

# On Being a Healthy Pastor

A resource paper for credentialed clergy in the Evangelical Covenant Church

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

The Evangelical Covenant Church, along with the Board of Ordered Ministry, desires that all credentialed persons thrive in their walk with Jesus Christ, their ministry, and their personal lives. We long to see ministers become, by the grace of God, people who are *“like trees planted by streams of water, which yield its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers”* (Psalm 1:3 NIV). We hope that in the words of John Weborg each minister is *“made healthy in ministry for ministry.”* (Weborg, 2011, p. 4)

The central matter of this document is to clearly articulate components of ministerial health so that both ministers and those who care for them have the language to assess health. To speak of ministerial health is to speak about a dynamic, multi-variant concept. In other words, for ministers, health falls along a continuum where one is moving toward healthy actions, postures, and spiritual practices or one is moving away from them. Moreover, ministerial health or lack thereof, must take into consideration ministry contexts that also fall along a continuum of healthy to unhealthy.

Yet we need to acknowledge that our idea of health is too often single-focused. In a physical sense, a person is considered healthy if they eat right, exercise, and avoid sickness and disease. In the church, health is often solely focused on one’s prayer life and walk with Christ. Neither of these concepts provides a complete definition of health because health should be viewed holistically, as it includes dimensions that go beyond the physical and the spiritual. It includes all areas of one’s life that influence one’s ability to live into who God has created, called, and commanded one to be.

Any discussion of health from a Christian perspective should be grounded in creation and the ministry of Jesus Christ with an awareness of, not a focus on, our sinfulness. Placing the focus on the creation story gives a positive understanding on what it means to be a human being and how we are *“fearfully and wonderfully made”* (Psalm 134:14 NIV). God created the world and entrusted it to humans creating them in his likeness, placing within them the breath of life, giving them freedom and

responsibility, and declaring them good. Being healthy is being a human and living into that goodness, into the responsibility given to steward God's creation, and into relationship with God, others and self. Church father Irenaeus declared "*Gloria Dei est vivens homo!*" which is often translated as, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Being "fully alive" gives God glory and gives a simple basis for a definition of what it means to be healthy.

Likewise, placing the focus on the ministry of Jesus leads us to trust God to reconcile us to himself, restore us to health and renew our ability to be fully alive in him. Jesus tells us, "*I have come that they may have life and have it to the full*" (John 10:10 NIV). Ephesians tells us that through Christ, God made us the "*focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.*" (Ephesians 1:3 The Message). Jesus invites us to abide in him and bear fruit in his name. Living in Christ, finding our identity in him, and trusting his love to make us holy and whole is the first step towards health. Here again words from Irenaeus are helpful as he reminds us that in the incarnation: God became like us in Christ so that we can become like him (Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 2008). The incarnation allows us, again, to ground our understanding in the idea that God loves human beings and desires humans to be whole and holy. The incarnation is the pathway that God uses to make us fully alive as the people we were created and, in Christ, redeemed to be. Allowing Christ to restore us from unhealthy or sinful patterns and practices into a healthy way of life, calls us into this abundant resurrection life.

Scripture often utilizes organic concepts of bearing fruit to illustrate the health of God's people and the pathway for creating that health. The prophet Jeremiah describes both a healthy person (one whose trust is in the Lord) and an unhealthy person (one who places their trust in mere mortals) in organic terms. The unhealthy person is a "*shrub in the desert*" (Jeremiah 17:6a NRSV) while the healthy person is a "*tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.*" (Jeremiah 17:8a NRSV) That tree will stay green even in a year of drought and it need not be anxious and will not cease to bear fruit. Jesus, too, uses the organic image of God's people bearing fruit as he describes himself as the true vine

and invites his followers to *“Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.”* (John 15:4 The Message).

A healthy, fruit bearing tree is simply doing what it was created to do when it bears fruit; it is flourishing and therefore gives glory to God. Likewise, a healthy person is one who “bears fruit” and flourishes by being, to the fullest extent possible, the person God created and called her or him to be. Creating practices that nurture the sort of healthy environment where we can become fully alive, and avoiding practices that corrupt and lead toward diminished well-being is the way to tend to the environment in which we live. By so doing, we can see health spring up within us allowing us to flourish just as a well-tended plant grows within the right environment. Being healthy is flourishing, which John Ortberg defines as *“becoming the person [God] had in mind in creating you. To flourish means to move toward the best version you can achieve of God’s ‘you’”* (Ortberg, 2010, pp. 14-15).

