

Introduction

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In the concluding chapter of *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen writes: “A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a mutual deepening of hope, and sharing weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.”¹



I like that thought. Along the way, I have looked for openings and occasions for new visions. The hope of ministry is always that “the coming strength” might be realized and experienced in the present.

The purpose of *Well-Being and Excellence in Ministry* is to provide practical assistance for ministers and caring congregations as together they seek these qualities in ministry. It is written for ministers and pastor search committees as they give thought to the beginning days of their lives together. It is for ministers and personnel committees as they share the ebb and flow of congregational life day after day. It is for ministers and deacon bodies who serve one another and are served by one another. It is for those who share the journey of discovering a flourishing Christian way of life.

Several years ago, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship sensed a need to address ways for ministers to find renewal and enrichment. Therefore, we launched the Initiative for Ministerial Excellence with generous funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The goal of the initiative is to influence the culture of our shared life by providing an environment that leads to healthier pastors. This



resource is developed to provide practical assistance for taking concrete strides toward well-being and ministerial excellence.

In the wake of the launch of this initiative, peer learning groups have emerged across the Fellowship. Ministers have gathered monthly to support and nurture the ministerial virtues of vision, imagination, discernment, and relationship. We have found that excellence in ministry is often a product of collegial relationships. Pastors comment with increasing frequency about a growing sense of isolation in ministry. For that matter, congregations are prone to feel the same way—estranged, up against it without journey partners. We can no longer endorse doing ministry alone. Ministers and congregations are nurtured through shared relationships. Mentors and peers must adopt a role of primary significance. In order to achieve this goal of well-being and excellence, a good question to ask any minister is, “Who are your models for ministry?” A good question to place in front of your congregation might be, “Who are the people that inspire your faithfulness for this day, for this place, for this time?”

Another provision of the initiative has been the Ministerial Residency Program, an opportunity for graduating seminarians to hone their ministry skills and encourage the rhythms and practices for long-term health and excellence in ministry. By working with teaching congregations that clearly demonstrate congregational health and with supervising pastors who can provide positive ministry experience, young ministers are made ready to accept the next call. Ministry is best lived when it is blessed and embodied with real live persons and real live relationships. We have tended toward disembodied ministry. But excellence is given the opportunity to emerge through rubbing shoulders with visible human flesh and bone.

Life together in ministry must always await the coming grace. Each day in ministry closes with more still to be done. This challenge creates enormous highs and debilitating lows. “It is a lesson, how one may pass quickly from the immortal feeling of triumph to the mortal mood of grumpiness.”² Ministers live between these extremes, but ministry does not need to be confined to or stymied

by how this minister or that minister happens to feel on any given day. Well-being in ministry seeks openings and occasions for a new vision. It is best lived when ministers and congregations seek “the coming strength” together. May this work prompt good conversations. Let this resource encourage you to form and shape ministry together by undertaking intentional actions that set well-being and excellence in motion.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. From the first day until the last there are shared opportunities for ministers and congregations to create life together. How can you and your congregation make the most of this opportunity to discover a flourishing Christian way of life?
2. Jesus took time for friendship, worship, prayer, silence, and even play. Which one of these is most likely to suffer when ministers or members are stressed?
3. Name three churches and/or three ministers who might serve as mentors or friends because they represent well-being and excellence in ministry?
4. What good conversations could ministers and congregational leaders in your area share in the coming year?

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 96.
2. Walter Wangarin Jr., *The Book of the Dun Cow* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 42.