“And Also with Your Spirit, Pastor”: Toward a Balanced Framework Designed to Forge, Cultivate, and Sustain Holy Friendships among Clergy

By

William James Watson

Date: 4/5/2021

Approved:

L. Gregory Jones, 1st Reader

Andrew Wakefield, 2nd Reader

William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Over the last several decades, pastors, ministers, and other clergy have benefited from countless biblical, ecclesial, theological, and practical resources designed to provide church leaders with appropriate strategies for discipleship, mission work, preaching, and pastoral care. Additionally, seminaries and divinity schools have successfully trained and prepared ministry leaders to serve local churches and parachurch organizations through the biblical, Christ-centered teaching and proclamation of the reign and rule of God. Yet, numerous pastors, ministers, and other clergy suffer from various types of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual maladies that plague their health and well-being. Church leaders share these burdens; however, these burdens manifest themselves in unique and specific ways. To endure the hardships of ministry and vocationally flourish, pastors and other trained ministers must learn to create, cultivate, and sustain viable, holy friendships with the only people who can truly empathize—fellow clergy.

Utilizing numerous academic, biblical, and theological resources, this thesis exposes how desperately necessary holy, clergy friendships are in combatting the congregational stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue that ministers tend to experience throughout the course of their ministries. Moreover, many clergy suffer from a lack of wholesome self-care, which prevents pastors from adequately and maturely facing the problems or managing the conflicts that arise in the local church and its community.

After discussing various ministry burdens, this thesis establishes that God institutes holy friendship and intends it for God’s glory—holy friendship is a covenant blessing between God and humanity and between humanity and itself. This thesis focuses this shared blessing of holy friendships through the biblical lenses of God’s covenant with Israel, citing specific examples of covenant friendships among biblical and postbiblical saints.
After solidifying holy friendship as God’s gift to God’s self and humanity through biblical and postbiblical figures, the thesis moves toward a framework for helping clergy find balance in their lives and in their ministries. This occurs by acknowledging and accepting the power of reconciliation, as well as learning to embody it through the threefold mediating ministry of Jesus Christ (munus triplex). Moving from the historical and ecclesial problems that stymie the joy and well-being of pastors and their congregations, this thesis delineates the threefold mediating ministry of Jesus Christ (prophet, priest, and royalty) and offers a theological and practical framework for creating and sustaining holy friendships among clergy. As pastors and ministers begin to view themselves and their fellow clergy through the lenses of priestly vulnerability, prophetic imagination, and royal transformation, hidden yet important questions begin to surface, and clergy form vital bonds through shared suffering. This thesis attempts to create a framework for church leaders to learn how to invest in lifelong, enduring holy friendships with other clergy. These holy friendships will benefit ministry leaders as they gain interpersonal insights and encouragement, affirm their shared vocational mission, and celebrate authentic, spiritual companionship along their ministry journeys. The goal of these holy friendships among clergy is a clearer sense of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, resulting in improved, overall clergy health. As pastors, priests, and other ministers learn to cultivate and sustain holy clergy companionship they become better equipped to endure both personal and congregational hardships. Just as Elijah experienced the sustaining power of God under a desert broom tree, ministers must also be fed through intentional, vulnerable relationships that help them spiritually grow and change. As they freely draw from the reservoir of empathic friendship, Christian ministers experience the power of reconciliation in and through
the Spirit of Christ in one another. Empowered by this truth, all things become possible for clergy engaged in holy friendships.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................................i

1. Introduction: A Living Parable................................................................................................................1

   1.1 Overview of the Argument and Chapter Breakdown........................................................................4

   1.2 “And Also With Your Spirit, Pastor”: A Working Definition of Holy, Clergy Friendships..........................8

   1.3 Scope and Limits of the Thesis..........................................................................................................11

2. The Clergy’s Shared Burden: Holy Friendships Are Desperately Needed to Carry the Weight of Ministry.........................................................................................................................13

   2.1 “Something’s Got to Give, Lord” – Exegeting Numbers 11:1–17..................................13

      2.1.1 Perpetual Pastoral Stress.........................................................................................................19

      2.1.2 Susceptibility to Empathy and Compassion Fatigue.........................................................27

      2.1.3 High Risk of Ministry Burnout..............................................................................................34

      2.1.4 Facing the Shame, Loneliness, and Wounds of Ministry Failure....................................46

      2.1.5 Absence of Wholesome, Ministry Self-Care .................................................................55

3. The Clergy’s Shared Blessing: Holy Friendships Are Covenant Blessings Between God and Humanity..........................................................................................................................59

   3.1 “God’s Blessing: A Yoke of Rest” – A Matthew 11:25–30 Homily................................................59

   3.2 Holy Friendship as God’s Initiative: Covenant Types, Procedures, and Roles.................................68

      3.2.1 God’s Friendship with Noah.................................................................................................74

      3.2.2 God’s Friendship with Abraham..........................................................................................76

      3.2.3 God’s Friendship with Moses..............................................................................................78

      3.2.4 God’s Friendship with David.............................................................................................82

      3.2.5 God’s Friendship with Jesus..............................................................................................84
3.3 Holy Friendship as Ministry Companions: Biblical & Postbiblical Exemplars........................................................................................................88

3.3.1 Old Testament: Elijah & Elisha | Ruth & Naomi ..........................89

3.3.2 New Testament: Paul & His Ministry Partners | Jesus & His Disciples .................................................................................................91

3.3.3 Postbiblical: St. Ambrose & St. Augustine | St. Perpetua & St. Felicity | St. Teresa of Avila & St. John of the Cross ............................................94

4. The Clergy’s Shared Balance: Holy Friendships are Forged, Cultivated, and Sustained by the Threefold Mediating Ministry of Jesus Christ (Munus Triplex)..100

4.1 “The Ministry of Reconciliation: Clergy as Visible Representatives” – A Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:18–20.................................................................100

4.2 The Munus Triplex: Jesus’s Threefold Office of Mediating Ministry as a Hermeneutic for Holy Friendship.................................................................103

4.2.1 Priestly Vulnerability—A Picture of Christ’s Humility.................105

4.2.1.1 The Kenotic, Incarnational Question: Where Are We?...107

4.2.2 Prophetic Imagination—A Picture of Christ’s Disruption.................................................................108

4.2.2.1 The Eidetic, Incarnational Question: Where Should We Be?.................................................................................................109

4.2.3 Royal Transformation—A Picture of Christ’s Rule and Reign….110

4.2.3.1 The Metamorphic, Incarnational Question: Where Can We Be?.................................................................................................111

4.3 “The Covenant of the Broom Tree”: A Balanced, Pragmatic Framework for Holy Friendships among Clergy.................................................................112

4.3.1 Forging Clergy-Initiated Communities of Priestly Vulnerability...115

4.3.2 Cultivating Clergy Discussions of Prophetic Possibility............119

4.3.3 Sustaining Holy, Clergy Friendships through Spiritual Mutability.................................................................................................121
4.3.4 The Benediction

Appendix 1

Bibliography
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Threefold Mediating Ministry of Christ..................104

Figure 2: The Covenant of the Broom Tree..........................125
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In summary, please receive my most humble “thank you” for being enduringly dear, eternally valued, and, above all, my personal, priceless, and beloved holy friends.
1. Introduction: A Living Parable

I get it. Truly—I get it.

The night before my writing retreat at the Prayer Center began, my fellow clergy friends from our Pastor Support Group and I received notification via email that one of our group member’s ninety-four-year-old mother had passed away. After perusing his mother’s online obituary, I realized that the funeral and subsequent graveside service would take place less than a half an hour’s drive from the hermitage where I would be staying. This would work well. I would arrive at the hermitage, wake up the next day, and attend the service at the cemetery. I knew my presence would mean a lot to my dear friend. Within minutes I emailed a reply to my grief-stricken pastor-friend, offering him the following words of comfort and consolation:

Brother, every moment you spoke of your dear mom was a moment filled with appreciation, love, and grace. I am so glad that you shared her with us in conversations through the years, and no doubt you will keep her memory and legacy alive as you live out your ministry of grace in everything you do for others. I wish I could hug your neck right now, but I know the Holy Spirit is doing a superb job in bringing you and your family comfort during these fragile moments. You are loved, you are appreciated, you are highly valued, and I am absolutely honored by your friendship and compassionate loyalty. God bless you and your family as you prepare to remember her, and always know we are here for you. Hugs, hugs, hugs, dear one. Love you!

Next, I opened my online calendar and logged in my time of departure for the morning of the graveside remembrance. In the meantime, my friend prepared to officiate his own mother’s funeral, taking on a most difficult role in pastoral ministry—but possible indeed with God’s empowering mercy through the Holy Spirit.

Two days later, I drove the circuitous, rural roads of central Rockingham County in the Piedmont of North Carolina in order to stand alongside my grieving friend and fellow clergyman. Standing with him on this difficult day symbolized my ongoing support and loyalty;
it was easy to support a friend who always treated me a like a member of his own family. I arrived early to the cemetery and waited in my car until I observed the funeral cavalcade enter the memorial gardens with a hearse in tow. I watched my friend emerge from his assigned car and amble slowly toward the head of the casket. Shortly thereafter, various sounds of car doors closing and shoes scuffling on the asphalt filled the melancholy air. Like others in attendance, I walked between the rows of tombstones and headstones to find my own place to stand, careful to maintain six feet of distance between me and another person while wearing my facemask (COVID-19 preventative measures). As the immediate family took their seats underneath the shaded tent at the designated burial plot, my pastor-friend peered over a decent crowd of mostly familiar faces and opened his lips to speak. Then I heard him address the crowd at the graveside, promising that he would be brief; after all, everything that he wanted to say was spoken at the funeral home, and now he only wanted to share a couple scripture passages and close in prayer.

When he stopped speaking, I watched him flip the pages of his worn, well-used Bible to the ever-familiar Psalm 23. I took a long, lasting look at my dear friend. In typical fashion he wore his patented short-sleeved dress shirt with a loose-fitting tie and stood comfortably in his big, burly black dress shoes. In all the years I have known him, I have never seen this particular clergy friend wear a suit. In fact, his style and his uncanny knack for not caring about the others’ judgments are two of the things I love and appreciate about him and his ministry the most. (To be clear—he cares deeply for others’ hearts and affirms and ministers to them in their suffering, but he never lets others’ thoughts and expectations distract him from living out God’s call to be himself always.) After my pastor-friend finished reading Psalm 23, he segued from Jesus’s compassionate, pastoral care to the bold hope of the resurrected body in 1 Corinthians 15. Finally, before he closed in prayer, he heard a tumbling sound behind him and proceeded to
make a humorous quip about the flower arrangement that had tumbled to the ground. This comment relaxed those in attendance as a bit of laughter filled the air. Interestingly, humor is another trait I appreciate about my clergy-pal. He and I love sharing puns and inventing them on the spur of the moment when we gather for our monthly Pastor Support Group meetings. For amid the chaos and difficulties of ministry life, I am content simply knowing that my fellow minister-friend and I can crack a joke or two and smile, if just for a passing moment in time. After all, scripture tells us that “a cheerful disposition is good for your health” (Prv 17:22, MSG). Likewise, holy friends are imperative to good health, too.

Yet the cemetery was not the most fitting location for prolonged laughter in those fragile moments. Instead, when the service ended, I patiently waited my turn to tell my dear friend three words that I know he needed: “I love you.” I removed my face mask so that he could identify me, and when he realized who I was his eyes widened—and so did his smile. I could tell that my presence at the graveside meant a lot to him, especially since he didn’t expect me to attend; moreover, he thanked me for coming to the graveside service. Because of the close, intimate friendship we share, he did not waste any time in lamenting other related feelings of intense grief. I listened as he shared the pain not only from losing his dear mother but also from remembering the former anguish of an emotionally absent father, a so-called parent who only demonstrated his love when he felt his children earned or deserved it. He briefly spoke to me about his father, alluding to the heart-wrenching wounds he experienced from his dad’s silence during the first three decades of his life. His father refrained from vocalizing any love or meaningful affirmation during those formative years, and consequently his father forfeited the opportunity to build a strong father-son relationship with my friend. I recognized, several moments later, that in addition to shouldering the emotional burden of his recently deceased
mother, he was simultaneously attempting to manage unanticipated, thirty-year-old painful memories. (His father died when he was thirty-five years old.) Now that both parents were dead, his sullen face communicated the regret of “what might have been,” and his tired eyes revealed the sadness of his inner child who yearned to hear and experience the words every boy wants to hear from his father: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11, NIV).¹

I get all that he told me. I get the frustration and the heartache. I get it.

More specifically, I get him. And praise God, my friend gets me, too.

What a holy blessing indeed.

1.1 Overview of the Argument and Chapter Breakdown

From the two-minute feedback from my grief-stricken clergy-friend at the cemetery that day, I reflected a little longer about his life, my life, and the lives of fellow clergy who are, like all human beings, fragile children of God reflecting God’s own image. After all, this particular pastor-friend and I spent over seven years participating in each other’s suffering; even today we are still learning how to share life honestly and transparently. Yet, this kind of authenticity is rare and special in the life of a pastor. While my clergy-friend could have shared this highly fragile and personal information with church members throughout his previous pastorates, would those parishioners understand? Would they keep confidences? Would they listen thoroughly and humbly? Perhaps the responses to these questions might be: “Not exactly.” Therefore, it begs the following questions: Where do pastors go when they need a pastor? How can pastors find,

¹ All Bible translations are NRSV unless noted otherwise.
develop, and sustain safe, authentic, and holy friendships among other clergy who understand the demands of vocational ministry? The answer, I believe, is in the formation and cultivation of meaningful, life-giving clergy friendships, relationships that embody the loyalty and love of the one and only true friend—Jesus Christ. Jesus knows that pastors need pastors. Jesus knows that ministers understand ministers. Jesus knows that pastors need the empathy and understanding that holy friendships among fellow clergy can bring.

Like the parishioners I lead and serve, other pastors and church ministers also carry in their hearts a myriad of personal struggles, traumas and pain resulting from unresolved wounds or wasted opportunities for pursuing reconciliation. In addition to the daily emotional and spiritual burdens of ministry, pastors can suffer compassion fatigue and other stressors, which can lead to burnout and depression. To compound these pastoral health concerns, the inevitability of church conflict and other congregational hazards that often accompany it can lead to long-term suffering, unless they intentionally pursue meaningful relationships and appropriate self-care.² Pastors are expected to lead and manage the pressures of churches in and through times of difficulty, not just within the church walls but beyond the limits of the church campus; this expectation means formulating an appropriate and timely biblical response to the current social and political activities happening around them citywide, statewide, nationwide, and even worldwide. For example, at the time of writing this thesis, COVID-19 had taken the lives of millions of people globally.³ Racism and bigotry were escalating quickly, tearing and dividing the fabric of our free nation.⁴ Relationships between civilians and law enforcement were

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strained and in need of social repair.\textsuperscript{5} Political polarization and viral hate were spreading through social media as acceptable means of interpersonal communication. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding had increased year after year. In addition to remaining aware of cultural pain and suffering, a pastor must attend to both the emotional and spiritual health of her spouse and children as well as her own emotional and spiritual health; this critical skill in mindfulness requires a strong self-awareness in order to make specific plans for self-care throughout the pastor’s tenure. Even spiritually mature and well-prepared pastors suffer as they try and faithfully live out the vocation of preacher, pastor, counselor, worship leader, and administrator. Therefore, that many clergy leave within the first five years of vocational ministry is no surprise.\textsuperscript{6} Often operating in what is known as the proverbial fishbowl, pastors need protected, consecrated friendships with other pastors who can fully empathize and sympathize with their respected, humbling, and holy callings. With so many inside and outside influences threatening the health and effectiveness of today’s pastor, that clergy have safe, authentic spaces for healing, help, and hope is imperative. Though I have painted a dark picture of the reality of pastoral ministry, and though there exist ecclesial struggles and potential hindrances to practical, effective ministry, this holy vocation is altogether hopeful, imaginative, revitalizing, life-altering, heart-shaping, and community-transforming. The pastorate calls forth Holy Spirit-led, Christ-centered leaders who are authorized to love and exhort their parishioners to “deny themselves and take up their crosses daily and follow [Jesus]” (Lk 9:23, NRSV). Furthermore, I argue that pastors cannot operate as lone rangers—they need the compassionate and loving friendships with like-minded clergy: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their


\textsuperscript{6} Olson et al., \textit{A Guide to Ministry Self-Care}, 8.
toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help” (Eccl 4:9–10). Therefore, the telos of my project is to move pastors toward a practical, hermeneutical framework for creating, cultivating, and sustaining healthy and holy friendships among clergy. These holy clergy friendships, bound by shared ecclesial burdens and blessings, attempt to find a healthy balance in life and ministry through the intentional, consistent, and meaningful companionship they experience in all phases of their vocational journeys.

The thesis will be supported and woven together over three chapters using ecclesial, biblical, theological, and pragmatic research in order to demonstrate the need for established and sustaining holy clergy friendships. Chapter 2 focuses on the shared burdens that most, if not all, pastors experience: congregational stressors, compassion fatigue, ministry burnout, the absence of ministry self-care, and other related barriers to clergy health and well-being. These problems hinder healthy, flourishing parish ministries and prevent pastors from finding fulfillment and longevity in their pastorates and vocational positions. To address these problems, chapters 3 and 4 focus on God’s gift of holy friendship as expressed through the biblical and postbiblical bonds of covenant blessing, as well as through the vehicle of the three-fold, mediating ministry of Jesus Christ (*munus triplex*), respectively. Chapter 3 explores Matthew 11:28–30 as the foundational scripture, the biblical support for God’s covenantal friendship with Abraham and Jesus in particular, noting the significance of the various covenants revealed throughout the Old and New Testaments. Examples of biblical and postbiblical holy friendships, I argue, reflect the blessing of God’s grace-filled covenant with God’s people. Chapter 4 offers a practical structure for creating and sustain holy clergy friendships by first acknowledging and celebrating the blessing of relational renewal and restoration through the grace of reconciliation. Here, the pastor
embodies what it means to serve as a minister of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–20), developing clergy friendships that are simultaneously reconciled, both internally and interpersonally, through the framework of Jesus’s threefold mediating ministry of priestly vulnerability, prophetic imagination, and royal transformation. In this fourth and final chapter, I propose that the munus triplex gives pastors an excellent, practical model to create and sustain holy friendships among all those who serve in varying ministry contexts while fully depending upon the work of the Holy Spirit to bless and strengthen these Christ-centered relationships.

1.2 “And Also with Your Spirit, Pastor”: A Working Definition of Holy, Clergy Friendships

Perhaps the best way to begin this discussion on holy friendships among clergy is to observe Paul’s Trinitarian benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13, NRSV). In most liturgical churches around the world, the pastor might invoke a similar biblical greeting at the commencement of the worship service. The congregation subsequently is then called to respond to this Trinitarian blessing with a brief blessing of their own: “And also with your spirit.” For most church members in these ecclesial contexts, these opening greetings are expected forms of liturgical worship. This initial shared greeting is compassionate and thoughtful, though a lingering tendency exists for people to overlook the blessing due to its repetitive usage. What does a parishioner appreciate about the opening words of the priest? When one acknowledges and receives “The Lord be with you,” is “And also with your spirit” simply a rote response or an

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honest desire for God to dwell deeply and mercifully in the heart of the pastor? An alternative view might insist that a repetitive congregational response might actually develop habitual kindness towards the pastor rather than hinder it. Even still, due to several congregational stressors, conflicts, and the potential for burnout, as well as compassion fatigue and loneliness, clergy must wonder if this *et cum spiritu tuo* is genuine. If so, how does it manifest itself relationally between priest and parishioner, pastor and layperson? While many churches have loving and supportive members who reach out and support their parish leaders well, many pastors do not share a similar experience. Is this shared blessing an equal opportunity to participate in the holy dance of congregational life, much like the perichoresis of the Holy Trinity? Does the friendly, mutual engagement of both shepherd and sheep determine the blessing, or is the blessing one-sided? Could it be worse? Could the pastor and congregation speak the words but not have love for one another in their hearts? If a pastor is suffering from loneliness or social isolation, where does the pastor find, cultivate, and sustain holy friendships beyond the boundaries of the church property?

Theologian L. Gregory Jones describes holy friends as those who “challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.” This definition demonstrates the hard work and effort that true friends, set apart by God to fulfill divine purposes, must undertake. Furthermore, holy friends care enough to give tough love. Instead of merely offering lip service, holy friends are intentionally honest and upfront about their compassionate involvement in each other’s life. After all, too much is on the line not to care—the Kingdom of God is at stake. For these reasons, Jones believes that holy friends are the best vessels to help articulate God’s vision for one

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another. The only way to cultivate holy friendship, he explains, is by investing in one another’s life, creating quality time concurrent with large quantities of time. The value of these holy friendships cannot be underestimated as Jones believes that genuine, Christ-like communities grow from the hope and power that these holy friendships generate. Inquisitively, Jones asks the following: “How can we cultivate communities and institutions in which more people can discover the significance of holy friendships for their own lives, and offer such friendship to others?”

Numerous audiences can answer Jones’s question in a variety of ways, but for the sake of pastors, priests, and other church leaders, this thesis attempts to respond to that question in terms of the creation, cultivation, and sustainability of holy friendships among clergy. Pastors are a community of like-minded servant leaders whose vocation demands the best of what holy friendships can deliver. Pastors urgently need holy friends, specifically other clergy friends who challenge sins that they have come to love, affirm the gifts they are afraid to claim, and dream dreams they would not otherwise dream. A myriad of struggles and unique suffering that church ministers experience, not only in their congregations but also in their homes, produces urgency to forge these holy friendships. While the pastoral ministry is indeed rife with meaningful fellowship, worship, teaching, counseling, and mission work, pastors need fellow shepherds who empathize with the difficult seasons of pastoral ministry, those fellow clergy who “get it” and are able to say with a calm, bold assurance: “And also with your spirit, too, Pastor.” Therefore, since the life and work of the Christian minister is uniquely differentiated from other vocations, I submit that a new definition of holy friendships is necessary, a definition nuanced for pastors, priests, and other clergy that builds upon the Christ-centered, foundational work of L. Gregory Jones, “Discovering Hope.”
Jones: Holy friendships among clergy are forged within a genuine, affirming community of priestly vulnerability, cultivated through the daring possibilities of prophetic imagination, and sustained by the transforming power of God’s Kingdom reign in Christ. Pastors will build upon their understanding of L. Gregory Jones’s explanation of holy friends by exploring the gift of clergy friendship through the lens of the threefold mediating ministry of Jesus Christ. I will spend most of chapter 4 fleshing out this definition both theologically and practically.