Pastors are tasked with the care of God’s people and are therefore called to move others towards health. To do this well one requires depth of character, competency and constancy. *Our Ethical Principles for Those Serving in Vocational Ministry in the ECC* reminds us that while ministry belongs to the whole church, *“we nonetheless recognize that we have been called and gifted through the Holy Spirit to devote ourselves to be servants of the Word, the Sacraments, the congregation, the church at large, and the world in which we live.”* (The Evangelical Covenant Church, 2010, p. 2). This devotion requires us to seek to live into our own health before and while we serve, pursuing a spiritual maturity of our own from which we can lead and bless others. Operating from unhealthy places and deficit in our own lives not only is a danger to our own health, but to the health of others. Continual growth in spiritual depth and maturity is a necessary trait for a servant of Christ and the church. John Weborg writes, *“The spiritual maturity of the practitioner in the practice of ministry...requires that one be a hearer of the Word before one is a preacher/teacher of the Word; that one fully appreciates one’s*

*baptismal identity as a baptizer of others, and that one embraces to the fullest extent possible that one is a communicant before and while one is a celebrant of the Eucharist...These three locations of ministry and three acts of ministry serve as the transcendental grounds for the competence, character and integrity of those in vocational ministry.” (Weborg, 2011, p. 4)*

With these concepts in mind, a definition of a healthy pastor is possible:<sup>1</sup>

**A healthy pastor is one who flourishes through receiving life from an ever-deepening relationship with Christ, experiencing vitality within her or himself, and growing to live and serve increasingly as a blessing to others. A flourishing life witnesses to and ministers from a place of continual growth toward Christ-like character, competency, and constancy.**

**Attending to the dynamic balance between the spiritual, emotional, and relational as well as the physical, financial, and vocational dimensions of life helps a pastor to become and to serve as the person he or she is uniquely created and called to be.**

The following sections will address these six identified dimensions of ministerial health. The intent is to raise awareness, define expectations, and trigger discussion and action regarding each dimension. We acknowledge that there are many nuances and details within each category that this paper is unable to address in its brevity. Provided at the end of each section are examples of questions to help you explore each area more deeply. Please feel free to add your own.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be acknowledged that certain ministry settings can be corrosive to a leader’s soul and that there are times when a change in ministry settings will foster ministerial health. The topic of healthy and/or toxic ministry settings is beyond the scope of this paper, but should be considered when discussing ministerial health in general.

***SPIRITUAL HEALTH:  
Fostering a Vibrant Life with God***

Flourishing is a gift of God and comes from an ever-deepening relationship with Christ. Living into spiritual health requires living into it as relationship, gift, and grace. One of the challenges for leaders in tending to their spiritual health is realizing that no one can lead himself or herself into a deeper spirituality. The only way to do that is by awakening to and resting in God's transforming presence, welcoming God's grace, and surrendering into the deep, abiding love of God.

Eugene Peterson writes that the vocation of ministry requires large external expenditures of time and energy. The problem he observes is that many ministerial leaders or staffs have little interior capital to meet the demands of that vocation (Peterson, 1992, p. 3). Healthy ministers recognize the need to invest in and focus on their life with God in order to serve with integrity and joy. They seek to ensure that they know God deeply rather than trying to speak out of a life that is spiritually stunted. They readily acknowledge this possibility and seek ways to participate with the Holy Spirit in opening their hearts to the loving grace of God.

Healthy ministers cultivate openness to the Spirit's work through a variety of practices such as regular morning prayers, bible meditation, and things like regular retreats supplemented with conversations with a spiritual director. Whatever the practices, it must be noted that a healthy minister, through "trial and error" and the support of colleagues, plans to find his or her way to a grace based "rule of life" – a way of living and praying that receptively orients his or her soul to the presence of God who, in love, holds that minister's life in grace. God's grace made known through a life giving "rule" builds the necessary interior capital for ministers, enabling them to serve out of abundance rather than deficiency.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. How goes your walk with God?
2. How is the health of your soul; and how do you measure it?
3. Where do you find joy in your life?
4. What planned and regular spiritual practices have you found most helpful in the nurture of your life with God?
5. What things most easily derail you as you pursue God?
6. What you need to change anything in order for you to be more attuned to God?
7. What resources do you need to make your life with God more meaningful?

***EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH:  
Growing Self-Awareness***

The ministry of Christ to the world is expressed through his people who are led by ministers that are called and credentialed to oversee the flock that has been entrusted to them. Each minister of the gospel, however, is uniquely challenged by his or her particular vocational context. Healthy ministers increasingly recognize and nurture their own personhood and perspectives. They know that one of the best gifts they can give to those around them is a well-differentiated and grounded sense of who they are in Christ.

More specifically, healthy ministers are growing in areas such as an understanding of personal self, the impact of families of origin on life and ministry, and personal needs and limitations. Attention is also paid to positive and destructive emotions, psychological strengths and weaknesses, and any patterns of living that either foster or inhibit health, relationships, and effectiveness in fulfilling the ministry call. Pastors must also seek to grow in awareness of their own cultural background and the biases, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings that shape who they are. Self-knowledge, in all of its dimensions, is critical for ministers to consider as they seek to live out their vocation humbly, and in ways that embrace and enhance unique ways of responding to individual calls.

In order to flourish and grow in Christ-like character, ministers must deepen their understanding of their identity in Christ. Shame, discouragement, and struggles with their own integrity diminish a person's capacity to be what he or she was called and created to be. Ministers must understand that they, too, are worthy of love and dignity as children of God and are called to appropriately tend and protect this inherent value. They recognize that it is not healthy for them or for others, nor is it honoring to God, to allow patterns of dysfunction and abuse to persist whether reflected in the way they treat others, or in how they allow others to treat them. They expect and work to maintain appropriate boundaries and mutually respectful relationships with all.



Healthy ministers seek to be persons of emotional health who also call others to that same standard of living. They balance the demands of ministry with times of replenishment. They uphold ethical standards and choose to be honest with themselves and others. Finally, healthy ministers entering into conflict understand that conflict is normal and can be addressed in thoughtful and caring ways. In this manner, relationships and churches are strengthened through wrestling with differing opinions instead being torn apart by them.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. What does self-awareness mean to you?
2. Who are some of your heroes of wholeness in Scripture? In your life?
3. What do those you trust say about your level of self-awareness?
4. What are some of the insecurities or life experiences you have had that might be making it more difficult to be at peace with all people?
5. Think of the most difficult person you have ever encountered. In what ways did you interact with or respond to them that invited them into a more enjoyable relationship than they seemed to be offering you? Were there any actions you took that actually did the opposite?
6. What have you discovered about yourself in the past year that you realize needs to be changed, enhanced, or addressed? Do you have a plan to do so?

**RELATIONAL HEALTH:  
*Relationships with Family and Friends***

The Great Commandment states, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* (Matthew 22:37 NIV). Yet, Jesus does not end his description of a healthy child of God there. He commands that his followers invest deeply in relationships with others by loving their neighbors as themselves. Fundamentally, these three areas, relationship with God, self, and others, form the basis for what it means to be a healthy minister.

Humans were created to be in relationship with each other; and without intimate relationships, people are unable to thrive. Andy Crouch says, *“The bedrock flourishing of human life is when our lives are embedded with other lives in ways that we are both set free and in some ways constrained by others”* (Crouch, 2016). These are intimate relationships that allow a person to be fully himself or herself instead of playing a role. It is no overstatement to say that, in most cases, where personal relationships are not healthy, neither is the minister – at least not to the degree that God intends. This is true for both single and married clergy.

Being in ministry adds a layer of complexity to the typical challenges of family life. A healthy servant leader understands that he or she will need to give priority to building relational wholeness in the family. To that end, healthy ministers protect their schedules so that they have time to practice the art of being in love with and adoring their family, friends, children, and spouses. Routines such a weekly night out (with spouse, child, or close friends), an uncompromising commitment to family vacations, and seasonal retreats with friends or family are life giving. Limitation of the number of evenings away from the family or, if single, away from creative, life-giving pursuits, regular times together to unpack life as a couple and household or with trusted friends, and even proactive sessions with a professional counselor are examples of things healthy ministers report as normative for their life.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. If you are married, what have you planned and done in the last three months that was designed specifically to bless your spouse and invest in your marriage?
2. If you are single, what helps you cultivate healthy family and close personal relationships?
3. If you have children, what have you planned and done in the last three months that was designed specifically to invest in each of your children?
4. How did you handle things the last time you encountered a “problem” with a family member or a close friend? What did you do well and what would you have done differently?
5. What small thing could you do today to enhance your relationships at home and among friends?

