most often follows me into...

I know I have moved from processing into rumination when...

Week One has done its work when you begin recognizing consumption while it is happening rather than only after you are exhausted by it.

Week Two — Contain

Give Conflict a Place Without Giving It Every Place

Continue noticing.

Now ask:

Where does this conflict belong right now?

Containment is not avoidance.

Avoidance says:

I will not deal with this.

Containment says:

I will deal with this when I can engage it faithfully.

Healthy containment gives conflict enough room to be taken seriously without allowing it to become psychologically boundaryless.

For this week, experiment with four kinds of containment:

Time. Place. People. Body.

Time — When Will I Attend to This?

If the conflict does not require immediate action, decide when you will return to it.

Perhaps:

Tomorrow from 9:00 to 9:30, I will review what happened and decide whether I need to respond.

Thursday, I will talk with my coach.

Monday, I will prepare for the session conversation.

After worship, I will decide whether the issue still requires attention.

When the conflict returns before then, remind yourself:

I have not abandoned this. I have scheduled it.

You are not telling your mind that the problem does not matter.

You are telling it:

There is a time for this, and this is not that time.

Place — Where Will I Work on This?

Give the conflict a physical home.

Perhaps it is a notebook. A document. Your office. A particular chair. A walking route. A folder where relevant correspondence is kept.

When something important occurs to you outside that place, record it briefly.

Then return to what you were doing.

The physical act of closing the notebook or shutting the computer can become part of the practice.

The conflict is still there. I do not need to hold it in active memory.

People — Who Should Help Me Carry This?

Pastors need places to tell the truth.

That may include a spouse or close friend. Intimacy requires sharing what is happening in our lives.

But a spouse or friend can gradually become the place where the same conflict is rehearsed night after night. They may begin carrying anger, anxiety, or resentment toward people with whom they have no direct relationship.

The question is not:

Should I talk about ministry at home?

The better question is:

Has home become another meeting room for this conflict?

Ask who can best help you with what you actually need.

Perhaps you need comfort.

Perhaps perspective.

Perhaps someone who understands congregational systems.

Perhaps someone willing to tell you that you may be contributing to the problem.

Perhaps denominational guidance.

Perhaps professional counseling.

Choose people who can help you become clearer rather than simply more certain that you are right.

The goal is support, not recruitment.

Body — How Will I Leave the Room?

Develop a simple transition practice.

Before leaving the office, write down the next action.

Take a walk around the building.

Stretch.

Breathe slowly for a few minutes.

Change clothes when you arrive home.

Listen to music during the drive.

Sit quietly before entering the house.

Pray.

The practice might be as simple as placing both feet on the ground and saying:

The meeting is over. I am here now.

Or:

God, this congregation is still yours while I go home.

Let your body participate in leaving.

When the Thought Returns

It probably will.

Do not fight with it.

Notice:

There is the conflict again.

Ask whether anything new has happened.

If yes, decide whether it requires attention.

If not, remind yourself where and when you will return to it.

Then gently redirect your attention.

Containment is not the ability never to think about the conflict.

It is the growing capacity not to follow every thought wherever it wants to take you.

Practice Scenario

Tomorrow morning, you have a meeting with two elders about an ongoing disagreement.

At 8:30 tonight, you discover yourself rehearsing the meeting again.

You have prepared.

Your notes are complete.

Nothing new has happened.

Ask:

Is there anything else I can faithfully do tonight?

If the answer is no, practice saying:

There is nothing I need to do about this tonight.

Then help your body leave the meeting that has not yet happened.

At the End of Week Two

Reflect:

What time boundary helped me?

What place helped contain the conflict?

Who helps me gain perspective rather than simply reinforce my position?

Where has the conflict been spilling into relationships that need protection?

What helps my body recognize that conflict work has ended for now?

When was containment hardest?

Week Two has done its work when the conflict still matters but no longer automatically determines where your attention goes.

Week Three — Engage

Decide What Kind of Conflict This Is

Containment is not the destination.

It creates enough internal space to engage more faithfully.

Before deciding what to do, ask:

What kind of conflict am I actually dealing with?

You do not need a sophisticated diagnostic system.

Begin simply.

Is this primarily:

A misunderstanding?

A substantive disagreement?

A damaged relationship?

A disagreement about roles or authority?

A boundary problem?

A recurring systemic pattern?

A values or theological conflict?

A personnel matter?

An ethical or safety concern?

Several may be present at once.

The purpose is not to label the conflict perfectly.

It is to avoid using the same response for every problem.

