

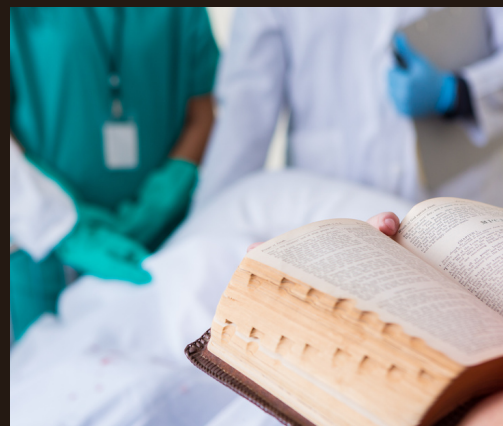


#PandemicPastoring

What it was like | How it changed us | Where we go from here
Surveys and Interviews with Clergy and Lay Leaders



SEPTEMBER 2022



A REPORT BY EILEEN CAMPBELL-REED

A Pastoral Letter

Beloved Community Leaders,

When I conduct research, I do so as a practical theologian and ordained minister, bearing witness to the good news of God's love and liberation. Often research reports begin with an executive summary, but I have chosen instead to write a pastoral letter to you. I offer it as a form of resistance and solidarity.

Like all of you I lived through Covid-19 and its ripple effects. I worried about keeping my parents, in-laws, and elders safe. In 2020 I was a member of my church's leadership team as we walked through hundreds of decisions. I traveled with my family and my faith community through this strange and uncharted land. I protested peacefully in support of Black lives in front of my Nashville church, and I worked to educate my students and the Three Minute Ministry Mentor community about becoming antiracist even as I encountered my own complicity and confronted white systems of dominance in my schools and classrooms and while I graded my students' work. I had conversations with my daughter about the strangeness of these times with all these unusual demands. And I parented and supported her through setbacks as she spent over a year in virtual school and like teenagers, children and adults everywhere suffered social isolation and profound stress.

In the summer of 2020, I got shingles and my body, hair and skin seem to have aged in dog years since 2020. Like so many, I lost countless connections and familiarity of in-person life and work, riches I did not fully understand or appreciate until they went missing. These elusive and ambiguous losses remain sources of grief. I am motivated by a pursuit of new rituals, taking every opportunity to lament loss, bear witness to the harms of systemic injustice, embrace recovery and healing, and step onto pathways that remake our lives.

One of the gifts of my vocation is that I get to talk with people. I'm especially happy that my work leads me to listen to ministers and theological educators,

to gather their stories and hear them reflect on complex and textured experiences of learning and change, as well as loss and grief. How could I not turn my researcher's eye to the work of understanding how pastors, ministers, chaplains, non-profit executives, and (with an invitation from Austin Seminary), lay leaders? How significant it has been to sit with ministry leaders and hear their stories over the last two years.

Being in and learning about the practice of ministry is an embodied, relational, emotional, spiritual, and integrative way of being in the world. Learning a practice as complex and nuanced as ministry takes time and grows with experience. And what a time it has been to be learning. Some ministers needed to walk away in the season. Others were remarkably resilient as they stayed. For some it was their resilience that gave them the courage and determination to step away from church for a season or longer.

In this task of listening to leaders across a broad spectrum of ministry, I learned important differences about how paid ministers and volunteer leaders attend to their spiritual well-being. I heard some things that clergywomen want their churches to know: the constant drip of sexism is exhausting and once again women bore the brunt of change and loss. They paid that price with their careers and with their relationships. And I learned things that lay leaders want to be sure their pastors know: we have your back, and we support you 200%, and we wish we had said so more often. And I learned about what pastors want their co-laborers in the church to know: just how much we tried to protect you and we see that the church will never be the same again and some of the change is very good and some of the losses continue to linger and need our loving attention.

Nearly every leader I spoke with since March of 2020, understands that our expectations for church, and ministry broadly understood, need to be reimagined, and our expectations reset. While churches and other religious communities remain among the most stable and lasting human endeavors, we are living in an unprecedented new era of ministry. We can continue to be the church, to love God and our neighbors, to work toward liberation and justice, and to learn from our experiences. At their heart, the most engaged and empowering churches and ministers are a places and people who embrace an ongoing process of learning.

During the last two-plus years, change in the church has been accelerated. All the usual challenges of life together in a faith community were amplified and made more complex by Covid-19 measures and the multiple pandemics that were revealed in this season. Grief and loss are widespread and emotional toll cuts deep. The direct loss of more than a million lives is only the tip of the iceberg. We need healing and new future stories.

What shall we do to live into this new era of ministry brought on through months of pandemic pastoring? How will we heal, recover, or find our way? This report aims to accompany you as you acknowledge and honor your losses and learn from these experiences at the last two years how to live in a new era of ministry.

Join me.



Eileen Campbell-Reed

Rev. Dr. Eileen Campbell-Reed surveyed and interviewed clergy and lay leaders for the #PandemicPastoring Report in 2020-22. Eileen is currently the Visiting Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Since 2009 she has been codirector of the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project, a national, ecumenical, and longitudinal study of Christian ministry in the United States. Eileen is experienced as a consultant and researcher with a variety of seminaries, churches, judicatories, and denominational bodies. Her 2021 book *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life*, presents stories and research findings from following 50 pastors and leaders in the LPI Project since 2009.

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Study Purpose and Scope

A new era of ministry is born. And the birth pangs have been mighty. Since the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic in March of 2020, ministers, pastors, priests, chaplains, congregational leaders, parachurch leaders, and theological educators who are part of the ecology of 350,000 churches, in approximately 250 denominations, along with 235 accredited theological schools in the U.S. have been laboring to deliver new forms of church. The church is always struggling to be renewed and reborn. Yet the unprecedented conditions of Covid-19 amplified the church's struggles, griefs, losses, and decline. The pandemic also accelerated adaptation, spurred new growth, and inspired the adoption of new ways to be the body of Christ in the world.

I have spent the better part of two decades giving my pastoral and theological attention and my best research and reflection to Christian ministry and how it is learned in practice. Unsurprisingly, as a global pandemic seemed imminent my thoughts turned to ministers, churches, and ministry settings such as healthcare, the military, and universities.

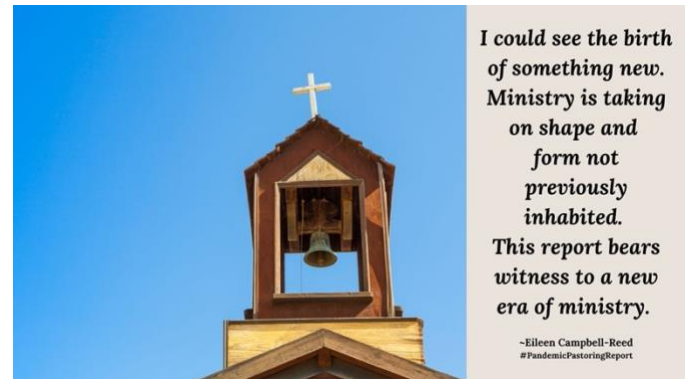
Like many I held out hope in the early weeks, that we might "flatten the curve" and slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus. Yet I also wondered about much more sinister scenarios. I gathered and shared resources and ideas.¹ It became clear by summer that we needed new ways to make life in a pandemic somehow more sustainable. And no one could grasp fully the impact or variety of ripple effects now 30 months later.

By early June, waves of new revelations filled the headlines, and "multiple pandemics" were shaking our social and spiritual fabric. It was time to put on my research hat. I wanted to listen closely to the lives and ministries of the 50 people in the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project, who I have been following since 2009. The LPI Project was in the early stages of 10-year interviews begun in late 2019.

In June of 2020 we launched a survey, something Chris Scharen, Catrina Ciccone, and I have done regularly in the past. Our study participants shared powerful, moving stories of how the Covid-19 pandemic and the social uprisings were impacting their lives and work.

At the time I was working with Helping Pastors Thrive, an initiative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc.). With permission from HPT director, Scott Hudgins, we began surveying ministers in a "new pastor" cohort. In that same summer I was completing the manuscript of *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life*. Fortunately, some nuances and insights from the surveys and LPI 10-year interviews made it into the 2021 book.²

In the late spring of 2021 Dean David Jensen of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary contacted me. He wanted to survey and interview ministers and lay leaders, as well as other constituents, in anticipation of a curriculum review. He had funding, and he asked me to coordinate the research. A team of APTS graduates, Rev. Daryl Horton, Rev. José Lopez-Chapa, and Rev. Melissa Lopez, completed training and became partners in the interview process. We nearly doubled the pool of ministers and added a substantial group of lay leaders to the study.



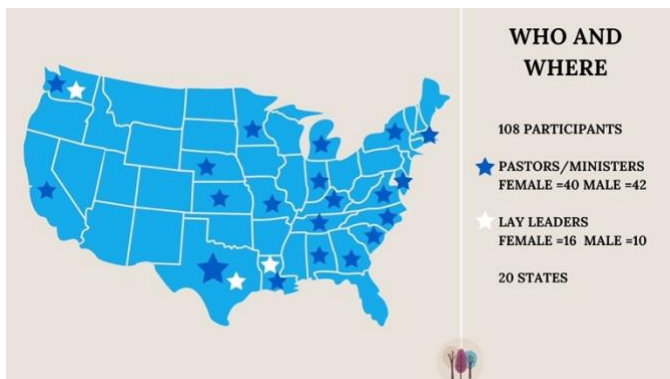
Taken together these interviews and survey results created an extended conversation about pandemic pastoring, leading the church, and other kinds of ministry broadly understood over the last two-plus years. This report cannot contain it all, so I am attempting with humility fitting for a project of practical theological research, to bring together the most salient issues. This is the work of interpretation required of all qualitative studies, and the brief illustrative material in many ways speaks for itself, and I trust readers will add their interpretations to what is presented herein. I hope the report will support seminarians, ministers, congregational leaders, theological educators, and denominational leaders who care deeply about the future of the church. I hope it will stir up questions for all ministry learners. The longer I worked on this project the

more I could see the birth of something new. Ministry is taking on shape and form not previously inhabited. This report bears witness to a new era of ministry.

Demographics of Survey and Interview Participants

Accounting for participants from all three groups, features of the study cohort include:

- **108 total pastors and lay leaders participated in the study**
- **102 surveys**
- **80 interviews**
- **66% pastors and ministers**
- **34% lay leaders**
- **20 states in all regions of the U.S.**
- **20+ denominational affiliations**
- **nearly equal numbers of men and women**
- **adults aged from their 20s to their 80s**
- **pastors, military and healthcare chaplains, campus ministers, lay leaders in every area of congregational ministry**
- **Data gathered between June 2020 and April 2022**



This study focuses on congregations, but also includes insights and contributions from ministers in chaplaincy and non-traditional settings. Some ministers are in hybrid ministries that include a congregational setting as well as an adjacent ministry setting, such as a university campus or recovery ministry. The majority of ministers in the study are serving within the first 12 years of vocational ministry.

Surveys

Surveying over 100 clergy and laity, I learned just how much they share in their commitments to leading and caring for the church and its mission in the world. An analysis of the data also signals where there are small and more significant divergences in their experiences. For example, pastors and lay leaders both experienced similar challenges personally and related to their congregations. However, for volunteer leaders, isolation was the top concern while for pastors it was at the bottom of the list. Pastors typically named a greater variety of challenges, griefs, and surprises, but fewer types of self-care. The similarities and differences raise fascinating questions and highlight important insights that may help lay leaders and church staff and pastors collaborate with greater mutual understanding.

The surveys launched for the #PandemicPastoring Report consisted of two parts: open ended questions and two multi-choice lists: 1) ministry areas to be rated for concern level; 2) types of support needed.

Across all three cohorts in the study from 2020 to 2021, I kept the same approach, asking identical or slightly modified questions. They follow a pattern of Ignatian discernment, known as the Examen, which tests the spirit of a time or place or situation.³ Because my approach is to understand ministry as both a professional and spiritual practice, I asked questions that are based in a spiritual approach to understanding and meaning making. The process trusts leaders to share their insights, wisdom, and experience.⁴

Ignatian questions allow one to focus on a particular period of time or event by posing questions of consolation and desolation. Thus, we asked about *challenge, change, surprise and delight, grief and desolation, self-care and well-being, levels of concern, and forms of support*.