1.3 Scope and Limits of the Thesis

This thesis engages the biblical, ecclesial, theological, and practical areas of holy friendships involving pastors and ministers, and other spiritual leaders within the context of the local church and other parachurch organizations. I define clergy (pastors, priests, ministers) as those men and women within the local church or parachurch organization who are called by God to lead others spiritually by a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–20), whose mission and vision is synonymous with God’s Kingdom reign and rule through Christ’s death on the cross and subsequent resurrection from the dead, and whose core values are the purposes of the church (worship, discipleship, evangelism, community building, and ministry; Acts 2:42–47). While this thesis focuses on all clergy, much of the focus concentrates on pastors and priests. This thesis will also take a broad, ecumenical approach to holy friendships among ordained clergy that is racially, ethnically, socially, and economically inclusive and is neither limited by gender nor sexual orientation. It is also important to note that while this thesis focuses on the pastor, clergy of all stripes are equally interchangeable throughout this proposal. Although this thesis speaks of holy friendships among clergy in categorical generalities, I acknowledge that more detailed emphases could emerge from in-depth research on particular clergy friendships or on unique,
niche groups of ministers (e.g., specific denomination, theological approach, age bracket, etc.). Additionally, considering same-gender or coed holy friendships among clergy, or how pastors in non-North American cultures develop intentional, holy friendships, may be beneficial. Even though my energy is spent looking at holy friendships among clergy in a broader sense, the majority of these explorations, while worthy of pursuit, will not be provided in this thesis.
2. The Clergy’s Shared Burden: Holy Friendships Are Desperately Needed to Carry the Weight of Ministry

2.1 “Something’s Got to Give, Lord” – Exegeting Numbers 11:1–17

The call to ministry is always spiritual. It is always purposeful. And it is always intended for a specific time, person, place, and reason. The voice of God still calls servant leaders out of their ordinary walks of life and along the extraordinary road of humble surrender to the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ. The voice, much like the one Elijah heard on Mt. Horeb centuries ago, still beckons men and women through a gentle whisper, calling them to lead churches as pastors, priests, and ministers within the various contexts of Kingdom mission. Like Elijah, pastoral leaders feed on God’s word and seek to embody the wisdom of the cross in order to accomplish Christ’s vision of self-denial and self-sacrifice: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’” (Mt 16:24–26, NRSV). Shepherds who preach and teach this gospel of suffering call their sheep to pick up their crosses and follow Jesus into the very places where people do not want to go or are afraid to go. Yet, clergy remind their congregations that the offering of self on behalf of another is the embodiment of God’s grace and mercy, the same grace and mercy that brings healing and hope to the oppressed, the outcast, and the marginalized. The call to ministry is always a spiritual call to serve. And while the call to serve is full of Christ’s joy and the promise of the Holy Spirit’s enduring presence, ministry is never tidy, or neat or sanitary—it is usually unkempt, puzzling, and, at times, unsatisfying. Yet, in spite of the
struggles in learning how to be the body of Christ together, God still calls the church to pursue forgiveness, seek reconciliation, and continue the spiritual sojourn in order to “make the most of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:17). Still, as far as the church is concerned, the work of the ministry is easier said than done. No one knew that better than Moses.

Moses, whose Hebrew name (mosheh) means “to draw out,” was saved as a baby from the tall reeds of the Nile River by Pharaoh’s daughter. She named him Moses after his Hebrew mother weaned him. The story skips ahead to a grown-up Moses, and the narrative of his leadership begins. Here in the Exodus account, success and failure, faith and doubt, and fulfillment and frustration dominate Moses’s pastoral leadership. In fact, God called Moses and “drew him out” from his occupation so that he would accept (though hesitantly) his spiritual vocation. Moses, who murdered an Egyptian and attempted to cover it up, becomes a fugitive and eventually finds rest within the boundaries his father-in-law Jethro’s land in Midian, tending to his father-in-law’s sheep. One day, he witnesses a curious burning bush that is not consumed, and he approaches this natural enigma. Moses hears the voice of God from the bush, which tells him to remove his sandals, for the place where he was standing was holy ground. God proceeds to call Moses out of his ordinary experience and instead to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. After a long conversation dominated by Moses’s assessment of his own ineptitude and his fair share of complaints and excuses, God relents somewhat and lets Aaron assist Moses in his eventual leadership of the Hebrew people. Moses will obey the LORD during all ten plagues and on the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn, God will save the Hebrew people due to the Passover blood of the lamb over the doorframes of their houses. As a result, Moses and the Hebrews escape from the clutches of Pharaoh’s army, and God saves them
via the division of the Red Sea, providing safe travel on dry land. Pharaoh’s army drowns as the sea waters recede. Then, Moses and the people rejoice at God’s deliverance.

But Moses’s problems are just beginning. He will endure the criticisms and complaints of the hundreds of thousands of people who left Egypt in search of freedom in the Promised Land. The wilderness experience tests not only the people’s faith and trust in Yahweh but also Moses’s. Moses’s emotions are fragile, and he is prone to anger (Exodus 2). The Hebrews complain numerous times about needing water. They lament embarking upon the exodus at all, expressing an intense desire to return home to eat the familiar, enjoyable foods they shared in bondage while in Egypt: the meat, the leeks, the onions, and the fish. Moses finds himself at his wits’ end; no longer is he able to manage the people’s needs, nor is he able to manage the immeasurable stress that is consuming his time, his mind, and his body. His emotional tank is empty, and no one inquires of his own pain and suffering. Even so, on numerous occasions, he cries out to the LORD on their behalf. He asks for water, and God provides for them. He asks for food, and God provides for them (even meat, beyond what their stomachs could digest). So, Moses is now weary, tired, and exhausted, mentally, spiritually, and physically. He is ready to die if something cannot be done. Though most pastors do not manage hundreds of thousands of people, Moses’s anger and depression are not strangers to pastors today. This similarity of experience is why Numbers 11:1–17 has much to say to pastoral leaders who are stressed, fatigued, burned out, lonely, and unappreciated. It is our benevolent, compassionate who God hears our cries for help, and without judgment or criticism, the LORD finds ways to help us share the ministry load.

What exactly does Moses teach us about the pastoral leader in this text from Numbers?

In order to learn from Moses’s emotional angst and the overwhelming stress that this Hebrew leader was under, examining the biblical text is important:
Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned against them. The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery. So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. (Nm 11:1–17, NRSV)

Will Willimon describes the tension pastoral leaders and their congregations experience through the example of Moses: “This same tension between hope and despair, failure and victory—tension that is at the heart of the biblical story—continues to be at the heart of church life today. You and I live within the middle of this tension. Some days, we are Moses standing in despair before the bickering, faithless children of Israel. On other days we are arguing with God, refusing to prophesy, unsure of ourselves and the power of God. There are still other days when we are part of the amazing liberation of God.”10 This statement is true—there are moments in the life of a pastor when, in spite of the liberating moments of Kingdom celebration, the stresses of

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ministry are too much. Congregations flare up and complain, and conflicts threaten to derail the spirit of the priest. As a result, those years of repressed anger and stress deeply affect the clergyperson’s physical, emotional, and mental health. Similarly, in Numbers 11, Moses could no longer withstand the pressures of the people and exploded in anger and frustration, sounding like the shrill whistle from a burning tea kettle that follows a necessary release of steam. Moses’s relationship with God is an intimate one, and he does not refrain from sharing his stress with the LORD. Moses’s complaint is genuine and honest and a good example for all clergy to follow. God is looking for our honesty, our authenticity, and our genuine self; God wants to hear the pain we experience and the frustrations that we bury deep within our souls. Moses offers five questions (presumably rhetorical) to God which say more about Moses’s inner state than the present situation. Moses’s congregation, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, became for him a heavy burden, and he could no longer bear it alone. The LORD hears Moses’s angry rant, and he interprets it as a desperate plea for divine intervention; therefore, God answers Moses, promising that seventy elders share the burden of leadership through the power of God’s Holy Spirit. These seventy elders not only take added stress and anxiety off Moses, but they provide Moses with the appropriate personal space to rest and find healing from the LORD. Though Moses was willing to die due to the oppressive burden of the people he led, God assisted Moses by giving him ministry companions who could help manage Moses’s congregational stressors, his emotional fatigue, his ministry burnout, his lack of self-care, and his loneliness and sense of failure. God’s solution for Moses was a provision of strong, supportive fellowship—elders who shared both Moses’s burden and God’s spirit, and kept hope by moving the mission forward.

Clergy urgently need for their parishioners to recognize the burdens that pastors and priests carry on a daily basis; however, while many congregations are supportive of their pastors,
they might not recognize symptoms of burnout or fatigue in their church leaders. Yet, while laypeople inquiring of their pastors or priests would be beneficial, this interaction does not always happen. It is also not the fault of the parishioner who wants to help but simply does not know how; here, pastors do well to offer how laypeople can assist through their own preaching and teaching and through their individual relationships they build with church members over time. Even then, few people truly understand what a pastoral leader goes through, except the pastoral leader herself and her fellow clergy friends. After all, pastors, priests, and other ministers do not fit in a one-size-fits-all vocation. Instead, they often wear numerous and varied hats (especially those who are serving as the only full-time church staff member). In addition to preaching, teaching, and counseling, ministers are preparing worship services, visiting hospitals, attending to the sick, officiating weddings and funerals, dedicating babies, administrating the church office, managing the church property, and attempting to keep the budget on track. Additionally, there are meetings to attend, conflicts to resolve, and ministries to initiate or eliminate. Personnel turnover can alter the flow of staff and layperson effectiveness, and denominational changes can drastically affect the function of a church’s ministry. By the time a church leader referees the theological and doctrinal arguments in monthly business meetings and chooses to fight the traditional versus contemporary worship war, the tendency is that her emotional and spiritual tank might well be on empty. These experiences are just some of the reasons why pastors and other church leaders must find healthy ways for managing the stress and fatigue that accompany the daily challenges of church ministry. With burnout, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and even suicide surfacing in the lives of ministry leaders, it is no wonder that several ecclesial leaders, theologians, professors, and Christian authors paint a grim picture when it comes to clergy health. Consequently, in chapter 4 of this thesis I will provide a practical
approach to assisting ministers with the burdens and blessings of pastoral ministry through the
creation, cultivation, and sustainability of holy friendships among clergy.

2.1.1 Perpetual Pastoral Stress

“For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not
as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander,
gossip, conceit, and disorder” (2 Cor 12:20). What was true for the church in Paul’s day is still
ture for the contemporary church; moreover, the polarization within the body of Christ is even
more pronounced today as it learns how to embody its identity amid the viruses of COVID-19
and systemic racism. Pastors are attempting to bring the message of reconciliation during a time
when churches want to be known for what they stand against instead of what they stand for. It is
highly probable that clergy feels much like Moses did in Numbers 11. Are there safe outlets
where pastors can safely share their personal and ecclesial burdens in confidence? Is there hope
for priests who feel isolated and alone, desperate for mutual empathy and compassion? What will
become of the minister who has nothing left to give, simply because he never learned the
blessing of self-care? How can pastoral leaders, who are bereft of meaningful relationships
outside of the church, pursue and engage other ministers for the mutual benefit that holy
friendships bring?

It is true that a call to ministry is a call to suffer alongside those who suffer. Ministers
who serve their congregations understand that truth, theologically and practically. In fact, while
pastors expect to struggle and experience stress of various kinds along the journey of ministry,
many church leaders are extremely effective in their work and enjoy the parishes they are called
to serve.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, even while theological education and seminary degrees are so vitally important in preparing clergy for the ministry, no mentor or professor can adequately predict, much less prevent, the overwhelming struggles that pastors and priests will inevitably endure in their particular ministry contexts; instead, one can lovingly hope, through the words of Jesus: “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (Jn 16:33). If there was anyone who understood persecution and stress amid serving others, it was Jesus Christ. Ministry was never intended to be comfortable, but its stressors can potentially wreak havoc on the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of its servant leader. Commenting on this reality, Robert Phillips and Thomas McDill wrote, “The minister of the Christian gospel has responded to a call to one of the most exacting and stressful vocations open to human beings.”\textsuperscript{12} After all, pastors, priests, and ministers are members of churches filled with sinners, and the effects of individual and collective sin take their toll on church leaders and those they serve.\textsuperscript{13} At any given time, clergy can likely face, either personally or among their congregants, a seemingly inexhaustible list of challenging issues, such as depression, sexual harassment, gambling, pornography, divorce, suicide, grief, physical and mental abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, adultery, molestation, pregnancy issues, murder, rape, and abortion. While the goal of the pastor is not to eradicate all of her church’s problems, the reality is that effects of sin will continue and will never fully be resolved until God brings the heavenly kingdom.\textsuperscript{14} Accepting this truth brings some perspective to the church leader, but it does not eliminate the stress that ministry produces. Stress can result when church members’ values are at odds with ecclesial leadership, or with one

\textsuperscript{11} Olson el al., \textit{A Guide to Ministry Self-Care}, 8.
\textsuperscript{13} Kenneth L. Swetland, \textit{Facing Messy Stuff in the Church: Case Studies for Pastors and Congregations} (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005), 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Swetland, \textit{Facing Messy Stuff}, 7–9.
another; furthermore, laypeople can experience frustration or disappointment when their pastoral expectations go unmet. If leaders do not handle congregational stress appropriately, or in a timely manner, the pastor’s own stress can build and affect not only her ministry service but also her relationships with parishioners. What are the reasons for this pastoral stress, and what (or who) is a clergyperson’s most common stressors?

Church life itself can positively or negatively affect a pastor’s stress level. A 2015 survey of American Baptist clergy showed that several church leaders describe their current ministry position as follows: rewarding, meaningful, hopeful, exciting, fulfilling and joyful. At the same time, they described their ministry experience in negative ways: low-paying, frustrating, disappointing, discouraging, exasperating, deadly, painful, confusing.¹⁵ That same survey asked the question, “How has your experience in ministry affected people close to you such as your family?” Fifty percent indicated positive or supportive results while the other half listed negative responses: “Family always gets the short end of the stick. When we can spend time with them we are exhausted”; “weekends are brutal on pastors”; “children hostile to church, wife avoids”; “a lot of pain in my family. My family is largely unchurched.” When the survey asked these clergy how often they think about leaving the ministry, twenty-eight percent responded either every week or at least one time a month. A separate questionnaire from the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development was given to 1,050 pastors who attended one of two conferences.¹⁶ What is so revealing about the study is that 100 percent of pastors who took the questionnaire indicated that they had a close associate or seminary friend who left the ministry,


never to return. Ninety percent noted that they are often fatigued, 89 percent contemplated leaving the ministry, and a mere 23 percent shared they felt happy in their relationship with Jesus. These numbers are alarming but not surprising to those parish leaders who attempt to serve local churches and congregations in ways that model and mimic the call of Christ. It is no wonder that many pastors are choosing to leave the ministry to use their giftedness in other ways in order that they might find healing and hope amid their vocational struggles.

It is also no surprise that pastors have both church and non-church friends who they genuinely trust and who bless their lives; research supports this truth, but many pastors and church leaders do not take advantage of this healthy relational outlet. Therefore, the stress and depression can worsen and lead to all sorts of problems both internally and interpersonally within the context of one’s congregation and immediate family. A pastor, priest, or church leader must learn to recognize the types of symptoms that stress can exhibit. By recognizing such symptoms, they can better take care of themselves and, in turn, others. Some of these symptoms that overly stressed people experience, including clergy, are as follows:

- Mood symptoms consistent with depression or anxiety
- Anger and irritability
- Muscle tension in various parts of the body
- Cardiopulmonary symptoms such as a racing heart, irregular heartbeat, and rapid breathing (including difficulty breathing)
- Sympathetic symptoms such as trouble sleeping and sweating when pressured
- Neurological symptoms such as dizziness and weakness

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17 Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 64.
• Gastroenterological symptoms such as nausea, stomach pain, and diarrhea
• Cognitive disorientation symptoms such as difficulty concentrating and making mistakes more consistently or repeating the same thoughts over and over
• Upper respiratory symptoms like colds and the need to clear your throat more often

Though all of these symptoms may not directly affect clergy during the duration of their ministries, they are indicators that pastors and other church leaders must recognize in order to acknowledge what is causing or triggering stress in the first place. Some pastors could perceive their stressful circumstances to be more harmful instead of challenging, and therefore the stress will be harder to manage and control. While stress is inevitable, and some could potentially be more harmful than challenging, pastors’ perceptions might not bring about a more healthy approach. Sometimes church leaders are blind to their symptoms; because of this concern, I will demonstrate later in this thesis that through the gift of God’s covenant relationships and through the relational power of vulnerability, imagination, and transformation, healthy clergy are those church leaders who engage in meaningful holy friendships among other clergy. The overwhelming need for holy friendships among ministers is further evident in the work of ecclesial and theological experts who recognize the heavy burden that stress can create in the lives of those who serve Christ’s church.

Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, with the help of Laurie Pratt, compared segregated surveys of both United Methodist Church clergy and nonclergy relating to questions of depression. The data showed that 8.7 percent of clergy, compared to 5.5 percent of US

18 Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, Faithful and Fractured, 249–56.
19 Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, Faithful and Fractured, 76.
20 All statistics and data here are from Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, Faithful and Fractured, 37–39.
adults, demonstrated qualities indicative of moderate depression or higher. This survey measured depression symptoms over a two-week period of time. Proeschold-Bell notes that her own self-administered survey shows 11.1 percent of clergy actually show moderate or higher symptoms of depression, concluding that the 8.7 percent figure were phone interviews in which clergy might have shied away from being completely honest about their mental condition (perhaps due to the negative social stigma of mental illness, especially within the church). The studies continue to illustrate the problem of depression in clergy as it relates to specific age demographics. Both researchers looked at people between the ages of forty and sixty (the common clergy age group), and the results were similar to the overall comparative studies: 9.7 percent indicated depressive symptoms for clergy versus 7.3 percent who indicated depressive symptoms for nonclergy. What did the statistics show regarding both gender responses to questions of depression? Male clergy surveyed showed an 8.8 percent response to depressive symptoms versus 4.4 percent of the overall US male population. Female clergy surveyed showed an 8.2 percent response to depressive symptoms versus 6.6 percent response to depressive symptoms. With respect to gender differences surrounding depression, the results surprised Proeschold-Bell. She was intrigued to see that, while women generally have higher rates of depression than men, male clergy have a depression rate consistent with that of female clergy. While it cannot be assumed that ministry work alone is contributing to these depression rates in both male and female clergy, enough research reveals that high congregational expectations and other stress-related circumstances can take their toll on the mental state of church ministers.

While parish ministers and pastors find both joy and pain in the work of ministry, certain stressors can cause issues both mentally and emotionally for church leaders, especially for those
within the first five years of their ministry positions. Pastors are tempted to leave their current roles in ministry when they lack sufficient time for nonchurch related activities such as time with family or personal rest and recreation; additionally, pastors are stressed due to the isolating nature of the pastorate, discouragement from failed ministries, divisive, in-church conflict, or deep-seated depression—all these stressful circumstances can provoke a pastor to take on a fight-or-flight mentality, which can only serve to endanger himself and the parishioners he is called to serve. When church leaders refuse to set and maintain appropriate boundaries, their time and their immediate family’s time are threatened, increasing anxiety as more interruptions are anticipated. With expectations over office hours, parsonage or housing use, vacation days (and the use of personal days), and congregational communication out of alignment, stress can tempt the priest to feel overly anxious which can dangerously lead him down a road to depression.

Pastors and other clergy also experience other forms of emotional stress during the midlife and retirement years of ministry. Bruce Epperly and Katherine Epperly describe the season of midlife church leadership as the “autumn of ministry,” which requires appropriate attentiveness to renewal and regeneration. Epperly and Epperly list six tasks towards vocational renewal, all of which can be highly stressful for the midlife church leader to face and engage:

- Confronting grief and loss in ministry: Oftentimes, the church leader is called to leave a place of ministry, find a faith community, experience the death of beloved church members, and accepting one’s limits within the context of church ministry.
- Cultivating novelty in ministry: After several years, the challenge for a pastor is how to preach in new ways or how to approach the same biblical texts from innovative vantage points; furthermore, certain, expected annual ministries and

traditions can prevent or overshadow new, creative ministries and traditions that can enliven the congregation and its faith community.

- Letting go of perfectionism and indispensability: Particularly stressful is the dependence laypeople place on their pastors if these pastors refuse to create and maintain appropriate boundaries or have a “Savior” complex and erroneously believe that ministry cannot survive without their leadership.

- Taking responsibility for one’s own health and well-being: Midlife ministers acknowledge their mortality at this life stage and face the stress of changing bodies and changing schedules in order to accommodate physical exercise.

- “Finding harvest in midlife”: Managing the stress of knowing how to navigate “wilderness” experiences in ministry, both personally and congregationally while learning how to accept and welcome spiritual dry spells along the ministry journey.

- Rediscovering your first love in ministry: Sometimes it can be stressful to answer the following questions: “Where is your current passion?” “What is your first love?” “Are you living out of your deepest vocational and spiritual gifts?”

Epperly and Epperly also address the feelings of anxiety, sadness, and depression that can be associated with retiring from professional ministry. Retirement can become a spiritual crisis as the pastor or church leader considers whether or not her legacy impacted the Kingdom of God and inspired people to follow in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. There are also difficult, often burdensome, realities to face upon retirement, such as the hurt and pain caused by specific church members through the years. Pastors also address several wounds that have not yet healed.

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due to either a parishioner’s lack of forgiveness or a church member who leaves the parish without explanation—no “Thank you,” no “Goodbye,” no opportunity to personally acknowledge the collective good produced from years of shared ministry together. Additionally, it can be stressful for the pastor and the church member to seek forgiveness before a pastor’s retirement, but it can also be one of the last, meaningful witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that a shepherd could give her sheep. Lastly, pastors and church leaders who retire must consider the financial repercussions of a retirement decision. As expenses and the cost of living rise, and available income remains the same, the stress of paying bills and maintaining a comfortable lifestyle may be in jeopardy. That pastors plan ahead is paramount, even before accepting a call to serve a church, so that they can prepare for their retirement and insurance needs, not only for the duration of the ministry but also for the years that follow in retirement. The pastors who plan well ahead of their ministry journey are best prepared to meet their family’s needs in retirement; however, those who insist that “The Lord will provide” and do not set aside funds to prepare for retirement (which is evidence of God’s provision) will face greater and more oppressive levels of stress for themselves and their families in the future. Later, I will argue that initiating holy friendships among other clergy will support the emotional and mental well-being of ministers who seek to serve God in the healthiest, most meaningful way possible.24

2.1.2 Susceptibility to Empathy and Compassion Fatigue

In addition to several congregational stressors and various forms of stress, which can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, and depression, pastors and other church leaders are also susceptible to

24 Epperly and Epperly, Four Seasons of Ministry, 18.
favoring empathy over the church’s mission as well as suffering from compassion fatigue, resulting from the exhaustive traumas that accompany pastoral care. While both empathy and compassion are necessary characteristics of love in the life of the church, and the community it is called to serve, the pastor must be careful that she does not allow herself to abuse the gifts of both, either to the detriment of the parishioner or herself. First, let us determine why church leaders are susceptible to excessive empathy.

