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## Ways of Nurturing Church Workers in High Stress Environments



ENCOURAGING, NURTURING AND LOVING others characterize both a healthy Christian and a healthy church. Just as servants of the Lord strive to manifest a genuine love for those under their care, the people of God need to have a deep love for the professional church worker. The way a church nurtures its workers speaks volumes about the Christ-centeredness of the congregation. Churches can—and must—do much to help pastors and called workers weather the stress inherent in their ministries.

### Spiritual Nurture

Nurture begins by remembering what the Bible teaches. Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Peter echoed that commandment, urging that we “love one another deeply from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). The apostle Paul offered

similar instruction, reminding us that one’s “love must be sincere ... honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:9-10).

Yet the reality is that congregations do not always view professional church workers through caring, understanding eyes. Congregations often want their church workers to be perfect—not the sinner-saints that they, like all Christians, are. Nurturing church workers in high-demand ministries requires congregations to adopt a Christ-like attitude in three significant areas: realistic expectations, a compassionate heart, and a forgiving spirit.

NURTURE SPIRITUALLY THROUGH A HEALTHY LOWERING OF EXPECTATIONS. Heroes of our faith—Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—all manifested imperfections and character flaws. Only our Lord Jesus provides a model for the perfect Christian. Thus, congregations need to refrain from placing unreasonably high expectations on church workers. Serving the Lord is not a ministry of perfection—it is a ministry of service to God’s children, all of whom are broken with sin.

Not every sermon a pastor preaches will be awe-inspiring. Not every subject a teacher presents will be riveting. Not every meeting a youth group director conducts will be

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engaging. Parishioners must realize that expecting perfection from church workers is crippling and destructive—to the workers and the church. Frustration, bitterness, and resentment smolder, sapping workers of their energy and creativity. In contrast, reasonable expectations allow church workers to grow and flourish. Workers can feel free to be themselves, confident that any misstep will not unleash the congregation's wholesale condemnation.

**NURTURE SPIRITUALLY WITH A COMPASSIONATE HEART.** Throughout the Old and New Testament, our loving, merciful God is spoken of in numerous passages as compassionate. The Psalmist stated, "The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion" (Psalm 116:5). In Zechariah 7:9, we read, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.

Jesus demonstrated a compassionate heart throughout the Gospels. Wherever He went, He cared for children, women, the lame, and the lonely. For example, Matthew 14:14 reads, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick." Christian compassion is the ultimate goal for all believers in Christ. But it is not enough for parishioners to just talk about compassion. They must nurture one another, starting with the very people they called to serve their church.

Compassion happens in a variety of ways. Demonstrate Christ-like care by asking church workers what to pray for in their ministries and in their families. Express appreciation in writing with cards or notes. Recognize that workers have private lives and honor their personal and family time. Place a note in the church newsletter reminding members to encourage workers.

**NURTURE SPIRITUALLY WITH A FORGIVING SPIRIT.** In the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded how important it is to forgive others because God in Christ forgives us. The Bible itself has nearly 125 references to the importance of forgiveness. Yet believers frequently struggle to forgive others, and

forgiving church workers can sometimes be the hardest task of all.

But church workers need to receive forgiveness—again and again. Congregations are enhanced when Christians understand the vitality of forgiveness for all relationships. Forgiveness cleanses, clearing the way for parishioners to see opportunities to nurture. Our Christ-likeness is in direct proportion to the forgiveness demonstrated toward others, including workers.

### **Nurture through Encouragement of Self-Care**

Working long hours, serving others all day, being involved in emotionally demanding situations, especially after many years of service, can lead to compassion fatigue. At greatest risk are servants overflowing with selflessness and filled with an idealistic vision that they are the "savior" rather than one pointing parishioners to our Savior Jesus Christ. When compassion fatigue overwhelms, ministers become distant and detached from parishioners and co-workers.

Church workers need to focus on self-care to be faithful servants and to model healthy behavior for their parishioners. When self-care is absent, congregational leaders and parishioners must encourage professional church workers to seek balance by focusing on their spiritual, emotional and physical health.