The responses demonstrate a definite spirit of the times for Christian leaders, revealing some consolations and many desolations of living through the long Covid-19 pandemic season. Each question is presented with a summary of responses in the order of frequency. Some concise reflections follow each summary, including brief quotes from the open-ended questions on the surveys. The “levels of

concern” questions provide additional insight into how concerns shifted from 2020 to 2021.

1. What about the season of pandemic has challenged you and/or your church?

Pastors and lay leaders experienced the challenges of the pandemic season as it related to church life in somewhat different ways. We asked lay leaders two questions, separating personal and church challenges. However, we only asked pastors one question about challenges. They responded in ways that signaled both personal and church-related concerns.

PERSONAL CHALLENGES

Pastors	Lay Leaders
1. Relational concerns 2. Leadership concerns 3. Personal stress/ mental / physical health 4. Isolation	1. Isolation 2. Child/family challenges 3. Worship losses 4. Personal losses

Pastors named relational concerns and leadership concerns when it came to the personal challenges they experienced. Isolation was lower on their list. The leadership concerns included a wide range of things such as time pressures, decision-fatigue, burnout, financial concerns, leadership skills, worries about managing staff, and minimizing harm to others. One pastoral leader said they were “feeling like a scapegoat for general pandemic-induced fatigue and anger.”

Lay leaders on the other hand were most challenged personally by isolation followed by a variety of losses in their families, concerns about raising children, finding childcare, and various personal losses and griefs.

Following a similar pattern, when lay leaders answered about challenges to their church, they were far more concerned with the loss of connection which bled over into another category that can be summed up as a “challenge to worship and pastoral care when mediated through technology.” Lay leaders were also concerned about conflicts and divisions, and like

pastors, they named something akin to “the disruption of everything,” which we can surmise as running through *all* other challenges.⁵

Thinking about why it was that *isolation* topped the list for lay leaders, but fell to the bottom of the pastor list, here is one possible explanation. By virtue of their employment, ministers could not stay in isolation, even if their connections were virtual or distanced.

Pastors named personal challenges related to knowing *how to lead* through the last two-plus years, yet in the survey, lay leaders did not name this concern explicitly. Each of the five survey questions reveals a host of similarities and differences between lay leaders and clergy. These results invite pastors and lay leaders to learn from each other how their experiences were both different *and* similar, creating greater opportunity for shared leadership.

Some of the challenges named by pastors in the survey defied category. For example, one pastor voluntarily reduced their work, so another staff person could work full time. Another pastor quit her ministry job and moved across the country. Still another began a new call on the day that schools were suspended for Covid-19.

Although “leadership concerns” could have fit in some cases with “church related” challenges, generally they came across as personal struggles with *how* to lead in an unprecedented environment rather than problems or challenges from the church.

CHURCH RELATED CHALLENGES

Pastors	Lay Leaders
1. Worship/Care/Tech challenges 2. Loss/challenge to connections 3. Conflict and divisions 4. Disruption of everything 5. Communal stress/vulnerability	1. Loss/challenge to connections 2. Worship/Care/Tech challenges 3. Conflict and divisions 4. Disruption of everything

Hidden in the overall tally of church-related challenges is a notable difference occurring over time. In the summer of 2020 pastors named “losses and lack of connection” felt by the community at the top of their list of challenges. But in the summer of 2021, “conflict and divisions” was the most frequently named, surpassing the other two leading challenges.

Some of the challenges named in the survey went beyond mere difficulties and pointed to the character

of the new era in ministry. Two examples of this type of response were 1) the pervasive concern about technology and 2) variations on a theme of “the disruption of everything” as one pastor put it succinctly.

Pastors named among the church-related challenges a concern for how worship and care mediated through technology created difficulties. And their top concern was a conglomeration of various conflicts and divisions that arose during the coronavirus pandemic time. And as congregational leaders, they experienced isolation and loss of connection less often than lay leaders. These distinctions point to differences worth bearing in mind when seeking to understand the *different ways* paid and volunteer leaders experienced the challenges of the pandemic.

Although technology was among the challenges, the greater concern 18 months into the pandemic was the loss of human *connection* and human *life*. As one lay leader put it, “Distance from people especially my church family. We were able to get online quickly thanks to forward thinking elders but there is nothing that can take the place of human touch. I lost a very dear friend during the pandemic before the vaccine. I’m still dealing with the grief and anger over her death.”

Many lay leaders and pastors worried over the social divisions that the Covid-19 pandemic revealed. One lay leader responded with this. “I’m saddened to see the divisiveness of our country. I feel like I’m watching society break down, like a slow-motion car crash. I worry for my children’s future.” Pastors also named divisions, including, “the expectations from the white dominant culture on the immigrant community.”

Juggling the competing, overlapping, and overwhelming challenges compounded any single challenge which was already remarkably demanding. One lay leader named the pile up of challenges this way: “Struggling with how to effectively serve the ministries I lead in a way that supports various safety level concerns, Zoom fatigue, and coping with pandemic concerns on my own. It’s a challenge leading people through such a huge change when you are impacted as well. It almost feels paralyzing at times.”

Another pastor said, “It has been impossibly difficult to overcome the constant feelings of compassion burn out. While I am dealing with my

own complicated COVID-19 grief, I am doing my best to make sure all others (especially the staff) feel heard and cared for, as well. It’s like a Sisyphean boulder of compassion overload.” One pastor and parent said it this way: “Everything? On a social level, I’m overwhelmed by how people seem to live in such disparate realities. On a personal level, I am a mother of two young children and am exhausted.”

Pastors also worried about the disruption and fracturing of “theology that is the foundation for churches as *places of belonging*.” The challenges were not just burdens to bear or problems to be solved. In the interviews we learned more about these deeper concerns.

Some pastors took on the disruption as a kind of professional and spiritual challenge in their work. One young minister said, “Before I became head of staff, as a director, I was frustrated by the fact that senior leadership in churches were almost adverse and unable to pivot, think creatively, or solve immediate problems (i.e: worshiping outdoors, livestreaming, CE outdoors, new ways of celebrating milestones).” Then her role changed. She says, “Now as a Pastor/Head of Staff it is the divisions found in masking, and also the divisions in our country, which make it hard to be a pastor of a ‘purple’ church.”⁶ We as leaders are asked to pick a side, but I enjoy the challenge of proclaiming that the Gospel is central to all decisions that we should make as Christians and challenging congregants to see how their ideologies and political affiliations have been shaping their faith instead of vice-versa.” With a note of resilience, another pastor said the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic gave them, “a new backbone... It’s made a huge difference in being bold.”

2. What about pandemic times brought you desolation or grief?

Pastors	Lay Leaders
1. Lost worship/gathering/rituals/ funerals 2. Insensitivity / denial 3. Isolation/ lost relationships 4. Witnessing/caring for others 5. Grief over loss of life 6. Exhaustion 7. Loss of Future/vision/plans	1. Lost worship/gathering/rituals/ funerals 2. Isolation/ lost relationships 3. Grief over loss of life 4. Witnessing/caring for others 5. Insensitivity / denial

On this question, lay leaders and pastors were closely aligned in the ways they named loss, desolation, and grief. Lament over the loss of life was named by both groups but not universally by everyone taking the survey. More often both groups named losses related to 1) being together for worship, 2) gathering in person to solve problems, and 3) sharing rituals, including funerals, which give a consistent container and space for grief and processing loss.⁷

Isolation and the inability to give care or provide a compassionate witness to people who are suffering was also named in both groups. Not only did church leaders feel isolation for themselves, they also felt it on behalf of other people in their communities of faith. Pastors grieved the exhaustion they felt over the “disruption of everything.” And lay leaders named grief over the insensitivity and denial related to racialized and other injustices that they witnessed in the world and in their congregations.

One lay leader summed up the contours of grief about church life this way: “Not being able to see anyone. We were at a stage where my ministry was growing exponentially and then, Covid-19... it changed everything. Attendance was all over the place. It was no longer consistent, and people [got] over virtual programming quickly.” Several respondents named the “lack of closure” among their griefs.⁸

Others lamented the loss of physical proximity to people they care about. They felt grief in their loneliness and loss of “the ability to feel a person's physical heartfelt presence.” The absence of others cuts deeply into the sense of the embodied character of faith and ministry.⁹ One lay leader said, “I've lost faith in our ability to come together and solve the many significant challenges we face (Covid-19, climate, economic inequality, racism, etc.).”

Pastors were not immune to the personal heartbreaks of the season. One pastor told this story.

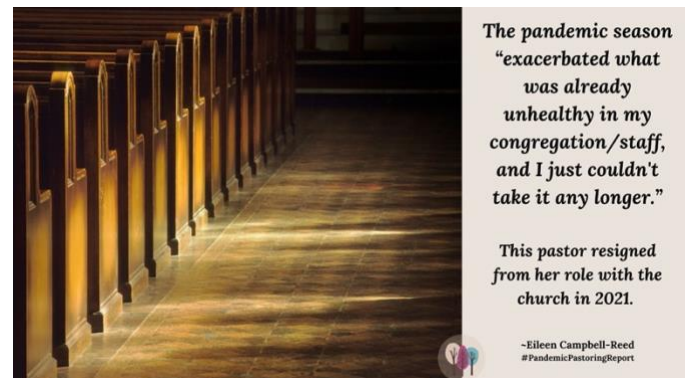
In January of 2021 my father was hospitalized with COVID-19 and eventually had to go on a ventilator for a week. Thankfully he has recovered. But it is exhausting and demoralizing when I hear congregants speak so flippantly about how COVID “isn't really that bad” or that “the percentage of people who get it is so small. Why are we bothering with any of this?”¹⁰ My family is a part of that percentage, and somehow for a set of people who claim to care and love their pastor (and

who regularly checked in on social media to tell me how they were praying for my father's recovery), it's like that whole experience was conveniently erased from their memory.

Another pastor said, the pandemic season “exacerbated what was already unhealthy in my congregation/staff, and I just couldn't take it any longer.” This pastor resigned from her role with the church in 2021. Closely related griefs over pastoral work itself included, “the extra amount of work that goes into planning *each and every* program” as well as “conflict and lack of communication between people with opposing perspectives.”

Pastors also lamented the loss of “church members who no longer come to church events or stream our worship,” indicating how much melt the attendance numbers experienced in some places.¹¹ They also lamented the losses that church members themselves experienced including, “senseless and untimely death... desolation for disruption that the pandemic caused... loss of jobs ... and re-allocation of the job market.”

Each pastor's list of losses and desolations weighs heavy. One pastor shared this list: “lack of in-person contact with parishioners, preaching to a video camera in an empty sanctuary, worship without lay participation, and the time pressure that was involved in ‘producing’ recorded worship.” Another pastor lamented the uncertainty around pastoral care, “Not being able to visit hospitals, nursing homes, the constant unknowing on when to go, when to call, when to leave it to family.” Pastors felt a sense of helplessness to be or do anything “meaningful beyond the ministry of presence and listening.”



Still other pastors grieved the loss of connections with supportive peers in “continuing education and professional development.” This “lack of connections

with colleagues” could not be resolved with a virtual meeting. “Zoom [is] not a substitute since it's been a workspace for all of us.” This particular concern expressed by pastors, points to one of the differences in how lay leaders and paid ministers described self-care on very different terms (see more in Question 4 below).

One North Carolina Baptist pastor said in 2020, “I really felt like I was moving toward a new visioning process ... Now that is postponed until when exactly?” He lost both the future planning and also much of his first year of pastoring the congregation to focusing on responding to the pandemic rather than getting to know church members.

3. What about pandemic pastoring (times) has surprised or delighted you?¹²

Pastors	Lay Leaders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closer/stronger relationships 2. Creative adaptation/ leadership 3. Resilience & joy of people 4. Adjusting to tech 5. Racism discussion 6. Nothing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creative adaptation/ leadership 2. Adjusting to tech 3. Closer/stronger relationships 4. Resilience & joy of people

On the question of surprise and delight, pastors and lay leaders agreed that the creative adaptation and stepping up of leaders was something to be celebrated. As one lay leader said, “I was pleased with our ability to adapt. I was on the PNC [pastor nominating committee] and we figured out how to use Zoom to interview potential preachers. Even though we were in a pandemic we managed to function and find a minister.” We learned later during the interviews that this pastor also moved into a new town and new call without having met members of the congregation in person.