Empathy is a powerful tool, for it allows ministers to understand and feel what another human being is experiencing.25 Gil Rendle elaborates on the necessity of empathy in the life of the community by telling the following story:

In a visit to Emory and Henry College in Virginia, I was part of a group in conversation with Tal Stanley, director of the Appalachian Center for Civic Life. Emory and Henry College lies deep in the liberal arts tradition in which the purpose of education is not just to prepare the student for the workforce but to form the student as a person. Stanley spoke about citizenship and the college’s commitment to form persons connected to others in their place, their community, through imagination (a picture of what does not exist) and through empathy (the ability to see beyond themselves and be mutually connected to others). Empathy makes us part of a community. If reflected in education, empathy is equally at the heart of the Christian experience and the fundamental concern for “the least, the last, and the lost.” It is reflected in the mission outreach, the concern for nurturing Christian community, and the pastoral care of one another in times of need. Empathy connects people to one another. As such, empathy takes on an even more important role if the culture moves away from the more cohesive, convergent values that held people together as they once did in the aberrant time.26

Yet, the Christian community knows that what is for our good can also be manipulated into a tool for selfish purposes. Much like the sweet, syrupy words of the snake in the Garden of Eden narrative, people use what is good to satisfy a personal agenda or fulfill a hidden desire.

This truth is biblically reinforced in the New Testament book of James. Here, the author writes

26 Rendle, *Quietly Courageous*, 175.
that “when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death” (Jas 1:15). How, though, could empathy be a portal for selfishness? Moreover, how can a misuse of empathy lead to compounded stress in the life of the church leader? Perhaps it is because pastors, priests, and other clergy are constantly tempted to focus their time and energy on relationships, simply because the attention those relationships receive is rewarded. The temptation for empathy to be misused is great because the very people who pastors feel compelled to attend to the most are the ones who hold the minister’s contract (and therefore a minister’s livelihood). What complicates this temptation to cater to the parishioners who hold authority (and the pastor’s contract) is the fact that those who evaluate church leadership are the very ones who are also subject to the spiritual leadership of ordained clergy. This is why clear-cut direction and purpose, along with a balanced sense of empathy, can benefit organizations like the local church. Still, pastors and church leaders are tempted to satisfy the people they lead in order to avoid any conflict, even though the complaints might be instructive and helpful. If the pastoral leader pleases the flock while dismissing real issues that could be hindering mission and direction, then empathy becomes a form of control—everyone feels affirmed and rewarded but necessary ground is lost with respect to the pursuit of church mission and vision.27

Empathy is a way to connect people to others in order to reduce or relieve another’s pain. Still, Rendle argues that “despite empathy living at the heart of faith, in the current situation unconstrained empathy can lead us away from our purpose. Individualism unchecked leads to emptiness. Empathy unchecked … can lead to paralysis.” Over time, the overuse of empathy will bring social reward but will severely limit the pursuit of mission or ecclesial direction.28 In

27 Rendle, Quietly Courageous, 174.
28 Rendle, Quietly Courageous, 176.
ministry, clergy are often emotionally stoked by congregants desiring to achieve a specific goal, whether for good or selfish purposes. Often manipulation by the laity can happen while the church leader is naively and blissfully unaware. Virtually, the focus on relational approval through excessive empathy leads to a breakdown of leadership, direction, and focus. Church leaders may already be stressed due to the high parishioner demand and the energy expended to keep people happy. This stress results in anxiety, depression, and repressed anger. The pastor feels as though she has been taken for granted. This feeling can produce bitterness and resentment, feelings that the pastoral leader must submit to God in order to find peace leading to a wholesome resolution. Excessive empathy is dangerous and problematic, and those who are susceptible to its trap are usually those church leaders deemed to be “nice.”

Niceness is something that is valued, mainly because being nice is to be thoughtful, considerate, accommodating, and caring. The problem with being too nice, ironically, is that niceness can be a strategy for managing the conflict or the stress within the church; however, this approach actually increases the stress (sooner or later) due to the absence of achieved mission on behalf of the Kingdom of God.\(^\text{29}\) There is hope for the pastoral leader who exercises excessive empathy, according to Rendle; nevertheless, it is not without its own measure of eventual stress: “The way through temptation of empathy is a clear, missional, caring focus on purpose. It can be exhausting. However, if the quietly courageous leader can model it, the people can mirror it. The discomfort of the postaberrant time can be eclipsed by a mission future.”\(^\text{30}\)

Excessive empathy is an issue that many church leaders face. Another concern that augments the stress of many pastors and ministers is compassion fatigue. While some compare compassion fatigue with burnout, it is not necessarily the same thing and is defined in unique

\(^{29}\) Rendle, *Quietly Courageous*, 188.
\(^{30}\) Rendle, *Quietly Courageous*, 191.
ways that make it different from burnout altogether. Compassion fatigue is “the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events. It differs from burnout, but it can coexist. Compassion fatigue can occur due to exposure on one case or can be due to a ‘cumulative’ level of trauma.”31 Still another definition is provided by Chris Marchand, who studied the origin of the term compassion fatigue:

“Compassion fatigue is the natural behaviors and emotions resulting from Secondary Traumatic Stress, which can be defined as: the stress associated with helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person, resulting in a reduced capacity or interest in being empathic. Although it may lead to burnout, it can emerge suddenly and without warning.”32 This means that pastors and church leaders experience the stresses and strains through emotional identification with a person or series of persons they serve over time.33 Robert Wicks expresses compassion fatigue as disorientation, pain, and disruption that occur within the person giving care due to the catastrophic nature of the trauma and its accompanying grief.34 Denise Hill notes that compassion fatigue is something that can occur quickly as opposed to the progressive, cumulative effect that burnout can take on the life of the caregiver.35

What is important to note is that, regardless of how compassion fatigue is defined, it affects caregivers such as pastors, chaplains and counselors alike.36 Because of the nature of the ministry call, church leaders are susceptible to compassion fatigue, especially if they spend the

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32 Chris Marchand, An Investigation of the Influence of Compassion Fatigue due to Secondary Traumatic Stress on the Canadian Youth Worker (DMin diss., Providence Seminary, 2007), 17, quoted in Olson et al., A Guide to Ministry Self-Care, 35.
33 Olson et al., A Guide to Ministry Self-Care, 35.
36 Olson et al., A Guide to Ministry Self-Care, 36.
bulk of their ministry attending to various traumas affecting their members. Over time, these traumas can upset the emotional and mental well-being of the pastoral caregiver. Therefore, the impact of compassion fatigue can be sudden and heavy, and is able to affect the entire body, as the following symptoms suggest:

• Cognitive—lowered concentration, apathy, rigidity, disorientation
• Emotional—powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, anger, numbness, fear, helplessness
• Behavioral—irritable, withdrawn, moody, poor sleep, nightmares
• Spiritual—questioning life’s meaning, hopelessness, loss of purpose
• Somatic—sweating, rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, aches and pains, dizziness

Based on these symptoms, it is not surprising that compassion fatigue is linked to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and secondary traumatic stress (STS). While burnout, which I address in detail in the next section, tends to occur progressively, and cumulatively, compassion fatigue can strike quickly—and without warning.

The term compassion fatigue first originated in literature addressing the high stress situations of nurses who worked closely with traumatized patients. Tulane professor Dr. Charles Figley observes an intriguing phenomenon based on his research and written analyses about compassion fatigue. He explains that professionals who work with others in crisis can also be traumatized by being exposed to the client’s intense story of traumatic experience. The primary difference is that the client (known as the primary survivor) is the individual exposed to the traumatic event. However, there is a ‘cost to caring’ […] as the professional helper (referred to as the secondary survivor) can acquire a reaction

39 Stebnicki, Empathy Fatigue, 21.
very similar to that of the client’s posttraumatic stress experience . . . [T]hose who have enormous capacity for feeling and expressing empathy tend to be more at risk of compassion fatigue.\textsuperscript{40}

Additionally, further evidence shows that professionals who demonstrate high empathy and compassion for the traumatized people they serve often spread this secondary traumatic stress to their family, friends, and colleagues. Figley concludes, therefore, that compassion fatigue has a “contagion effect” which can be transmitted to the professional’s support system.\textsuperscript{41}

Applying this research about compassion fatigue to the pastoral ministry, it is imperative to pause and remember that men and women who are called by God to offer a shepherd’s care are still sheep of God’s fold, too. Church leaders are always in need of the Shepherd’s care in order that they might offer that same care to those they are called to serve. Churches are not immune to trauma and neither are the pastors and priests who guide their laypeople. In many similar and practical ways, ministers offer a nurturing, compassion care that mimics that of a nurse, or a counselor or a social worker. Therefore, the accumulation of pastoral care needs, especially related to a pastor’s involvement in the personal traumas among the laity, can greatly affect her mental and emotional well-being, regardless of her level of spiritual maturity. Notably, while pastors are trained to exercise what they have learned, acquired, and tested in seminary, they are still limited by their knowledge or their expertise. If a priest or church leader attempts to address weighty, emotional issues for which she is unprepared and does not refer her church member to a licensed, mental health professional, she is setting herself up for compassion fatigue. It is better for the minister to refer a layperson when she has reached the limits of her ministry expertise.

\textsuperscript{41} Stebnicki, \textit{Empathy Fatigue}, 21.
Over time, church leaders who spend the bulk of their ministries addressing pastoral care needs relating to trauma will not only experience cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, and somatic symptoms but will also, based on aforementioned research, share their secondary stress with loved ones, only serving to perpetuate the unhealthy emotional cycle of compassion fatigue. Therefore, it is vital that church leaders address their own spiritual, mental, and emotional need for self-care and self-awareness well in advance of any early symptoms of compassion fatigue. Yet, despite all the precautions a pastor can take in her ministry, the temptation to overexert herself in the traumatic experiences of her church members can be overwhelming, and eventually tiredness, despondency, irritability, achiness, and anxiety result. A congregation’s shepherd is called to be a caregiver, one who empathizes with pain and brokenness and is imbued with the Holy Spirit’s power to encourage, help, and counsel; by nature, a pastor sympathizes and empathizes with both the healthy and unhealthy choices of her laity. However, since compassion fatigue can surface quickly and without warning, it is essential that ministers develop, cultivate, and sustain meaningful, safe clergy friendships with other ministers who can lovingly provide mutual support and constant hope.

2.1.3 High Risk of Ministry Burnout

To complicate matters, ministry burnout is a reasonable concern for pastors, priests, and church leaders during their service to those they are called to lead. If churches and parish leaders are not proactively aware of ministry stresses and burnout factors, tragic consequences can occur. Seacoast Church never considered it would hear the heartbreaking news about its pastor,
Darrin Patrick, and his self-inflicted gunshot wound administered in May, 2020. Pastor Isaac Hunter, son to President Obama’s spiritual adviser, is another spiritual leader who took his life as clergy all over the country continue to battle depression, internal and external pressures, and suicidal thoughts. Pastor Steve Austin nearly committed suicide, too, several years ago but demands that churches offer clergy radical acceptance in safe, supportive communities—after all, burnout can lead to mental and emotional incineration if churches and their leaders are not careful to extend grace to one another.

To quote John Sanford, burnout is “a word we use when a person has become exhausted with his or her profession or major life activity.” Referring to the dictionary definition of burnout, Sanford makes the ecclesial parallel: “If we apply the dictionary definition of burnout to human beings, we must imagine a man or woman who has been devoured from within by fiery energy until, like a gutted house, nothing is left. Or we may imagine a person who once carried a current of psychic energy but now, like a burned out electrical conductor, cannot supply power anymore. Or an individual who, like a burned out forest, feels that her power to renew herself has been destroyed.” Since fire is associated with energy, Sanford therefore makes the claim that ministry burnout “is a problem of energy.”

Insofar as energy levels in ministry are concerned, it is not realistic to expect that clergy are constantly exhilarated about their work, especially due to the likelihood of encountering

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45 John A. Sanford, Ministry Burnout (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 1.
multiple stressors during a typical week. Drawing from C. Maslach’s work, Proeschold-Bell and Byassee describe this lack of energy in one’s vocation as burnout, divided into three, separate components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal achievement.47 With respect to ministry, emotional exhaustion occurs when a pastor feels strained as her emotional resources become depleted. Depersonalization takes place when a minister becomes detached from, and cynical toward, the people he serves. And lack of personal achievement in the ministry causes the church leader to doubt her church legacy, based on accomplishments alone. In 2016, Proeschold-Bell and Byassee conducted surveys among full-time, church-appointed pastors to determine the prevalence of these three types of burnout. Of the three types, high levels of depersonalization was the least experienced category of burnout (12.4 percent), probably due to the high value that clergy places on empathy, negating much of the cynicism that could arise while relating with church members. Emotional exhaustion was experienced by 15.3 percent of survey takers, revealing the emotional and mental stress and strain that these full-time pastors encounter in their ministry environments.

Yet, Proeschold-Bell and Byassee were most alarmed by the 28.1 percent of responders who suffer from lack of personal achievement in ministry. They noted that clergy often feel most effective when they help a layperson find clarity in their spiritual walk, or when they inspire someone to do something worthwhile, or when they giving someone hope in the midst of their dark, anxiety-ridden moments. The hard part is that these kinds of blessings are difficult, if not impossible, to measure according to normal workplace standards. Interestingly, 30 percent of survey responders revealed that they encounter low levels of emotional exhaustion.

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depersonalization, and lack of personal achievement in pastoral ministry. It should be noted that, according to this 2016 survey, church leaders suffer “less burnout than police officers and emergency personnel. [suffer] similar burnout to social workers and teachers, and [suffer] worse burnout than counselors.” However, in spite of these mixed results, stress-related maladies like depression and other ministry burdens further multiply and complicate the challenges that ministers face. This reality is demonstrated by the high numbers of pastoral leaders choosing to take a break from ministry or leave altogether. Pastor and author, Christopher Ash, who experienced ministry burnout on a personal level shares some sobering statistics: “In the USA it is estimated that some 1500 people leave pastoral ministry each month due to burnout, conflict or moral failure. The causes are diverse, but they show the intense pressure that many in Christian ministry find themselves under. A third of pastors say they feel burned out within just five years of starting ministry, and almost a half of pastors and their [spouses] say they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.”

When churches remain unaware of the emotional and personal problems that their church leaders encounter, they are more likely to succumb not only to congregational ineffectiveness but also to losing the heart, soul, and passion of their shepherds. What is at stake here is the actual physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of the parish pastor and the pastor’s support system. Therefore, it is incumbent upon church leaders and congregations alike to recognize the numerous symptoms of ministry burnout in the early months of a pastor’s ministry call in order to provide a healthy, balanced environment in which she can flourish. There is a tendency for

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48 The previous statistics and analyses are from Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured*, 29–31.
many churches to be unaware of the extent of their pastors’ health needs; consequently, they are blinded to the many reasons for ministry burnout, let alone its particular symptoms.

To analyze the reasons for ministry burnout effectively, a return to the work of John Sanford is quite helpful. Sanford highlights nine different reasons for potential burnout within pastoral ministry. The first reason for ministry burnout is that the job of the Christian minister is never finished. Other professions have the luxury of celebrating a finished product, such as a completed chair sanded by the hands of a carpenter or a recently constructed bridge, designed by the engineer. The working minister does not often receive this same satisfaction. The cascade of ministry responsibilities like services, weddings, funerals, dedications, crises, congregational conflicts, holiday traditions, hospital and shut-in visits, classes to teach, and administrative tasks are ongoing and cyclical, leaving the church leader tired and overwhelmed. Sanford likens this ministry cycle to the character of Sisyphus in Greek mythology, whose fate it was to push a large stone up a mountain only to have it roll down again and again just before reaching the top. Ministry burnout is exacerbated by the continual burden of ministry that, if not managed well, can produce frustration, suffering, and exhaustion.⁵⁰

A second reason for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister cannot always tell if his work is having any results. To experience an unending cycle of ministry duties is one thing, and still another thing is to never fully know whether the work being done is making a difference. A priest can work faithfully and tirelessly for years and still never know if the spiritual service was truly effective; after all, how does one measure ministry effectiveness? The main work of the minister is to provide pastoral care and spiritual nourishment of the people she is serving. On certain days she may feel that people are benefitting from her ministry, and on

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other days she may feel that she is not making the kind of impact that she hoped she might. What metrics provide her with the satisfaction of knowing that her job is done well? Sanford notes that church building programs are one of the only ways that church leaders can observe the progress their church members are making toward Kingdom building. When money is raised, and people celebrate the completion of the new edifice, pastors can point to those important moments in their ministry and better articulate success. Overall, however, ministers do not get the benefit of knowing whether or not their work is helping the personal growth of the people they serve.51

A third reason for ministry burnout is that the work of the Christian minister is repetitive. Due to the nature of the Christian calendar, the holiday schedule of most churches—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other major liturgical seasons—promotes a good, spiritual rhythm for the church but can simultaneously contribute to the burnout of the pastor. Church leaders attempt to preach the Christmas story in a brand new way, every year, and the same is true for preaching the Easter story.52 It is easy for a pastor to coast through the church calendar, especially when repetitive traditions offer less creativity. This coasting can also induce burnout, especially since the planning and preparation lack zeal, energy, and a reminder that God is creative, fresh, innovative, and always “do[ing] a new thing” (Is 43:19a). Even so, pastors who are creative suffer from the repetition of Christian seasons, and the monotony of traditions can produce a significant amount of burnout.

A fourth reason for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister is always dealing with people’s expectations. The expectations on a minister are widespread, diverse, and burdensome and can deeply affect her emotional and mental well-being. These expectations can vary from one parishioner to the next, and the priest can easily be persuaded to fulfill them all unless she is

51 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 6–7.
52 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 7.
attuned to her own understanding of self and able to give herself grace. Some want a masterful preacher, a great orator, a wizard of proclamation; yet, others might want a meek, tender shepherd who can provide pastoral care at the drop of a hat. Still others want a great administrator, or a deft, financial guru, or a wise counselor, or even a reputable wedding officiant. The expectations can be so high and unrealistic that the pastor becomes emotionally and mentally exhausted. When traditions are not kept or the pastor espouses differing theological convictions, the results can be harrowing.\(^5^3\) Sanford notes,

> Some expect [the minister] to devote himself to calling on the sick, or making parish calls or attending community social functions, or being concerned with the poor or civil rights, while others want him for a personal counselor, or want him to be a famous preacher. On and on the list goes, and clearly no one person can be so gifted, so energetic, and so varied in his interests that he can hope to fulfill all these expectations. Furthermore, these people with their expectations are persons who must be reckoned with. They are the ones who pay the bills. They are the ones whose favor must be won if his work is to be successful, or, sometimes, if he is even to keep his job. They can make or break the success of his program, and they can make his life agreeable or disagreeable. For this reason, the ministering person pays a price in energy if he ignores these expectations just as he does in fulfilling them. It takes energy to contend with the rejection, criticism, or hostility of people, just as it does to please them by doing what they want us to do. Many ministering persons perform certain tasks in their work not because they want to, or even believe in their value or importance, but because it takes less energy to do the work than to struggle with people whose expectations have been disappointed.\(^5^4\)

A fifth reason for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister must work with the same people year in and year out. Taking on a new church appointment is a little like getting married: once the church leader ties the knot, it is more difficult to untie the knot down the road. Other professions have the ability to fire a client if the person is unpleasant or difficult to work with, but not so with the minister. She is stuck with the same person every Sunday and cannot

\(^{53}\) Sanford, *Ministry Burnout*, 7.