Most church workers understand the importance of seeking to know God better through daily Bible reading, prayer, and a devotional life. But job demands and pressures can interfere with devotional life. Like all Christians, servants need to be reminded to maintain daily habits that increase trust in the promises of God's Word.

Laughter and a sense of humor are important components of self-care. Laughter combats negative emotions and helps people manage anxiety. Smiling and laughing actually have a positive impact on physiology. An appropriate use of humor by parishioners can lighten the load and positively nurture faithful servants. Regular exercise helps, too. Exercise

distracts the mind, reduces muscular tension and diminishes emotional strain. Parishioners who encourage church workers to exercise with them greatly assist in self-care. Congregations should even consider giving health club memberships, thereby increasing workers' opportunities to exercise. The payoff from such investments can be rewarding. Exercise gives workers an emotional "lift," and it increases the physical energy needed to serve the Lord.

**MODEL QUALITY WORKERS.** Some church workers connect with those struggling in both ministry and life. Bonding with another distressed, unhealthy worker often leads to a downward spiral of difficulties. Servants need to be encouraged to associate with those who accentuate the positive, possess an attitude of gratitude, and maintain a cheerful spirit. Persuade them to seek the wisdom of faithful servants who have been "successful" in the ways of the Lord and to learn from those wise in earthly matters as well. Promote consultation with mentors who have achieved "well done" service in kingdom work. By connecting with excellent workers and modeling healthy behaviors, coping skills are learned, hope prevails and growth occurs.

**ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER.** Church workers need to assume personal responsibility for their wellness. One method for achieving this goal is to have an accountability person, a confidant, or perhaps a confessor. A close relationship with at least one other person creates a safe haven for support. The confidant-mentor may be another church worker within the congregation. However, a better choice is someone more removed. One Synod official shared that his "best friend" or accountability partner is more than 1,000 miles away.

Church workers should look for confidants who are Christ-centered, trustworthy, good listeners, compassionate, and nonjudgmental. The professional church worker needs to speak with the accountability partner on a regular basis. Topics may include disappointments in

ministry, frustrations with parishioners, tension in co-worker relationships, and struggles with temptations.

## **Nurture through Encouragement of Support Outside the Congregation**

In church work, pastors and church workers can easily feel alone. Sometimes, the more successful a church worker becomes in ministry, the more likely he or she is to experience overwhelming feelings of isolation. Their "success" creates a withdrawal in order to hide human frailties and shortcomings. The confidential nature of ministry may cause disassociation from family members, leading to distressed relationships at home and church.

Given all this, congregations should purposefully encourage outside relationships that can contribute to the inner peace and fulfillment of church workers. To build a support network, consider the following:

**SUPPORT GROUPS.** For pastors, circuit meetings can be a safe haven where friendships are developed and support obtained. Likewise, workers may find a safe haven elsewhere in their community. For instance, a number of years ago a district pastoral executive shared that his support group was Christian men he worked out with three times a week at the local YMCA.

When support groups do not exist, church workers should be encouraged to start their own—perhaps to meet biweekly for Bible study, encouragement and consultation. Meeting regularly with workers from outside one's circuit to discuss health and wellness themes and how to handle challenges in ministry can be immensely beneficial.

**POST-SEMINARY APPLIED LEARNING AND SUPPORT.** PALS is a LCMS program where five to 12 recent seminary graduates meet with an experienced pastor during their first three years of ministry. In these meetings, the new pastors worship, study and discuss their experiences as well as gain skills to deal with ministry challenges. The goal is to help pastors and wives transition from seminary life to parish ministry. A detailed

description of the program can be found at the LCMS website under “Ministerial Growth and Support.” Congregational leaders should promote the importance of PALS to new pastors.

### **Nurture from the Body of Believers**

Congregations need to be proactive in supporting workers at many levels so as to guard against ministry burnout and marital/family discord. In 1997, the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee on Ministerial Health and Wellness of the ELCA and the LCMS developed a wellness wheel to guide congregational leaders in nurturing church workers. The guide can be obtained from Wheatridge Ministries. In addition, parishioners—working as a body of believers—should consider the following:

#### **CONGREGATIONAL SUPPORT TEAM.**

Healthy churches establish some type of congregational support team for pastors and workers. Team members pray for church workers, listen to concerns, and ask appropriate questions about the worker’s spiritual, relational, financial, and emotional needs. The team seeks to learn how it could assist workers to serve more faithfully. This support group guards against the spread of rumors and gossip and attends to the general welfare of workers and their families.