Not everyone found delight, however. Only surprise. As one lay leader put it: “Nothing delighted me. The high level of isolation necessary was a bit of a surprise.”

Nevertheless, many in both groups were surprised by the adoption, adaptation, and adjustment to the virtual environment. One lay leader spelled out the joy felt: “Seeing the faces of

my congregation in their homes with all the family and gathering in ‘Zoom room’ after worship to visit. I became well acquainted with people I really had not known. We formed bonds going through this together that helped us identify what we miss and love about our church and what we don't want to lose when we return to church.” Some pastors and lay leaders reported that relationships with church members grew stronger through the season of adaptation.

The relationships that grew stronger and delighted people were not only with people, but also with God. One lay leader said, “The work-life balance that God required of us all. He made us evaluate the things we do for him vs. what we do out of tradition/habit. There were things that we literally could no longer partake in. And we survived and focused more on our relationship with God... I found delight in the relief that God provided despite the HUGE challenges we were experiencing.”

Some pastors in the study, most of whom are still in the early years of learning to be ministers, wrote about how the pressures and challenges of remote / virtual worship pushed them to hone their skills in preaching and leading worship, learning to traverse the distance created by the technology. Others were surprised and delighted by the stability and growth of their congregations through the long season of crisis, including “an increase in church membership and continued healthy financial support.” Several pastors and lay leaders mentioned resilience in their communities of faith, and “joy with which they return to church.” One pastor named the delight at being able “to preach, teach, pray, and encourage people without boundaries, the church without walls. This has truly been a tremendous blessing because I have been able to minister to individuals on a national platform.”

While the isolation and challenges to human connection were overwhelming, experiences of joy and delight endured, sometimes from surprising places. One pastor shared this joyful experience: “The resilience and faith of the oldest members of our congregation. They often pastor me in finding rest and peace in my faith. When I call in to make sure they do not feel ignored and disconnected, they appreciate the connection, but always encourage me with their unshakable faith that God's got this.”

4. How are you attending to your own self-care and spiritual wellbeing?

Pastors	Lay Leaders
1. Prayer / Spiritual Practice	1. Family / Friends / Colleagues
2. Family / Friends / Colleagues	2. Other activities*
3. Health / Fitness	3. Bible Study/Church Activities
4. Other activities*	4. Prayer / Spiritual Practice
5. Coaching / counseling etc.	5. Health /Fitness
6. Reading	6. Coaching / counseling etc.
7. Bible Study	

* “Other activities” included: reading, arts/crafts, pottery, cooking/baking, travel, singing, social media, projects, time in nature/outdoors, TV/Netflix, laughing/amusement, and writing letters.

Clergy who took the survey reported the leading ways they attend to spiritual well-being are to pray, practice spiritual disciplines, and give attention to their physical health. Specific spiritual practices were mentioned less often by lay leaders. For lay leaders time spent with family, friends, and colleagues was mentioned most often as a significant important form of self-care. That was closely followed by the category called “other activities.” These included a wide variety of activities mentioned by both pastoral and lay leaders, usually just one or two people naming each thing. Taken together, however, these activities demonstrate the creativity and resilience used by both groups to attend to their personal well-being.

While both groups identified attention to health as a significant way to respond to self-care needs, pastors named it much more often than lay leaders.¹³ Health-related responses for both groups included the following: exercise, walking, nutrition/eating well, rest/sleep/time off, taking breaks, working with a personal trainer, and focusing on weight loss.

Each group named something unique to their group, and largely absent in responses from the other group. The lay leaders named one of their top modes of self-care and spiritual well-being to participate in Bible study, committee meetings, and church activities. As one person put it, "Participating in preparation of and conducting online services and watching those I'm not otherwise involved in." Whereas no pastor in the study described the work of

the church as a form of self-care. Conversely the clergy group named various forms of coaching, counseling, and therapy just as often as they mentioned friends and family as means of caring for themselves. Whereas only two lay leaders mentioned professional counseling among their self-care practices.

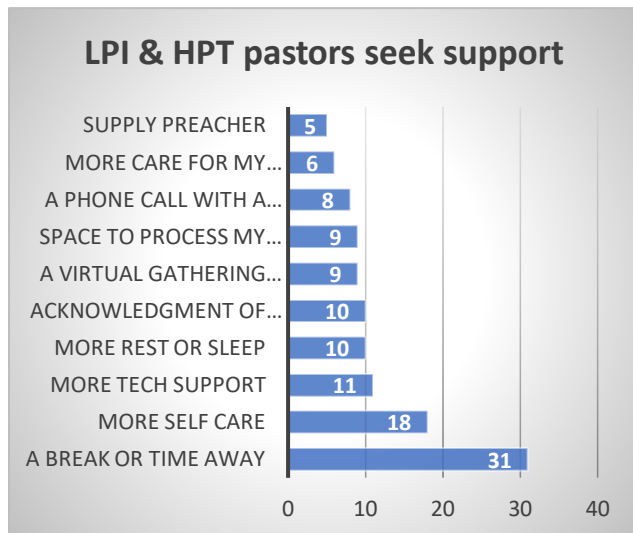
Notably more than one minister responded to the question in the negative. This pastor started out critical of his self-care, but then described changes to his habits. “Poorly. My compassion gas tank is empty, no time for me to close up shop and take care of myself. I need to do just that. So I started bringing my sneakers to the church and going for quick walks whenever I can spare 15-20 minutes, intentionally finding something to do each weekend that is outside my comfort zone, walking to a local farmer's market, seeing a play at a new theater, finding a small town to just explore. Taking time for me is an absolute necessity.”



Self-care and spiritual wellbeing can take many forms.

5. Which kinds of support would you most appreciate right now?

For the summer of 2020, here are the ways pastors in the LPI Project and HPT initiative prioritized support they desired.



In 2020, pastors told us three things were most important in the way of support: 1) a break or time away; 2) more self-care; 3) more tech support.



In 2021, Pastors told us four things were most important in the way of support: 1) more rest or sleep; 2) a break or time away; 3 / 4) more self-care and space for grief. A couple of pastoral leaders said either their needs were currently met, or they did not “currently serve a congregation” and did not find the question applicable. However, most pastors responded with one or more choices.

Additional forms of support that pastors named beyond our suggestions listed in the survey included the following: “a well-planned, intentional distraction... board games, book club with anything-but-theology books, or some other kind of play to reconnect to the joy that our calling feeds us;” a silent retreat; continuing education; financial resources; problem solving; a conversation partner; and training with social media.



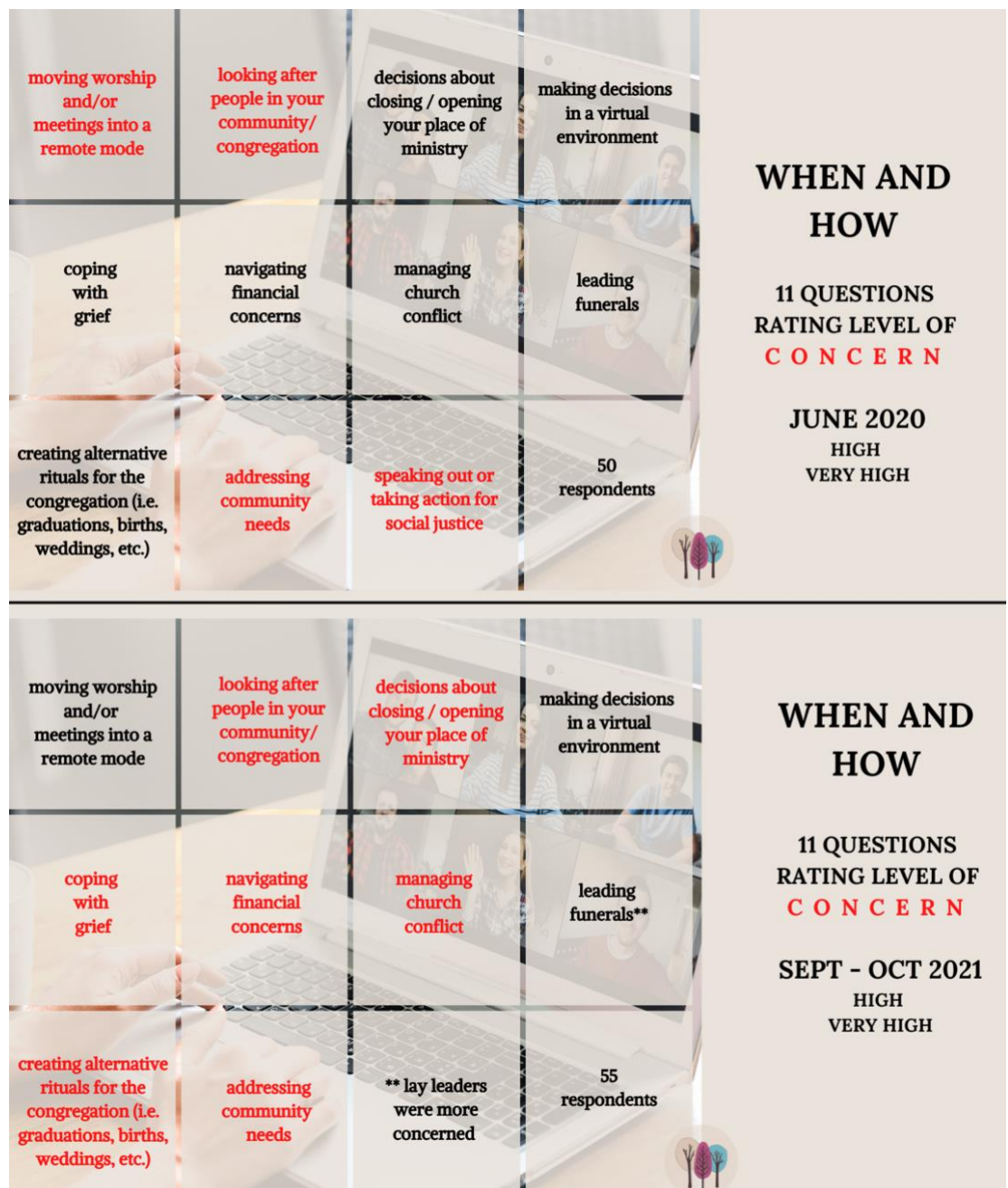
Lay leaders told us four things were most important for feeling supported in this time: 1) gathering virtually or in person to support one another; 2) a break or time away; 3 / 4) spiritual guidance and more rest or sleep. Several lay leaders said they felt fully supported. One lay leader expressed contentment this way, “I’m really pretty good right now, family is healthy and happy. Certainly about all one can ask for in this world.” Another lay leader expressed a need for more “FOCUS on our congregation and ‘togetherness.’” Two more lay leaders asked for time and patience, “to put into words and practice what I observed during this [pandemic] time to help others who struggle or doubt.” Another said they needed patience “to figure out my ‘new normal’ and what I will no longer commit to going forward. I want to [be] intentional about my service, and hearing from God, and move away from being busy to be busy.” This final comment captures one of the questions that the pandemic season has raised for the entire church. How will churches re-evaluate the purpose and meaning of all their many activities?

6. How would you rate your levels of concern?

We asked survey takers to mark their perceived level of concern on 11 items. To give a larger context for how the levels of concern played out in the survey with Austin Seminary graduates and lay leaders, we can look back to make a comparison from the first instance of this survey in June 2020. At that moment, three months into the global coronavirus pandemic, 50 pastoral leaders in the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project and the Helping Pastors Thrive Initiative took the same survey. They marked the following items (in red) with high or very high concern.

In the late summer and fall of 2021, graduates of Austin Seminary and lay leaders answered the same survey and reflected a largely different set of high and very high concerns.¹⁴ Looking after people in the community or congregation and addressing community needs are the two areas that both remained at levels of high or very high concern. Otherwise, the answers are markedly different. Comparing the two sets of responses provides an opportunity to see how concern levels changed over time during the long pandemic season.

with lingering grief; 2) from technical concerns to relational concerns; 3) from the difficulties presented by transition to virtual forms of connection to the harder or more complex decisions regarding the return to in-person worship, meetings, and activities; 4) from lesser worries over decision making to a reappearance or new instances of conflict(s) over decision making and finances.