\(^{54}\) Sanford, *Ministry Burnout*, 7–8.
altogether avoid the fact that sooner or later she will have to face this belligerent person. The minister finds herself caught in a trap, one that unfortunately plays to the tune of the bully until the bully eventually leaves the church. The minister cannot afford to retaliate, especially if the bully has friends that have large stakes in the economic life of the congregation. The tragedy is how long the minister suffers while enduring the unruly person, an opponent who saps the church leader’s emotional and spiritual energy. The converse is also true; over time, members that the minister particularly likes may decide to move on or pass away, yielding heavy amounts of grief and sorrow that the ministering person must bear.55

A sixth reason for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister endures a great drain on her energy, due to fact that church leaders work with people in need.56 Sanford describes this physical dilemma as follows:

The energy drain that comes from working with people who are in need is subtle. One hardly uses one’s physical energy in working with such people, but mentally and spiritually one becomes depleted. It is like having a small but constant loss of blood. When a ministering person once complained of how tired he has been getting, a colleague remarked, “Well, how many blood transfusions a day can you give to people?” That is what a person does when he ministers to someone in need: his energy is used up in supplying energy to the other person. This is so even if the person in need is a fine person whom we like; it is all the more so if the needy person is difficult, demanding, or clinging.57

The problem is multiplied when the person who is in need remains constantly in need, further diminishing the energy resources of the ministering person. Sanford acknowledges that it is like “pouring money down the drain. We put energy into someone, but it seems to disappear, and the troubled or difficult person remains as he was before, leaving us feeling depleted and empty.”58

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55 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 8–9
56 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 9.
57 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 9.
58 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 10.
A seventh reason for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister deals with many people who approach her, not to be fed spiritually, but for their own ego. Oftentimes people attend church not only to participate in the blessings of fellowship, worship, and spiritual formation but also for the potential opportunities to bolster their ego. Some church people, perhaps unaware, are looking for someone or a place to cling to, feel important, or even hide from the realities of life’s struggles and difficulties. Some congregants simply yearn for power and seek to dominate meetings, situations, and other church people. These kinds of attendees are looking to the minister for *strokes*—those words or actions that serve to build up a person’s ego. These people desire to get what they want, not what they need, from their church leader and are pacified as long as their egos are fed.\(^59\) According to Sanford, there are dangers to feeding church people who need constant strokes:

\[\text{Those church people who need their egos stroked}\text{ demand a lot of attention. They feel it is their right, and if they do not receive the strokes they need and deserve they are apt to be resentful and even vindictive. Giving out strokes to such people is exhausting, but not doing so requires that a price be paid, as the ministering person now has a resentful person on her hands. The ministering person who satisfies someone’s desires for strokes may seem to benefit from receiving approval in return, but she will be what Fritz Kunkel called a “White Giant” in the eyes of others, who will elevate her because she gives them what they want. Of course she must continue to give out strokes as demanded or run the risk of suddenly becoming a “Black Giant” who refuses to make people feel better and therefore becomes the object of criticism or even hatred. We are “giants” because to many people the priest or other ministering person is elevated to a special status. But whether we are a White Giant or a Black Giant, in neither case are we being related to as we really are, for we are perceived largely in terms of whether or not we give out the required strokes.}\(^60\]

The eighth reason that Sanford gives for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister must function much of her time on her persona. The persona is the mask that ministers develop

\(^{59}\) Sanford, *Ministry Burnout*, 10.  
\(^{60}\) Sanford, *Ministry Burnout*, 11.
and wear on the outside of their truest selves in order to relate to others. This disguise serves two purposes: (1) the persona helps project the personality of the minister to her congregation and the community she serves; (2) the persona protects the minister from others by assuming an outward appearance while hiding other aspects about their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.\textsuperscript{61} It is important to note that the persona of the pastor can be very helpful. Sanford interjects:

As an example [of the helpful side of the persona], let us say that you are a priest and are very tired, but a wedding is to take place, and even though you would rather go to the beach, you know that you must pull yourself together and perform the ceremony. To do this you put on a good front with the help of your persona—and this helps you do your job—but you keep your inward self hidden. Someone may say to you, “How are you this afternoon?” Instead of saying, “I’m worn out; I wish I weren’t here,” you probably will answer, “Oh, I’m just fine. Looks like this will be a beautiful wedding.” In this example the persona is helpful. Nevertheless, when we function via the persona too much of the time and when the persona is too unrelated to the genuine personality so that other people do not see the person we really are, then we have a problem. And part of the problem is a loss of energy, for it takes a lot of energy to function through such a persona. When we are being genuine, energy flows in us naturally, but when we have to cover up part of our genuine feelings, or, worse yet, assume a posture that does not belong to us at all, a lot of energy is required.\textsuperscript{62}

Oftentimes the congregation hands the church leader their preferred persona, and when the minister’s persona does not match the perceived persona of the laypeople, there is disappointment, frustration, and anger. The tragedy is that the minister is “not allowed” to be angry; the persona must always be friendly, joyful, and willing to serve at a moment’s notice. Yet, like anyone else, pastors can get angry and often are justified in doing so.\textsuperscript{63} Sanford illustrates this important point by telling a true story, expressed by a fellow minister:

One clergyman told of a class he was teaching that was repeatedly interrupted by a young man who asked annoying and irrelevant questions in such a way as to disrupt and impede the class. This young man was a stranger to the clergyman and he tried to deal with him tactfully and kindly, but as he become more irritating the clergyman became angry and finally decided to express his anger

\textsuperscript{61} Sanford, \textit{Ministry Burnout}, 11.
\textsuperscript{62} Sanford, \textit{Ministry Burnout}, 12.
\textsuperscript{63} Sanford, \textit{Ministry Burnout}, 13.
openly. That settled matters with the young man, who caused no more difficulty, but afterward the clergyman received several letters from people who had attended the class expressing shock that he had become angry. Interestingly enough, the young man phoned the clergyman the day after class, asked for an appointment, told him that he realized he needed help, and asked where he could go to find it.64

The real danger is in the minister’s loss of self. As long as the priest or pastor caters to the emotional needs of the congregation, and satisfies their longings, the persona takes over and the minister soon forgets what she looks like.65 From the viewpoint of scripture, one could argue that pastors who overuse their persona are acting hypocritically, and they are not embodying the authentic life God calls them to live. For instance, to obey the Christ of scripture is to live a life of authenticity, living out of the true self, and imitating the Savior who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6). However, when the pastor chooses to abuse her persona, to her detriment she becomes the idol of the congregation and cannot remember her genuine self, the person she truly is. “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (Jas 1:23–24). Wayne Cordeiro, founding pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu, Hawaii, shares his own personal struggle with trying to live up to the congregational expectations of their perceived, pastoral persona: “As a senior pastor, my life was bookended with weekend services. I had developed the discipline of image management, but on the inside, I was experiencing a slow-motion implosion. Pastors are expected to lead even when the desire or inclination to do so is severely challenged. I knew others loved me, but living up to the expectations systematically ingrained into the fabric of who I was became the person I could

64 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 13.
65 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 14.
not escape.”66 This kind of pastoral example is a case in point—living up to a false persona is exhausting and extremely hazardous to the clergyperson’s mental and emotional health. If the minister is not careful to consider the temptation of the persona before or during the early months of her pastoral appointment, she threatens to bankrupt herself and the congregation she is called to lead.67

The ninth reason that Sanford gives for ministry burnout is that the Christian minister may experience exhaustion due to failure. Perhaps the most vital source of burnout, failure, whether factual or perceived, can lead to long-term fatigue and feelings of uselessness.68 Feelings of failure may be just that, feelings, but they are real to the pastor experiencing them and can be harmful to the overall health of the pastor and her support system. Will Willimon shares the following anecdotes about failure:

I once asked a distinguished neurosurgeon, half in jest, “Why are all the brain surgeons I know such strange people?” “What do you expect?” she replied. “About 90 percent of the work we do is either just standing by and watching nature take its course or else a total failure. There is really very little we can do for serious diseases and injuries to the brain. Some days I do nothing but stand helplessly and watch people die. That does something to a person.” In the church, we also do a great deal of standing helplessly as people die, as their marriages fail, as their cancer does not heal, as their enthusiasm lags, as their old, self-destructive habits reappear. It does something to us. “You’re a pastor?” a man asked me at a party. “Well, I’m not exactly sure of what you do, but I know that you do people a lot of good.” Do I?69

Therein lies the rub for Christian ministers. In spite of the baptisms, sermons, counseling sessions, building projects, community mission work, dedications, and funeral services, the pastor is never quite sure how to accurately measure ecclesial success. Some days ministers feel

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66 Wayne Cordeiro, Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 18.
67 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 14.
68 Sanford, Ministry Burnout, 15.
69 Willimon, Clergy and Laity Burnout, 41.
as though they are merely “standing by”; this leaves them feeling worn out, drained, and utterly exhausted. Though more will be said about ministry failure in the following subsection, the fact remains that ministry exhaustion and fatigue lead to burnout. Therefore, it is imperative that pastors, priests and other church leaders find a refuge—a safe, welcoming community of ministers who share similar burdens. By sharing these ministry burdens alongside empathic, clergy friends, church leaders can benefit from durable, holy friendships that help them flourish in their particular ministry settings and in their personal lives.

2.1.4 **Facing the Shame, Loneliness, and Wounds of Ministry Failure**

**Shame**

Pastor and author J. R. Briggs writes about ministry failure and how to find hope and grace amid it. However, he spends a large portion of his book, *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure*, helping ministers to learn the side effects of failure: shame, loneliness, and wounds. Early in the book, he provides details of what he considered to be a failed ministry experience, flying across the country to take on a new pastoral role only to experience the lies and slander of church leaders several months later. Struggling from a desire to please people, innocently suffering from unnecessary and unwarranted verbal tirades and attacks by church elders, and reeling from his own battle with male infertility, Briggs recalls the shame, loneliness, and heartache of a messy experience that left him tending to fresh, emotional wounds.³⁰

On the surface my story may not seem like ministry failure in the traditional sense of the word. It is not laced with scandalous headlines or sexual impropriety. It did not involve an arrest or a gruesome addiction. Other pastors certainly have had it worse that I. And yet everything I felt was consistent with what failure traditionally feels like: betrayal, hurt, hopelessness, grief, loss, disillusionment, bitterness, doubt, anger, the need for survival, and the gripping anxiety of wondering how we would make it. As a people pleaser I had failed to live up to the expectations others had placed on me. As a husband and as a man I had failed to live up to cultural expectations of being a man: the ability to get my wife pregnant. I had lost trust in leadership, in church and in people. And I had failed to live up to the expectations I had placed on myself. I had embraced a failed narrative that became deeply embedded in my mind. This was not the ministry trajectory others told me I was supposed to be on.\textsuperscript{71}

Relating to shame, Briggs recognizes that much of his understanding on this subject he owes to the work of Brene Brown, reputable professor, author, and speaker from the University of Houston. In a talk she gave in June 2010, Brown revealed that human connection and interaction are severely affected by vulnerability and shame. She views shame as “the great unspoken epidemic, the force behind many forms of broken and destructive human behavior,” and she defines shame as “the fear of disconnection, it is the question that asks, ‘Is there something about me that if other people see it or know it, will make me unworthy of connection?’” Briggs explains: “You cannot measure shame, but we certainly know its undeniable force. Shame reveals itself in various forms (guilt, manipulation, hiding, humiliation, blaming, embarrassment, etc.), and it eats perfectionists for lunch. Shame sharks smell the blood of failure in the water and swim close to the victim, anticipating attack. Shame loves to take us by the arm and usher us into darkness and hiding.” Shame is an overwhelming fear that attempts to define a person with the following statement: “I am unlovable.” What shame cannot stand is extreme and transparent vulnerability; instead, it thrives on secrecy and tells lies to the person affected by this spiritual disease.\textsuperscript{72} For the minister, an awareness of shame opens the door for

\textsuperscript{71} Briggs, \textit{Fail}, 33.  
\textsuperscript{72} Briggs, \textit{Fail}, 75–76.
personal healing and paves the way for the ministering child of God to love herself genuinely, as she is and not as others expect her to be. In doing so, the minister embodies the Great Commandment, loving God, neighbor, and self: ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30–31).

For those church leaders who identify as unworthy or unlovable, shame can color their view of themselves which can significantly alter their emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Effects of shame can be seen in the ways that pastors try to hide from it, or attempt to control it altogether, by creating what Sanford called the pastoral persona. Shame is not just something ministers experience; instead, it is a powerful, universal malady: “The Thai word for being shamed literally means ‘to tear one’s face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community.’ With the Shoma people of Zimbabwe it means ‘to stomp [or wipe] your feet on my name.’”

Briggs articulates how perilous it can be when pastors hide their shame:

> I’m slowly learning that the most dangerous thing I could do after a shaming experience is to hide or bury my story. Failure’s undeniable presence gets right up in our shame grill and takes us to dark places. When I experience shame, I find myself standing on the tract of land called, “I’m not good enough.” As pastors, if we are not willing to deal with our won shame, we can easily be tempted to use it as a veiled form of controlling others. Pastors can be skilled shame manipulators. Unfortunately, we can infer, imply or directly communicate in a way that brings shame on others in order to avoid experiencing shame ourselves. When we manipulate shame, it’s simply an attempt to insulate ourselves from experiencing it further.74

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73 Duane Elmer, Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In around the World (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 175, quoted in Briggs, Fail, 78.
74 Briggs, Fail, 79.
Briggs will emphasize the role of vulnerability in the healing of shame, and I will spend time unpacking what vulnerability looks like in holy friendships among clergy. It is quite apparent that failure can be a catalyst for shame in the hearts of broken, imperfect ministers.

**Loneliness**

All pastors, priests and church leaders suffer from loneliness at one time or another. The irony is that while a minister can spend time in worship, fellowship, and mission alongside fellow church members, she can also feel invisible, left out, and forgotten. Pastors and other clergy want to know who their real friends are, who they can truly trust, and who will stick beside them no matter may come their way.\(^{75}\) Sometimes ministers just want to be themselves, and valued and affirmed as such. Briggs shares the following story about a pastor struggling with loneliness:

One pastor told me that although he is an extrovert, he struggles at parties and social functions. He wants to fit in and be like everyone else, enjoying the event and socializing with others, but people always seem to steer the conversation toward church matters and counseling issues. Others make lighthearted jokes about the need for everyone to behave because a member of the clergy is present. With a sense of resignation he asked me, “Where can I truly be myself? Does anybody really want me to be myself, or do they just want me to be pastor all the time? Where can I be me?”\(^{76}\)

The struggle of loneliness is exacerbated by the target most pastors and other church leaders metaphorically wear on their backs.\(^{77}\) Over time, the arrows of resentment, bitterness, and anger are shot in their direction, often as a way to resist change or as an attempt at control of some sort. To illustrate this pastoral reality, Briggs quotes Dan Allender:

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\(^{75}\) Briggs, *Fail*, 85.

\(^{76}\) Briggs, *Fail*, 86.

\(^{77}\) Briggs, *Fail*, 86.
If [pastors, priests, or other clergy] lead, we will at some point serve alongside of Judas and Peter—and maybe more than once. The Judases will purposefully and disparagingly betray us; the Peters will deny us, even when they think they are incapable of doing so. Betrayal and denial are a part of the human experience; not if but when—and who. “It is like looking at the ten people who serve on a committee with you and wondering, ‘Who will take my words and soak them in kerosene and attempt to burn down my reputation?’”78

Loneliness is a normal part of the human experience, but seemingly multiplied in the lives of pastors. However, personal insecurities, people-pleasing, self-doubt, and secretive fears betray the core message of the gospel that every clergyperson desires to proclaim. When pastors are too nervous to reveal who they really are, pride or fear—or both—keep them hiding, augmenting their loneliness and keeping them from living a life of authenticity. This duplicitous lifestyle can get overwhelming, even debilitating, and can lead to extreme depression, isolation, and emotional detachment, not only from those they serve in their parishes but also their immediate families and other filial systems of support. The tragic part is that when pastors present their true selves to those they serve, there are many who support and sympathize with their church leader’s struggles, yet there are many who would rather believe that their pastor is anything but fragile, weak, and broken, too.79 Briggs shares this pastor’s personal story:

Bryan told me that after months of soul search, he courageously and appropriately confessed areas of personal brokenness to his congregation. He felt relieved, sensing he was modeling for his congregation the way of brokenness and grace. Over the next few days congregants complained, expressing disappointment that a pastor would share so openly. One comment dogged him: “We know you struggle with things in your life, like all of us. But you’re the pastor. We want to believe you have it all together.” Bryan vowed he would never open up again.80

Briggs continues to expand on the certainty of loneliness in the pastorate by delineating some of the factors that drive it. He explains how church leaders are deft at believing “almost

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79 Briggs, Fail, 87–89.
80 Briggs, Fail, 89.
truths,” those lies of Satan that compromise what we know about the Gospel, the falsehoods that compel us to believe the following: “Nobody else is feeling what I’m feeling” and “If I am a good enough pastor I will be worthy of being loved.” Briggs continues: “When we believe these almost truths, we are tempted to live dual lives. We preach God’s unconditional love and yet live by religion’s conditional arrangement. The natural result of believing almost truths is to reach for masks.”

Masks help church leaders hide; masks intensify loneliness. These masks that pastors metaphorically wear are as follows:

• **The “I’m the strong one” mask**: “I have what it takes to be the super pastor you want me to be.”

• **The “I’m theologically educated” mask**: “My seminary training and master of biblical languages prepares me for any situation.”

• **The “I’m spiritually mature” mask**: “I can handle any circumstance and will keep it together because Jesus is on my side; I am the pastor, after all.”

• **The “I’m not hurt” mask**: “God’s grace is sufficient and therefore [insert a few verses and spiritual clichés], and I can convince you that I’m all right.”

• **The “Do you know how much I put up with? mask**: “I deal with so many messy people and intense issues in a given week, I deserve a break.”

• **The “I’m just like everyone else” mask**: “I may serve as a pastor, but I’m just a normal person like you.”

• **The “I’m super busy” mask**: “I really wish I could, but I have too much going on right now.”

• **The “I only struggle with the little, petty sins” mask**: “I am a sinner, but I only struggle with ‘respectable’ sins.”

• **The “See how vulnerable I am” mask**: “I’m willing to share only some parts of my life with you where I’m less than perfect.”

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81 Briggs, *Fail*, 90.
In all the scenarios above, pastors are tempted into believing that they can uphold the expectations and desires of the people they serve. Though no church leader can satisfy the needs of all her laypeople, the mask helps to hide this truth in order that she might appear capable, smart, strong, mature, impenetrable, worthy, humble, diligent, pious, or vulnerable. In other words, masks are objects that pastors and leaders of all stripes wear in order to pretend that they are something that they are not. The irony is that church leaders want to be humble, honest, and completely vulnerable; they want to be accepted for who they are, warts and all. The Gospel promises pastoral leaders the same grace. But the more hypocritical that pastors, priests, and other clergy become, the more lonely they feel as they try to maintain the graven image they themselves have carved. Soon, addictions tempt church leaders to find means of escape, means that entice and lead down dangerous paths. All people suffer from various addictions, and pastors are not immune. As Briggs states, the temptations of “pornography or progress, alcohol or applause, sex, success, painkillers, email, food, or another late night at church” can evolve into addictions that further isolate the church leader, a tragic result of self-deception. In order to avoid self-deception and adequately face the temptations of loneliness pastors must seek intentional, holy friendships with other clergy so that they can find honest, safe, and healthy relationships characterized by Kingdom transformation, prophetic imagination, and priestly vulnerability. It is in this area of vulnerability where church leaders seem to be most reluctant; after all, most clergypersons know best about the sting of congregational wounds.

**Wounds**

“For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely

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82 Briggs, *Fail*, 94.
die.” Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death. Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him. (1 Sm 20:31–34)

Saul’s insecurities, mixed with rage and jealousy, negatively affected the very people he loved, namely, his son Jonathan. Though Saul’s spear missed his son, Jonathan was still the target of his father’s mentally unstable outburst. Ironically, though Saul’s weapon failed to hit his son’s body, the emotional damage was already done. In fact, Saul managed to hit his target after all, wounding Jonathan emotionally and augmenting his son’s grief, both over his best friend, David, and shame associated with a father’s betrayal. Likewise, church leaders experience wounds from the people they serve. They, too, attempt to dodge metaphorical spears that church members hurl in their direction: veiled insults, passive-aggressive behavior, withholding of finances, shared gossip, written threats, private meetings about the pastor, or abandoning church relationships and activities without warning. While pastors are not immune from exhibiting these types of prideful behaviors themselves, the reality is that pastors do not have the luxury of responding as freely as their laypeople. As Laura Stephens-Reed explains to congregants, “What’s your pastor doing to do if you get mad? She can’t fire you, refuse to work with you, or give you a bad grade.” Wounds are indeed part of the pastoral experience. While God knows that sheep can retaliate and bite their shepherds from time to time, the Gospel reveals a much better way. The problem is that pastoral wounds can accumulate, and if not dealt with in healthy ways, can wreak havoc on the physical, emotional, and spiritual life of clergy.

Briggs observes that many pastors suffer the wounds of betrayal and deception at the hands of those they are called to serve, and that often the best way to manage these wounds is to expect that they are the result of the human condition.\textsuperscript{87} He suggests that pastors, priests and other clergy look to the Psalms and seize the power of complaint and lament in order to manage the difficult realities of pastoral woundedness.\textsuperscript{88} Still, the wounds clergy experience run deep and often leave large scars reminiscent of the painful memories from congregational spears and arrows. These accumulated wounds inflate a clergyperson’s sense of failure. To illustrate this internal struggle with disappointment, Briggs shares the following stories about the personal wounds from pastors he has mentored through the years:

- “You draw near to God and [God] walks away from you. There is no light at the end of this tunnel. It’s just dark.”
- “Why would God give me a congregation full of people who believe in Jesus but a wife who no longer does?”
- “I was at about my breaking point, believing God had given me enough to bear. Then my wife and I got the news that our nine-year-old daughter had leukemia. I would have quit ministry forever that week, but I had no other employable skills. So I’ve stayed in for the past seventeen years.”
- “God called me to ministry four years ago. All it has felt like is the desert.”
- “I have a scarlet F on my chest. It feels like a permanent F on my report card. How will I explain my past to future churches I might interview with?”
- “My depression is all-encompassing. I don’t know how to lead a congregation well when I struggle to get out of bed each morning.”
- “My brother died seven years ago. It was incredibly difficult. I mean no disrespect to my brother, but his death was not as painful as the experience with my denominational leaders and bishop when we had to shut down our church.”\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} Briggs, \textit{Fail}, 100-103.
\textsuperscript{88} Briggs, \textit{Fail}, 104–9.
\textsuperscript{89} Briggs, \textit{Fail}, 97–98.
While these pastoral responses reveal deep-seated pain and emotional imbalance, their sense of failure is raw, real, and enhanced by their feelings of shame and loneliness. Often, a minister is tempted to feel as though she is the only one failing in ministry while encountering stress, fatigue, depression, burnout, shame, loneliness, and woundedness. The good news is that God provides healthy practices of self-care that pastors can utilize during their ministries. However, if church leaders do not take the time to care for themselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, they will slowly collapse under the weight of the aforementioned stress. Clergy who ignore self-care cannot maximize their effectiveness in ministry; additionally, ministers’ well-being is severely affected not only as congregational leaders but also as marital and parental leaders in the home. The absence of self-care is yet another burden that ministers carry. Only when ministers are able to convene in the healthy, supportive context of holy friendships are clergy able to shoulder the stressful load more safely.