**PHYSICAL HEALTH**  
***Tending Jars of Clay***

Healthy ministers understand the importance of physical health and take steps to schedule regular exercise. This commitment to physical well-being bears the fruit of more energy, better focus, and greater enjoyment of ministry and life in general. Helpful practices have ranged from programs as challenging as high intensity training or boot camps to the discipline of daily 30-40 minute walks, importance being placed not so much on severity as on regularity.

Additionally, eating well along with the practice of Sabbath-keeping are important activities for ministers who steward their bodies as good gifts from God. Healthy ministers see the connection between the spiritual temple and the physical one, and are careful to invest in both. They know that eating and resting well are as important to their vocation as praying and studying Scripture, so they do the latter without neglecting the former.

Tending to one's physical health also includes routine appointments with a physician, a dentist, and other specialists as appropriate, as well as attention to weight management. The affordability of important medical care means that ministers need to have serious conversations with the lay leadership or administrators in their ministry setting about provision of health insurance. Making sure that health care coverage is part of a letter of call or job agreement is crucial. Additionally, acts of personal grooming such as haircuts and attention to nails and skin are part of regular care, not indulgences.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. Do you have an exercise plan? If so, what is it? If not, what are your primary hindrances?
2. How are you feeling physically and how do you measure that?
3. When was your last medical check-up?

4. When asked about your eating habits, what would your closest friends say about how healthy your eating is?
5. If you drink alcohol, what guidelines are in place that foster healthy consumption among family, friends, and ministry settings?

**FINANCIAL HEALTH:  
Stewardship and Generosity**

Money is a dangerous good. It is dangerous because it can become a preoccupation and good because it enables ministry leaders to provide for themselves and/or their families. It is dangerous because *“the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,”* (I Timothy 6:10 NRSV) and it is good because in our society it empowers the church to do the kingdom work that it is called to do. Money is dangerous because ministers can find themselves trapped by fear, scarcity and debt, but it is good because it can be used to enhance trust, freedom, and personal care.

A spirit of generosity is a necessary antidote for the dangerous side of money and a pathway for accomplishing the good. Former World Vision Canada president Dave Toycen writes,

*Generous acts have the unique ability to lift us to a higher level where we are more human, more the person we really want to be. In the very act of encouraging someone else, we are graced with awareness that life is better. It is an essential element in enriching our lives, building a more co-operative future, improving our emotional and physical health and simply making life more fun.* (Toycen, 2004, pp. 18-19)

One who pursues financial health seeks to use money for God’s purposes and ongoing sustenance rather than the aggrandizement of self or even of community. The divisions in families around financial issues, the economic injustice and inequality found within our society and the high cost of necessities (i.e. food, healthcare, education) are a hindrance to our health. Yet, so is a sense of entitlement and the consuming desire for fulfillment that is prevalent in our society. When aware of both the positive and painful financial journeys of others as well as the siren call of wealth and prosperity, pastors can live into a healthy appreciation and awareness of the role money plays in the ability to flourish as a people and a society.

Healthy pastors recognize their own limitations when it comes to managing and investing their own personal finances and advising the church leaders. Rather than avoiding financial questions or difficulties, a healthy pastor will ask for help.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. Do you have any concerns about money right now?
2. How free are you to discuss the subject of money with family or supervisors?
3. What are your personal financial goals?
4. If you have debt, are you comfortable with the level of debt you have?
5. Do you have a will and estate plan?
6. What is a healthy approach to money as a ministry leader? What role does it play in ministry?
7. How often do you preach on generosity and stewardship?

**VOCATIONAL HEALTH:  
*Life-Long Learning and Ministry Relationships***

Since the focus, for clergy, is on call in the context of what it means to live into who God uniquely created us to be, we must nurture our understanding of what it means to be called, and what it means to live into vocational ministry in a world that is rapidly changing. We must pursue both life-long learning and live into the relationships that God has placed before us in our individual ministry settings. Healthy pastors seek to nurture attitudes, beliefs, and understandings that increase their ability to minister in this multi-cultural and complex world.