Four areas of shifting concern level are worth noting: 1) from shock to loss in the rising concerns

Concluding thoughts on the survey results

Considering the survey results suggests a way to see how to ministers and lay leaders share a great deal of commitment and concern for their congregations, the spiritual life, family, community, and the mission and purpose of the church. By looking at the subtle and more overt differences between responses from the two groups, we also see how their experiences of the world of church are notably different. One gift from these open-ended questions is the possibility of greater mutual understanding, learning, and cooperation.

For example, when we re-frame and embrace ministry “as a spiritual practice” we have greater possibilities for seeing the continuum of vocation that laity and clergy share.¹⁵ This framing of ministry as *not* mainly professional but as spiritual practice also offers a much needed resistance to the ways capitalism turns ministry (and other labors) into “work for hire.”¹⁶ If we recognize the meanings we assign to our various labors, and the exchange of money for those labors, then we can see how those meanings create different understandings of work *versus* self-care in a capitalist society. Thus, self-care for a lay leader includes meaningful contributions and support in the life of their church and faith community, whereas church participation is not revitalizing to the ministers who took the survey. This is not a suggestion to stop paying pastors or providing appropriate benefits. Rather it is to hold in tension the reality that ministry is spiritual work and resists the ways that capitalism defines our lives. This was a major revelation to people in many kinds of work during the pandemic.

Another reframing comes from the lay leaders we surveyed. They named a much more extensive variety of activities that are part of spiritual well-being. Ministers might consider learning from lay leaders how to expand their self-care repertoire. Lay leaders might learn from pastors how to expand their spiritual practices for the sake of well-being. These differences in role need not be dissolved, but mutual learning and greater understanding are potential outcomes when the differences become clear.

Interviews

Between June of 2020 and April of 2022, I worked with my LPI research partner Chris Scharen and the APTS team to conduct interviews with 56 clergy and 24 laity. This generated several hundred pages of transcribed conversations, stories, and a very deep well of ideas and insights about ministry in a global pandemic, as well as the wider issues of ministry and spiritual well-being. Much of what we learned has a direct impact on planning and implementing seminary education as well as the day-to-day work of congregational leaders, chaplains, ministers in non-traditional settings, and the wider ecology of people and organizations that make up the church broadly understood. By capturing this thick description of ministry in the very midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and with glimpses into the long-term effects of it on church life and its leaders, we have a powerful opportunity to reshape seminary curricula to be both *responsive* and *anticipatory* of ministry in the coming seasons and years. For people already beyond seminary and serving the church, we have an opportunity to articulate language for understanding the losses and changes and potential gifts of ministry in a new era.

Here we will consider first how pastors and lay leaders experienced challenges over the last two years. Nearly everything known to be part of ministry was upended since March of 2020. There is no “return to normal.” And there is no going back. Instead, we can learn from how ministers improvised their leadership, suffered grief and loss, found resilience, worked in isolation, and were occasionally surprised and delighted by God’s grace and life-giving moments that transcended the disruption of church and ministry as we have known them.



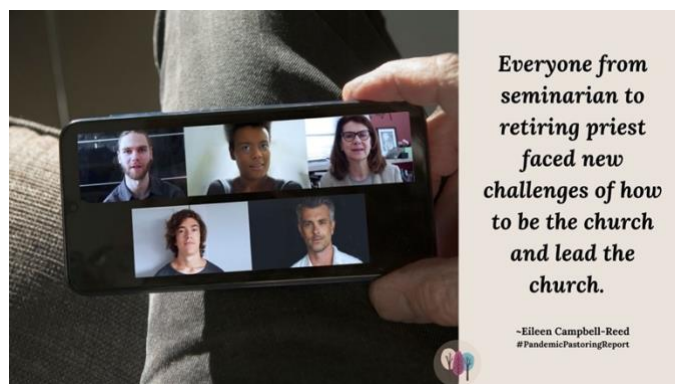
What we learned has a direct impact on planning and implementing seminary education as well as the day-to-day work of congregational leaders, chaplains, ministers in non-traditional settings, and the wider ecology of people and organizations that make up the church.

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#PandemicPastoringReport

Challenges in practice through the pandemics

The level of challenges and disruptions to church life and ministry practice starting in March of 2020 is perhaps impossible to calculate. In our interviews, pastors, chaplains, and lay leaders recounted a host of challenges. In the first place, all the everyday changes of life together in a community of faith carried on. People got married and died, not just from Covid-19. Babies were born, and the air conditioning unit at the church needed to be replaced. Yet changes from the mundane to the monumental were amplified and complexified by the restrictions on community connections and the anxiety of the times. Large questions about the purpose of the church surfaced, and conflicts ebbed and flowed. All the while ministers remained on a steep learning trajectory, exploring, and improving their practice of ministry. Some perhaps stalled in their growth. A few told us how defeated they felt in some art or skill of ministry. Everyone from seminarian to retiring priest faced new challenges of *how to be the church and lead the church*.

In the first month after Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, one poll of pastors found virtual church attendance climbing, financial support declining, and well-being of pastors and congregation members holding steady, but with the personal impact of the lock-down beginning to show. Pastors and congregations still expressed hope for returning to usual operations by May of 2020 or August at the latest.¹⁷



We know now that the crisis and long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic made lasting changes in most congregations. Some of the big challenges we heard in interviews fall into these

categories. The immediacies of worship and pastoral care mediated with new (and old) technologies distressed leaders. Pastors shared their concerns over long-term staffing and volunteer leadership; financial practices and stability; fear and anxiety in the congregational system; and struggles with a scarcity mentality. Leaders in predominantly white churches talked with us about raising awareness about chronic racialized disparities; lay leaders in Black and mostly immigrant churches focused on caring for the people of their churches and neighborhoods through financial stress. We heard from nearly all leaders about political tensions, the ways injunctions to wear a mask, unmasked polarizing differences; navigating conflict; the constant drip of sexism and homophobia; and keeping the vision and values of the church central.

Worship, pastoral care, and day-to-day sustenance

Covid-19 brought on questions not considered previously on any scale by churches and chaplains. *How will we worship when we cannot be together in one place? How do we organize pastoral and spiritual care in a virtual environment? What measures do we put in place to carry on day-to-day ministries?* Problems arose that were unique to the effects of Covid-19, such as how to manage singing, or do without it, in worship and how to care for and welcome unvaccinated children and their families. Problems related to masking and social distancing also impacted worship, care, and everyday interactions profoundly.

Some ministers told us that pastoral care requests were down during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Only the most urgent cases came through, and often the pastor could only support by phone, text, and email. In fact, Rev. Karmen (he/him), an associate pastor and bilingual Spanish/English speaker at a predominantly white urban Presbyterian church says that people really appreciate their pastors reaching out by phone, text, or card, something that might have seemed small or less significant in the past. Now he says, it is the way of connection. Even as in-person options for worship, pastoral care, and everyday work in ministry returned, the virtual and electronic connections are

lingering, and hybrid forms of worship and ministry appear to be here to stay.

Lay leaders we interviewed readily gave us their views on virtual connections, worship, and mutual care. They expressed major concerns over social isolation and losses from changes to their church as well as the death of loved ones. One lay leader expressed a common concern, “We have a really elderly congregation, so we’ve been especially careful.” Some lay leaders found “Zoom was life-saving” while others expressed concern that “Zoom did not work for everyone. We lost some people.” The use of virtual worship generated sadness over the inadequacy of grieving rituals in this season.

The loss of a sense of place was also palpable especially for lay leaders who often did not have responsibilities that took them to the building in the same way paid staff did. Rhonda (she/her) is a ruling elder and choir member in a bilingual (English/Spanish) congregation. She said, “sometimes I would just drive and park my car in front of the church because I needed to see our church building. I know church is everywhere. God is everywhere, but I just missed the environment.” She is one of many lay leaders who also lamented the loss of choral music in worship.

Rhonda says, “The church had a program for people who lost their jobs, due to the pandemic. We have funds for neighborhood families to help them with their electrical bill, water bill, or their rent. We deliver food to the elderly around the neighborhood. Yet the low Sunday attendance is demoralizing.” Rhonda’s church like many others was thrown into the position of rethinking how to do everything.

Some of the need for comprehensive rethinking was tied up in the profound sense of loss when physical and spiritual presence with one another was not possible face-to-face. A lay leader named Geraldine (she/her), who volunteers with Vacation Bible School and women’s ministry in her Black Baptist church, appreciated how services were “streamlined with the video capability.” However, she also noticed how that platform “doesn’t have the lingering effect of what it used to be.”

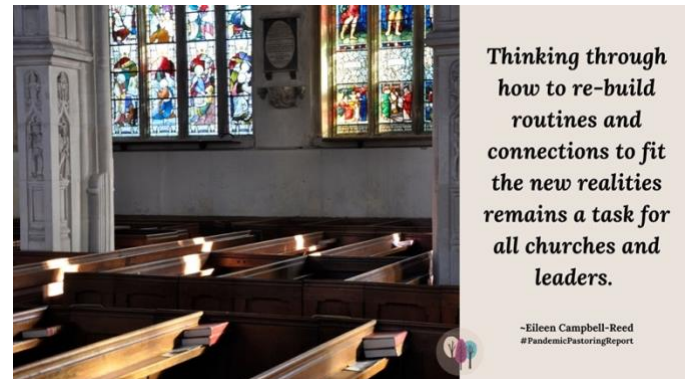
In person, and in a familiar sanctuary, they had cultivated habits that allowed them to “organically let things happen, which happens when you have that sense of community and fellowship and worshiping... because it’s Sunday.” Geraldine is getting at the embodied and relational and spiritual character of

ministry. It’s not right to say that we lost those entirely, but they shifted dramatically and precipitated a sense of loss.

Indeed, there are both limits and gifts to in-person engagement and online engagement. However, the vast majority of churchgoers in the United States and beyond are highly skilled at being present in a building together with a group to worship. Church goers have honed these skills and practices for decades and centuries, and they pass them on without formal teaching to each person who is initiated into the community. Virtual connections for the sake of worship, Bible study, prayer, and fellowship are activities that most of us enter into as novices and beginners. Yet this season since March of 2020 has introduced people to a new form of community engagement, and a sense of its gifts is emerging.

Rev. Flora (she/her) is an African Methodist Episcopal, bi-vocational pastor in rural Texas. She said, “The change to the way I minister [on] the platform of worship will be different post pandemic.” During this extended pandemic the structure of her congregation’s worship service went from 90 minutes to 60, and now as a pastor Rev. Flora is “figuring out how to navigate and be present for” in-person and virtual services each week.

We asked all groups what has been most pressing in the past week. Pastor Olivia (she/her) serves a small Presbyterian congregation that partners with an Episcopal congregation. She told us about a Presbyterian meeting on Tuesday by Zoom that lasted four and a half hours! She said, “It’s exhausting, and it doesn’t encourage participation from the ruling elders who [are] not used to doing this.” Among her biggest concerns is pushing the “committee on ministry report to the very end of that meeting.” This allowed several significant personnel and compensation decisions to be made without discussion.



Thinking through how to re-build routines and connections to fit the new realities remains a task for all churches and leaders.

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Pastor Olivia's story illustrates how big decisions made in the throes of crisis, can mean years of implications may follow. To be sure, the level of long-term impact of both large and small ripple effects from Covid-19 remains unfathomable. Nevertheless, pastors with whom we talked, keep meeting each occasion with a sense of urgency and commitment.

Ministers spent a lot of their energy during the first two years shrinking their focus to the most immediate survival of the weekly routine and most basic connections. And even that – pastoral care to hospitalized members or confirmation classes – became lower in priority. Being in crisis mode also shapes our ability to learn in practice. On one hand we can think of it as the problem of learning in a stressful and strained situation, something that typically diminishes creativity and knowledge acquisition. However, we also know that being pulled up short and being forced to take a risk and responsibility for new leadership in the situation, has its own formation process.¹⁸ Both realities were present over the last two-plus years. Thinking through how to re-build routines and connections to fit the new realities remains a task for all churches and leaders.