**SALARY.** Healthy congregations have a committee to annually review district salary guidelines. At a minimum, congregations must consistently strive to provide a salary based upon district guidelines. Church workers deserve to have a salary commensurate with training, experience, and assigned responsibilities.

In addition, healthy congregations remain alert to the stress pastors and church workers undergo and, when appropriate, provide more vacation time or a paid weekend mini-vacation. Parishioners may treat the worker and/or their family to a lunch or dinner at a restaurant. Perhaps gift certificates for a movie or a spa treatment can be provided. Further, parishioners can show their commitment to nurturing church workers

by providing special gifts on holidays, anniversaries, birthdays—or whenever the time seems right.

#### **RECOGNITION OF MINISTRY SERVICE.**

Congregations should always be thankful for the dedication and service of the ministry staff. Thus, they should honor workers for every five years of ministry service and recognize every five years of service to a particular congregation or institution. They should also organize an appreciation dinner and/or reception on a Sunday morning to express congratulations for ministry service.

**SABBATICAL.** Some congregations are now recognizing the tremendous renewal power of sabbaticals by providing church workers with time off and financial support. During a sabbatical, professional church workers are absent from ministry responsibilities for roughly three to 12 months to rest and recharge. The Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support has detailed information regarding the benefits and process of sabbaticals. So does Wheatridge Ministries on its website under *Ministry Sabbatical Resource Center*. In addition, the Alban Institute has published a useful pamphlet titled *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning*.

The Eli Lilly Foundation website, [www.resourcingchristianity.org/grantsinfo](http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/grantsinfo), describes the 2008 National Clergy Renewal Program, whereby pastors can receive funding for their sabbaticals. This program, established in 1999, has allowed more than 1,000 pastors to take breaks from their congregations and engage in pursuits ranging from biblical studies to spending time in different cultural contexts. This year the Lilly Endowment fund anticipates awarding as many as 120 grants of up to \$45,000 each to Christian congregations to support pastor renewal. As much as \$15,000 of the grant may be used for congregational expenses such as paying for interim pastors.

**CONTINUING EDUCATION.** Medical doctors, nurses, mental health counselors, and others in helping professions are required to earn a certain number of continuing education hours

annually. Although continuing education is not a requirement for ministry, professional church workers benefit from attending conferences and one-day seminars. Church workers should be encouraged to take courses in key ministry areas to enhance their knowledge and foster insight. One of the most neglected components of the ministry, continuing education should occur during regular ministry hours—not as part of vacation time.

**BOOK ALLOWANCE.** Congregations should not hesitate to provide money for books, journals, and other resources for church workers. Church budgets should include a continuing education and book allowance and allow church workers to select how to spend the money to enhance their ministry.

**VACATION TIME.** Along with providing vacation time, congregations should encourage church workers to use all their allotted days off. Equally important, congregations should convince church workers to take their designated days off each week. Regular times of rest, renewal and recreation are essential and must be strongly encouraged by the body of believers.

**FAMILY MEMBERS OF CHURCH WORKERS.** Ministry impacts church workers' spouses and children, often leaving them feeling neglected by and disconnected from parishioners. Congregations need to be aware of the unique needs of spouses and children, especially during periods of high stress. Surprise the worker's family with a special day or evening of their choice paid for by the members. Or, in church newsletters, remind parishioners to tell family members how special and valued they are to the congregation. Suggested books, magazines and websites to encourage spouses are listed at [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org) (category "Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support," section "Wives Resources").

**PASTOR/PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKER APPRECIATION SUNDAY/MONTH.**

Congregations should set aside a month, usually October, to recognize the faithful service of pastor and staff, including deaconesses, DCEs, and DCOs. The website [www.parsonage.org](http://www.parsonage.org) has a *Clergy Appreciation Month Planning Guide* that offers exciting celebration suggestions and step-

by-step instructions. If an entire month is not workable, set aside one Sunday to show special appreciation.

