



Dear I-K Synod Rostered Leaders,

Welcome to the first issue of *Putting on Your Own Oxygen Mask First*, a quarterly newsletter dedicated to enhancing the personal well-being and mental health of rostered leaders in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA.

If you have any reactions or suggestions for future items in the newsletter, email I-K Synod Pastoral Counselor Pr. Ted Stoneberg at tastoneberg@anderson.edu.

Strategies for Thriving in Ministry

adapted from James E. Hightower, Jr. and W. Craig Gilliam, "A time for change?: Revisioning Your Call," Alban Institute, 2000.

John 17:6-26

Every minister I know is a survivor. He/She has to survive parish politics, difficult people, and the loss of idealistic views of what ministry is and what ministers do. Each of us has a choice about how we tell our own story. We can talk about the difficulties we have faced and the damage that being in ministry has caused us or our families. We also can tell the story of the internal resources we have acquired through our efforts to remain contributing clergy, given the challenges of professional ministry.

Have you noticed that some people can repeatedly face complex challenges and remain calm and emotionally centered, perhaps even flourishing? Have you wondered how that was possible? To thrive well in ministry is a skill that consists of discrete strategies, ones that can be learned.

1. Remember Who You Are

It is easy to lose oneself so that personhood and profession become fused. There are ministers whose entire identities are tied up in being "Pastor So-and-So." When they are asked to step out of the pastoral role, it is as if they don't know themselves. We all know people who are so enmeshed with family, job, addiction, or self that they no longer know who they are.

Have you ever uttered statements like "Every single member of my church is my boss?" This statement suggests that the minister may not have a well-defined self. Every member can be a boss only if the minister, has lost his/her sense of internal authority.

Remembering who you are begins with your personhood, not your profession. To reinforce your sense of personal self, take time now to write five personal qualities you like about yourself. Beside each quality, write one example of how you have recently used this personal quality. Possible examples of personal qualities are: sense of humor, integrity, faithfulness, loyalty.



How easy was it for you to recall five personal qualities? A beginning point of surviving change and thriving in ministry is to distinguish between your professional self and your personal self.

There are outside factors that strongly influence who a pastor is as a person, how a pastor acts as a person, and what priorities a pastor sets as a person. For example, pastors often let the denomination define not only their ministry, but also their personhood.

Which outside influences have most strongly affected your personhood? Examples are: family of origin, spouse, and denominational expectations.

To which of these influences do you want to continue paying attention? Which ones do you want to let go of? Differentiated people do not fuse together so that they think, act, and feel alike; they stay in their own boats along side each other.

2. Develop the Skill of Mature Dependency

Emotionally healthy people learn how to depend appropriately on others and do not operate as lone rangers. Appropriate dependence means being aware of your need for outside support and being willing to call on others for support without becoming dependent on them.

Appropriate dependence also means learning how to discern who is dependable. In a church, learning which individuals and groups are dependable and trustworthy is often confusing and difficult. There are people who are readily available to help but who will overfunction. They are not dependable and will seek to shape us in their own image of who we ought to be.

People with whom we can have a relationship of mature dependency are people who will see accept us as we are and give us objective feedback. Relationships of mature dependence can help us face enormous challenges without crashing and burning.

3. Turn Insight into Action

Insight brought about by the courageous searching of one's past and present life and one's family of origin and family of choice can be of great value to you. However, it can be of profound value only if you turn your insight into action.

If you are feeling stuck now and needing new insight, use your skill of mature dependency and reach out to others. Maybe you will reach out to a friend, perhaps to a professional, or possibly both.

4. Be an Artistic Inventor

Losing and reclaiming the artist within are normal occurrences. In times of great stress or transition, you and I often misplace the creative side of ourselves.

Nurturing personal creativity in one arena of life is a good way to keep channels open for discovering creative solutions in other arenas. Being an artistic inventor can also give you a way to channel the energy of your pain rather than exploding internally or externally.

Living well through conflict or transition requires imagination. Remembering to play as a way to achieve emotional repair and remembering to be an artistic inventor as a way to channel your pain can be critical to surviving well.

List the play or artistic activities that you are willing to investigate. Locate one resource for each activity you list and write it. Finally, designate the date by which you will make an initial exploration and when you get home write down the telephone number or email address for the one resource you listed. You are too important not to play and invent. What would you love to learn to do?

5. Keep Your Sense of Humor

Laughter makes a heart merry. Humor has the capacity both to reduce a problem to its actual size and to make you large enough to face the problem. Humor is another way to being an artistic inventor.

Some have suggested that faith and humor are linked in that both demonstrate a capacity to transcend oneself. One thing is sure—humor is fundamental to our well-being. Churches that are caught up in conflict are without exception overly serious, lacking in humor.

Now identify something that makes you laugh and share it with someone close to you.

6. Engage in Recreation

Recreation is time to refresh oneself physically, mentally, and spiritually. List the last three times you took enough time away from your work and everyday routine to refresh yourself physically.

When you do take time for recreation, what are the activities and attitudes you need to leave behind?

Do you have time scheduled to recreate? If not, write a plan with dates and places to recreate yourself.