Fear, Anxiety, and Scarcity

Many pastors told us about fear, anxiety, and scarcity – both their own and that of the people they serve. For example, Rev. Nancy (she/her), a pastoral resident in a large midwestern congregation, noted how the 'scarcity' mentality had taken over in her large suburban church. Other pastors, like Methodist pastor Rev. Allen (he/him) in South Texas described the "pervasive anxiety in the system" that was there before Covid-19 and grew during the months since March of 2020.

Rev. Miguel (he/him) is a church planter, and bilingual English and Spanish speaker, working at the US-Mexico border. When we asked pastors what pulled them up short, Rev. Miguel told us about three dynamics he bumped into when he arrived a short time before March 2020, to start a new church: 1) navigating well-deserved resistance from locals to outsiders who try to "tell them what to do"; 2) making the transition from in-person to the virtual; he knows about social media, but doesn't "enjoy it,

feels ill-equipped, not prepared... and overwhelmed by it"; and 3) in spite of his commitment to "see God's possibilities," he continues to encounter a "scarcity mentality" in the community.

Rev. Claire (she/her), a Presbyterian pastoral resident, shared openly with us about her own personal anxiety. She said, "Now that I'm in this, I'm scared. I don't want to die. I don't want to go to the hospital." She said she is trying to remember to be a pastor while also "honoring that I'm a person. And It's so difficult."

Rev. Gail (she/her), the interim head of staff in large southern city, summed up the anxiety dilemma in her congregation when they regathered in person for the first time in September of 2021. Some thought it too soon, and others said it was too late. She said, "Everyone's just unhappy right now. I think that's the moral of the story. And everyone is very anxious on a deeper level, scared and anxious."

Each of these brief vignettes of fear, anxiety, and scarcity mentality point to habits of thought and skills that pastors and lay leaders need for leading through times of crisis. To help congregations or even families navigate crisis and its intense feelings, pastors need skills for deep listening, emotional intelligence, and being present with lesser anxiety. It's one thing to see the gap that each of these ministers has described, it's another to know how to step into it and lead.

Staffing, Volunteers, and Finances

Both church finances and volunteer structures suffered decline during the Covid-19 pandemic in many congregations, but neither loss was a universal problem. We heard various stories about the challenges of recruiting volunteers, low energy among church members, and the ripple effects of both financial and volunteer declines. We also heard stories of continued, consistent giving and various uses of federal loan programs to support the ongoing work of the church and community.

Rev. Gail told us that due to safety concerns and reducing programing quickly, a practical reality is that staff took on duties typically covered by volunteers. She says it raised an ethical question for her staff: "It isn't just that we can't get any volunteers, but also, *should we even get volunteers?*" When we interviewed her in September of 2021, Rev. Gail

reflected on her church's first regathering of Sunday School since lockdown in 2020.

A lay leader convening the group asked: "What did you miss about church? What are you excited about for church?" Another lay leader responded, "The staff has continued to feed us during this time. And because of Covid-19 ... honestly because we have fallen out of the habit, we have not been giving back to the church in a way that I have before." And she said, "The staff is doing all of the work that used to be dispersed among all of us." She said she had a new goal of "giving back to the church" in response to "the last year and a half." She soon volunteered for Vacation Bible School, which in her words, "ended up actually being really fun."

Rev. Claire told us about a different yet related problem. She said, "because the giving was down over Covid-19 we can't afford to have the staff that we need. Now that we're back and we're open... we don't have the people to support them. She said every staff minister is doing two or three jobs and "staff burnout, and not being able to hire new people, is probably 70% of our anxiety at this moment."

We heard about a transition team that needed to go "twelve deep" before finding an interim pastor, search committees that did their entire pastoral search using Zoom, virtual ordinations, and pastors coming to new calls without having met anyone in person. We also heard stories about early retirements, grandmother-ministers who left pastorates to care for homeschooled grandchildren, and minister-moms departing their jobs with little or no offer of support.

Even when staffing was stable, church leaders often reported financial struggles. One pastor in the study reported a 50% drop in giving during the Covid-19 months. Several others spoke about the lack of giving when the offering plate was no longer passed in person. Part of the difficulty in transitioning to online and virtual connections, was the need to gather resources electronically or by means that did not include in-person collection of tithes and offerings. Some churches had this in place prior to March 2020, but for others it was yet another component of what had to be addressed as they moved into a virtual environment.

Late in the interviewing process we began asking lay leaders about the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). We asked one group of lay leaders, *How did*

you do financially? Did you take the PPP loan? And how did that work out for you?

Norma (she/her) is an elder, deacon, and worship committee member in a Presbyterian church. She told us, "We took the loan. And it went very well." Their loan was forgiven. When the congregation had a surplus of cash at the end of the year, Norma says the session voted unanimously to give donations to several different nonprofits. A missions committee helped give direction for the donations. "Financially our church is doing about the same as when we were meeting in person," said Norma. "We're actually not spending as much money now, because we only have to keep the sanctuary cool for the pipe organ; we're not using paper for bulletins, etc."

In contrast we heard from Selena (she/her), an elder and chair of finance in a small bilingual (Spanish-English) congregation. She said, "To begin with, our pledges don't even support our budget on a regular basis, because we are a very small church, and [our members] are elderly or come from the [low-income neighborhood] around the church. Our true pledges come from a smaller population of members who drive in from other areas of the city." Her church took the PPP loan as a part of their commitment to keeping the pastor and small staff employed and paid during the pandemic. It was also forgiven.



Like other facets of the multiple pandemics, we heard stories of wealthier, stable congregations remaining that stable or growing, while struggling congregations continued to struggle.

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"But we struggle still," she said, "because right now we've just started our new pledge drive. And it's really difficult for us in a normal situation. So, we've been hurting because we also have continued ministries ... feeding our elderly and homebound. We had to upgrade audio visual equipment to do pandemic worship, because we didn't have anything to begin with. We are a very small bilingual church. And we are not tech savvy. So we did struggle

financially. However, we did start a Covid-19 fund. And people were very, very generous to that. The fund exists to help church members and our community members to lessen the struggle to survive during the pandemic. So, financially, yes, we were hurting, and we are still hurting.”

The Interlocking systems of church finance, volunteer leaders, paid staff, and the aims of serving the wider community are complex and unique in each situation. Like other facets of the multiple pandemics, we heard stories of wealthier, stable congregations remaining that stable or growing, while struggling congregations continued to struggle.

Raising awareness about chronic disparities and multiple pandemics

The day-to-day isolation and social disconnections which marked life in much of the United States starting in March of 2020 opened the ground to reveal much more than a global healthcare crisis. If we understand “apocalyptic language” as describing that which is revealed, then the time of the pandemic has certainly been apocalyptic by that measure. Not only has the Covid-19 pandemic revealed healthcare disparities and the difference between living with privilege and living at the margins for social and economic well-being, it has also revealed other gender and racialized divides. These are the “multiple chronic pandemics” of our time.

As the whole world was “sheltering at home” in the opening months of the global pandemic, three murders gripped the public’s attention and headlines in major newspapers. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd became focal points of public protest and heightened awareness by everyone from small town church members to CEOs of corporations like Ford, Dell, and Target. Important particularly for predominantly white churches and their leaders was coming face-to-face with how far from racial justice they truly stood. The chronic disparities and ongoing marginalization of people living in lesser- or non-privileged social locations in the United States became more jarringly obvious during the months of restricted social interaction. We heard a

variety of stories from leaders that touched on these intersectional concerns.

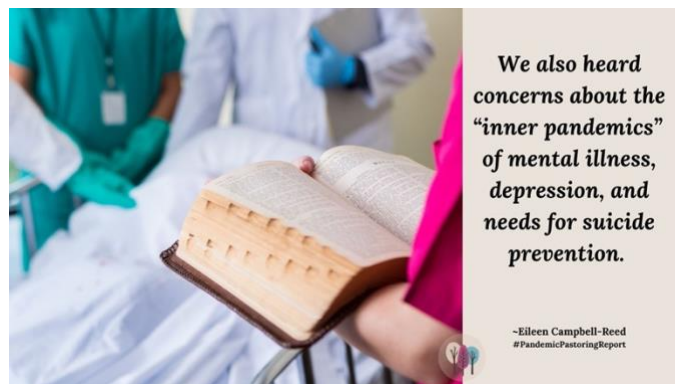
One survey respondent noted “Vulnerable populations served by my ministries (i.e., the imprisoned, the sick, immigrants and refugees, and those who work at sea) have become increasingly isolated during this time. Pastoral care services are not able to reach them in the same way as before, if at all. This has resulted in increased anxiety in the populations we serve - as well as in some of our ministers who are inhibited and unable to provide care as normal” (clergy survey, 2021).

A congregational leader named Franco (he/him) is a member of the finance committee in his United Methodist congregation. He says the church’s response to the widespread protests in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd and ongoing racialized violence was “a disappointment and a challenge.” He went on. “The content of the homilies last summer while America was burning was [a summer series] on nature and trees and birds. I was extremely disappointed we did not touch on what was going on in our society.” He wondered, *Why aren't we talking about [racial justice] a little more? Why aren't we praying for people? Why aren't we being more intentional?*”

Rev. Valarie (she/her) is a woman of color and mission pastor at a majority white urban congregation. She told us, “I’ve been the mission pastor. So every time the news media flashes, something like Haitian migrants, or a tornado coming through our neighborhood, everybody wants to know, *What are we doing?*” She says, “This mentality and approach to compassion and service is something I’m still trying to unpack.” It seems to be a “need for people to jump in.” And she sees the impulse as “this white savior complex that still grips [people] in white mainline Protestant churches.” She thinks, “That it is ego that drives a lot of our church members. And what drains me? It is helping you to feel good about yourself because you feel like you’re loving your neighbor. But also, we’re trying to educate you on the ways that your ‘perceived helpfulness’ is actually harmful, and it is rooted in harmful theology.”

Pastor Lucas (he/him) is a bilingual (Spanish/English) pastor who was on the cusp of beginning a new call to an immigrant church. He identifies as

gay. He discovered in his interview visit, “how hard is it to navigate two languages, including preaching in two languages, with a worshipping community.” He said laughing, “This is gonna be a fun ride!” He went on. “I think the other piece in terms of race particularly, is navigating that dynamic with a predominantly immigrant Spanish-speaking congregation that has a few well-meaning and well-intentioned white folks who have been (from their perspective) keeping the church afloat. And alongside that dynamic is talking about what it means to be an inclusive congregation that affirms LGBTQ folk, because if they call me, they will get a gay Latino pastor.” Pastor Lucas is getting at the complex intersectional questions that are present in many congregations, but not always addressed directly. In his case he was prepared to work directly on these questions of equity and inclusion and complex relational and power dynamics.



We also heard concerns about the “inner pandemics” of mental illness, depression, and needs for suicide prevention. Rev. Flora (she/her) is an African American bi-vocational pastor in rural Texas. She told us about her training for suicide prevention. She said, “Mental health has been extremely big in my context. I want to help people navigate through mental illness especially in the African American context dealing with the pandemic and social injustices that have occurred. So I've educated myself,” and she is now training more Black and brown people in her community. She also told us about having to use her pastoral platform “to promote vaccines and encourage people who are hesitant about becoming vaccinated against Covid-19. So I'm seeing myself

stand up in different ways and being a voice to educate and navigate through different emotional stresses that people are facing.”

The variety of responses related to chronic disparities, which were both revealed and amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrate the need for greater learning and sustained attention to how white supremacy, and power differentials may be deconstructed and how becoming anti-racist, and also confronting the traps of privilege, remain largely aspirational among the white leaders we interviewed. Pastors and lay leaders of color seemed more prepared to talk without hesitation about dynamics of race, sexuality, gender, and health in their congregations.

Keeping vision and values central

A recurring theme in the interviews from clergy and lay leaders alike was an expressed hope of using “time outside of time” when all the world slowed down to reevaluate the vision, mission, purpose, and values of the church. The slowdown was only part of the story. Churches also faced what it means to be a community without meeting in person and without their usual routines and rituals. The desire to engage in communal discernment was also challenged by the sense of crisis that characterized the season of multiple pandemics.

Rev. Nancy, a pastoral resident in a large midwestern congregation, pointed out how the *urgency of the now* was shaping so many decisions for churches and consuming tremendous energy: “Can we get our service live streamed on Sunday? Do we have the people to staff it?” And she rightly points out, this crisis mode, “changed the dynamic of the church.”

