

LeAnn Gunter Johns

A young minister being intentional about developing patterns of self-care



Being intentional in the care of their ministers is a new concept for most churches. Care plans, sabbaticals, and ministry support groups are not part of the vocabulary of many parishioners. That said, as one young minister in Georgia experienced, congregations do care for their leaders, even if they don't have a specific plan in place as to how best to go about it. LeAnn Gunter Johns served as associate pastor of Peachtree Baptist Church in Atlanta from August 2002 until June 2008. Although she had a positive experience by being part of the ministerial residency program sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a peer learning group, she has experienced the greatest care by investing in her congregation and building relationships with them. Her story takes us on her path to congregational ministry (not exactly what she thought she'd be doing as a young GA at missions camp), and the wonderful gift of relationship that she experienced at Peachtree.

LeAnn Gunter Johns began her ministerial journey where lots of little girls do, at Girls in Action Camp. After being involved with her family in church from a young age, she first felt God start to lead her toward full-time vocational ministry at GA camp. LeAnn continued to be involved in GA camp, eventually serving as a leader throughout high school and college in both Florida and Georgia. Early in her journey, she believed her calling to be as a missionary. In college, she was encouraged by friends and mentors of the importance of seminary in her ministry training.

The seminary experience was life-changing in terms of better understanding her calling. In seminary, many areas of ministry were opened for LeAnn. She realized the abundance of possibilities for ministry and learned more about her own gifts and passions in ministry. Her love for preaching and pastoral care

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began leading her on a path toward congregational ministry. She realized the wonderful opportunity in church ministry to walk alongside people throughout their lives and to engage with them in what God is doing in their lives and in their world. She found that, as God used her within the church setting, she could help others discover their callings and ministries outside the church.



LeAnn began serving Peachtree Baptist Church during seminary. The first two years in that role were as part of a ministerial residency program. After completing her residency, she continued on staff where her responsibilities included pastoral care, administration, occasional preaching, Bible study leadership, and much more. Through her years at Peachtree, she learned much about ministry and developed a deep love for the congregation, as well as her opportunities of service there. She acknowledges that her favorite parts of her ministry are preaching and teaching. Helping people find their passions and callings is exciting, and walking alongside them as they explore what God is doing in their lives is a joy. Another of her favorite parts of ministry is developing relationships with the congregation. These relationships have given her great joy as she has celebrated several important personal moments with the congregation including her ordination and her wedding.

Although her generation of ministers is much more aware of the need for ministers to have both effective self-care and congregational care, LeAnn admits that it is an area of struggle for her. Throughout seminary and into ministry, she realized the importance of good self-care and her own tendency to be a workaholic. Balancing her work habits (including her tendencies to overwork) with her desire to be a healthy, well-adjusted minister has been a bit of a challenge. Some things that have helped her self-care include seeking the help of a professional counselor, exploring new hobbies, and being really intentional about having friendships outside of church.

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While at Peachtree, she was part of a peer learning group for young ministers in the Atlanta area. Being a part of that group provided a great outlet for learning, fellowship, and support. One of the greatest things about such a group for her is the variety of experiences and perspectives the group members bring



which can be helpful in providing objective feedback for ministry.

Although Peachtree does not have a specific care plan in place for its ministers, the congregation is supportive and caring toward their staff. As a resident minister, LeAnn had a congregational care group that provided support and feedback to her throughout her residency. Although the group officially ceased to function when her residency ended, many of the relationships formed during that time have remained important parts of her full-time ministry. Having members of the congregation to help her be accountable in her workload, for instance checking to make sure that she takes her days off, has been helpful. Peachtree was also proactive by offering their senior pastor the opportunity for sabbatical after his seventh year at the church. LeAnn remembers, that even during that experience, the church was careful to make sure she took a vacation after the pastor returned.

From her own experiences and observations, LeAnn believes one of the greatest keys to ministerial care is good communication between the church and the staff. Many churches do not realize the need to be proactive in caring for their staff. The most helpful approach for both ministers and churches is open communication.

During one particular time at Peachtree when other staff ministers were away for several weeks, LeAnn carried a particularly heavy load of ministerial responsibilities made even more challenging by a death in the church. It was a time during which she felt overwhelmed and exhausted. Yet LeAnn

acknowledges that at her most stressful, burned-out moment in ministry, the church was probably totally unaware – partially because she did not communicate her needs. Also, she has found that the failure to have a good backup plan to share the workload created by the absence of one of the ministers results in a stressful work situation for the remaining staff members. The conversation must be a two-way communication, however, which is born out of mutual love and respect between minister and church. LeAnn’s favorite part of ministry, loving her church, may be just the thing that helps her remain a healthy long-term church leader.

Sabbaticals are crucial for the longevity of pastors and for their emotional and spiritual renewal.

Currently, LeAnn is serving as a chaplain resident in the Veteran Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System in Palo Alto, California.

LeAnn’s story provides keen insight into the need for a good plan of care for ministers. It raises good questions about the support for the minister(s) that exists within your congregation. Her positive experience in the minister’s residency program offers practical understanding into this ongoing ministry. As a young minister, LeAnn has already learned the importance of continuing education and peer support.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does the church provide its minister(s) time and financial support for continuing education and renewal?
2. Does your congregation provide a ministry support group(s) for your minister(s)?

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3. What would a concrete and specific plan of care look like for the minister(s) of your congregation?
4. What are the specific plans for the support and well-being of your minister(s)? What is your minister's plan for his/her well-being? Is your minister part of a peer learning group committed to exploring ministerial excellence?
5. How do your ministers use their days off? Does your church respect staff members' days off, regardless of meetings scheduled on that day?
6. If being an excellent and healthy minister is the goal, how would you rate your church's support of your minister(s) toward this goal? Rate your church on a scale of one to 10, with one being low.
7. This book is written with a conviction that both women and men are called to ministry. How could your congregation grow in this understanding? How are both male and female young persons in your congregation encouraged to consider God's call on their lives for both ministry and mission?