2.1.5 The Absence of Wholesome Ministry Self-Care

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, pastors, priests, and other church leaders carry the emotional, mental, and physical burdens of ministry with them. Essentially, ministers are tempted to keep visiting the hospitals, or pray for the sick, or prepare the sermon, or meet with a grieving family, or take a late-night phone call—all in the name of Jesus Christ. To their detriment, pastors’ self-care is a healthy practice that is easily shunned or ignored altogether. I established that stress of all types negatively affects the well-being of the minister. This means that any time during a church leader’s ministry tenure, stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released in the body and can remain elevated if appropriate measures for self-care are
not taken into consideration.\textsuperscript{90} Olson delineates the physical ramifications that the stresses of ministry can create for us as Christian ministers:

We may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, indigestion, sleep problems, back or neck pain, or tiredness. Or we may notice behaviors that indicate excessive stress, such as overeating or being bossy and critical of others. It may be that emotions, such as feeling overwhelmed, easily upset, crying, or anger, emerge when stress is high. Or we may notice cognitive symptoms of stress, such as difficulty making decisions, memory problems, lack of creativity, and loss of humor. Each individual has different warning signals that the stress is getting to be too much, and it is good to be self-aware enough to recognize them. Many of these stress warning symptoms are caused by the extra adrenaline and cortisol that the stress response has dumped into our bodily system, which keeps the body tense and activated.\textsuperscript{91}

When ministry leaders are tense and unable to cope effectively, they suffer mentally and emotionally. Spiritually speaking, pastoral stress becomes a weakness that can be used as an opportunity for God’s strength, if proper self-care is administered. However, when pastors accumulate adrenaline and cortisol over time, their minds and bodies are not the only things that suffer. Sadly, church leaders’ ministries and the people they are called to serve suffer as well. One of the foundational problems for pastors experiencing the ongoing stresses and stressors of ministry is that many congregations are naively unaware of their shepherd’s struggles. As Pastor William L. Self notes, “No church I have served has ever suggested that I take care of myself. The casual church member does not understand the rhythm and demands of ministry life and secretly thinks that we only work one or two days a week anyway.”\textsuperscript{92} Stress can double when the pastor feels that she is expected to cater to the whims and wishes of the laity, believing that a busy, hard-working pastor is the sign of a faithful servant of God. Pastor Self illustrates the

\textsuperscript{90} Olson et al., \textit{A Guide to Ministry Self-Care}, 57.
\textsuperscript{91} Olson et al., \textit{A Guide to Ministry Self-Care}, 57.
disconnect between a congregation’s understanding of pastoral leadership and the Bible’s understanding:

Naively, I tried to reach my first church about the role of the pastor. The denomination had a program in which all churches were encouraged to study a book of the Bible simultaneously. My first year there, the Bible study books were 1 and 2 Timothy. This was the perfect text to teach the church what the Bible said about pastoral leadership. They would have none of it. It went against their cultural understanding of the church and its ministry. This is interesting in light of the fact that they claimed to be a biblically based church. I learned there that when culture and the Bible clash, culture usually wins the first round.93

The essence of wholesome self-care is that it honors the God who made humankind in God’s own image. Self-care acknowledges that in order to sustain healthy ministry, necessary steps must be taken in order to ensure long-term well-being. According to Self, “Self-care is not destructive self-indulgence, but rather it is being a steward of some rather special gifts—the human body and soul, along with the capacity to bring joy to others as well as to experience it. Charles Spurgeon observed that the farmer is working just as hard when he is sharpening the plow as when he is tilling the soil with it. The fisherman is working as hard when he mends his nets as when he casts them. It is a commitment we make to God when we accept [God’s] call to serve. It takes courage to take care of yourself.”94

Pastor Self believes that pastoral self-care revolves around five areas that ministers often take for granted. These easily ignored areas of self-care are Sabbath time, regular exercise, learning to laugh again, accepting the blessing of therapy, and developing a support system.95 When priests are able to set aside time for rest, devotion, and prayer, they experience the healthy outlet of spiritual communion with God that the LORD established as one of the Ten Commandments. When pastors plan and execute their daily or weekly exercise regimen, they are

93 Self, Surviving the Stained Glass Jungle, 41.
94 Self, Surviving the Stained Glass Jungle, 44.
95 Ibid., 44-54.
providing vital bodily healing and producing mental relaxation. When church leaders take life less seriously, laugh more, and smile often, they release excess stress hormones and produce endorphins that cleanse the body and promote mental well-being. When ministers seek professional therapy and learn how and why they respond to various stressors, they are able to react maturely and safely and embody a non-anxious presence for themselves and those they lead. And when clergy create and cultivate covenant relationships with other clergy, they soon realize that other ministers empathize with similar stresses and are willing to listen through their relatable set of vocational ears.

This kind of consecrated support system is critically important in helping ministers navigate the inevitable peaks and valleys of pastoral ministry. Ultimately, the shared blessing of sustained, holy friendships enables church leaders to thrive and flourish in their ministry contexts. For pastors to understand this truth and still choose suffer in isolation is antithetical to God’s dream of celebrating the shared gift of covenant community in the world. Therefore, though pastors, priests, and other clergy share this common burden of suffering, covenant relationship is the tangible reminder of divine hope, the promise that all can be reconciled by the power and presence of Jesus Christ. God’s covenant with creation is a blessing God shares with the entire world—and it is in this shared blessing that worn-out clergy must not only willingly embrace but also choose to engage consistently. After all, there is no such thing as holy friendships among clergy without God’s gift of covenant relationship, expressed most intimately in the person of Jesus.

The shared blessing of covenant relationship is the topic of my next chapter, an essential reminder that every person is created for intentional, healthy community—and clergy are no exception.
3. The Clergy’s Shared Blessing: Holy Friendships Are Covenant Blessings between God and Humanity

3.1 “God’s Blessing: A Yoke of Rest” – A Matthew 11:25–30 Homily

Theologian and professor James Boyce refers to Matt 11:28–30 as “one of the most beautiful passages in the Gospels.”\(^9^6\) Another biblical scholar remarked that Matt 11:28–30 “are among the most beloved and quoted verses in the Bible.”\(^9^7\) Pastors, priests, and other clergy struggle to lead churches amid internal conflicts, moral decay, racial division, and a great panoply of social injustices. This causes tired minds, worn-out bodies, and loads of emotional exhaustion. God’s people need this scripture passage because “all of us feel burdened and in need of rest.”\(^9^8\) This is a tremendous understatement. Today, more than ever before, clergy must hear these blessings, afresh and anew, God’s words of hope through the Son, Jesus Christ, promising to lead us to rest in order that we might join the Savior in the work of God’s Kingdom.

First, let us observe the context in which Jesus shares these tenderhearted and pastoral expressions of love.

Earlier, in Matt 11:16–24, Jesus pronounces judgment on those cities who refused to repent and submit to God’s Kingdom reign in Christ, a divine rule that forgives, restores, justifies, and saves. There is an air of sadness in Jesus’s tone as he directs his thanksgiving to God in prayer (vs. 25). We acknowledge that God’s divine will was, and still is, to open up the gifts of the Kingdom to those who are ready and willing and open to accepting them; however,

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for those whose hearts are hardened to this message, judgment will follow. Still, Jesus yearns for people’s hearts to accept the loving oneness that he and the heavenly Father mutually experience. Looking at verse 26, Boyce makes the following observation: “Now in explicit language of revelation, Jesus addresses the Father and announces that his ministry is a sign of his oneness with the Father and with the Father's gracious will (11:26). That will is seen in the Father's handing over all authority to the Son (see also 28:18–20). And now in this revelatory passage we hear what the Son will do with that authority.” Boyce observes that Jesus’s authority, given by the Father, will now be used to free his followers from their emotional and spiritual chains. Jesus longs to liberate the people from their sinful, spiritual bondage that weighs them down and prevents them from experiencing holy rest and Spirit-filled peace. Christ-followers know that this kind of peaceful rest can easily be taken for granted. Yet, if the people of God submit to the strength and rest of the LORD, they will concur with the words of the Psalmist: “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up” (Ps 68:19).

I confess that I am not good at resting. Don’t get me wrong, I love resting, but I don’t plan it well nor do I consistently open my mind and heart up to the voice of God who yearns to still my soul and turn my attention to Christ alone. While I enjoy the work God has called me to do, I find it easy to remain busy and burdened throughout, instead of fulfilled and restful during the weekend. Larry Chell tells a story that illustrates one’s unwillingness to lay down one’s burdens:

In the Philippines I heard a local pastor use the following parable to illustrate Christ's offer of rest (Mt 11:28) and the response of people who won't trust Him completely: The driver of a [...] wagon was on his way to market when he overtook an old man carrying a heavy load. Taking compassion on him, the driver invited the old man to ride in the wagon. Gratefully the old man accepted. After a few minutes, the driver turned to see how the man was doing. To his surprise, he

found him still straining under the heavy weight, for he had not taken the burden off his shoulders.\footnote{Larry Chell, “Resting in Christ,” \textit{Sermon Illustrations}, accessed November 5, 2020, http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/ resting_in_christ.htm.}

Similarly, I have naively continued to carry my own spiritual and emotional burdens well beyond my personal limitations. I have convinced myself that I am fairly deft at bearing my heavy burdens. However, these burdens are the same that Jesus so desperately yearns to carry on my behalf! So when I have chosen to rest in the embrace of Jesus, my burdens begin to lift, I feel lighter, and my disposition changes. I am more aware of others’ needs and less concerned about how I can satisfy my own selfish desires. Could it be that resting in Christ is the key to unlocking the spiritual and emotional well-being of the mind and heart? Could it be that resting in Christ, being fully present with the Savior, unencumbered by burdens, is what heaven is truly like on earth? Perhaps Matt 11:28–30 is a picture of what the Kingdom of God is like. Serving alongside Jesus is where we find our rest and our peace. It is the place where we experience wholeness. How we need to lay down our burdens at the feet of Jesus! He alone is the one who can provide us with the peace we need amid the storm.

Years ago, Mahalia Jackson, the famed Gospel singer and dear friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., often sang the beautiful African-American spiritual entitled “Down by the Riverside.” After beginning with the following stanza, “I’m gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside,” her voice eventually rose to faith-filled assurance as she crooned, “I ain’t a-gonna study war no more,” a direct biblical reference (Is 2:3–4, NRSV): “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the \textsc{Lord}, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the \textsc{Lord} from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and
shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” The words of Jesus will be instruments of peace; his words will be a healing balm and a calming presence. With respect to healing and well-being, Matt 11:25–26 beautifully captures the embodiment of relational peace as Jesus’s words illustrate the wholeness of the Triune God. This blessed relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reinforces the comforting, verbal reassurance of Christ’s shalom in verses 28–30. These verses represent the significance of the Sabbath relationship that Rabbi Jesus and disciples share. Jesus alone offers this divine rest, hope that instruments of war can be reshaped into instruments of communal growth through the pursuit of peaceful unity. It is only when the Christ-follower lays down her burdens, and chooses to let go of her desires to dominate and oppress, that she finds herself truly free—free to love herself and all of her neighbors (see Luke 10:25–37) with the Sabbath rest that God alone offers us in the gift of the Messiah.

By observing and heeding Jesus’s words in Matt 11:28–30, spiritual rest can only occur through self-surrender. Yielding to Christ in humble submission to his loving leadership helps the Christian disciple find rest, renewal, and wholeness again, even amid excessive busyness, abundant chaos, social division, and emotional discord. Therefore, the reader of this biblical text must pay attention to Jesus’s imperatives: “come,” “take,” and “learn.” However, I would like to interpret these biblical, imperative phrases in the following manner: (1) approach Jesus; (2) accept his yoke; and (3) acquire his understanding. If I am truly burdened but I trust Jesus to personify peace-filled rest, than I will indeed experience the assurance of the Psalmist: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants after you, my God” (Ps 42:1). Ironically, it will be the spiritual yoke that one shares with Jesus which ends up lightening the load, a burden
that engenders true freedom. Therefore, each of us must answer the following questions honestly and thoroughly: How badly do I need and want the peace-filled rest of Christ? Am I presenting symptoms of unrest through interpersonal conflicts with God and others? What does Jesus’s Kingdom message of divine rest have to do with being joined to Christ?

What does it mean to approach Jesus? “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-burdened and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). Prior to this section of scripture we find Jesus thanking the Father for revealing the secrets of the Kingdom to little children, the weak, the vulnerable, and the dependent of society. Now Jesus begins verse 28 with an imperative statement borne out of love: “Come hither to me!” This command in the Greek is expressed as an interjection as well as an imperative. Interestingly, Strong’s concordance notes that the Greek imperative verb used here also means “follow.” Since we know this section of scripture will speak about a “yoke” (joining two oxen for agricultural field work), Jesus’s imperative statement “Come to me” could well be interpreted as “Follow me,” a phrase the Savior uses multiple times in the Gospels.

Whom does Jesus command to remain close to his side? Anyone who is weary, tired, and fatigued by mental, emotional, and physical work is ordered to find rest in God’s Son. Moreover, anyone who carries heavy burdens (the Greek can be defined as “overburdened with ceremony [or spiritual anxiety]”) is instructed by the LORD to learn from his compassionate character. It would seem logical that the offer of peace from a benevolent God would compel people to approach Jesus, even if for the sake of curiosity. Sadly, the invitation of Jesus here in Matt. 11:28–30 is snubbed, rejected, or ignored altogether. At present, this world is more divided and socially polarized than ever before. At every turn, modern day examples of the heavy weight of

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societal sin are ubiquitous. Spend a few minutes on a favorite television channel or social media site and chances are there will exist a plethora of stories glorifying oppression, exclusion, hatred, bigotry, disobedience, impurity, slander, marginalization, injustice, infidelity, avarice, fear, or anxiety. Our culture seems to champion its personal agendas rather than seek the good of others or build healthy communities based on compassion, mercy, and mutual trust. Anxiety is on the rise and legalism, the act of self-justification for keeping the Law outside of the completed work of Christ, continues to encumber the hearts and souls of God’s children, lumping burden after burden of sinful activity and unnecessary pain upon themselves.103 Every one of us feels the spiritual and emotional drain that sinful consequences yield. Still, we might imagine the voice of Jesus, crying out to us in this present moment, clearly and compassionately:

Come closer and follow me! You’re carrying burdens that I alone can bear. You simply cannot support the weight of these sins. They are affecting your heart and the spiritual health of your relationships. Here, let me give you a break, dear child. I will give you rest. Let me give you the refreshment you need so that when the time is right you can return to your Kingdom work. And next time you will remember to let me work alongside you, with you, assisting you in the work I have called you to complete. When you exchange your heavy yoke for mine you will understand. You were never meant to carry such oppressive burdens; instead, carry mine. They are light, peaceful, and liberating.

In order to receive Jesus’s divine rest, we need to realize that his peace is given to those who yield to his spiritual refreshment, which is the presence of Christ. “Be still and know that [the LORD] is God” (Ps 46:10a). This reminds us that we must cease from our labors, stresses, and busyness in order to experience the fullness of the divine rest of God. Dr. F. William May tells the following story about an exploring party in Africa, which had employed a group of native carriers to go with them into heart of the continent: “Being in a hurry to reach their

objective, the party was pushed relentlessly for several days. Finally the natives just sat down and would go no farther. Asked what was the matter, the superstitious natives replied, ‘We are waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies.’” Does the response of the natives resonate? Does one feel the need to pause long enough to let one’s soul catch up with the body? Is the mind racing? Is the to-do list always growing? Does one struggle with meeting deadlines? Is the pace of life move too fast? If the answer is “yes” to any of the previous questions, more than likely contentment is a far cry from the reality of your operational lifestyle. Because our lives are out of control, Jesus commands us to approach him. He knows we need the spiritual rest of his Holy Spirit. First, it is imperative that we learn to approach Christ Jesus when we are burdened. Secondly, it is vital that we accept his Kingdom teaching—an education of peace delivered through the means of Jesus’s yoke.

If we want true rest, we must accept Jesus’s yoke of rest. What is a yoke? Those who grew up on a farm will remember that a yoke is “a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (such as two oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together.” The image of the yoke is so instructive for the Christ-follower because Jesus knows that true peace and rest are experienced when we are joined, connected, and submitted to him. In this way, we serve alongside Christ, letting him lead the work and carry the burden that we are unable to bear on our own. Rev. Charles Twymon of the Macedonia Baptist Church of Detroit carefully describes the spiritual role of the yoke: “The ‘yoke’ Jesus refers to [. . .] is well illustrated by the process of training a young bullock to plow. In some parts of the world, the farmer will have the young bullock harnessed to the same yoke as a fully matured ox. The bullock, dwarfed by the ox, will

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not actually pull any of the weight. The ox will bear the whole load, but the young bullock is merely learning to walk in a field under control and with a yoke around its neck." Though the yoke is an oppressive, heavy wooden bar joining the necks of two oxen, Jesus reinterprets the yoke as a helpful training tool for his disciples. The yoke of Jesus is not an instrument of domination and might; instead, the yoke of Jesus is a humble teaching device used to guide us into the knowledge and love of God, support us in our weaknesses, and partner with us in ministry. Since Jesus carries the bulk of the ministry load, our burdens become easy and light. Jesus affixes us to his yoke, making the weight more manageable and gentler. Inevitably, the load we carry is no longer a frustrating encumbrance but instead a delightful work of holy friendship. Yes, Jesus mandates us to approach him and to accept his yoke. Yet, in order to learn from the heart of Rabbi Jesus, it will require us to acquire the skill of discipleship.

We must remain in Christ’s presence long enough approach him and accept his yoke. If we disregard his invitation to divine rest, we demonstrate that we are not teachable. Yet, the more teachable we are, the more willing we are to learn of Christ, the closer we come to the center of his will. This is where we find true rest. “The nearer the soul is to God, the less its restlessness, as the point nearest the center of a circle is subject to the least motion.” Therefore, if we want to reach the center of Christ’s heart and find true spiritual rest amid the chaos of the day, we must learn of Christ by taking on his yoke, studying his character while fulfilling his compassionate ministry. We must be enthusiastic and loyal pupils, recognizing that Christ calls us as disciples to follow his lead. Jesus is not offering us his rest in order that we might remain immobile and static in our lives. On the contrary, Jesus calls us to cease

unnecessary stress, strain, and excessive work and put on his yoke of rest. By heeding this divine mandate we are refilled, refreshed, and spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically prepared for the difficult days of suffering we share with the Savior. The good news is that Jesus will carry the heavy burdens as we learn to trust and serve him. What a blessing—Jesus offers us rest in order that we might be sharper, bolder, and better equipped to be his apostles and disciples in the world. To be yoked with Jesus is to embrace the reality of our weaknesses in order that the power of Christ might rest on us (2 Cor 12:9–10). This shared yoke of Jesus, learning from the wise leadership of the Savior, brings us peace and rest as well as the joy of offering God’s compassionate ministry of reconciliation to the world.

When we acquire the skill of discipleship, learning from the heart of the Master, we learn to approach and accept the yoke of Christ willingly and with a glad heart. Additionally, it is vital that we do not use Jesus’s rest as an excuse to remain static in our daily ministries; rather, we must actively worship the God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine while we wait on his call to serve (Eph 3:20). The following story illustrates this aforementioned truth:

One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. “I don't get it,” he said. “Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did.” “But you didn't notice,” said the winning woodsman, “that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest.”

Jesus’s yoke of rest offers us the chance to sharpen our saws in order that we might be as effective as possible in experiencing and sharing the peace-filled rest of Christ. It is a priceless,

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divine peace that invites us to cease from striving and straining in our own power. If we, like little children, will approach him, accept his yoke, and acquire the ministry skills of compassionate, merciful love in Jesus’s presence, then we will more clearly understand the Savior’s words in the Gospel: “Jesus called for them and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs’” (Lk 18:16).

Who yearns to wear the yoke of true rest in Christ? That person must approach Jesus with gratitude, accept the Savior’s yoke (letting go of heavy burdens), and acquire the ministry skills of Jesus’s Kingdom heart. As one develops the habit of submitting to Jesus’s yoke, spending time finding others who are in desperate need of the LORD’s yoke of rest is vital to spiritual health. When others receive the yoke of Christ’s peace, rest will find its home in those who sacrifice their lives on behalf of others, too. As ministers of the Gospel, let us take his “yoke upon [us], and learn from him; for [he is] gentle and humble in heart, and [we] will find rest for [our] souls. For [his] yoke is easy, and [his] burden is light” (Mt 11:29–30). Therefore, let us celebrate the yoke of Christ’s rest within the safe, healthy bonds of covenant community, those relational blessings that produce the gift of holy friendship. Amen.

### 3.2 Holy Friendship as God’s Initiative: Covenant Types, Procedures, and Roles

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God created light, the sky, dry land, seas, plants, trees, and the sun, moon, and stars. God created the animals, and the earth and the seas teemed with life. Lastly, before resting, God unveiled the pinnacle of God’s creation: humankind. After Adam was shaped from the soil, God breathed spirit-life into Adam’s nostrils, and a relationship was formed between the Creator and man. Reflecting the diverse friendship of
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God initiated a personal friendship with Adam and Eve, the complementary, female partner and friend of Adam. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gn 1:27). God’s invention was, after all, relationship. God’s dream and desire was to be intimately involved in the daily lives of earth’s first couple, communicating kindly and gently with them while providing for all their needs. God’s love for creation was so great that God offered all that was in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve apart from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This relational contract was established by God and conditionally based on Adam’s willingness to follow God’s specific commands. When sin entered the world, humankind suffered the consequences of its willful disobedience. However, God was determined to make a way to restore God’s friendship with humankind. Consequently, through a chronological string of divinely initiated friendships, God established and consecrated several covenants in order to redeem, reconcile, and restore humanity. Each of these relationships involved a call, and each of these relationships involved a covenant. With each successive friendship, the LORD was pointing toward a new and final covenant, which is the promise established through the blood of the Jesus Christ, the spotless and holy Lamb of God. It is the covenantal relationship that God shares with humanity that illustrates God’s profound desire to be intimately connected with creation in a most friendly, compassionate, and redemptive way. Therefore, in order to understand the holy bond of covenant friendship, it is first important to define what a biblical covenant is, both in type and procedure. Secondly, it is imperative to ascertain the role of covenant relationship in the biblical texts. Learning the types, procedures, and roles of God’s many covenants help ordained clergy and laypeople alike to appreciate and value the need for holy friendships, not only with God but also with one another. Furthermore, the very nature of
the covenant relationship demands the reexamination of the vital role that loyal friendships play in the flourishing of God’s people and how these friendships impact the Kingdom of God.