Rev. Linda (she/her), a UMC pastor says her congregation is asking about “going back to normal.” But rather than focus on the impossibility of “going back,” she is leading her congregation into “really looking deep.” They want to use the time to ask: “How do we become the church we are called to be? How do we use these moments to make sure we're meeting the people's needs, but then also how can we use it to be innovative and to cherish who we are, yet also keep moving forward?” The social upheaval of

the past two years has many people asking questions like these.¹⁹

Rev. Karmen (he/him), an associate pastor and bilingual Spanish/English speaker at a predominantly white urban Presbyterian church says, “We used to flood [members] with things to do, but now we can ask: *What are you really passionate about?*” He says now is the time when the church is “scaling down and narrowing focus” to *what really matters*.

Rev. Bridgett (she/her) is a Presbyterian pastor in the Western U.S. She reflected on the shifting membership and sustainability of financial giving patterns in her congregation. She says she wants church members to know, “how crucial their leadership is... it requires more than just a pastoral vision, right? I need my leaders to be involved ... And not just say *you’re the pastor, you’ll take care of it.*”

Like all organizations, churches have a natural lifecycle. Congregations begin with a particular time and story and place. And when healthy enough, they grow and reach a pinnacle (often five to ten times the size of their original gathering), and then they plateau and eventually decline, which is all inevitable. However, at the point of decline, renewal and revitalization are possible.²⁰ Consultant Alice Mann identifies three questions that congregational leaders need to ask to move toward renewal: “1) Who are we (especially at a faith level)? 2) What are we here for? 3) Who is our neighbor?”²¹

The dynamics of church life cycles were initially slowed then accelerated in many congregations since March 2020. Now the need for renewal is all too common. Vision for change cannot simply be the pastor’s best ideas, the community’s needs, the prerogative of the congregation, or even a biblical injunction. Learning to ask Mann’s questions *in community* and listening deeply to each other is crucial. Each contributor to the identity of a church or ministry setting – God’s Spirit, scripture and the teachings of Jesus, members, leaders, the neighborhood, and now the virtual participants in a church’s life – needs discerning attention for the renewal of ministry and congregational wellbeing.

Improvisation for long-term change

Pastors spent a lot of time improvising their ministry tasks in unexpected ways. But they were certainly not

the only ones. In the first place, lay leaders volunteered their time and technical skills to move church meetings and worship online and to expand the capacities of social media and websites to accommodate the newly virtual communities. While some pastors and lay leaders were moving everyone into an online environment and adapting worship to digital platforms, and later hybrid settings, others were creatively adapting their ministries in ways that would also last beyond lockdown and into a new era of ministry.

Chaplains in the LPI Project told us fascinating stories about how they used virtual connections to care for the dying and set up veterans with computer tablets to take part in addiction recovery and grief groups. Phone and video technologies became the new media for accompanying the sick and dying and their families through their hours of greatest need.

Lay leaders continued the work of the church in every way imaginable. Mona (she/her) leads in several administrative tasks, and she is a trustee at her Black Baptist church. She described several improvisations during the two years of pandemic. “One of the things that we’ve done is partner with a nonprofit organization, because we were still very concerned about the food pantry not being able to distribute the food. They use one of our facilities to provide free lunches Monday through Friday. And we have partnered with a medical group to provide drive through vaccines starting with Covid, and then it moved to flu shots.” With other partners they provided over 100 Thanksgiving meals. “We’ve just found different ways to begin to utilize the facilities for ministry,” which will continue beyond the days of lock-down.

In one interview during the fall of 2021, three women from two churches described a seemingly endless list of ways they continued to care for their fellow church members and the surrounding communities in need. They told us about hosting Zoom rooms after church, which was like the 15 minutes in the courtyard at the church house. They kept communication flowing through their congregations. They created seasonal bags and hosted drive-by parties to distribute them.

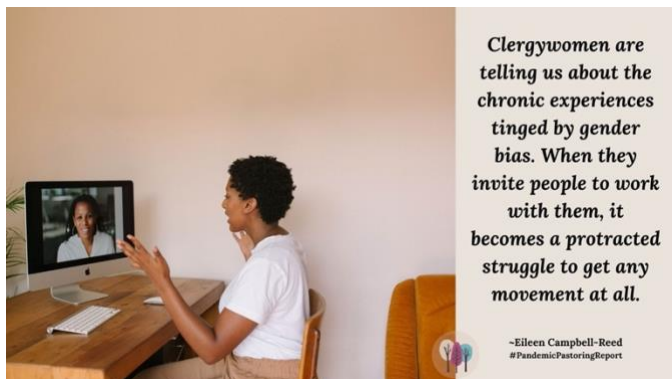
They collected blankets for neighbors who were sleeping outside. They sponsored food drives, delivered hundreds of meals to elderly people who could not otherwise get out, and they worked hard to keep people in the church connected. For

homebound people who could not “drive through,” the deacons delivered packages to them. They also supported neighborhood care groups for parenting education and childcare, especially geared to Spanish-speaking families. They told us about starting a Covid-19 fund to offer financial assistance for people who lost their jobs – both neighborhood and church members. They held front porch visits, distributed live plants to members who were feeling stuck at home. They sang, prayed, and distributed communion along with the pastor.

These lay leaders made a point to extend their care to the pastors themselves, making sure they got all the same provisions and notes as every other member in the congregation. And they told us about appreciation between pastor and people for all the mutual care in the congregation.

What clergywomen and queer clergy want the church to know

Sexism and homophobia and other fears about difference manifest themselves in an uncountable number of ways throughout life and in all corners of church life. Some of our study participants shared stories related to pandemic moments like closing the church building and coping with financial giving and decline and how those moments intersected with sexism and homophobia in ways that are felt – sometimes as demoralizing and sometimes becoming an opportunity for grace.



Elder Tess (she/her) is a United Methodist pastor in an urban setting. When responding to our question about the challenges of the multiple pandemics, she said, “A lot of it is women stuff, which I feel very comfortable saying here. You know a lot of just the

constant drip of being second guessed and having your male colleagues get chosen for things like weddings – when you both have the same [qualifications].”

She says her seminary classes “did actually help” her think about this aspect of ministry, but it remains exhausting in practice. She also felt the burden of judgment because she was the first pastor in the church’s long history “to cancel worship.” Of course, this was due to “Covid, on March 15, and it was the first time we did not have services on a Sunday. I felt a real weight about that. Now I know that it was the right call, and we did it for 15 months, but at the time it was so hard to pull that lever.”

Rev. Flora (she/her) is an African Methodist Episcopal pastor in rural Texas, and she said what “keeps coming to the top of my mind is being female and pastor in a historical context. While they receive you, *do they really receive you?* And the education and the theological knowledge that you have? Working with the congregation itself has been very interesting.” She said people on her board have used words like “stubbornness and complacency.” She says her expectations are not leading to any movement. “So, I am,” she says, “just trying to navigate, educate, love, as you say, the people. While yet, implementing the plan and moving forward with the operation at hand. That’s been one of my biggest struggles... to really get movement from the body, from the people, from the leaders, to move the church forward and not let it die. I’m sharing ideas that are not embraced.”

Rev. Flora says the struggle has been, “Getting the people to have a vision, especially with the energy and the excitement of a new pastor coming out of a great seminary, to meet me and to share what I have, and bring them up so that they won’t bring me down, and not lose what I have just received through the years of study. So that can be overwhelming.”

What Rev. Flora and Elder Tess are sharing are not just singular moments of being confronted. Clergywomen are telling us about the chronic experiences tinged by gender bias. When they invite people to work with them, it becomes a protracted struggle to get any movement at all.

Sometimes, however, the typical expectations of sexism and homophobia coming from outside the church becomes an opportunity for joy. Rev. Jasmine (she/her) is a solo pastor of a new start up

congregation in Texas. When we asked about life-giving moments, Rev. Jasmine said, “Things that bring me joy.... I call them *God glimpses*. I have been really lucky to be in a community where people discover us and come visit our church because they sense or have heard that we're different.” She gave an example. “When people post in neighborhood groups on Facebook or LinkedIn or Nextdoor, *I'm looking for a church*. People in this neighborhood, often will say, *Well, I don't believe in God, and I don't go to church. But if I did, I would go to this church*. That's the highest compliment! We are a church atheists can love.”

When people reach out to Pastor Jasmine, they usually have a lot of questions. She says, “A person wrote to me about a month ago. She said, *Hey, your website says you're affirming. I know a lot of churches say that, but its bogus because half the time they don't let women or queer people be in leadership. Or they don't actually believe in ordination of women and gay people. I need to know if your website like legit tells the truth, are you guys open and affirming? And if I show up, how am I going to be received?*”

Rev. Jasmine says, “And it is my greatest joy in ministry that I am now able to write back and say, *Hey I'm queer, too, and I'm the pastor. Let's go have coffee*. And we go, and this person shares awful trauma, and religious abuse that they've endured. And I'm able to give them an opening for God in that space that maybe they've never heard before. And then I'm able to apologize for the ways the church has hurt them. And that is the most joyful and wonderful and privileged space that I get to be in for people in this community. And that is the only reason that I can keep doing this and say that I don't care if giving goes down [during the pandemic].”

Four different mothers with children still at home, told us about leaving their ministry posts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these women have years, some of them a decade, of experience in chaplaincy or congregational ministry. One of the realities of this time since March 2020 is that parents were faced with additional burdens. Often mothers felt the brunt of the stress and pressure to make career changes that could accommodate homeschooling children and supporting the family through other stressors and strains. Women who are volunteer leaders in their congregations also told us about the added strain of parenting through the pandemic. I think women would like the church to

know that they are still disproportionately expected to make the adjustments when families have increased needs. In an individual situation it simply looks like the best possible decision, but when we step back and look at the numbers it seems clear that something more is happening, one more of the multiple pandemics revealed.

What lay leaders want their pastors to know

In our interviews with lay leaders, we asked two different questions to help us understand more about what they expected and hoped from their pastors. We asked: *Since March of 2020, what do you need your pastor to know?* (With a clarification it might be something they already know, or it might be something they don't.) And we asked some laity to imagine a hypothetical pastor search process. *What would they want a new pastor coming to the church to know?*

One of the most consistent and surprising answers was that the lay leaders wanted their pastors to know how much they supported them, appreciate them, and “have their backs.” Many told us that they pray for their pastors.

This seemed surprising because there is a long-standing stereotype that keeps suspicion and divisions going between pastors and lay leaders. This rift, something like management and labor, has been perpetuated by seminaries for decades and perhaps more than a century. The history of this division has roots in the rise of a professional class of ministers and an educated clergy, which put dividing walls between paid leadership and lay volunteers. It was refreshing to hear such an avalanche of support.

Lay leaders gave us many other hopes regarding what their pastors should know:

- “I wanted our pastor to know that we're still doing what we're supposed to be doing as much as possible” (meeting in discipleship groups).
- “We understand that a lot of pastors take on the full load emotionally and spiritually, and he's got some faithful people that are holding him up in prayer.”

- “Even though we may not be able to perform a lot of things as normal we [are] still committed to the vision of the church.”
- “We're still behind him 100%, so that he can be still encouraged... sometimes pastors get discouraged; and the things that affect us and we're feeling from the pandemic and the isolation, and we know that they feel it too.”
- “I needed my pastor to know about my struggles.”
- “In whatever vision God has shown him, I support him 200%.”

Rhonda (she/her), who is a ruling elder, choir member in a bilingual (English/Spanish) congregation says that her pastor’s ability to listen to the church and to be flexible were very important for getting through the intense months of the pandemic. She hopes the next pastor will equal these characteristics. She believes that from her perspective, her pastor did everything he could possibly do. “Right away he made good decisions to use YouTube, add a newsletter, include the choir, and he was in touch with everyone.” But she says, “I failed, by not telling him ‘Good job’ often enough.”

