

Council Toolbox Reflection: Congregational Burnout

How to use the Council Toolbox Reflection: Share this document with the Council members prior to the Council meeting and add 15 minutes to the beginning of the agenda for shared reflection. Prior to the meeting, invite one member of the Council to lead the discussion. **Here's a simple outline for how the shared reflection might go.** First, the reflection leader reads the scripture passage aloud. Second, the reflection leader highlights one idea from the reflection that the reflection leader found meaningful or challenging. Third, the reflection leader uses one or more of the reflection questions below to encourage discussion. When the discussion draws to a close, the reflection leader closes the time with the prayer using the prayer below or another prayer they create.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 121 (ELW)

- ¹I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?
²My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.
³The LORD will not let your foot be moved nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.
⁴Behold, the keeper of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep;
⁵the LORD watches over you; the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
⁶the sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
⁷The LORD will preserve you from all evil and will keep your life.
⁸The LORD will watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth forevermore.

Congregational Burnout

The following excerpt is from “What if we are all burned out?” by David L. Odom, Executive director, Leadership Education at Duke Divinity. (<https://faithandleadership.com/what-if-we-are-all-burned-out>)

“Could it be helpful for leaders of congregations to consider the congregation as being burned out? People are living with significant new stress. The government makes so many decisions in the name of health and safety that some experience ongoing fear while others respond with anger. The specific stresses are different in every community, and those already suffering from the long-term impact of racism, sexism and other oppressions are further harmed by the pandemic.

How do pastors and congregations respond to circumstances that affect everyone? Understanding the underlying conditions is key. . . . For our current moment, a [Harvard Business Review article](#) by Yu Tse Heng and Kira Schabram provides a concise summary of research on burnout.

It is a complex condition that can manifest any of three distinct symptoms: “exhaustion (a depletion of mental or physical resources), cynical detachment (a depletion of social connectedness) and a reduced sense of efficacy (a depletion of value for oneself).”

These researchers, a doctoral candidate and a professor of organizational behavior, urge business leaders to help prevent burnout and, when it happens, to identify which of these resources are depleted and take action to replenish them.

While developing a full response requires much more than reading a 5-page article, the simplicity of the distinct symptoms helps me as a leader take a few steps.

The first is to listen to myself. Which symptoms of burnout are featured in the stories I tell?

Ask for feedback from a spouse, friend, colleague, therapist or other confidante. What do they hear in your stories? Are the themes clustered around exhaustion, isolation, helplessness or something else?

Having someone listen and reflect with me then creates space to listen to others. I recommend starting such listening with congregational leaders and giving them feedback on what you are hearing. Help them to listen and give feedback to others. Some will be more gifted and practiced with such skills.

A key is to share this work and encourage listening to each other, including those outside the church walls.

This is not therapy but rather a skill that congregations need to practice with each other and the community in these stressful days.

As we listen to each other, themes will likely emerge that provide clues about how to support each other through burnout. The writers in Harvard Business Review suggest simple courses of action for each symptom. For these authors, underlying such actions are compassion and agency.

Being a good pastor in this case does not require developing a program but rather activating compassion and encouraging lay leaders to nurture others and help them replenish their resources.

If we are all suffering from some degree of burnout then none of us can bear the full weight of care. Maybe we don't need to. . . . In a moment when daily life is so difficult, I wonder if church is instead a place where we listen carefully to God and each other. Where we feel loved and replenished and go out into our everyday work sharing that compassion with everyone we meet.

This work of supporting each other through burnout is not just the work within congregations but might be a critical calling for Christians to their communities."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where are you seeing exhaustion, cynical detachment, or a reduced sense of efficacy in the life of the congregation?
2. How might we create a space where people can listen carefully to God?
3. How might we create a space where people can nurture and support one another at this point in the pandemic?

Prayer:

By your power, great God, our Lord Jesus healed the sick and gave new hope to the hopeless. Though we cannot command or possess your power, we pray for those in need of healing. Mend their wounds, soothe fevered brows, and make broken people whole again. Help us to welcome every healing as a sign that, though death is against us, you are for us, and have promised renewed and risen life in Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

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