While there are numerous and varied theological and biblical views on the nature and extent of covenants in general, the fact remains that covenants permeate most of the Bible. Nearly three hundred references to covenant are found in the Old Testament and over thirty are found in the New Testament. ¹⁰⁹ Covenants can be defined as follows:

Covenants are solemn declarations governing important relationships. In one type of covenant the relationship is very one-sided. A superior states what is going to happen based on actions to be undertaken by an inferior. These are sometimes called “suzerainty” covenants or treaties. A suzerain is a master. A second type of covenant found in the Bible is a covenant involving a mutual exchange of promises, confirmed by an oath. These are sometimes called “parity treaties.” A third type is divine covenants, covenants God makes.¹¹⁰

Divine covenants came first because they were initiated by God (Jer 33:20, 25; Hos 2:18). God desired to live among his people wherever they travelled and wherever they put up shelter. Again, this was God’s initiative, not that of the Hebrew or Israelite people. God knew that humanity could not perfectly keep their part of the covenant and authorized the terms on God’s own accord. While Old Testament covenants proved God to be the only faithful partner, it was the new covenant and its mediator, Christ Jesus, who redeemed humanity and made a way for God to abide with his people forever. In most covenants or contracts, two parties agree on how to relate and act among one another, where both parties bear equal responsibility; however, the human race is incapable of executing their part of the bargain. This is why the new covenant is critical to people: it places the onus on Christ as mediator of the covenant in order to save and perpetuate the relationship God desires to have with his creation for eternity.¹¹¹ “Divine

¹¹⁰ Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 3.
¹¹¹ Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 5–9.
covenants are sovereignty determined, but they are motivated by love and implemented through grace.112 God’s ḥesed is the supreme motivator in building covenant friendships. It is vital that clergy and laypeople realize that the dream of creating meaningful, intimate, and loyal friendships originated in the heart of God. God is constantly initiating relationship based on unconditional love, inviting us to enjoy holy community with Jesus and with one another. The New Testament writer articulates clearly God’s divinely initiated love: “We love because [God] first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

As scholars suggest, scriptural covenants follow certain procedures and therefore contain specific features. The first feature of a biblical covenant is the “terms of agreement,” initiated by God and either fulfilled by God while the other party benefits or God and the other party agree to relate to one another in particular ways. Regardless of the terms, God accompanies the covenant with a sign, such as a rainbow in the Noahic covenant or circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant. The second feature of a biblical covenant is the swearing of an oath. Through writing or word, the two parties are bound by the oath. While humans swear by God, God swears by God’s self; this oath is binding. The third feature of a biblical covenant is the offering of sacrifice. In some parts of the Old Testament, animal sacrifices made to God were pleasing and secured the covenant relationship. Having a witness or witnesses is the fourth feature of a biblical covenant. The witness can be human, animal, or anything in creation (e.g., stones, sticks, etc.). The ubiquitous witness is always God. Feasting is the fifth feature of a biblical covenant that allowed both parties feel more comfortable in their dealings, reducing any tension that may have previously been present. “Offer and acceptance” is the seventh feature of a biblical covenant as both are experienced in the forming of these relational agreements. And finally, the

112 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 8.
eighth feature of a biblical covenant is accepting the “consequences of failure to keep covenants and possible termination”—regardless of Israel’s ability to keep their agreement, God always reserved the right to terminate or retain the covenant.113

Covenant is undisputedly one of the most important themes in biblical theology.114 Its role in scriptural understanding cannot be overstated. Covenant relationships are formed and celebrated, grieved and bemoaned, reinstated and celebrated yet again. While the theme of God’s continual purpose in covenant friendship with humanity is one of grace, there are specific covenantal features that run through each of the particular biblical covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and the new).115 In spite of the diversity of opinion about covenantal categories, most biblical scholars agree that covenant is indeed a major theological motif.116 The new covenant realities found Jesus Christ are repeated and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, anticipating the eschatological reality of God’s redemptive hope placed in the offering of the Son. The biblical friendships God maintains through divinely initiated covenants are vital to the understanding and interpretation of scripture itself. The reader of scripture acknowledges the thread of the new covenant woven through the tapestry of the Old Testament covenants as well. Thus, God’s covenantal relationships with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David pointed to specific promises, promises experienced by Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. God’s covenantal friendship with these leaders was established in order to bring about these promises of grace.117 Thomas E. McComiskey defines God’s covenant of grace as follows: “The

114 Paul R. Williamson and D. A. Carson, Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 29.
115 Williamson and Carson, Sealed with an Oath, 31. There are multiple opinions and interpretations about the number of covenants found in the Bible. This thesis will focus on the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic and the new covenant mediated by Christ.
116 Williamson and Carson, Sealed with an Oath, 32.
117 Williamson and Carson, Sealed with an Oath, 33–35.
covenant of grace is a sovereign disposition in which a glorious inheritance is bestowed on the people of God through the mediatorial work of Christ.”\textsuperscript{118} It is LORD’s compassionate intention for the people of God to receive the promise of a divine inheritance. The extent to which God goes to redeem humanity is expressed through this covenant of promise, serving the roles of redemption, salvation, and wholeness:

An element essential to any theological system based on the canonical texts of Scripture is the standard by which the continuity of the redemptive acts of God may be defined and incorporated into theological description. The promise covenant functions as this category, for it crystallizes for all time the unchanging aspects of the inheritance God promises for his people. Since God covenanted an eternal promise—a promise that is unchanging in essence—his people thus share a common inheritance. It is therefore difficult to posit a radical distinction between Israel and the church. The common inheritance of promise, shared by the people of both testaments, creates a bond that transcends the covenantal eras. The people of God comprise a continuum throughout history. They are the people to whom the Lord has covenanted his redeeming love in the form of promise.\textsuperscript{119}

God is passionate and deliberate about forming holy friendships among God’s people. Throughout the Old and New Testaments God establishes covenants among the people through specific leaders. Through these imperfect leaders God remains loyal, trustworthy, and committed to fulfilling the terms of the various biblical covenants. This shared blessing of holy friendship can be observed time and time again through the pages of scripture and are most evident in God’s friendships with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

\textsuperscript{119} McComiskey, \textit{The Covenants of Promise}, 189.
3.2.1 God’s Friendship with Noah

When readers of scripture encounter Noah in Genesis 6, they find him to be a holy man, upright in character and open to the words and ways of God. “Noah walked with God” (Gn 6:9).

What, specifically prompted God to befriend Noah and enter into a covenant with him and his descendants?

The solemn institution of a covenant requires a generous and loving God and a recipient who is willing to accept its terms. In Noah’s case the terms were not onerous, but we should pause to consider the willing and responsive nature of this great servant of God who is commended among the heroes of the faith. When Noah was warned, unlike his contemporaries he responded, thus condemning human society. Noah brought pleasure to God because of his righteous, God-oriented nature [. . . ,] his absolute trust in God’s will for him, despite opposition and the difficulty of the task to which he was called, his wholehearted obedience to the entirety of God’s command to him, and his willingness to warn others as God had warned him.120

What we find in God’s relationship with Noah is a perpetuation of the commands given to Adam and Eve, those life-giving mandates for respecting the earth, animals, and humankind, which would provide the necessary conditions for all living things to thrive. So, “at the very centre of the Flood account lies the solemn and binding covenant made by God with Noah as the progenitor of the human race. On this rests the authority which God delegates to humankind to order society and the environment, confirming and expanding the injunctions given to Adam and Eve. It is therefore fundamental to our understanding of the place of humanity, in God’s purposes and in the development of [God’s] redemptive design.”121 God forms a covenant with Noah based on grace, and while there are specific behavioral conditions placed on Noah and his descendants (no bloodshed), this entire covenant rests on the loving, capable shoulder of God alone. The permanent nature of this covenant lies in God’s promise to never flood the earth

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121 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 14.
again, symbolized by the sign of the rainbow. For all generations, this colorful symbol in the sky will provide a reminder of God’s immutability and tender compassion toward all of creation.  

After the global deluge, God expects behavioral changes to occur in the lives of Noah, Noah’s family, and the rest of Noah’s family tree. God is adamant about eradicating bloodshed, evidenced by the divine decision to flood the world, a decision stemming from people’s willful violence and selfish killing of one another. And God is serious about killing and murder: “Noah and his descendants are therefore expressly warned that they will be held directly responsible for the taking of human life. God is vitally concerned about the death of men and women, because of their high status in [God’s] order, created in [God’s] image.” God values the sanctity of human life because human life reflects the image of God. It is in the very nature of God to love, and God loves creation. God, in God’s compassionate mercy, is the initiator of this covenantal friendship with Noah and his family. The LORD pursues Noah and divinely selects and preserves this man and his descendants. God shares the blessings of preservation, protection, and provision with Noah and his family tree (Genesis 6) while recreating the world from scratch, promising never to drown the earth again (Genesis 9). God’s holy friendship blessed Noah, bringing about deliverance, hope, and peace. It was a holy friendship, a shared blessing forged in a covenant of saving grace, valuing the image of God in men and women while celebrating the sanctity of every human life. And like the rainbow, God promises this shared blessing of holy friendship for clergy, too, helping to create, cultivate, and sustain a fellowship of respect, honor, and dignity.

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123 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 18.
124 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 18.
125 Williamson and Carson, Sealed with an Oath, 59–64.
3.2.2 God’s Friendship with Abraham

By the time readers of Genesis approach chapter 12, the world is in significant disarray, much like the condition of the world during the time of Noah. The Tower of Babel demonstrates the egotism, conceit, and pride of humanity coupled with rampant idolatry. God pursued a man from the family line of Shem named Abram (later Abraham, meaning “father of many nations”) from the land of Ur of the Chaldees. The story of God’s covenant with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1–3, 15:1–21, and 17:1–14, and consists of three major aspects: the promise of land, the promise of descendants, and the promise of widespread blessing to humankind in general.

When God spoke to Abraham, the appeal of new real estate holdings and the promise of a son, an heir, was quite satisfying, especially since Abraham and his family lived in a culture that placed great importance on the safeguarding of future generations through male offspring. God knew that Abraham was a man of reverence and humility, a man devoted to God and willing to follow obediently the LORD by faith. Abraham understood the spiritual rites of sacrifice and demonstrated deference through the spiritual leadership of his family. As in all of the covenants, God keeps his part of the covenant with Abraham, and Abraham’s righteousness is credited to him through faith (Gn 15:6).

126 God’s relationship with Abraham was tender, personal, authentic, and honest. This kind of intimacy demonstrates God’s desire to be close to those God loves:

The Abrahamic covenant was the first clear indication of the basis of how God was to interact with mankind and how mankind was to be enabled to enter into a restored relationship with [God]—through faith alone in [God’s] provision, and not by any merit or effort on our part. Despite what subsequently followed in the Mosaic covenant—or the people’s interpretation of it—the required response from mankind was categorically not on the basis of works, or mere formal adherence to the Law (see Gal 3:10–14). Only through faith in the provision God […] has made in [God’s] beloved Son can we have access to God and enter into relationship with [the LORD], as our Creator and heavenly Father. 127

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126 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 21–23.
127 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 25.
In addition to Abraham’s descendants receiving land and reigning as kings, God promises to be with Sarah’s offspring as well. This promise solidifies God’s covenant as the Lord of Abraham’s family tree, whose offspring would be God’s own people.\textsuperscript{128} McComiskey explains why God’s desire to share his promises with future generations is one of intimate friendship: “This element of the promise sets forth the fact that the offspring would experience the blessings of an intimate relationship with God. The LORD would be their God, providing them with the protection and benefits expected in such a loving relationship. This great statement is the heart and soul of the promise because of all the gracious benefits of the promise derive from the loving power and volition of God expressed in the intimate and mysterious relationship with him that the people of faith enjoy.”\textsuperscript{129} God is the creator of the inventor of the human family. God is the heavenly yet intimate parent who makes his covenant with Abraham, donning him as the “father of many nations,” ensuring that future generations would endure due to God’s impeccable loyalty to Abraham and the covenant. God loves Abraham and happily desires to bless the family tree for centuries to come:

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” (Gn 17:4–8)

The LORD willingly and generously chooses to bless Abraham and his family, reinforcing his desire to engage in relationship with the people while honoring the covenant of

\textsuperscript{128} McComiskey, \textit{The Covenants of Promise}, 57.
\textsuperscript{129} McComiskey, \textit{The Covenants of Promise}, 57.
promise. Through God’s covenant with Abraham, the promise is extended vicariously in order to bless clergy who in turn bless each other and those they are called to lead. These blessings thrive in the context of holy clergy friendships due to the sharing of their lives in committed, empathic relationships.

### 3.2.3 God’s Friendship with Moses

Moses, though born a Hebrew slave, was found among the reeds of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter and though nursed by his mother, grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Moses never forgot his roots as he murdered an Egyptian who was blatantly mistreating a fellow Hebrew. Moses flees to Midian and takes the job of a shepherd, watching over the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, on the far side of the wilderness at the site of Horeb, the mountain of God. God appears in the flames of an unconsumed bush, which Moses notices as strange. Because of this odd sight, Moses is drawn to the flame like Moses was drawn from the water—Moses is about to receive a divine call and fulfill his destiny as God’s leader of the Hebrew people. In a unique and overwhelming conversation between God (aflame yet not consumed in the burning bush) and sandal-less Moses, the LORD wastes no time in revealing deep concern about the injustices and suffering the Hebrew slaves endure. God calls Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. Even though Moses initially scoffs at the idea and makes plenty of excuses, he finally relents after God promises Moses to reveal his divine authority to the people.

Throughout Moses’s ministry journey his leadership, and his patience, is tested. Risking his life, Moses puts his faith in God’s rescue plan, warning Pharaoh of ten plagues, assembling the Hebrew people to observe the first Passover, and flee the country following the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn. Moses continues to trust God to deliver them from the pursuing
Egyptian army miraculously by parting the Red Sea and allowing the Hebrew people to cross on dry land, watching their enemies drown in the receding waters. Moses exhibits holy, righteous anger following his encounter with God and the descent from Mt. Sinai, while holding the tablets containing the Ten Commandments; Moses rebukes his people’s idolatry and pleads for God’s mercy, persuading the LORD to remember his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Moses endures insufferable, interpersonal disputes and multiple, selfish complaints from the Hebrew people regarding the lack of good food and fresh water, as well as adverse travel conditions. Because of these experiences, Moses’s respect and faith grows in the LORD, and both Moses and God share a remarkable transparency before and during the Israelites’ wilderness journey. This shared vulnerability is a loving component of their holy friendship. Both Moses and the LORD are unashamedly transparent in telling one another the truth, emoting without hesitation or reservation, and regarding one another’s hopes, dreams, and desires. This shared vulnerability conveys a sense of deep, profound reverence between God and Moses. This openness to experiencing disappointment is a risk God takes with Moses and the Hebrews; sadly, the people disrespect God and abuse the intimacy that the LORD generously gives them. Yet, God never wavers in his loyalty and commitment to Moses and the people. God establishes a covenant between the Hebrews and their leader through the creation, administration, and compliance with the Ten Commandments; however, it is important to note that after Exodus 32, God makes another covenant with the Hebrew people due to the breaking of the two tablets by Moses on account of his people’s idolatry.

To understand the characteristics and features of this Mosaic covenant, it is fitting to observe its relationship with the previous two covenants, the Noahic and the Abrahamic.

[The Mosaic covenant] didn’t replace the Noahic and the Abrahamic covenants [. . .] but would serve to bring into ever increasing focus God’s purposes in regard
to salvation of the fallen world. Like the previous covenants, it was an agreement between a sovereign God and [the LORD’s] subjects initiated by God, equally binding and, like the Abrahamic covenant, one that was ratified in blood. However, the main and significant difference between this and the previous Abrahamic covenant was the conditional nature of it that required a bilateral contract (but obviously with unequal parties and with one-sided stipulations) and an intermediary. God had made an unconditional unilateral promise with Noah (specifically), and with humanity (generally), not to destroy all life ever again with a flood, a reminder too that God is holy and judges sin. Likewise with Abraham, God made a unilateral promise to bless him, his kin and all nations who believe in God through faith. In contrast, the Mosaic Covenant was conditional in nature and directly related to Israel’s obedience to God’s law given to them at Sinai. Grace and forgiveness were ever present but this covenant was more about the life lived with God and for God in unique covenant relationship and the blessing associated with obedience.  

What is striking about God’s holy friendship with Moses is where God chooses to engage Moses and enact this particular covenant: in the wilderness. Indeed, “Egypt was not the place of the covenant, neither was Canaan, but the wilderness: for it was there, specifically at Sinai, after knowing God’s grace toward them unconditionally in Egypt, that blessing upon the children of Israel was to continue on the grounds of their obedience and special relationship with God.”

Friendships and covenant relationships are tried and tested in desert-like conditions. The lessons that are learned and the skills that are developed there strengthen the bonds that formed between holy friends. Though Moses is unable to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land due to his disobedience, God graciously permits Moses to peer out over the land of promise from atop Mt. Nebo, reinforcing the divine promises to Abraham and Noah.

Another element to the covenantal friendship between God and Moses is the notion of protection and preservation, specifically on the part of God. Williamson provides great detail about Israel’s covenantal commitment as a nation of holiness:

Given Israel’s particular role—as a model of God’s kingdom on earth—it was vital that the nation remained distinct from other nations, especially those Israel

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was about to disposses. While the point is not made explicitly until later (Lv 18:24–29; although cf. Ex 23:20–33), Israel’s distinctiveness was also necessary for retaining possession of the territorial inheritance. Expulsion from the Promised Land would in turn jeopardize the fulfillment of God’s ultimate objective—the blessing of all nations through Abraham’s royal ‘seed.’ Therefore, just as the Noahic covenant had guaranteed the preservation of life, in particular human life, on earth, so the Mosaic covenant guaranteed preservation of Israel, Abraham’s national posterity, in the land.132

This Mosaic covenant illustrates God’s desire to protect the relationship God enjoys with Moses and the Israelites, while Moses and the Israelites are tasked with preserving the vital qualities that set them and their LORD apart, namely, holiness. This holy friendship is precious and therefore worthy of protection and preservation; after all, there is none like it anywhere on the planet, and it serves as an example to the world about honoring the value of life.

The promise that the LORD would be the god of the Israelites and they God’s people is not given the same importance in the Abrahamic covenant as it is in the Mosaic covenant. While appearing in Genesis 17:7–8, the Abrahamic covenant finds its voice in Exodus 6:7 where the LORD says, “I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.” Though the divine-human relationship is not expressly indicated in the Mosaic covenant, there are significant relational overtones in Exodus 29:45–46 in the context of the covenantal establishments of the tabernacle and the priesthood.133 Though the Law, in many respects, does not explicitly contain intimate language, strong relational overtones prove God’s promise to protect and provide for the children of Israel. The Law itself will bind the divine-human relationship through a divinely ordained litany of laws and commandments. The commandments themselves will prove, however, that humans are incapable of perfectly keeping the Mosaic Law; therefore, God will demonstrate the depth of his mighty love for the Israelites as the covenant is made with David

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132 Williamson and Carson, Sealed with an Oath, 99.
133 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 69.
and finally, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the author and keeper of the new covenant.

### 3.2.4 God’s Friendship with David

It is imperative that a discussion on the holy friendship between God and David emphasizes God’s profound love for this particular son of Jesse. David is, after all, “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sm 13:24). David leaves his role as shepherd of his father’s sheep to eventually look after the sheep of the house of Israel. Though imperfect and susceptible to the sins of the flesh, David “found favor with God” (Acts 7:46). God provides David with a deeply intense and heartfelt friendship in Jonathan, Saul’s son. Through their familial journey we witness the love of God, while the LORD continues to prosper David in both his military and personal affairs. There is a beautiful tenderness in this holy friendship between God and David, evidenced not only in God’s blessing of David and his family but also in David’s praise and worship of God, both instrumentally and vocally, as many of these writings are ascribed to him in the Psalms. It is the Davidic covenant that God establishes with David’s house that is irrevocable, an enduring promise for David’s descendants, spoken to David through the prophet Nathan:

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that
they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall
afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my
people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover
the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days
are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring
after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his
kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of
his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When
he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows
inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I
took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your
kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established
forever. In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke
to David. (2 Sm 7:4–17)

Though David wanted to construct a house for God, the word of the LORD through the prophet
Nathan declared that Solomon would execute that responsibility instead. The irony is that God
builds a house, an eternal dynasty for David’s Kingdom. McComiskey writes: “The house that
the LORD would build for David is a dynasty (2 Sm 7:16, 19). This promises thus secured a line
of kings, who were descended from David and who would rule over the kingdom established by
him.” There are also several overtones of the Abrahamic covenant that are found in the
Davidic covenant: David is promised a great name, security in his own land, offspring, and kings
will descend from him. Like God’s covenant with Abraham, the Davidic covenant is an eternal
promise based entirely on the LORD’s divine merit. God’s covenant with David is also
reiterated in Psalm 89, a psalm that affirms the enduring establishment of Davidic kingship.
Significantly, the prophets of the Old Testament point to a messianic king using Davidic motifs,
speaking of the eternality of the throne and the unending “increase of his government and peace”
(Is 9:7). This covenant of kingship between God and David represents a kingdom of

134 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 21.
135 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 21.
136 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 21.
137 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 21.
138 McComiskey, The Covenants of Promise, 24.
benevolence, a kingdom where the ruler cares compassionately about the royal subjects, enough
to give his own life for them. This kind of holy friendship is altruistic, empathetic, and merciful.
Delbert R. Hillers asserts the following about this merciful, everlasting dominion of the Davidic
dynasty: “The dominant idea in Judah, from David’s time on, was that God had promised the
land to Abraham by covenant and in a parallel way had promised dominion to the line of David.
Through this divinely ordained king would come the fruits of a world in harmony.”139 These
fruits of David would produce a Messiah who would be king on the throne of David forever.
Worthy of the title, Christ, the Anointed One of Israel, is both the progenitor and fulfillment of
the new covenant. The author of this new covenant is Jesus—the true, regal, and rightful son of
God, the King of all kings.

3.2.5 God’s Friendship with Jesus

The promised Messiah hails from the line of David as the royal son of God. The prophets
correctly predicted that the Messiah would be born King of the Jews and reign forever on the
throne of David: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his
shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of
Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of
David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from
this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (Is 9:6–7). Unlike
failed kings of the past, the Messiah would rule with wisdom and the fear of the LORD: “The
days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and

139 Delbert R. Hillers, Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea, Seminars in the History of Ideas (Baltimore, MD:
he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23:5). Jesus, the resurrected King of kings, would return in his glorified human body, continuing God’s loyalty to his promises made to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.\textsuperscript{140}

Jesus, God’s beloved Son, is blessed by his Father immediately following his baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3:17). Similarly, God blesses Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in the presence of Peter, James, and John: “Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” (Lk 9:35). The blessing of holy friendship between God the Father and the Son preexisted before the incarnation yet is expressed in humanly affectionate and intimate terms in these aforementioned texts. In the Gospels, Jesus is the Son of God, born of a virgin through the Holy Spirit to parents who feared the LORD and desired obedience. Jesus is the young preteen whose parents thought he was lost in Jerusalem during the Passover; yet, Jesus indicates his close relationship with God, his Father, in his response to his worried parents: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house” (Lk 2:49). Jesus is the obedient son of his earthly father, Joseph, who learned the trade of carpentry and left it all behind at the age of thirty to fulfill his heavenly Father’s will. Jesus calls his own disciples, teaches the townspeople, performs several miracles, interprets the Law and the Prophets, amazes the masses, heals the sick, the blind, the deaf, and the lame, and shows compassion toward the oppressed, the grief-stricken, and the marginalized. This Son of God often slips out of sight to pray to his Father, often praying for his disciples and for those who will hear of the Gospel after his passion. Jesus shares a prayerful vulnerability with the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, yet he submits to God’s will to suffer for the sins

\textsuperscript{140} Hayes Press, \textit{An Introduction to Bible Covenants}, 64–65.
of the world through crucifixion, fulfilling the Old Testament scriptures. Even on the cross, Jesus desperately cries out to his Father, echoing the words of the Psalmist: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1a). Following Jesus’s death, God raises the Son on the first day of the Jewish week and promotes him to God’s right hand (Phil 2:5–11). God’s dream of reconciling the world through the eternal King from the line of David is fully satisfied in blood of the Son, Jesus Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant.

In this New Covenant, God not only demonstrates the strong, durable friendship God shares with Jesus the Son but also shows the world how much the LORD loves all of humanity. This New Covenant deals solely with humankind’s inability to keep the Law and hold fast to their roles in previous covenants. This New Covenant is God’s final covenant revealed through “the atoning work of Christ Jesus and realized through the indwelling Holy Spirit.”