A misunderstanding may require clarification.

A relationship rupture may require conversation and repair.

A governance question may require a governing body.

A systemic pattern may require broader consultation.

A serious ethical or safety concern may require immediate intervention and outside authority.

Ask:

What kind of conflict is this, and therefore what kind of response might it require?

Decide What Is Yours

Now ask:

What is mine to do?

Not:

How do I make this disappear?

Not:

How do I make everyone understand me?

Not:

How do I get the congregation back to normal?

What belongs to you?

Perhaps an apology.

A clarification.

A boundary.

A direct conversation.

A decision.

A request for help.

A governing-body discussion.

Documentation.

Listening.

Waiting.

Sometimes the faithful next action is:

Do nothing yet.

That is not necessarily avoidance.

Perhaps you do not know enough. Perhaps everyone is too activated for a productive conversation. Perhaps you need consultation before responding. Perhaps the situation simply needs time to settle.

Intentional waiting says:

I am choosing not to act yet because acting now would not serve the situation well.

Avoidance says:

I hope this disappears so I never have to deal with it.

Learn the difference.

Separate Action from Outcome

Conflict becomes consuming when we assume responsibility for outcomes we cannot control.

You can prepare carefully for a conversation.

You cannot guarantee how another person receives it.

You can apologize.

You cannot require forgiveness.

You can explain a decision.

You cannot require agreement.

You can establish a boundary.

You cannot prevent disappointment.

You can lead a fair process.

You cannot guarantee reconciliation.

Write:

The action that belongs to me is...

Then:

The outcome I hope for but cannot control is...

Your responsibility is faithfulness.

You are not sovereign over the result.

Choose the Next Faithful Action

An anxious mind tries to solve the whole conflict.

Instead ask:

What is the next faithful action?

Perhaps you need to call one person rather than convene six.

Perhaps you need to ask what someone meant rather than respond to what you assume they meant.

Perhaps you need to acknowledge one mistake without accepting every accusation.

Perhaps you need to ask the session to own a decision that belongs to the session.

Perhaps you need to say:

I need time to think before I respond.

Perhaps you need outside perspective before doing anything else.

A modest next action often accomplishes more than hours of imaginary conflict.

Practice the Conversation Out Loud

If the next step is a difficult conversation, practice the opening.

Listen to yourself.

Do you sound defensive?

Accusatory?

Overly apologetic?

Already convinced you know the other person's motives?

Can you enter with clarity and curiosity?

Try:

“I think something has developed between us that we need to talk about directly.”

Or:

“I left our last conversation concerned that I may not fully understand what you were trying to tell me. I'd like to hear more.”

Or:

“I think we disagree about this decision. I want to understand the disagreement without making the relationship itself the casualty.”

You do not need the perfect script.

You need enough steadiness to enter the actual conversation rather than the one you have been conducting alone.

When You Need Another Set of Eyes

There is a point at which conflict consumption itself can distort perception.

If you are no longer confident that you can tell what is happening, that is a good reason to consult someone outside the conflict.

A trusted colleague, coach, therapist, mentor, mediator, COM representative, Executive Presbyter, or other appropriate person may help you ask:

What is actually happening?

What am I contributing?

What belongs to someone else?

What requires action?

What can safely wait?

What am I not seeing?

Choose someone who can help you discern, not merely take your side.

Sometimes the most resilient thing a pastor can say is:

I am too close to this to trust my interpretation by myself.

Practice Scenario

A ruling elder has repeatedly criticized a decision you made.

You have spent several days imagining how you will defend yourself at the next session meeting.

Pause.

What kind of conflict is this?

A disagreement?

A role issue?

A relationship problem?

Something systemic?

What do you actually know?

What are you assuming?

What belongs to you?

What outcome are you trying to control?

Perhaps the next faithful action is not a better defense.

Perhaps it is:

“You seem to have significant concerns about this decision. Could we talk before the session meeting so I can understand them?”

One real conversation may accomplish more than fifty imaginary ones.

At the End of Week Three

Reflect:

What kind of conflict am I dealing with?

What action actually belonged to me?

What outcome was I trying to control?

Was waiting appropriate, or was I avoiding?

What happened when I engaged the real situation rather than the imagined one?

What did I learn?

What remains unresolved?

That final question matters.

Faithful engagement does not always produce resolution.

Week Four — Release

Let the Conflict Be Unfinished

Some conflicts resolve.

Some do not.

Some improve slowly.

Some change form.

Some decisions leave people disappointed.

Some relationships never return to what they were.

