

Hardy Clemons

A seasoned minister with a track record of positive self-care and team staff ministry



The concept of caring for ministers is a new one for many congregations. Many churches have either grown to expect their minister to be at church seven days a

week and on call around the clock or wrongfully think that the minister works only a couple of days a week (Sunday and Wednesday). This leads to quick burnout and short careers for many individuals in ministry. In an effort to shift some of the current trends, churches, seminaries, and even denominations are beginning to consider seriously the importance of self-care, team ministry, and even sabbatical in the care and career longevity of ministers. Although these may be brand-new concepts for many, they are tried-and-true tools of ministry for pastoral trailblazer, Hardy Clemons. He was leading churches to think outside the box in many areas, including minister care, before many of today's younger pastors were even born. His story expands on the importance of team ministry and minister care along with practical steps for churches as well as his own personal experience after many years in pastoral leadership.



No matter the size of the congregation, it takes more than one person to pastor it.

Although Hardy Clemons grew up in church, no one could have been more surprised than he when he felt the call to full-time ministry as a 20-year-old student at Texas Tech. That calling began a journey in which God has led him to pastor

churches in South Carolina and Texas for the past four decades. Although he's technically retired, he served three years as interim executive pastor at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio where he acted as a general resource person

and a “designated hitter” of sorts, helping out where needed in ministry in the church. Retired again, now Hardy spends some time serving as interim preacher, counselor, and mentor to those who seek him out.

During his ministry Hardy found great joy in being a pastor. He enjoyed seeing people become and grow as disciples and encouraging them through preaching and counseling. Through his years as pastor, he learned much about the importance of minister care. Early in his ministry, he experienced a personal crisis in ministry that led him to take a month off to recharge. Through his own personal experience and with the help of some pastoral care greats like Wayne Oates, longtime professor of pastoral care, he established some important standards of care for both himself and the churches he served. This self-awareness and open communication with churches helped him years later when he experienced a physical crisis. He was able to communicate openly his needs to church members, who were then able to understand and accommodate his needs.

A hallmark of Hardy’s pastoral leadership was his role as team leader. As a firm believer that “no matter the size of the congregation, it takes more than one person to pastor it,” Hardy developed a sense of team ministry in each church he served. He recognized early on that the more a staff and church operated as a team, the more it would accomplish. As pastor, he was intentional as team leader. As opposed to the totem-pole structure of leadership, Hardy used the visual image of a circle to symbolize the workings of the staff. Each person’s name went in the circle with the pastor’s name at the top of the circle slightly elevated to demonstrate that, as an organization, there was a person to whom the rest of the circle was ultimately accountable. Otherwise, the circle demonstrated the connectedness of the whole staff and the importance of each part. The ministerial staff developed detailed written covenants with one another and God. With the addition of each new staff member, the covenant would be revised. He also made sure staff members received the same level of care from the congregation as did the pastor.

Well-Being and Excellence in Ministry

For Hardy, a key element of minister care and longevity is the ministry sabbatical. He took his first sabbatical in 1972 while pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas. Beforehand, he wrote a paper on the spiritual validity of sabbatical and took it to the leaders of the already progressive church. They agreed, and Hardy took the first of many sabbaticals. As sabbaticals become more common, Hardy uses his years of experience in this area to make suggestions for others considering a sabbatical.

One of the greatest keys to ministerial care is good communication between the church and the staff.

First, timing is everything. He suggests taking a sabbatical at a time of year that is not too busy in the life of the church. He found winter to be the best time and fall to be the worst. Preparation is the second key to a successful sabbatical. Both the church and staff need to be fully prepared and reassured that everything, including emergency situations, will be taken care of and covered during the absence of the pastor or other staff person. Good preparation, with the help from resources like the Lilly Endowment, Inc. even allows the possibility of sabbatical for pastors of small churches where they may be the only staff person. With well-thought-out planning and church support, Hardy stands by the sabbatical as crucial to ministerial and congregational health.

Hardy's experience as pastor, team leader, and counselor has convinced him of the great benefits of minister care for the individual minister and church. He shares a particular image exemplifying the importance of both self-care and the team concept. "Geese can fly 57 percent farther since the lead goose periodically goes to the back of the flock where the lift is better and the flying is less stressful." Pastors and staff ministers are more productive and have greater longevity in ministry when they function as a team and remain healthy (physically, emotionally, and spiritually). He says it's also helpful periodically to remind churches that, although a staff member may have five to 20 jobs in their lifetime, they will hopefully have only one spouse and family. It is important for

ministers and churches to have effective communication in order to maintain the right priorities. With the hindsight of over 40 years in ministry, Hardy Clemons can look back and see just how important it was over the years to think outside the box in ministry. He encourages churches and ministers to do the same when it comes to staying healthy!

Hardy's story reflects the importance of the minister's self-care. It offers keen understanding into a team approach to ministry. Hardy has long championed the value of sabbaticals for career effectiveness and longevity. Building strong staff relationships is one of the keys to Hardy's success and faithfulness as a pastor. He has been influential in raising the bar on the standards of care for both himself and the churches he served. The development of a staff covenant played an important role in building a healthy staff and team.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the graphic configuration of your staff team? What positive outcomes would be derived from a circle description of staff relationships?
2. What are the elements of a good staff covenant? What covenants has your congregation made with your minister(s)?
3. How does your ministry team bring clarity to the expectations upon them as they bring leadership to your congregation? Does the staff have an annual retreat for planning? How does the personnel committee walk with the minister(s) of your congregation through a process of performance planning and review? What are the positive outcomes of this process? How can it be improved?
4. Who are the models of ministry and life that guide the vision of your ministerial team? What does this reveal to you about the direction of your ministry together?

5. Do you think outside the box? What would your church look like if it explored its visions for what the church really wants to be and do together as the people of God? What would the church like to see happen by the end of this year?