

Relational Sanctuaries for Clergy

During my first few months on the Foundation staff, I have been listening to pastors. The stories have been intense! In fact, several pastors have shared stories of trauma and the detrimental effects of stress and conflict. The aftermath of these incidents is often depression, isolation, and loneliness. Recently, I shared with a clergy colleague who expressed these feelings, “You are not alone.” He was relieved. If you, too, are experiencing traumatic stress and the related emotional responses, you can take heart in knowing that you are not alone.

I connected over the summer with numerous church-related leaders in various capacities and organizations. Clergy emotional health was a reoccurring theme in every conversation. During one of these conversations, a colleague mentioned a podcast episode, [Pastor Dan White Jr. and the Great Pastor Resignation](#). He raises many of the hot button issues which pastors face. His account is the most severe that I have heard. It is frightening, enlightening, and engaging. I listened, and my heart ached. Yours will too...

The interview unpacked theological, political, and personal conflicts in Pastor Dan’s first twenty years of ministry. Initially, he denied that ministry impacted his personal health. Eventually, he was diagnosed with Cumulative Traumatic Stress Disorder (CTSD). He mapped out with his therapist nearly two hundred small traumatic events that happened over his twenty years of ministry. These incidents were described by his therapist as a cumulation of multiple small deaths. The pandemic only intensified his health situation to the point of incapacitation. His reality is replicated over and over again in other clergy.

Have you found a sanctuary?

Many pastors are starved for authentic relationships and a place where they can be vulnerable. The missing link for many pastors is what Ron Heifetz describes as a *sanctuary*. “To survive, you need a *sanctuary* where you can reflect on the previous day’s journey, renew your emotional resources, and recalibrate your moral compass” (Heifetz Blog). This Holy space keeps you from falling into the abyss, especially during the most challenging times. Tod Bolsinger in his new book, *Tempered Resilience*, describes how pastors need to create three layers of relationships. First, the *front stage* includes our allies and teammates who share a common goal. Second, the *backstage* is comprised of the supervisors, mentors, and coaches. These people help us lead better. However, most pastors stop here. They do not create the third layer, the *offstage*. This layer consists of an intimate group of confidants. These confidants build us up and protect us. Bolsinger challenges us to widen our circle of confidants to include spiritual directors, counselors, and support groups.

Who are your confidants? Are you willing to widen your circle?

We need to widen our circle of learning in the *offstage* and move beyond best practices. Many of these practices are not working and quite frankly have not worked for some time. The world has changed. Leaders are now facing multiple adaptive challenges. We are frequently leading in

this uncharted territory. It is a difficult task to lead in this space on your own. Church leaders need support as they tackle these new challenges. Based on my conversations with leaders across the country, I have discovered a common way to widen our circle is to gather pastors in small cohorts.

Is a leadership cohort for you?

The formation of a cohort is not a new idea. However, these innovative groups now focus less on content and more on creative space for discernment. They are specifically designed to create a Holy space to birth conversation of discovery and new ideas. Tilled and watered, ideas can grow and flourish. Group facilitation is another distinctive of these cohorts. As a facilitator, I help guide the discussions as leaders help other leaders.

A leadership cohort is likely to help you learn, reflect, and navigate those small traumatic events of everyday ministry before they overwhelm you. Like Pastor Dan, you will find many of your colleagues searching for wellness. Following a season of burn out, Pastor Dan eventually opened a retreat center for weary pastors in Puerto Rico. Pastor Dan successfully returned to ministry. It is a story of Good News. God is good!

Let's find a time to chat about your ministry and discover places of sanctuary and creative spaces for discernment. Watch for future details about the formation of clergy leadership cohorts which will help build your *offstage*. I'm excited to come alongside your ministry and to help you fully and confidently live into God's call.

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