If resilience depends upon complete resolution, unresolved conflict will always own us.

The final movement is therefore not resolution.

It is release.

Ask:

What can I put down even though this is not finished?

Release does not mean deciding the conflict no longer matters.

It does not require agreeing with what happened.

It does not require deciding that an accusation was fair.

It does not require surrendering the truth as you understand it.

It means relinquishing continuous possession of the conflict.

You can remain responsible for tomorrow's conversation without rehearsing it all night.

You can believe a decision was unjust without arguing the case internally every hour.

You can know that a difficult meeting is coming without conducting it repeatedly in your imagination.

You can say:

I have done what is mine to do today.

Then:

I will return when it is time to engage again.

Some Things Need to Be Grieved

Not everything that keeps returning needs to be contained more firmly.

Some things need to be grieved.

Conflict can cost us something.

Trust.

Friendship.

A sense of belonging.

Confidence in another leader.

An uncomplicated relationship with the congregation.

An imagined future.

Sometimes the pain remains because something has actually been lost.

Do not confuse grief with failed resilience.

You may need to name what the conflict cost you.

You may need to lament.

You may need to tell the truth to someone safe.

You may need to pray without trying to fix anything.

You may simply need time.

Release does not mean rushing grief toward closure.

It means allowing grief to be grief rather than requiring it to become an endless argument with what happened.

When You Were Treated Unfairly

Some conflicts consume us because we believe something untrue or unjust has been said about us.

Perhaps confidentiality prevents you from telling everything you know.

Perhaps someone has distorted what happened.

Perhaps you carried public criticism for a decision made by a larger body.

Perhaps you did what you believed was ethically necessary and suffered relational consequences for it.

Perhaps you were simply treated badly.

Release does not require you to call injustice acceptable.

Putting something down for tonight is not the same as deciding that it no longer matters.

You may still need documentation.

A conversation.

A formal process.

Consultation.

Repair.

Accountability.

But continuing to prosecute the case in your mind at midnight does not make justice more likely.

You can remain committed to truth without requiring yourself to carry the argument every hour.

Develop a Release Practice

When a period of conflict work ends, mark the transition.

Write down:

What happened?

What is the next action?

When will I return to it?

Then close the notebook.

Close the computer.

Stand up.

Walk outside.

Move your body.

Pray.

Call someone who knows you without needing you to be their pastor.

Cook.

Garden.

Read.

Listen to music.

Laugh.

Return to something that reminds you that your life is larger than the conflict.

The activity itself is not magical.

Its meaning is:

This conflict is part of my life. It is not my whole life.

Return to What Is Still Good

Conflict narrows attention.

One angry member can become more psychologically visible than fifty people who remain connected to you.

One painful meeting can overshadow a week filled with meaningful ministry.

One damaged relationship can begin defining an entire congregation.

Do not use gratitude to deny pain.

Widen the field of vision.

The conflict is real.

What else is real?

A conversation that mattered.

A person who grew.

A prayer that nourished you.

A meal you enjoyed.

A friendship.

A sunset.

A piece of music.

Something funny.

Someone you love.

The goodness does not erase the conflict.

The conflict does not erase the goodness.

Resilience makes room for both.

Practice Relinquishment

Eventually, release becomes more than a psychological technique.

It becomes a spiritual practice.

Pastors can begin imagining that the congregation's future depends upon whether we solve the conflict correctly.

Our leadership matters.

Our decisions matter.

Our integrity matters.

Our willingness to repair harm matters.

But the church does not finally belong to us.

There comes a point when continued mental effort is no longer faithfulness.

It is an attempt to possess what cannot be controlled.

Relinquishment says:

I have done what faithfulness requires of me for now. I release my claim that continuing to carry this will somehow control what happens next.

Perhaps the prayer is:

God, I have done what I know to do today. Show me what is mine tomorrow. Until then, I return these people, this congregation, this conflict, and myself to you.

Then go to sleep.

The congregation belongs to God while you sleep.

When You Pick It Up Again

You will.

An email will arrive.

Someone will make another comment.

The next meeting will approach.

Or nothing new will happen, and your mind will simply return to familiar territory.

Do not treat that as failure.

Return to the practice.

Recognize

What is happening in me? Am I processing or circling?

Contain

Does this need attention now? If not, when and where will I return to it? Who can help me see clearly? What does my body need in order to leave the conflict for now?

Engage

What kind of conflict is this? What is the next faithful action? What outcome am I trying to control?

Release

What remains unfinished? What needs to be grieved? What can I put down until it is time to engage again?

