

Dear Newly Ordained Minister,

These are challenging and exciting times to serve the PCUSA, and you would like to serve it for a long time. You can't do it alone. You need a network of support to help you get started and to keep you going. That network of support is out there, but don't expect it to be given to you.

Many new ministers do not understand this and feel abandoned after they leave seminary and begin their work in the field. They assume that the instruction, support and structure of seminary will continue in a new kind of way. Some efforts are made by presbyteries and, here and there, some are helpful. However, the PCUSA, like other mainline denominations, is having something of an identity crisis compounded by fiscal constraints, so there is a "hit and miss" aspect to what is officially offered.

For your own good, accept the reality of that right now. Remember that you are ordained and that means taking on personal responsibility for your own support. Just as medical ethicists encourage patients to be proactive about their own health care, be your own advocate for "Ministry Care" and seek out what you need.

So, what is it that you need? Based on what has sustained me over three decades of ministry and based on sabbatical research done on what sustains new ministers, I suggest the following:

- Keep the Sabbath. Worship, rest, play.
- Find coaches. They tell you how "to do." What do you need to learn? Find someone who is really good at it. Then be a coach because by teaching, you learn.
- Find mentors. They teach you how "to be." Then be a mentor because, by leading, you find a new way to follow.
- Seek out best practices. Most times it is easier to improve on something than invent something. Then share best practices because by giving away you gain colleagues and build the church you will need tomorrow.
- Find or form a peer support group. If, after a year, the group drains you more than feeds you, find or form another one.
- Stay ahead of the stagnant curve. The world, culture, the congregation, the church, and your life are going to keep developing. Ministries adapt or die. So read, attend continuing education events, self-examine, and seek critique and counsel. By doing so, you can help keep the expiration dates on your ministries in the future.
- Be humble. That means pray, because humility is a gifted virtue and not an achievement. Keep praying the core of the prayer Jesus taught us: "Not my will, but thine." Keep praying that prayer because a humble pastor has staying power. A humble pastor knows she does not have all the answers. A humble pastor knows that on his own he will do more damage than good in the churches he serves. A humble pastor continually seeks out support, guidance and critique. A humble pastor better deals with

and learns from failure. A humble pastor is more willing to share the credit with, and receive critique from, others.

When you have a good network of support in place, treat the network like a garden and tend it. Nourish what feeds you, weed out what doesn't, and plant something new when it is time. Tend the healthy garden and you will not only be nourished over a long ministry, you will share what you have with others and help them too.

I hope in these NEXT Conference blogs, you'll find some helpful gardening hints.

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