**TEACHER APPRECIATION DAY/WEEK.**

Teachers deserve a special day or week of recognition, separate from pastor and staff. The website [www.teacher-appreciation.info](http://www.teacher-appreciation.info) provides students and parents with suggestions to thank teachers for their nurture, care and support. In addition, [www.parsonage.org](http://www.parsonage.org) lists more than 40 articles and websites containing suggestions for appreciating teachers. Check under the section, "Frequently Asked Questions," and then click on "*What can parents do to improve public schools?*" The suggestions are applicable to all teachers, including church workers.

### **LCMS Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support**

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has a national commission that advocates for church workers and their families.

A detailed description of this commission—the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support—is listed on the LCMS website. To assist congregations and workers, the commission offers two valuable tools titled *Paths to Growth* and *Let's Talk It Over: 10 Conversations on Supporting Church Workers*.

*Paths to Growth* is an educational DVD designed to spark conversations on ministry struggles and to focus on finding growth opportunities for church workers. *Let's Talk It Over: 10 Conversations on Supporting Church Workers* includes a DVD and workbook to investigate areas pertinent to the life of a worker as he/she seeks to serve a congregation. Topics touch on everything from pay and benefits to vocational development, from proper boundaries to spiritual warfare. District and circuit leaders would do well to share these programs with congregations. Annual study sessions by congregation leaders and workers are recommended.

### **District Ministerial Health Commissions**

Most districts have a ministerial commission for the health of church workers. For example, the Indiana District Ministerial Health Commission has as its mission: "To assist

professional church workers for overall health and wellness by 1) serving as an advocate for them, 2) connecting them with appropriate care, and 3) encouraging their participation in preventive and enrichment opportunities.” Recently, the Indiana commission prepared a one-page “Ten Tips for a Healthy Professional Church Worker” with specific actions that the lay leadership of a congregation might take to enhance a worker’s health.

### **Nurture through Outside Assistance**

When emotional struggles or relationship difficulties stall a church worker’s ministry, leaders can initiate assistance through websites, phone assistance, consultants, district officials or counseling. When church workers have interpersonal problems with members, enlisting outside help usually begins with the circuit counselor. If needed, a district reconciler and even the district president may become involved.

PARSONAGE.ORG. A website of *Focus on the Family*, this resource is primarily for pastors. However, all church workers have access to the many useful products, websites and articles available at [www.parsonage.org](http://www.parsonage.org).

PASTORAL CARE LINE. Where can a church worker turn if his/her accountability partner is unavailable? *Focus on the Family* provides assistance for church workers through the “Care Line,” a service available 9 AM to 4 PM Mountain Time at a toll-free number (877-233-4455). Callers can speak to an individual trained to listen to concerns and is willing, if needed, to offer some practical wisdom.

AMBASSADORS OF RECONCILIATION. As mentioned earlier, forgiveness is at the heart of healthy relationships. An organization that explains forgiveness and reconciliation is Ambassadors of Reconciliation, a non-profit group and a Recognized Service Organization of the LCMS. Ambassadors assists congregations and church workers in resolving disagreements in a loving Christ-like manner. One of Ambassadors’ main goals is to equip churches for living, proclaiming and cultivating lifestyles of reconciliation.

Ted Kober, founder and president of Ambassadors, wrote *Confession & Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, to educate leaders, parishioners and workers with a thorough understanding of peacemaker principles. Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation construct a ministry of nurture for the whole church.

CONCORDIA PLAN SERVICES. Concordia Plan Services provides an excellent employee assistance program (EAP) for church workers and family members exhibiting emotional distress. Most districts have the names and addresses of good counselors to contact when workers need counseling.

Each calendar year a worker receives five free-of-charge counseling sessions through the employee assistance program. A co-pay of \$20 kicks in with the sixth session. Congregations should encourage workers to seek help through the EAP program and, if further sessions are necessary, perhaps assist financially with co-pays. The district office or the district ministerial health commission may cover co-pays in serious situations.