This is not a technique you master once.

It is a way of returning to yourself when conflict begins carrying you somewhere you do not need to go.

When Conflict Is More Than Consuming

Sometimes you cannot stop thinking about a conflict because something genuinely serious is happening.

A congregation may be intensely polarized.

A group may be organizing against the pastor.

You may be experiencing harassment, intimidation, retaliation, discrimination, threats, professional misconduct, financial impropriety, boundary violations, or other destructive behavior.

Your livelihood may be at risk.

Your family may be affected.

Your physical or emotional safety may be compromised.

In those circumstances, containment must never mean minimizing danger.

Release must never mean accepting abuse.

Your vigilance may be telling you something important.

Pay attention.

Do not navigate serious conflict alone.

Contact appropriate denominational leadership. Consult your COM or equivalent governing body. Speak with a trusted colleague, coach, therapist, mediator, attorney, or other professional appropriate to the circumstances.

Document what needs documenting.

Seek protection where protection is required.

And remember that being consumed by a conflict can make it difficult to assess that conflict accurately. That is another reason for trustworthy outside perspective.

There are conflicts that call for resilience.

There are situations that call for intervention.

Often they call for both.

Resilience is not the capacity to remain indefinitely inside destructive circumstances.

It is part of what helps us remain grounded enough to recognize what faithfulness now requires.

A Coach's Reflection

You Do Not Have to Resolve It Before You Can Rest

Pastors sometimes postpone rest until everything is all right.

After this meeting.

After this decision.

After that conversation.

After the difficult member settles down.

After the session agrees.

After the congregation understands.

Then I can rest.

But ministry rarely gives us that moment.

Something is almost always unfinished.

Someone is disappointed.

A decision remains unresolved.

A relationship needs attention.

A sermon is waiting.

A person is grieving.

If rest requires resolution, pastors will rarely rest.

Perhaps one of the deeper spiritual disciplines of ministry is learning to live faithfully among unfinished things.

You can care deeply and stop thinking for tonight.

You can be responsible and take a Sabbath.

You can love a congregation and allow people to be disappointed.

You can believe something was unfair and still enjoy dinner.

You can grieve one relationship and receive joy from another.

You can be uncertain about the future and remain present to today.

You can put something down without abandoning it.

There is humility in that.

It acknowledges that our continuous mental attention is not what holds the church together.

The work of God continues when we stop working.

The Spirit does not wait beside our bed for us to wake up and resume worrying.

The church remains God's church.

The people remain God's people.

And you remain more than the conflict you are carrying.

Carry This With You

When conflict begins consuming you:

Recognize

What is happening in me? What happened, and what am I afraid it means? Am I processing or circling?

Contain

Does this require attention now? If not, when and where will I return to it? Who can help me see clearly?

Engage

What kind of conflict is this? What is the next faithful action that belongs to me? What outcome must I release?

Release

What remains unfinished? What needs to be grieved? What can I put down for now?

Remember:

Conflict may require your attention. It does not deserve unlimited access to you.

You can remain engaged without remaining engulfed.

You can care without carrying the conflict every hour.

You can seek truth without endlessly rehearsing your defense.

You can do what belongs to you without controlling what happens next.

And when today's faithful work is finished, you can put it down.

Closing Prayer

Faithful God,

you know the conflicts we carry
and the conversations that continue within us
long after the room has emptied.

You know the words we replay,
the answers we wish we had given,
the accusations we fear,
the losses we grieve,
and the outcomes we cannot control.

When conflict follows us home,
help us recognize what is happening within us.

When our minds travel the same ground again and again,
give us wisdom to know
when reflection is leading toward discernment
and when anxiety is simply circling.

When our bodies remain in rooms
we have already left,
help us return to where we are.

Teach us to give difficult things a place
without giving them every place.

When action is ours,
give us courage to act.

When apology is ours,
give us humility to offer it.

When truth must be spoken,
give us clarity and compassion.

When waiting is wiser than acting,
give us patience.

When something has been lost,
give us permission to grieve.

When we have been hurt or treated unfairly,
keep our hearts from hardening
without asking us to call injustice good.

When we can no longer see clearly,
send us companions who can help us discern.

And when we have done
what is ours to do today,
teach us to release what remains unfinished.

Return us to the people we love,
to the life beyond our work,
to beauty and laughter,
to Sabbath and sleep,
to prayer that does not need to solve anything.

Remind us that the church is yours.

The people are yours.

The future is yours.

And we are yours too.

Amen.