For all eternity, the New Covenant fulfills the words of the prophet Ezekiel: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ez 36:26). Because God makes a covenant in the blood of the Son, it is vitally important for both clergy and laity alike to comprehend the components and functions of the New Covenant. The New Testament reveals Jesus proclaiming the New Covenant through the symbolism of the cup of wine. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, along with Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, describe Jesus speaking of the cup as the new covenant in his blood (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). This cup is a drink of suffering met in the cross, yet it also becomes a cup of blessing as an indication of the glory that is to come. Significantly, the spilling of blood is an important Hebrew sacrificial custom. “The Hebrew word [for] a covenant or agreement [. . .] is derived from a word meaning to cut or

141 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 76.
142 Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 82.
divide. At a time when the knowledge of reading and writing was not widespread, especially in legal matters, it was the custom in making solemn covenants to pass between the divided parts of the animal victims (Gn 15:9–10; Jer 34:18). Terms of mutual agreement or stipulations involved were thus confirmed and given authoritative backing, in the presence of witnesses in many cases.**143**

God’s love for humankind is so profoundly and intimately loving and compassionate that the LORD gave Jesus Christ to the world and for the world in order that the divine-human relationship would be maintained and flourish. In other words, God passed through the sacrifice of God’s-self in order to perfectly keep the solemn vow to bless humanity for eternity.

Essentially, God is as good as God’s word: “So shall my word that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). Thus, God proves God’s great love for the world “in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Therefore, since God keeps God’s covenant in and through Christ, no one and nothing can break it. Moreover, the church must humbly bow in deference to the God who so wondrously delivered the world from sin and death. In Christ, the church becomes the vessel through which the loving relationship of Father God and Jesus the Son can be embodied and witnessed. The New Covenant is the result of God’s magnificent love for creation and all of humanity. After all, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). In summary, the New Covenant demonstrates with absolute certainty both the endless ability and mighty power God maintains to fulfill both sides of this holy friendship agreement in Jesus:

> By his death on the cross, Christ did what the sacrifices of old taught should be done but could not themselves accomplish. He made the true atonement for the sins of the people, when he offered up himself once for all. While seated round the table with his disciples, he had clear knowledge of what he was to undergo within the next few days. He was conscious of the soul-suffering he would

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143 Hayes Press, *An Introduction to Bible Covenants*, 82.
experience in Gethsemane’s garden, of the anguish and passion of the crucifixion, and the humiliating shame that he would endure. But he also knew the purpose of it all. He saw himself as the high priest having taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle. For him there was a ministry as far superior to that of the Old Testament priestly service as is the covenant in which he is the mediator and the promises upon which it is legally secured. This is the New Covenant in his blood: his own blood. On this ground he has entered the true heavenly sanctuary once and for all, having secured eternal redemption.¹⁴⁴

God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David illustrate how seriously God desires to bless humanity and celebrate the divine-human relationship as holy friendship. The lengths to which God is willing to go to keep his covenant and maintain relationships are quite remarkable. This kind of friendship is most explicitly demonstrated in the Father-Son relationship of the New Covenant. Nowhere else in the universe is the incarnate blessing of ḥesed seen except in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s one and only Son. The church is called to mimic this divine-human relationship, and the same is true for holy friendships among clergy. God yearns for the faithful to find the true rest of shalom in the blessing of holy friendship—both with God and with one another.

3.3 Holy Friendship as Ministry Companions: Examples of Biblical and Postbiblical Saints

The biblical covenants God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus Christ enable Christians to grasp the special divine-human relationship God desires with humanity. Likewise, the holy friendships shared among biblical and postbiblical saints merit observation. Clergy do well to identify, study, and analyze the beauty and the power of strong, human relationships, especially the ones that can be found in the pages of the Bible or in postbiblical

¹⁴⁴ Hayes Press, An Introduction to Bible Covenants, 85–86.
literature and other writings. While the following examples of biblical and postbiblical saints are by no means comprehensive, they do exemplify the shared blessing of holy friendships and serve as models of authentic companionship for the journey of Christian ministry.

3.3.1 Old Testament: Elijah & Elisha \ Ruth & Naomi

Elijah is first mentioned in 1 Kings 17 and Elisha in 1 Kings 19. God calls Elijah to serve as prophet in Israel in order to rebuke King Ahab and rid the land of idolatry through a series of miracles and personal confrontations. Detested by Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah flees for his life, but God gives him nourishment in the form of food, encouragement, and a renewed calling in a cave at Mt. Horeb. God commands Elijah to place the mantle of prophetic leadership on the shoulders of a man named Elisha. Elijah christens Elisha with his cloak, and Elisha summarily follows. The teacher-apprentice relationship begins, and Elisha’s admiration and respect grow for his “father” in the ministry. Eventually, in 2 Kings 2, the time comes for Elijah to split the Jordan River miraculously with a strike of his cloak and return to the LORD in whirlwind, accompanied by fiery chariots and horses. It seems, however, that there is a third miracle taking place at this intersection of the biblical text, one that Ellen Davis acknowledges is based not on ephemeral, supernatural events but rather on the power of holy friendship:

The narrator passes over the two confirming miracles quickly, giving hardly any details, and dwells on something else entirely—something that hardly seems important at all, in terms of Elijah’s public career—namely, the long goodbye between Elijah and Elisha, when Elisha does not want to let his teacher go. It’s a long walk these two take together, in the final days, as they journey from one region or town to the next. Elijah is trying to slip away, to be alone when God takes him. “Stay here,” he says to Elisha at Gilgal; “God is sending me to Bethel”—a couple of days’ journey away. And Elisha flat-out refuses to be left behind: “As God lives and you yourself live, I am not leaving you!” (2 Kgs 2:2). The scene is repeated several times, until at last Elijah realizes why the young man won’t let him go: because there is something this disciple still needs from the
master. “So ask me, [Elisha]—what can I do for you?” “Let a double share of your spirit come to me,” the young prophet answers (2:9). To translate that request into language we can more readily understand: “I want to be devoted to God, as fully as you are—a person whose whole life is shaped and guided by faith. I have been your disciple; now, my father, give me your legacy. Share with me the spirit of God that I see in you.”

Similarly, Ruth desires to share in her mother-in-law’s legacy of obedient faith, pleading to remain with Naomi on her trip back to Bethlehem from Moab: “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (Ru 1:16–18). Like Elisha, Ruth is determined to stay with her mentor and friend no matter the cost, even if death. For Ruth, the holy friendship she shares with Naomi is akin to breathing—as widows, they are able to share similar griefs and help bear one another’s emotional loads. While Elisha continues the legacy of Elijah’s prophetic ministry, Ruth’s covenant promise to Naomi extends, unbeknownst to Ruth, God’s covenant legacy with David, protecting and procuring his line and throne.

These particular Old Testament relationships highlight, albeit imperfectly, God’s characteristic of loyalty and God’s bold commitment to covenant relationship. Both relationships demonstrate the strong admiration and love that flow between mentor and apprentice, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. God provides the healthy environment, which serves to create, cultivate and sustain these specific friendships in the most difficult of circumstances, proving that holy friendships built on faith are those that thrive and flourish.

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3.3.2 New Testament: Paul & His Ministry Partners \ Jesus & His Disciples

Following his Damascus road conversion, Paul prepares for a life of evangelism and mission. God sends particular people into Paul’s life, those who will befriend and support him, and those who at times will disagree with him and depart in another direction. Paul’s missional goals, evangelical ministry, and letter-writing legacy hinge on the holy friendships he maintains, trusts, and enjoys. Therefore, Paul’s ministry is buffeted by the strength and support of his loyal and supportive companions. These faithful comrades encourage Paul’s preaching, his teaching, and his leadership as he travels Asia Minor and much of the Roman world. The following people represent the holy companionship Paul experienced and valued along his three missionary journeys:

1. **Silas** (or Silvanus) is a competent leader, preacher (2 Cor 1:19) and companion (1 Pt 5:12) who accompanied Paul on portions of his first missionary journeys, and then is selected to serve on Paul’s second missionary journey following the split with Barnabas;
2. **Luke the Evangelist** is traditionally accepted as the writer of the canonical Gospel bearing his name as well as the book of Acts and is a fellow traveler with Paul, one who provided companionship to Paul near the end of his life (1 Tim 4:11; Acts 28:16);
3. **Timothy** is a fellow traveler of Paul and Silas during their second missionary journey, one who receives ministry assignments and letters (1 and 2 Timothy) from his mentor, Paul, and becomes a fellow coworker in preaching;
4. **Barnabas** is a Cypriot Jew and an early Christian, traveling with Paul on missionary journeys and defending Gentile converts against Judaizers, and is instrumental in the work of the Jerusalem Council, only leaving Paul’s side over a dispute over the fellowship of John Mark;
5. **John Mark**, who traditionally is regarded as the one whose Gospel bears his name, accompanies both his cousin Barnabas (Col 4:10) and Paul on their first missionary journey to Cyprus and on to Perga, but he parts ways with Paul as he and Barnabas return to Cyprus;
6. **Titus** is a dear friend of Paul’s serving as his coworker in ministry for twenty years, traveling to Jerusalem with Paul, serving as an example of a Gentile circumcised by grace through faith, and partnered with Paul in Ephesus, and he mediated reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthian church;
7. **Aristarchus of Thessalonica** is described as Paul’s “fellow prisoner” (Col 4:10) and “fellow laborer” (Phil 1:24) who is seized by the mob at Ephesus, returns with Paul from Greece to Asia, and accompanies Paul on his journey to Rome;
8. **Jason of Thessalonica** is a Jewish convert and early Christian believer (Acts 17:5–9; Rom 16:21) who is traditionally numbered among the Seventy Disciples, and he is the friend who offered his home in the city as a refuge for Paul, Silas, and Timothy;

9. **Epaphrus** is a “fellow servant” of Paul’s (Col 1:7), is strongly endorsed by Paul (Col 4:12–13), and was likely converted by Paul himself;

10. **Gaius** is a traveling companion of Paul’s in Macedonia, along with Aristarchus (Acts 19:29), and a Gaius is also mentioned from Derbe, named as one of Paul’s seven companions on the ministry journey;

11. **Onesimus** is a slave of Philemon, converted to Christianity by Paul while in prison, and is affirmed by Paul in a letter to Philemon in order that Onesimus might serve the LORD as a Christian brother;

12. **Sosthenes** is a convert to Christianity, part of the Seventy Disciples, and the chief ruler of the synagogue at Corinth, and he is beaten due to his refusal to press charges against Paul at the insistence of the Jews (Acts 18:12–17);

13. **Trophimus** is an Ephesian convert to Christianity and accompanies Paul during a part of his third missionary journey, sticking close to Paul as one of eight friends who remained with him until the journey ended in Jerusalem (Acts 21:29);

14. **Tychicus** is an Asiatic Christian (Acts 20:4) who accompanies Paul with Trophimus on his journey from Macedonia to Jerusalem, and he is sent by Paul to the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae to encourage and exhort them in the power of the Gospel;

15. **Priscilla and Aquila** are described as Paul’s “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom 16:3) who instruct Apollos, a major evangelist of the first century, share Paul’s tent-making skills, house Paul for eighteen months, start the church in Corinth (1 Cor 4:15) and provide companionship along Paul’s ministry journey;

16. **Lydia** is from Thyatira, a wealthy woman selling purple dye who is converted to Christianity through Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the very apostles she shelters in her home during their Philippian stay (Acts 16:14–15).146

God blesses Paul with a circle of holy friendships, which enables him to complete the missionary work God calls him to fulfill. Through struggle, strife, persecution, imprisonment, exhaustion, and pain, Paul’s ministry companions embody the spiritual gifts that Paul speaks of 1 Corinthians 12–14. Each of Paul’s friends is faithful, devoted, and committed to helping him build relationships with Gentiles in Roman-occupied cities to the glory of God. Undoubtedly, the holy friendships that Paul and his companions create and cultivate serve to sustain the work of

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the Gospel ministry during three missionary journeys amid brutal oppression from the Jews and the Roman authorities.

Likewise, Jesus spends his three-year missionary journey in Israel accompanied by twelve disciples: Peter and Andrew, James and John (sons of Zebedee), Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus (Lebbaeus), Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Out of the twelve Jesus calls by name, four are fishermen, one is a tax collector, another is a political zealot, and yet another is a thief. Even so, Jesus surrounds himself with men from all walks of life who not only have much to offer in the way of vocational experience and unique skills and gifts but also in temperament, attitude, and loyalty. These men grow close to Jesus during this three-year ministry and, despite Judas Iscariot’s eventual treachery, remain their Rabbi’s intimate companions. Throughout Jesus’s ministry, his disciples listen to him teach about the Kingdom through parables; they observe the miracles of feeding five thousand and raising Tabitha, the widow’s son at Nain, and even Lazarus from the dead. They ponder their teacher’s stories and consider their meanings. Though they are slow to understand, Jesus demonstrates patience with all twelve, calling them to a life of sacrificial obedience to God through a life of service to others, especially to the lonely, the lost, and the left out. During Jesus’s ministry in Israel, his disciples help him look for food, find shelter, and meet the needs of the poor and the oppressed. As Jesus embodies the parables he tells, the disciples draw closer to God and to their Rabbi. Although the twelve abandon him following his crucifixion, Jesus reinstates their call to ministry when he appears to them collectively in a locked room after his resurrection. Once Jesus ascends to the Father, the disciples know that they must wait for the promised Holy Spirit, and during Pentecost the disciples are empowered to begin and be the church, Christ’s body, in the world. And the holy friends of Jesus, his disciples, carry the
message of their Savior to the surrounding cities, towns, and villages until other apostles, like Paul, carry the Gospel through the Roman world. For the disciples, there is no holy friend like Jesus. Jesus alone is the Creator, the Cultivator, and the Sustainer of ministry companions everywhere, enabling all who are called to serve God and God’s people with the capacity to love, show compassion, and give mercy to both themselves and to others because of the strong and protective bond of Christ’s holy friendship through the Holy Spirit. During what is known as Jesus’s Farewell Discourse, he mandates his disciples to share holy friendship with others:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (Jn 15:12–17).

3.3.3 Postbiblical: St. Ambrose & St. Augustine \ St. Perpetua & St. Felicity \ St. Teresa of Avila & St. John of the Cross

The great theologian St. Augustine of Hippo spent much of the first thirty years of life fulfilling licentious, sexual pleasures. However, his pursuit of the truth, philosophy and rhetoric become tools for seizing knowledge and greatness. Disappointed with his students in Carthage, he travelled north to Milan where he met the well-known and well-respected St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Though Augustine subscribed to the heresy of Manichaeism, he was enamored by the love of the common people for St. Ambrose. Augustine attended worship services just to hear St. Ambrose preach in order to attest personally to this man’s greatness. Augustine was primarily intrigued by St. Ambrose’s reputation and his penchant for compassion and kindness. This observation compelled Augustine to listen to more of Ambrose’s sermons and scour the

Though Ambrose maintained a very busy ministry and study schedule, he was generous, kind, and sensitive to Augustine and his spiritual journey in Milan.\footnote{Ibid.} Naturally, Ambrose embodied his own words about friendship:

Preserve, then, my sons, that friendship ye have begun with your brethren, for nothing in the world is more beautiful than that. It is indeed a comfort in this life to have one to whom thou canst open thy heart, (\textit{Cic. de Amic}. 6, §22) with whom thou canst share confidences, and to whom thou canst entrust the secrets of thy heart. It is a comfort to have a trusty man by thy side, who will rejoice with thee in prosperity, sympathize in troubles, encourage in persecution. What good friends those Hebrew children were whom the flames of the fiery furnace did not separate from their love of each other (Dn 3:16 ff)! Of them we have already spoken. Holy David says well: “Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant, inseparable in their life, in death they were not divided” (2 Sm 1:23).\footnote{Ambrose, “De Officiis 21-22 on Friendship,” accessed December 9, 2020, http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0397_ambrose/03_amb-off-friend.htm.}

Eventually, through the example of Ambrose, Augustine devoted himself to God and to celibacy, answering his mother’s longtime prayer for his conversion. Shortly thereafter, the Bishop of Milan baptized Augustine at the age of thirty-three. A few years later, Augustine returned to North Africa and was ordained into the priesthood where, just a few years later, he became the Bishop of Hippo.\footnote{Paulgaard, “The Impact of Ambrose.”} James Paulgaard writes: “Though their contact with each other was relatively brief, Ambrose had a major and long-lasting impact on Augustine. Ambrose was able to show Augustine the truth of Christianity so that he might accept it, and serve as a role model that Augustine was able to emulate, and eventually, outshine.”\footnote{Paulgaard, “The Impact of Ambrose.”} This holy friendship, while not built on quality personal time, was instead forged in the profound spiritual connection...
Augustine had with Ambrose. Augustine found God in Ambrose; their mutual admiration and respect for one another as truth-seekers augmented their individual ministries. Created and cultivated by the Holy Spirit, their friendship sustained the ongoing work of God in both Italy and North Africa during that time.

St. Perpetua and St. Felicity are two young women who were persecuted, imprisoned, and eventually martyred for their faith in 203 CE. Perpetua was a young noblewoman in her early twenties, and Felicity was Perpetua’s slave. At the time of their arrest, Perpetua cared for her infant son, and Felicity was pregnant. While imprisoned, Perpetua wrote about her experiences in a diary which was later published as “The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” one of the earliest writings by a Christian woman. Before their arrest, both female friends studied the scriptures and prepared for baptism. Their baptism took place; however, it happened while in prison, administered by their teacher who was also with them in jail. As a result of the women’s strong, faithful witness, the prison warden converted to Christianity. Because of their faith in Jesus, Perpetua and Felicity were sentenced to death by Emperor Severus yet bravely faced their death in the amphitheater with courage and hope. An editor of Perpetua’s diary explains: “The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.” Still alive after facing wild animals, Emperor Severus ordered that Perpetua and Felicity be put to death by the sword. These female friends illustrate the beauty of holy friendship through their loyalty and commitment to God and to one another. Amid hardship and trial, they embodied the contentment found in the book of James: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it
nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2–4). The holy friendship of Perpetua and Felicity was cultivated in suffering, tested in sacrifice, and ultimately sustained even beyond their death into the eternal rest of Christ.  

St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross are an example of how holy friendship is bound not by age or gender but rather by a mutual purpose and shared vision to serve others in the love of Christ. Though both hail from different economic backgrounds (Teresa’s family was well-to-do and John’s was poor), their submission to the will of God binds their friendship at its core. The Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles describe their bond of holy friendship:

These two, although years apart in age and in their lived experience of religious life first met when Teresa, beginning the foundation of her second reformed Carmel, was 52 years of age and John newly ordained as a priest was 25. At the time of their first conversation John was considering leaving the Carmelite Order for a more prayerful and secluded life as a Carthusian monk. Teresa, dissatisfied with the quality of her religious life after living several years at the Incarnation Convent in Avila, had begun her reform to establish houses closer to the original spirit of Carmel. Having permission to also erect a reformed priory she needed a male counterpart to begin the foundation. This would require a like-minded person, one who shared a common vision. Thus out of this need grew a deep and lasting friendship. Teresa speaks of such a relationship when she writes in one of her letters, “What a wonderful thing it is for two souls to understand each other, for they neither lack something to say, nor grow tired.”

Teresa and John develop a deep, profound friendship because of the mutual appreciation and respect they both had for the other. The Carmelite Sisters of the most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles describe the shared affinity that Teresa and John maintained: “John recognized in

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154 Carmelite Sisters, “St. Teresa and St. John.”
Teresa’s reform what he had so ardently been seeking and acknowledged her leadership and guidance. Teresa appreciated in this new acquaintance the richness of his deep interior life and soon selected him as her spiritual director and later requested him as the confessor for the Incarnation Convent. Their likenesses advanced them toward the same goal while their differences enhanced the spirit that would permeate the reform.” Teresa lives and practices a spiritual-sensible love that nurtures friendships between spiritual persons, such as the companionship she enjoyed with John. Because these kinds of friendships are rooted in the Spirit, they form a stable union between two people. They are holy relationships that, due to the “atmosphere that these friendships create around souls, the persuasive force that they add to counsel, the affectionate support that they afford, they can rescue a soul from loneliness, from bad surroundings, or from the mediocrity of a milieu, to elevate it into purer and more supernatural regions.” The blessed comradeship of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross is a testament to God’s ability to unite people of different genders, backgrounds, and ages in order to transform countless lives for the Kingdom. Their deep, passionate love for God not only establishes and cultivates a holy friendship between Teresa and John but also sustains God’s vision for Carmelite reform and further ministry with the poor and needy.

The shared blessing of covenant relationship between God and God’s people is based on God’s ability to keep God’s word and establish that commitment of friendship forever in Christ Jesus, the incarnate Word. This truth allows the church to model loyal, committed friendships with God and with one another as expressed in and through the biblical covenants. These covenant relationships were formed, cultivated, and sustained through the centuries, and they represent God’s heart for mutually edifying community. The topic of my next and final chapter

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155 All quotes and information in this paragraph are from Carmelite Sisters, “St. Teresa and St. John.”
focuses on the shared balance that is necessary to sustain holy friendships, specifically among clergy. Through the interpretive lens of the threefold mediating ministry of Christ, I will provide a framework for the creation, cultivation, and sustainability of holy friendships among pastors, priests, and other church leaders.
4. The Clergy’s Shared Balance: Holy Friendships Are Forged, Cultivated, and Sustained by the Threefold Mediating Ministry of Jesus Christ (*Munus Triplex*)

4.1 “*The Ministry of Reconciliation: Clergy as Visible Representatives*” – A Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:18–20

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

—Eccl 4:9–12

Most pastors, priests, and church leaders consistently engage their congregations on a weekly basis. They are actively and intimately involved with their parishioners through their church’s worship services, fellowship events, Spirit-led ministries, evangelical outreach, and biblical discipleship classes. Yet, despite clergy spending large amounts of time with their church members, they often lack the necessary vocational empathy that only fellow ministers can provide. Who better to acknowledge the burdens and blessings of ministry than fellow clergy? Pastors need pastors; priests need priests; ministers need ministers. Long ago God knew that the only way to help humanity recognize its need for forgiveness and reconciliation was to send Jesus in a relatable form through the incarnation. Similarly, clergy need fellow clergy—ministers who walk familiar journeys, speak a similar language, and share similar experiences. God reconciled the world in Jesus Christ, making friends from enemies, challenging disciples to love likewise; therefore, clergy are called to be visible representatives of God’s ministry of reconciliation while acknowledging their own need for restorative friendships.
Though his relationship with them was strained, the apostle Paul wrote about the significance of reconciled relationships to a conflicted group of fellow Christians in Corinth:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:18–20). God’s primary desire is for the message of reconciliation to be distributed through the words and actions of ministers. Since all reconciled people are called into ministry through the exercise of their unique spiritual gifts, there must be an immediate emphasis on “loving enemies” and hopefully turning them into friends, restoring broken relationships, and healing divided hearts. Paul, who also wrote to the brothers and sisters in Ephesus, called out specific people within the church to lead this unified ministry of reconciliation, through the bond of peace: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:11–13). Since pastors and church leaders are called to “equip the saints for the work of ministry,” it is incumbent upon the clergy to be the visible representatives of reconciliation in the church. The ministry of reconciliation is critical to the overall effectiveness of the church within the culture. Richard Lischer asserts, “God’s work of reconciliation is acknowledged when each person accepts God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ and embraces the fullness of his or her humanity.”