Those of us who remain vitally engaged in ministry over the long haul are persons who cultivate a posture of learning. Each season of ministry requires discernment on the part of a minister as to what needs focus, what needs to be discarded, and what new perspectives need to be embraced. Healthy ministers recognize that gaining vocational clarity and competency, especially given the interior and exterior complexities inherent in ministry, requires the diligent pursuit of learning – learning that accesses historical, biblical, and theological material.

Healthy ministers then develop a positive posture toward growth. This posture is not oriented to fads but to the ongoing and important work of biblical reflection, integration, and application. As well, growing ministers seek to ground their vocation theologically in the present and active ministry, faithfulness, and power of Christ. They consciously work to avoid giving in to the temptation of making ministry a self-focused or self-gratifying endeavor. Ministers who cultivate a commitment to life-long learning do so through a variety of avenues -- attending seminars to pursuing advanced degrees, participating in study groups, or entering into the discipline of intentional reading plans for spiritual literature. What is common among such persons is their belief that God has made and gifted them to be creative in exploring the vast biblical and theological landscape of vocational ministry and the



accompanying confidence that the purpose of this exploration is for glorifying God, equipping people for Christian service in the world, and perpetuating a sustainable ministry of the gospel.

Leadership can be a lonely calling. Healthy ministers understand that doing ministry disconnected from colleagues is both painful and potentially disastrous. The pressure points of compassion fatigue, physical fatigue, unrealistic personal and congregational expectations, spiritual dryness, family pressures, and conflicted relationships are virtually impossible to navigate by oneself (Benner, 1998). Healthy ministers intentionally invest in collegial relationships that are appropriately vulnerable, authentic, and mutually supportive. These relationships can reach across denominational lines or can be cultivated within Covenant community. Within the Covenant, ministers are invited together in a whole host of ways to join with and encourage each other. Yet, many are still reticent to open their lives and hearts to the care of colleagues and that reminds all of us that we still have a long way to go. Healthy ministers overcome this reluctance, investing in and committing to one or more meaningful collegial relationships.

A central and unavoidable reality of the life of a minister is people. Being a minister means working with, listening to, encouraging, teaching, and challenging people. This is good and joyful work but work that has its bumps and traps. Relational pitfalls can include everything from misunderstandings to violations of ethical or sexual boundaries. Healthy ministers commit themselves to honoring boundaries between themselves and others. They understand how issues such as power and sexuality in relationships can become destructive to themselves and to others, and are vigilant in maintaining role differentiation and avoiding role confusion. They respect and relate to people in ways that are appropriate, clear, and redemptive.

Since they realize that ministry is about relationships, healthy ministers are never satisfied when relationships are strained. They live in the flow of the scriptural challenge of, “...so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18 NRSV). They are cognizant of the fact that the only

prerequisite for a person to be loved and treated with dignity is that they are a human being created by God, so ministers who are healthy are always looking for ways to respond to fractured relationships with redemptive hope that invites shalom. They understand and live into the notions of never dealing with anyone “directly” but always through Jesus and always acting to the advantage of the other party ... even when that “other party” may not be easy to love.

**Questions for individual or group reflection:**

1. What has your commitment to life-long learning looked like?
2. What might be the next area where you need to do some expanded learning?
3. What are some of the hindrances to life-long learning?
4. What role do collegial relationships play in your ministerial life? What role would you like your colleagues to play in your life?
5. How have you made yourself available to other colleagues in ministry?
6. Do you have a mentor? Describe that relationship. If not, what fears or insecurities are you aware of that are keeping you from investing in a mentoring/collegial relationship? Who might you look to as a mentor at this time in your life and ministry?
7. How might you be a redemptive blessing to those colleagues who may need you in this season of their lives?
8. How do you honor healthy boundaries in ministry? Do you understand the dynamics of the power of the pastoral office?
9. Why is it so important for a minister to be a “safe person”? Would people say that you feel safe to them? Why would they answer the way they would? What are ways you can and do make sure you are a “safe person” for those you serve?

10. Do you need to re-evaluate any relationships or the way you manage them in your work setting?

If so, explain.

11. How do you navigate mixed gender and/or potentially sexually confusing or charged relationships in your ministry setting?

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