7. Stay Anchored in Your Values

Knowing your values is knowing what really matters to you in life. Does your hierarchy give you any insight into yourself? Is there anything you would want to change? What would you have to change in your lifestyle to reflect a change in your value hierarchy? Are you prepared to make this change, or are you satisfied with your present lifestyle and habits? Knowing and living by your values will help you stay anchored during a period of questioning or transition.

8. Maintain Your Health

One of the greatest gifts we possess is our health. In times of stress, health needs to be maintained; perhaps you can even improve your health. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise, regular physical exams, and healthy thoughts make for good health. You can be in control of the habits that lead to good health.

Tell someone to whom you can be accountable one action you are willing to take this week to begin taking control of your health.

9. Remember: You Have Choices and Can Take Action

You choose whether you will tell your story as if you are a survivor or a victim. You can choose to move yourself out of the victim role, if that is the one you have been playing.

What three actions, in any areas of your life, do you need to take now to improve your chances not only to survive but also to thrive in life?



Are You Aware of a Valuable Resource for You and Your Family?

Did you know...

If you are enrolled in the ELCA Pension Board health insurance, there is an Employee Assistance Program available to you and your family members if they are included in your plan? Cigna Behavioral Health (1-888-259-6279) provides the mental health benefits for this policy. Your policy provides:

- no-cost confidential call-in service 24/7 to talk about stress, relationships, family issues, emotional health, career, substance abuse
- six free face-to-face counseling sessions per identified issue with in-network counselors
- medically necessary behavioral health care beyond Employee Assistance Program sessions
- online information concerning family and care giving, health, wellness, and daily living
- referral resources in your community
- one no-cost, 30-minute consultation with an attorney with the possibility of a discounted rate for additional legal services
- 60-minute consultation regarding identity theft with a fraud resolution specialist
- other non-clinical support services, such as advising regarding your personal finances

If you are not enrolled in this health plan, Dr. Ted Stoneberg (317-336-7897) is available for consultation and could provide financial support from the Bishop's Discretionary Fund.

An Important, but Simple Way to Improve Your Marriage

By Lisa Bertagnoli

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Next time your loved one asks you to look at the cardinal in the birdbath, do it. When he says, "Get a load of this news story!" and begins to read you an article, however dull it is, put down your own section of the paper and listen--that is, if you want your next argument to go a lot more smoothly.

These bits of wisdom come from John Gottman, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle and founder, with his wife, Julie Schwartz Gottman, of the Gottman Institute, a marriage clinic in Seattle. Gottman, who recently visited Chicago to promote his new book, "The Relationship Cure: A 5-Step Guide for Building Better Connections with Family, Friends and Lovers," explained his unorthodox way of addressing marital difficulties during a talk at Transitions Bookstore in Chicago.

Gottman told the crowd about work at the "love lab." Instead of sitting down troubled couples and telling them to spill all, Gottman lets their actions speak for them by sequestering them for 24 hours in the lab, a cozy apartment outfitted with furniture, appliances and hidden microphones and cameras.

During those 24 hours, Gottman and his colleagues record every move they make and every utterance they speak (truly private moments excepted). Gottman is keenly interested in those utterances. He's listening to how couples interact casually, for instance while eating breakfast and reading the paper, and how they resolve conflict too.

While viewing the tapes, Gottman particularly looks at how each person responds to "bids," or attempts to garner attention, make conversation or get emotional support from his or her partner. A bid can be as subtle as a touch on the arm, as offhand as a comment about the weather, or as anguished as a sobbing breakdown. These bids are, for the most part, subconscious and constant--with one couple, he recorded 70 bids in 10 minutes.

When presented with a bid, a partner has three choices: turning toward the partner with full attention; turning away and ignoring him or her; or worst, turning against the partner.

For example: Putting down the newspaper and listening to your partner read an article, then discussing it, constitutes a turn toward. Ignoring him or her makes it a turn-away. Snarling "Can't you see I'm trying to read?" marks a turn-against.

To date, Gottman has clocked 10 years of research and has viewed 600-plus hours of videotape, carefully sorting through these bids. As a result, he says he can predict with 90 percent accuracy which couples will divorce and which will stick together.

There are three basic types of couples and modes of interaction, he explains.

The first mode is attack-defend. One partner makes a verbal attack, the other defends himself or herself. Such verbal sparring wears out a relationship: These couples stay married an average of 5.2 years.

Then there's the silent-dead couples. "You've seen them in a restaurant; they sit there for an hour and say nothing," Gottman says. The silent treatment adds a few more years to a marriage. These couples raise their children then split up, an average of 16.6 years after their stint at the altar.

Then there are the couples who stay married, couples Gottman finds so awesome that he has no catchy moniker for them. “These are people who can laugh and be affectionate” even in the heat of an argument, Gottman explains. “They are amazing people.”

To date, this is Gottman’s strongest finding--that humor and affection keep couples together. Alas, he calls the finding useless. “You can’t admonish people to be affectionate,” he says.

No, forcing jocularity into a relationship won’t keep it from dissolving. But paying attention to those bids might. “It takes understanding that these tiny moments will affect the way you deal with problems,” he says.