God’s grace and life-giving moments

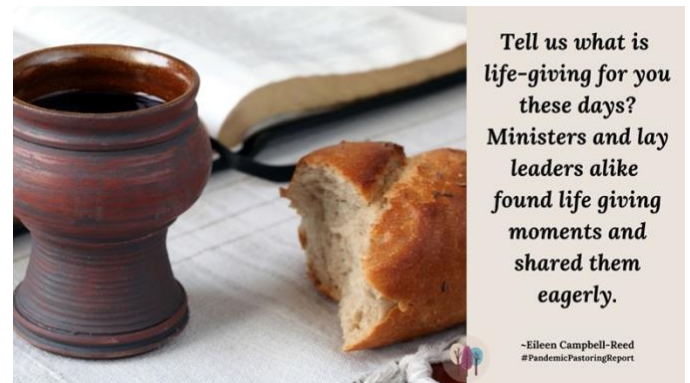
For more than two years I’ve been closing qualitative interviews with this invitation: *Tell us what is life-giving for you these days?* Although the surveys included a handful of refusals on the question of delight, I believe most everyone responded to this question. Ministers and lay leaders alike found grace-filled moments and shared them eagerly.

They told us about interacting with the preschoolers in the weekday school, watching them laugh and play. Lots of people told us about going outside. We heard about how life-giving it was to make human connections, to survive Covid-19, to witness people transforming their lives, to see church doing more with less, and rising to the occasion of a crisis, and to finally take notice of racial injustice, to “scale down ministry and reimagine how we serve the community,” to be with family and pets and teenagers in the youth group.

One pastor answered with this story, “My dad was in the hospital with Covid in January for about a

week. He was on a ventilator. It was very serious. And the ways people in this congregation just showed up to take care of me! And I'm saying, *That's my job!* And they're saying, *It's mutual!* They are truly wonderful and astounding ...They care so much. It's really a gift.”

A pastor in the LPI study told us this. “I have been reminded yet again that ministry is so much bigger than any one local church, that God works in the cracks and crevices of our lives, filling them with grace, and that loving and serving God is ministry, regardless of how much one is being paid.”

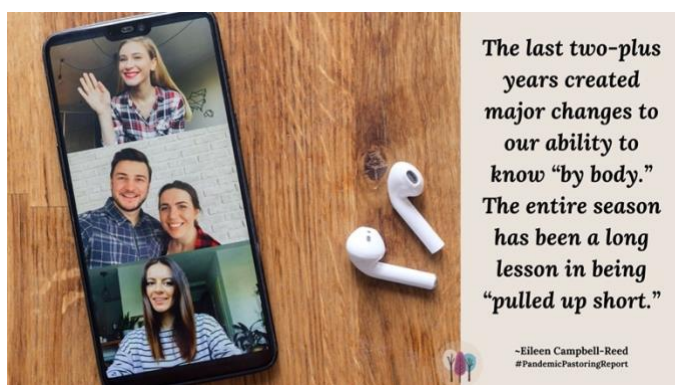


Concluding thoughts on the interviews

The power of hearing story upon story of what it was like for lay leaders and chaplains and priests to live through COVID-19 and the multiple pandemics of the last two-plus years cannot be overstated. That power is in showing the collective experience yet in all its particularities. The stories also bear witness to the end of an old era and the birth of a new one for churches and their leaders. With time we will understand more about what exactly has been born, and for now we need to continue to listen patiently and learn from the suffering and the resilience, the desolations and the improvisations, the griefs and the graces.

Analysis

The responses and stories from surveys and interviews stand solidly as witness to the changes brought on by Covid-19 and multiple pandemics. Yet the times deserve are careful analysis beyond the stories themselves. Several themes for analysis emerged as I lived with the findings from this study. The following themes offer frameworks for understanding what has happened and help us to rethink ministry as we continue living forward – the only direction we can go – into a new era. The last two-plus years created major changes to our ability to know “by body.” The entire season has been a long lesson in being pulled up short. And there were no mentors ahead of us on the road. These realities created grief and losses that are difficult to name and grasp, yet they need our lament and loving attention, nevertheless. One of our many losses was the inability to tell meaningful future stories, and now we have an invitation to craft them anew.



Changes to Embodied Knowing

“I’ve had difficulty making new connections during the pandemic. It seems to me that previously established relationships are relatively simple to sustain but connecting to new members and helping them connect to each other has been a challenge” (APTS clergy survey).

Ministers and lay leaders learn and practice ministry in an embodied and relational, spiritual, and

integrated way. Much of that knowing is not in our heads, as schooling leads us to believe. Rather we know “by body” and take our cues for what to do from our immediate situation. We typically remain unaware of this kind of knowing in a conscious way. And yet we move and operate and make decisions “by body” and “by relational connection” and by social and situational cues, and by intuition, which is really a matter of multiple cases of experience built up into knowing that no longer needs our deliberation to be operative. It simply becomes our mode of being in the world.

This kind of knowing is the way many church people knew (for good and sometimes for ill) how to be together for worship, prayer, singing, eating, and ministries of benevolence and care in church contexts and other ministry sites. We know what to do and how to act and interact – all as if without thinking, knowing by body and by relationship and by being embedded in the situation itself.

What the pandemic did in a thousand different ways was to up-end all of our embodied and relational and situated knowing. Isolation changed our everyday habits and patterns of interaction, disrupting our schedules, and pausing our rituals. Many people felt adrift in life in general. And people accustomed to worshiping and being in community at their churches were stuck without a clear way forward. It left us in a state of grief. We lost something that we didn’t really know how to describe or name. Yet the loss was felt deeply in our bones, profoundly in our relationships, and existentially in our absence from one another. Many of us entered into what Pauline Boss has called an “ambiguous grief.” The exact nature of our losses is unclear, and yet our sense of loss is overwhelming.

Many pastors and ministers, priests and chaplains, continue even now to cope with the disturbance of their previous routines, rituals, and habits. Even if some situations remain stable, many other important aspects of life and work no longer operate in an expected or comprehensible ways. Not only has the world changed but our ability to navigate through it is not immediately clear. **We are in a new era of ministry, and we need to move our bodies and arrange our relationships and gather our communities and different and more complex ways.**

Being pulled up short

"I've got problems. I speak too quickly and listen too little. This is made worse with the pandemic and the awkwardness of sitting in silence either on the phone or Zoom. I speak things out loud that are likely better left unsaid (in terms of racism/recognition of white privilege, etc.) as I work on understanding them better myself. I was recently called out by my boss for a racist phrase/viewpoint which was an awful experience, but through reflection, I think this odd practice of mine of being confessional (or saying out loud what I am recognizing as 'not good') is unhelpful. However, I am also recognizing that it comes from years of trying to stake my claim as a woman in ministry. I've always felt like I have to ask people to do things by first admitting my downfall with the same thing. When our diversity director talked through this conversation with me, she pointed out that my behavior is manipulation. She was also able to show me that my phrasing of my confession to my boss (who is a person of color) could only be taken as: *This is how white professionals do this, and if you can't respond the way we want, then you are stupid.* I was shocked and saddened, because my own understanding was the opposite of that" (pastor in the LPI Project survey).

This pastor found herself in awkward and uncertain moments more than once in the past two years. Even her efforts to learn by thinking aloud were doing harm. Many white people, including church leaders, found themselves confronted by their own deep-seated, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit racism in the last two years. Rather than being only called out and shamed, this pastor received feedback, support, and she took time for reflection. She made deeper connections and she expanded her awareness about her ways of leading. She knows she still has more learning to do.

A typical part of the learning process is what educational theorist, Deborah Kerdeman calls being pulled up short. It's coming face-to-face with our *not knowing*. The disruptions of the last two-plus years, however, have been a widespread and massive *not knowing*. Everyone has been pulled up short in one way or another, and there is no one who's wiser than another about how to get through a global pandemic. We can study history, read books, bring together the best minds in a Zoom room. And yet everyone is

simply figuring it out like everyone else. Fortunately, in the chronic pandemic of racism, however, there are many mentors and wise guides who can help those who are called out and pulled up short to shift their understandings and behavior.

Kerdeman's concept of being pulled up short provides a useful framework for understanding how people learn in practice.²² There is of course the long patient putting in time and practice that build skills with a slow drip-drip-drip of change. This is the week-by-week planning and leading worship, successive visits to offer pastoral care, teaching Bible study through the lectionary, planning the cycle of the church year, etc. There's an important dialectic, however, between this daily, weekly, and routine skill building and the more intense and uncertain moments of crisis.

Dramatic and powerful learning is possible when a moment of crisis or clarity appears, a moment when one does not know how to proceed, a moment when one is pulled up short. At this very moment, the learner/pastor has to reach for everything they know and all the people who can help them. They come to face emotional intensity and uncertainty as well as trusting in something sacred beyond their ability to know. How ministers and pastors and lay leaders navigate these moments is a test of character and skill and leaves a deep impression and lasting change in how one inhabits pastoral imagination.²³

Living in a new era of ministry means more experiences of being pulled up short. Yet it is the only way forward to learn the complexity of how to lead through unprecedented times. Everyday routines and business as usual will not give us what we need for this new season.

No mentors

One of the biggest problems of being pulled up short, which is a common experience for every new and beginning minister, is that pre-pandemic, there were mentors and peers to reach out to who are somewhat more experienced, further down the path. People who had been around the block where you are now standing on the corner. However, this time there was no such mentor. No map to get around the block. We were all in the same ridiculous lifeboat together.

Certainly, there were wiser people and people with more experience of leading through crisis. Recent seminary grads told us about reaching out to their seminary professors for mentoring. Professors didn't necessarily know more about what to do in a pandemic, but they do often have more ministry experience; and they were willing to stay with the new ministers until together they figured out solutions to pressing problems. Sometimes it took very long conversations on Zoom to get to that point.

This lack of mentoring or having anyone further down the pike on these dilemmas also turned us all into peer mentors for one another in the world of ministry and theological education (and in many other professions as well). And going it alone led some ministers to a kind of exhaustion and stress that took quite a toll. Pastors and ministers in our study did turn to each other, to peer groups, and life coaches, therapists, and spiritual directors. **There may be no mentors in a pandemic, yet that reality created opportunities in this new era of ministry for pastors and lay leaders to trust in each other, the Holy, and their own best instincts to lead with courage.**



Grief and loss

"We don't know how to process this grief. And it has become so prevalent and apparent. And in it is not acute grief, but it is a long-standing grief that will carry us into the next five years. So learning how to name it and talk about it. And to recognize that I don't have the answers to it. And I think that

is something I really would like to struggle with a little bit more" (Rev. Nancy, pastoral resident).

The losses during the pandemic are difficult to describe. Many of them were felt without being easily named. The loss of connection and isolation figured large in the survey responses. The multiple chronic pandemics of racism, healthcare disparities, and economic inequities that were revealed in the last two-plus years evoked loss and a need for lament. Pastors and lay leaders experienced grief over a long list of absences and gaps in their community's life together. Statements from ministers we interviewed illustrate grief over crumbling theology, the loss of physical presence, and the ministerial work that did not and could not happen.

Rev. Nancy tried to name the struggle she felt with her pastoral grief. She said, "I don't really know where to go from here. I think grief, and how we experience [loss] in the church are directly linked to how we understand our theology of the church. And this past year so much of our church foundations have crumbled, and we need to rebuild. And the reason we have to rebuild this [is] because oftentimes, not always, our foundations were crumbling before, and it took a pandemic to [reveal] it." She says the lack of theological foundation along with all the other losses has her thinking about "how we can equip people for grief, in the church and in the world." Rev. Nancy wants to reset the church's foundation in a theology of Christ and help her congregation see the connections between communion and community.

When asked about the challenges of the pandemic, a lay leader named Paul (he/him) who works in men's ministry in a Black Baptist church told us about a loss that feels hard to describe. He said, "personally my biggest struggle is the whole concept of disconnect. And I'm not a person that talks a lot. But I like to see people's faces and their reactions, because their eyes and their facial expressions, often tell you more than what the actual words from their mouth, tell you. When we had virtual services, I found myself getting distracted because there's so much going on at home (cooking in the kitchen, grandkids running through the house, all this kind of stuff going on). And I found it very distracting. And I couldn't get

that connection that I usually get when I'm [in the sanctuary]. I couldn't feel the full power of the Holy Spirit, taking over my soul. So, I'm still struggling with that right now, even though our doors are once again open, and we are having in-person services, I'm still struggling with some sort of disconnect."