CAREER COUNSELING. For church workers struggling in ministry, some districts provide career counseling to help them identify their God-given gifts and find where they can best serve the Lord. At times, a congregation’s offer for career counseling demonstrates its ultimate support and nurture of workers.

### **Congregations with a Track Record of Minimal Nurture**

Church workers today often command less respect, while enduring more demands, from parishioners. Unfortunately, nurture is a low priority for some congregations. When such congregations are unwilling to address their track record of neglect, they may benefit from a lengthy vacancy with an interim pastor.

Inspiring congregational leaders to actively support their workers and correct unhealthy patterns is a demanding task. A starting point for improvement might be a Saturday workshop where leaders and members draw upon biblical principles and learn nurturing skills. Wheatridge Ministries provides “Healthy

Teams Workshops” to energize parishioners to seek a healthy Christian lifestyle.

### **Nurture from District Personnel**

When necessary, congregations should turn to district personnel to provide guidance on nurturing church workers. Such personnel often have the most up-to-date resources. For example, President Dan May, Indiana District, developed a booklet for nurturing new pastors that was shared with all Indiana District congregations in the Fall of 2008. Ideally, district executives would remind congregations at least twice a year of appropriate district resources and strategies for nurturing professional workers.

### **Nurture through Growth Assessments**

Too many pastors and church workers have been “blindsided” by congregations because oversight boards failed to conduct annual performance reviews. These hurting church workers had no idea their performance was unsatisfactory until they were asked to resign.

Nurturing congregations seek to help church workers constantly grow. They schedule annual review meetings at which church leaders detail areas of praise and offer practical advice for ministry growth. To help with the review, churches should use reputable assessment tools. The Indiana District Ministerial Health Commission has prepared an “Effective Pastoral Growth” instrument that can be used annually by both pastor and church leadership for a face-to-face review. Similar formal assessments should be available for educators and all church workers through district offices. The goal of assessments is to identify areas where pastors deserve praise and to provide specific suggestions for improvement.

### **Nurture through Retreats**

Retreats provide opportunities for people to relax and to recharge emotionally, spiritually and physically. Congregations nurture workers by encouraging them to attend retreats and by budgeting monies and allocating time for the getaways. President Keith Kohlmeier, Kansas District, reports that his district has invested in a complete Worker Retreat Center on a lake near

Herrington, Kansas, with the theme, “A place for the worker to reconnect with God, him (her) self, and his (her) family.”

**PASTORS’ WIVES RETREATS.** Wives need support as much as their husbands, which is why the Indiana District sponsors a three-day “Katie Retreat” weekend for pastors’ wives every February. President Dan May describes the “Katie Retreat” as “an important time-away to talk and pray and worship and rest and laugh and think as you share and celebrate your faith in Christ.” Organizing retreats for spouses of all commissioned workers should be an important goal in every congregation.

**GRACE PLACE RETREATS.** In 2000, Dr. John Eckrich organized Grace Place Retreats, now a Recognized Service Organization of the LCMS, to provide all church workers with health education at weeklong retreats at resorts and other locations across the country. Focused in Christ, these retreats teach physical, emotional, relational, spiritual and fiscal skills for maintaining and enhancing the health and ministry service of workers. More than 20 retreats are offered yearly. More information and a list of retreat locations are available at [www.graceplaceretreats.org](http://www.graceplaceretreats.org).

Retreat information can also be found at [www.parsonage.org](http://www.parsonage.org). Under the category of Pastoral-Caregiving Ministries, one can find listings for camps and retreat centers available to clergy and church workers, free or at a greatly reduced cost.

### **Conclusion**

Congregations that grasp the essentials of nurturing church workers do more than please our heavenly Father. They motivate workers in a positive ministerial direction with sharing the Gospel. Even small gestures of nurture increase the enjoyment of serving fellow believers in Christ. Just as Jesus wholeheartedly nurtured his disciples and followers, let every parishioner be encouraged to show kindness and care to others. And let that nurturing begin where it should, in the house of the Lord among fellow believers.