Elder Tess, a United Methodist pastor in an urban setting, says when it comes to loss and grief in her pastoring work, she thinks about two columns. The first column would be "the creative, innovative things pastors did [like] getting online for the first time, putting Advent boxes together for kids, etc. But there's also a column of all of the things that did not happen. People died alone because nursing homes weren't open; people died without a prayer in person because hospitals weren't letting us in... and what bothers me is that those two columns don't match up. The Advent box didn't meet some needs. It was creative. We worked so hard. But there still were ministerial things that didn't happen. And I think that it will take a while for me to have grace for myself, and I don't think I'm alone in that. There's a lot that didn't get done and naming that grief is one thing... forgiving ourselves in some way, allowing grace for ourselves would be ... a third column."

Queen is a lay leader, minister's spouse, and she works in marriage ministry and youth ministry in her Black Baptist congregation. She summarized her griefs in a few words as, "personal challenges, lack of closure, and not being able to close the loop." She says each one impacted her ministry and the entire congregation. This reality was mixed with the "moments where I felt okay about the ministry and like we had the option to still learn and grow." Yet feelings of discouragement, sadness and uncertainty persisted especially in relationship to the marriage ministry she leads.

Queen, Paul, Elder Tess, and Rev. Nancy are all describing facets of what psychologist Pauline Boss calls "ambiguous loss." In her 2021 book *The Myth of Closure*, Boss, who has been working on this idea for several decades, make connections to the losses of the pandemic and ongoing social and racial injustices.

Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear and without official verification or

immediate resolution, which may never be achieved. The people we love can be physically gone but kept psychologically present—or the opposite, physically present but psychologically gone. We feel our grief, but because no death has occurred or been verified, it is often criticized as premature. Ambiguous losses then lead to a disenfranchised grief because others do not see the loss as credible and worthy of grief.²⁴



These losses from the long pandemic season will not simply disappear. Queen laments the lack of closure. And Paul describes the loss of connection which ran through many of the stories we heard over the last two years. Even with a return to in-person worship and church meetings, the sense of loss of connection remains for these ministry leaders and countless others.

What shall we do with these losses that will not go away and that often do not even have a name? As Boss points out, the more we can acknowledge, address, and ritualize our ambiguous losses, the less negative effect they will have on us and the more we can build resilience for life. One gift that churches can offer into the malaise of grief is to take the simple steps of acknowledging and honoring that grief, make space for lament, engage the rituals of faith that have for centuries accompanied humanity in its losses and griefs.

There is no return to normal, no having things the way they used to be. The losses are real and enduring. They need to be named and grieved, acknowledged and ritualized, and plumbed for their meaning(s). Not all losses have simple or straightforward meanings, which adds to the

ambiguity. Yet this grief work needs to be done, and pastors and lay leaders will be wise to attend with care to these losses in their own lives and in their congregations. **We cannot move fully into a new era of ministry without concurrently attending to our grief over what we lost and for all that is passing away.**

Unknown future stories

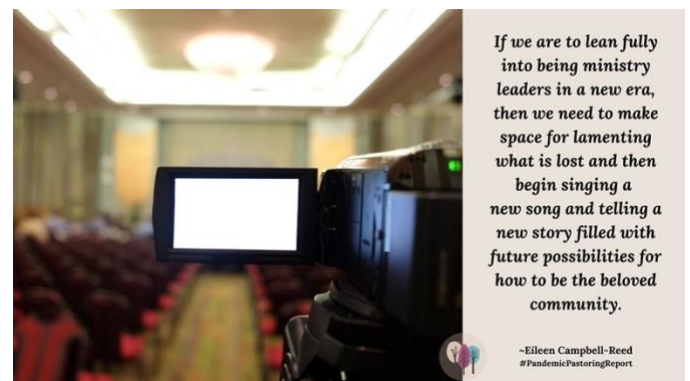
“I really felt like I was moving toward a new visioning process. Our team had scheduled to meet late March. They were all excited about this next step of our church’s life. Now that is postponed until ... when exactly? August will be my one-year mark, so in a way I feel cheated from my first real year with my congregation. I’m thankful I did have a few months to build those relationships prior to the pandemic but going into this year I really had different plans. We all did. I’m not sure I’ve even processed that loss fully yet” (Baptist pastor in North Carolina, 2020).

One of the losses that was hard to name for many people while living through the Covid-19 pandemic has been what the late pastoral theologian Andy Lester would call the diminishment or loss of “future stories.”²⁵ We saw this most readily when people lamented the loss of wedding plans and birthday parties, graduations and funeral or memorial services, deferred vacations, delayed moves, and job transitions.

Yet it turns out that people live more by the future stories they tell themselves than just the big ones we ritualize through notable cultural practices and rites of passage. Every day we tell ourselves future stories about everything from what will have for lunch to what it will mean when we finally have gray hair, to where we will serve next in ministry. One of the effects of the multiple shifts – global pandemic, threat to human life, reduction of movement, depletion of social connections – was a serious dimming of future stories on every level. This loss also impacted us on every level. One pastor told us, “I had so much planned for the rest of the year. It’s been hard to let go of all the visioning work I’ve done. I constantly feel like I’m pastoring with my left hand. Nothing seems like it flows easily or comfortably.”

Ministers know as well as anyone that life is largely open-ended and under-defined. Things can change at the drop of a hat. That change is not usually as dramatic as a global pandemic or the terrible revelations of multiple kinds of cultural violence on such vivid display as they were in the summer of 2020. So we typically go right on making our plans and telling ourselves a multiplicity of future stories when we are in a relatively safe and stable world. The despair of our times since March 2020, however, cut deeply into feelings of safety and stability. It dimmed our collective hope. And that despair also cut into our ability to tell multiple possible future stories in our communities of faith and in our personal lives. For some people that hurt their ability to tell any future story at all. We have an exploding mental health crisis to show for it.

Churches are repositories of hope when they are at their best. They tell not only the stories of the past and creation of the world by a loving God and the redemption of the world by a beloved Jesus. They also have been witnesses to the good news of the gospel which gives us grace and hope. Many churches leaned into this theological identity, but others struggled as Rev. Miguel told us “to see a God of possibilities.” The unknown future stories and the lost future stories and the inability to construct new future stories all need our lament. These losses, although somewhat intangible, are worthy of our grief. **If we are to lean fully into being ministry leaders in a new era, then we need to make space for lamenting what is lost and then begin singing a new song and telling a new story filled with future possibilities for how to be the beloved community.**



If we are to lean fully into being ministry leaders in a new era, then we need to make space for lamenting what is lost and then begin singing a new song and telling a new story filled with future possibilities for how to be the beloved community.

~Eileen Campbell-Reed
#PandemicPastoringReport

Recommendations for Ministers

For this new era of ministry, you will need both the ancient wisdom of your tradition and a willingness to improvise, take risks, and make new partnerships. Here are five concrete recommendations growing out of the #PandemicPastoring research:

- Tend to your own soul with the spiritual practices of your tradition, and perhaps beyond, extending patience and grace to yourself and your beloveds
- Look for opportunities to acknowledge and honor grief, making use of ritual, the power of words for naming, the container of worship, opportunities for teaching, creative space-making, and your calendar for conversations
- Put learning at the heart of what you do in ministry by noticing where you're pulled up short and how you lean into ministry as an embodied, relational, spiritual, and integrated practice
- Look for the places grace shows up, notice what is life-giving in your location, and put your love and energy in these places
- Take a risk and responsibility as you lead and bring partners along the way

Recommendations for Churches

In this new era of ministry begin by recognizing you're not the only game in town. You are part of a larger ecology of spiritual organizations and religious identities. Use the findings of the #PandemicPastoring Report to consider the following:

- Understand the lifecycle of your church
- Engage questions that lead to self-understanding and meaningful purpose
- Use tools like appreciative inquiry and asset mapping to think from where you are and create new future stories
- Resist the consumeristic and capitalistic definitions of work and money that undermine the spiritual community you are called to be
- Question the way your traditions have been shaped by privilege and white supremacy and marginalization and seek wisdom to decide what to maintain and what to let go
- Know your neighbors and look for ways to partner in this new era of ministry

Recommendations for Lay Leaders

You are the backbone and lifeblood, institutional memory, and bearers of embodied faith. May these gifts serve you and your community well in this new era of ministry. Please consider these five recommendations growing out of the #PandemicPastoring Report:

- Prioritize your spiritual well-being and engage in practices of prayer and spiritual formation
- Embrace your gratitude for being part of a community of faith and remember to speak that gratitude aloud
- Look for ways to partner with your pastors and church staff, because they need you and you need them; collaboration is the way forward
- Mentor young people and adults to help them pay attention to God's call -- not so they can do things the way you have done them -- but so they can notice the ways God is calling them into this new era of ministry
- Keep learning and choosing love and life

Recommendations for Theological Education

In this new era of ministry, you have a great responsibility and burden for our future leaders. Please consider the following recommendations:

- Embrace case-based teaching with stories and examples that help students imagine how it will be to lead
- Focus on teaching ministry *as a spiritual practice*
- Cultivate pastoral imagination by always asking: *So what? Why does this matter? How will we integrate practice and knowledge?*
- Listen to your graduates and pay attention to studies of ministry in practice; then think backwards to what is needed in your classroom and the curriculum as a whole
- Hire professors who are interested in the church and ministry broadly understood alongside their disciplinary specialty
- Train people for this new era of ministry rather than the one that is passing away

¹ See Three Minute Ministry Mentor's weekly posts since December 2018 that address cultivating pastoral imagination and after March of 2020 often address #PandemicPastoring: <https://3mmm.us/welcome>

² Eileen Campbell-Reed, *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

³ Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2003).

⁴ Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, "Ministry as Spiritual Practice: How Pastors Learn to See and Respond to the 'More' of a Situation," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 125–44. See also, Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, "Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing Is Practical Theological Work," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 2 (2013): 1–28.

⁵ More than 50 specific challenges were named by the two groups in the survey.

⁶ The label "purple church" evolved to describe congregations with members divided (or co-existing) with respect to their commitments to blue/Democrat and red/Republican party politics.

⁷ "To be effective, pastoral care conversation needs to address attachment, time, context, and meaning-making." Philip Browning Helsel, *Pastoral Care and Counseling: An Introduction; Care for Stories, Systems, and Selves* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 38.

⁸ Scholar of grief, Pauline Boss says "ambiguous loss" and the total lack of "closure" are hallmarks of the long season of the coronavirus pandemic. Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

⁹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

¹⁰ As of August 31, the "Johns Hopkins Covid-19 Dashboard" reported Total Cases at 603,153,792 and Total Deaths at 6,495,129 globally. The death rate from Covid-19 was higher in 2020. See: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

¹¹ Some pastors in the study reported increased attendance with the shift to digital platforms, but those early increases did not counter the steady declines in church attendance in recent years. See: <https://www.barna.com/changes-behind-the-scenes/>

¹² We used the word "pastoring" with the ministers and changed it to "times" for lay leaders.

¹³ This could be related to the ongoing challenges ministers face in caring for their physical and mental health, a struggle common in the helping professions. See for example the "Duke Clergy Health Initiative" which follows United Methodist pastors, asking health related questions: <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/chi/Flourishing%20Report.pdf>

¹⁴ One issue presented in 2020 was not on the survey in 2021. "Speaking out or taking action for racial justice." The team made a decision to address the concerns in the interview rather than the survey.

¹⁵ Campbell-Reed and Scharen, "Ministry as a Spiritual Practice." See also Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

¹⁶ See Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁷ Barna, "Well-Being, Attendance, Giving: An Update on Current Church Trends" [Articles State of the Church 2020](https://www.barna.com/research/update-current-church-trends/) in [Leaders & Pastors](https://www.barna.com/research/update-current-church-trends/) in [State of the Church 2020](https://www.barna.com/research/update-current-church-trends/) (April 14, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/update-current-church-trends/>).

¹⁸ Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, "The Learning Pastoral Imagination Project: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice." *Auburn Studies*, no. 21 (Winter 2016): 6–8.

¹⁹ Heidi Neumark, "A church undergoes structural change," *Christian Century* (August 5, 2022), available: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/church-undergoes-structural-change>

²⁰ Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). See chapter 1.

²¹ Ibid, p. 3.

²² Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," in *Education and Practice: Upholding the Integrity of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Joseph Dunne and Pádraig Hogan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

²³ See chapter 39, "Pulled up short" in Campbell-Reed, *Pastoral Imagination* 182–86.

²⁴ Boss, *The Myth of Closure*, 17.

²⁵ Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).



LEARNING
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