156 This statement is true not only for parishioners but for clergy as well. It is vital that

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pastors, priests, and other church leaders practice life with other clergy who recognize their limits and trust in the person of Christ to heal, renew, and restore. Moreover, when clergy and congregations learn to practice forgiveness while making peace in their respective relationships, they embody what it means to be human: “We were created to be unreservedly human and fully alive, which is God’s glory [. . . . ] It is what God intended for us all along. To embrace one’s humanity is not mere humanism but good theology.” It is one thing to recognize the need for reconciliation with God and with others, but it is another thing to acknowledge the need for reconciliation within one’s self. Lischer references Karl Barth, the neo-orthodox theologian who spoke about reconciliation in three phases, the last of which is a type of intrapersonal reconciliation, one that represents the acceptance of human fragility and is completely dependent on the forgiveness and restoration of Jesus Christ: “Because Jesus was the last Adam, Paul says in Romans and 1 Corinthians, he gathers in himself a new and reconstituted humanity.”

Clergy must demonstrate this humble example of reconciliation to their churches in authentic, tangible ways that represent the person of Christ. Nevertheless, they must not delay in embracing their humanity within the confines of fellow clergy friendships, those holy relationships that provide a true sense of integrity, acceptance, and empathic love. Since reconciliation is the pastoral and homiletical duty of God’s ministers, practicing reconciliation must be an ongoing pursuit, not just for church members but also for pastors, priests, and other ministers. Learning how to practice reconciliation within the safe, authentic boundaries of holy clergy is essential to healthy, effective ministry within the church walls and within the community that the church is called lovingly to serve.

157 Quotes from Lischer, The End of Words, 136.
4.2 The Munus Triplex: Jesus’s Threefold Office of Mediating Ministry as a Hermeneutic for Holy Friendship

“For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus.”

—1 Tim 2:5

Jesus is the lens through which we see God: “Whoever has seen [Jesus] has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9b). God and humanity cohere through Christ, for “in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17b). Jesus is the humble servant the church is called to imitate: “Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8). The church bows down before the royalty of Christ: “God also highly exalted [Jesus] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9–11).

Jesus is the perfect mediator between God and humankind. A useful model for how Jesus expresses his mediating ministry is through the threefold office of priest, prophet, and royalty (king). Curtis Freeman explains:

The biblical narrative describes how in the life of Israel, the word of this covenant was mediated through three types of leaders: prophets, priests, and kings. Those who exercised their gifts in these roles served as ministers of the covenant, and each was anointed as a sign of consecration to their respective ministries. The priest was anointed to perform the cultic ritual of the covenant enacting the reconciling promise of God’s faithfulness (Ex 28:41). The prophet was anointed to proclaim the word that called the people to covenant fidelity (1 Kgs 19:16). And the king was anointed to govern the people as God’s personal regent (1 Sm 10:1). In stark contrast to the other nations of the Ancient Near East—which deified their monarchs—the separation of powers between prophet, priest, and king served to safeguard the kings of Israel [. . .]. No one in the history of Israel
fulfilled all three roles [. . .]. Yet all three were realized in one life: God’s anointed, Jesus the Christ. [. . . And] throughout history the church has spoken of the threefold office of Jesus Christ (munus triplex), because he fulfilled all three offices as prophet, priest and king [. . .]. He was a prophet who spoke the word of the LORD [. . .] as the Great High Priest he offered up the atoning sacrifice on behalf of all humanity [. . .]. And he governs as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rv 19:16), yet he reigns not by the sword but through the cross, as the humble and suffering servant he has been given the name Lord and exalted to the right hand of the Father (Phil 2:5–11). By fulfilling all three offices in his life and ministry, Jesus Christ is the mediator of the new covenant.  

Therefore, since the church is entrusted by God with the ministry of reconciliation, it must be solely dependent on Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, in order to most effectively participate in this threefold ministry.  Furthermore, the roles, questions, and functions of church leadership as expressed through the threefold mediating ministry of Christ are critical to the church’s overall ministry of reconciliation (see fig. 1).

Freeman, “Mediating Ministry,” 394.
So, what does it meant to participate in the Christ’s friendship through his mediating ministry? The threefold model of Jesus’s mediating ministry offers a most valuable hermeneutic for describing holy friendships. By looking through the individual lenses of priest, prophet, and royalty (king), Christ-followers can share Jesus’s mediating ministry of reconciliation, repairing broken lives, and restoring neglected relationships. Furthermore, clergy must no longer ignore the practical blessing achieved through the priestly, prophetic, and royal blessing they receive through friendships with fellow clergy. As pastors, priests, and other ordained clergy seek to share the ministry of reconciliation with their congregations and mutually participate in the friendship of God in Christ Jesus, church leaders must also consider the vital need for establishing, nurturing, and sustaining holy friendships among themselves. Holy friendships among clergy are forged in priestly vulnerability, cultivated in prophetic imagination, and sustained through the transforming power of God’s Kingdom reign and rule in Christ.

4.2.1 Priestly Vulnerability—A Picture of Christ’s Humility

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

—1 Peter 2:9

Someone who is vulnerable is willing to be exposed to wounding, injury, and pain. Vulnerability might be perceived by some as a weakness that must be eliminated, but in the theological sense, Paul writes that weakness is actually strength: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with
weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10). In the “Christ hymn” of Philippians 2, Jesus humbles himself through the incarnation, exposing himself to the sufferings and struggles of the human body, making himself vulnerable to suffering from both the elements and his enemies. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus acknowledges his dependence on his heavenly Father, choosing to be weak in order that God’s power might rest on him. Interestingly, Jesus becomes vulnerable when he becomes “flesh and [lives] among us” (Jn 1:14a). Richard M. Gula observes, “To be human is to be in relationship.”

Therefore, the human body of Christ, the church, celebrates its relationship with Jesus, the head of the body. This relationship demonstrates the kind of vulnerability that clergy and the congregation must embody—a relationship that suffers pain, strife, and injury simply because it loves. Jesus defines love in sincere, impassioned words when he spoke to his disciples before his departure to the Father: “No one has greater love that this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Jesus, serving as high priest, offers not only the sacrifice for the sins of the world but also himself as the sacrifice, exposing himself to unimaginable suffering on behalf of those he came to save lovingly through his crucifixion:

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation.

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for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 5:1–10)

John Howard Yoder affirms the aforementioned scriptures: “Fully assuming the priestly system, as both priest and victim, once for all he ends the claim of the sacrificial system to order the community of faith, putting in its place a new covenant, a new universalized priestly order, an unshakable kingdom.”161 Moreover, the blessing of being in relationship with God through Jesus, the high priest, is that he sympathizes and empathizes with our weaknesses. Christ meets humanity in its vulnerability; this is where meaningful, authentic relationships are formed: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). Likewise, true, genuine friendships are marked by relational openness, affirmation, and acceptance. Like the priest who understands the weaknesses of those for whom he atones, a reconciled friendship is a safe, welcoming environment where vulnerability creates trust, dignity, and a real sense of belonging.

4.2.1.1 The Kenotic, Incarnational Question: Where Are We?

How does participation in the priestly ministry of Christ equip the church to be a foretaste of God’s Reign in the world right now? The church embodies its priestly role when it presently models the abundant life of God in Christ. In other words, the church leads as priest when it functions as Christ. As the church empties itself in order to serve its surrounding community, it seeks to form spiritual disciples who long to impact people for Jesus. The church as priest is concerned with the vocational practices of worship, witness, and ministry while continually assessing the strength of the church’s character, particularly in the areas of conflict, forgiveness,

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and reconciliation. By leading as the priestly Christ, the church previews the characteristics of God’s just, restorative, merciful Kingdom of healing in the here and now.162

4.2.2 Prophetic Imagination—A Picture of Christ’s Disruption

“The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.’ But until now you have not listened. Thus says the Lord, ‘By this you shall know that I am the Lord.’”

—Ex 7:16–17

God calls the prophet to proclaim divine words of wisdom and truth that speak to how people should model Kingdom relationships. Prophets speak truth to power and call attention to the inequities and injustices of human activity. The prophets of the Old Testament were given words of both judgment and hope for the leadership of Israel and their enemies. Moses, a great and notable prophet, spoke God’s truth to Pharaoh and led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and into the Sinai wilderness through the LORD’s miracle at the Red Sea. Countless prophets followed, serving as vessels for God’s word to be obeyed and fulfilled. Yet, no prophet was greater than Jesus. “Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope” (Heb 3:3–6). Like the prophets before him, Jesus speaks truth to power, angering the Jewish authorities and disrupting their status quo. “[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in [the cross]” (Col 2:15). Consequently, when the church prophetically

preaches the word of God it challenges sinful leadership in the world (including the world that exists in the church), pointing to how things should be through God’s Reign and Rule. In summary, the church embodies Christ as prophet in three ways: when it stands with those who are on the side of Jesus, when it articulates the vision of how Kingdom relationships should operate, and when it speaks plainly to the injustices of the day.\textsuperscript{163} Dan Allender offers a refreshing perspective on the prophet: “A prophet exposes our subtle turn to indulgence and self-congratulation. He points out our self-righteousness and underscores the evidence that our current condition is not true, good or lovely. And often, in order to expose the unrighteousness of the current way of being, he allows himself to be a fool.”\textsuperscript{164} Similarly, holy friends envision Christ’s greatest potential in the other; they attempt to articulate carefully the possibilities that only Jesus can attain for them. Like a prophet, the holy friend creatively imagines what should be and risks sounding foolish in order to maximize her companion’s potential for God’s Kingdom on earth.

\textbf{4.2.2.1 The Eidetic, Incarnational Question: Where Should We Be?}

How does participation in the prophetic ministry of Christ equip the church to be a sign of how God’s Reign in the world should be? The church leads as a prophet when it functions as a sign, pointing people to the redemptive love of God in Christ Jesus.\textsuperscript{165} When the church tells the truth about the dangers of the idols of this world and magnifies the cross as the healing alternative, it functions as prophet. The body of Christ must be the living witness both to and through Christ, offering a glimpse of Jesus and his intentions in the world for fairness, equity,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{163}{Curtis Freeman, “The Threefold Mediating Ministry of Christ” (lecture, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 14, 2019).}
\footnote{164}{Dan B. Allender, \textit{Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness} (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2008), 195.}
\footnote{165}{Hauerwas and Wells, \textit{The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics}, 21.}
\end{footnotes}
and justice. When the church acts prophetically, it brings truth to the fore and calls for repentance and reconciliation. Wells and Hauerwas illustrate this truth by describing tilted mirrors in a particular church cathedral, pointing to the tree of knowledge in Genesis 2 and to the tree of the Lamb in Revelation 22: “Lest the viewer peer into the mirror and become distracted or fascinated by their own image, the mirrors are tilted slightly [. . . ]. Without them, few would look up at all, and fewer still would realize what beauty and order lay above. With them, all will have an opportunity to see, some will use them to look in detail, and others will be inspired to look heavenwards for themselves.” The church acts as prophet when it acts as this mirror of grace, reflecting God’s goodness, joy and peace—showing others the way life ought to be.166

4.2.3 Royal Transformation—A Picture of Christ’s Reign and Rule

“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.”

—Is 44:6–8

What does it mean for the church to be a picture of God’s reign and rule through Christ? God’s Kingdom subjects must first acknowledge David’s confession of his true King as he worships the LORD with sincere gratitude: “There is no one like you, O LORD, and there is no God besides you” (1 Chr 17:20). As servants of the Most High God the church is tasked with executing Christ’s benevolent reign and rule in the world. Freeman defines what it means for the church to participate in God’s Kingdom work: “[The church’s] role as a kingdom and priests is not something they possess naturally. They share in this royal priesthood by virtue of Christ’s

mediating work. Because he offered himself as a sacrifice to redeem them, they participate in his royal and priestly ministry by invitation. And by sharing in his ministry they participate in God’s reign.”

Through the years, the church has debated about how the nature of God’s Reign is carried out in the world. Centuries ago, some Christians felt it necessary to bring about God’s millennial reign more quickly through violence, or through the coercion of civil governments; instead, a more theologically and pragmatically sound approach is to trust God’s Rule through the local church such that the Holy Spirit guides the body of Christ to live, love, and serve the church, not necessarily the church universal, but the church in its local context. The church has a responsibility to witness to its community as a local expression of the universal body of Christ.

The church can faithfully maximize its ministry because it completely trusts in its universal Sovereign, the King who “builds infrastructure to provide for the needs of the people and protect them from harm [. . . , who] works for a fair and just society [. . . , who] juggles crises, decision marking, allocation of resources, talent development, and issues of survival and growth.”

4.2.3.1 The Metamorphic, Incarnational Question: Where Can We Be?

How does participation in the royal ministry of Christ equip the church to be an instrument for how God’s Reign in the world can be? For the church to be a successful instrument for bringing hope, justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation in the world it must accept her humble role to implement its priestly and prophetic functions in and through the culture. Furthermore, the church must remember its sole purpose is to point to the kingship of Christ:

167 Freeman, “Mediating Ministry,” 401.
169 Allender, Leading with a Limp, 189.
170 Curtis Freeman, “Mike Krog’s Notes on The Threefold Mediating Ministry of Christ” (lecture, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 15, 2019).
The Church does not have a kingly ministry. Its task is, through prophetic and priestly witness, to point to the kingship of Christ. The kingship of Christ is, indeed, exercised in a prophetic and priestly way; but the Church worships Christ because of his sovereignty, not because of his style. He is king not because he is good, but because he is God; not because he is just, but because he is true. Christ achieved things the Church could never have achieved, and because Christ achieved them the Church does not need to. To take upon itself a kingly ministry thus either assumes that Christ was not victorious, or that he no longer reigns. Either way, it points away from and inhibits the prophetic and priestly ministry. The Church’s role is [...] to bring their resources to Christ, to wonder at his work, to distribute his gifts, and to ensure that nothing is wasted by gathering up what is left over. But Christ alone presides and multiplies.  

When the church trusts God to protect and provide for the church and all Kingdom subjects, and when the church points to the royalty of Jesus through the humble, courageous execution of priestly and prophetic ministries, it becomes the instrument of the incarnate Christ in the world.

4.3 “The Covenant of the Broom Tree”: A Balanced, Pragmatic Framework for Holy Friendships among Clergy

But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.”

—1 Kgs 19:4–5

The prophet Elijah spends much of 1 Kings 18 involved in a contest between competing deities, namely, the gods of Baal and the LORD, God of Israel. For hours the prophets of Baal cried out to their god, danced around crazily, and even cut themselves in an effort to entreat their god to set the altar on Mt. Carmel ablaze. After midday, Elijah built an altar of twelve stones, and he had four jars of water poured over the meat and wood three separate times. Elijah called on the LORD, the fire fell from the sky, and it consumed the burnt offering, wood, and stones.

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but the trench was dry. The LORD not only won the battle; he also won the hearts of those who had not yet believed. Elijah enjoyed a true “mountaintop experience,” basking in the joy of God’s omnipotence and might. After looking atop Mt. Carmel for God’s promise of rain, he girds up his loins and sprints ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel. However, as 1 Kings 19 commences, Elijah’s elation is short-lived. Elijah’s heart sinks; Jezebel’s messenger delivers Elijah a death threat, and he is understandably terrified. Danger is looming, so he flees for his life and heads to Beersheba, where he asks his servant to leave him alone. At this point in Elijah’s ministry, he is not only ready to forfeit his prophetic office but also his life. Depressed and despondent, Elijah begins a solitary trek in the desert, and, when he finds a lone broom tree, sits under its shade and asks the LORD to for death.

What Elijah experiences at the top of Mt. Carmel as well as in the valley of the Judean wilderness is, in similar respects, a microcosm of the pastoral ministry. The highs and lows of congregational service do indeed bring about experiences with stress, fatigue, and burnout. There are moments when pastors, priests, and other church leaders simply want to give up and hand over the responsibility to someone else. These types of ups and downs can be frequent and subsequently affect the spiritual, emotional, mental, and even physical well-being of clergy. Yet, struggles in the ministry are not surprising to God and often reveal the very heart of Christ who longs to meet his followers’ deep spiritual needs, especially in overwhelming, difficult instances. The good news for the clergy of God is that the promise of 1 Kings 19 continues—for there is hope found under the broom tree of grace amid the wilderness.

Here, the scriptures reveal an exhausted Elijah, mentally, emotionally, and physically tired and frightened enough to die. After falling asleep, God intervenes. He sends an angel to wake Elijah in order that he might eat and drink. After consuming this meal, he falls asleep again and
is summarily woken up by the angel and told to eat and drink again. Even amid loneliness, isolation, and desolation, Immanuel provides for Elijah. The food and drink signify God’s love for the prophet because they give him the energy to fulfill his prophetic purpose. Renewed and strengthened by the angel’s meal, he travels to Mt. Horeb and is met by God who speaks to Elijah in a cave—not in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but a gentle whisper followed by sheer silence. Though Elijah is still licking his chops from his severe anxiety attacks, he accepts his recommissioning and is told to anoint two kings as well as Elisha, who will assume the prophetic role in Elijah’s place. Elijah obeys the LORD and finds Elisha, plowing in the field. Elijah places his mantle over Elisha and, after sacrificing his own way of life to the LORD (giving the yoke of oxen and the wood of the plow as a burnt offering) follows his mentor in service to God, entering into a most holy friendship of priestly and prophetic ministry.

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18–19 parallels the overarching themes of this thesis. In the same way that Elijah suffers, experiences God’s friendship, and God reminds Elijah of his purpose, I have attempted to illustrate the shared burdens that pastors experience as well as the shared blessings they encounter in God’s covenant friendship, which extend not only to biblical and postbiblical church leaders but also to today’s clergy. What pastors, priests, and church leaders need are holy friendships among other clergy who collectively act as broom trees of shelter, safety, and reprieve. Clergy friendships provide the shade where God not only hears their pain and suffering but also their need for welcome, acceptance, and embrace. Holy friendships among ministers are the broom trees of hope amid despair, the place where purpose is reimagined and all things are possible. Clergy friends are those broom trees who thrive on the light and other nutrients that God generously offers in order to sustain Christ’s priestly and
prophetic ministry on earth. Therefore, it stands to reason that holy, clergy friendships grow best in the fertile soil of covenant relationships that flourish in intentional communities of priestly vulnerability, develop within prophetic discussions of possibility, and are sustained through a spiritual mutability that can only be accomplished by the power of God through the sovereign reign and rule of Jesus Christ. In other words, church leaders can experience a more balanced ministry and life through participation in a pragmatic framework for holy, clergy friendship that I am calling “The Covenant of the Broom Tree.”

4.3.1 Forging Clergy-Initiated Communities of Priestly Vulnerability

As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to commit to consistent intervals of uninterrupted time for equal exchange of individual stories, to gather at a safe and specific location for comfortable and confidential fellowship, and to offer my resolute willingness to reciprocate personal vulnerabilities and provide uncompromising acceptance of fellow clergy.

—The Covenant of the Broom Tree: Pledge of Vulnerability

Clergy can experience healthier ministries and a greater sense of personal well-being as they engage other clergy friendships within safe, affirming, and Christ-centered communities. L. Gregory Jones emphasizes the critical importance of nurturing holy friendships as a necessary foundation for the effectiveness of social innovation. When structures within the Christian tradition are examined and questioned, new strategies and mindsets often emerge, offering creative and essential innovations that can directly impact God’s Kingdom.¹⁷² God created people as social beings; therefore, amid pursuing the imaginative Christ in another, fresh alternatives surface that build and bless community. Jones asserts that “faith communities have typically understood human activity to be responsive to God’s prior action, thus emphasizing that

we are called to be catalytic witnesses to, and participants in, God’s work.”

Consequently, forming communities that nurture holy friendships helps the church “learn practical wisdom and practice Christian social innovation.”

Nowhere else could clergy more acutely experience the creativity and vulnerability of the Spirit than in a safe, welcoming community of other clergy who understand and empathize with colleagues in the pastoral vocation. Clergy need a confidential space where they can share personal struggles, incubate new ideas, and seek the encouragement of the Spirit in the hearts of other clergy. In this community of priestly vulnerability, pastors can mutually participate in God’s work of personal and interpersonal reconciliation.

Pastors know that faith does not exist in a vacuum—faith only grows when it faces and passes the tests and trials of life (Jas 1:2–4). Just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown in the fiery furnace for their faith in God, clergy must also anticipate severe tests of faith in their pastoral ministries. Likewise, just as Daniel’s friends emerge from Nebuchadnezzar’s oven unsinged, so clergy must also trust God for the strengthening of their character and perseverance on the other side of the struggle. Not only does faith grow through fiery trial but so also do holy friendships that experience similar tests. In the same way as objects to be shaped, molded, and contoured for a desired use in the hands of a blacksmith, friendships are forged with God and others through fire. As clergy subject themselves to other clergy who understand, they invite the Holy Spirit to bend their thinking into the way of Christ; this new flexibility to Jesus within holy, clergy friendships can only be ascertained through genuine vulnerability. Thus, clergy must initiate communities of holy friendships with other pastors, priests, and church leaders who are willing to share their most vulnerable selves. To forge a community of holy,

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clergy friendships, it is imperative that at least two or more ministers pledge to engage one another with three specific promises: (1) commit to consistent intervals of uninterrupted time for equal exchange of individual stories; (2) gather at a safe and specific location for comfortable and confidential fellowship; and (3) offer a resolute willingness to reciprocate personal vulnerabilities and provide uncompromising acceptance. Over the last several years of my ministry, I have greatly benefited from engaging in these types of holy, clergy friendships. Personally, I have found that the combination of these three aforementioned promises bears much fruit, both relationally and vocationally, as my clergy peers and I consistently commit to serving the church—and one another—well.

Holy, clergy friendships must first commit to consistent intervals of uninterrupted time for equal exchange of individual stories. Bruce G. Epperly reflects on the importance of time for the Christ-follower: “Intentional practices of transforming time through prayer, meditation, relationships and letting go can open us to God’s abundant kairos time in the midst of ever-flowing chronos.” In order for clergy to grow in their friendships with other clergy, there must be intentional, uninterrupted time set aside for sharing personal and professional concerns and praises. This means that a particular date and time interval must be mutually agreed upon by clergy who desire to grow in their holy friendship with one another. Regardless of frequency or duration of these gatherings, ministers agree to meet and exchange their experiences in an open, welcoming environment where all who gather are given an equal opportunity to share. In these clergy meetings, equal, uninterrupted time provides the appropriate atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to shape the hearts of clergy friends through empathic listening, spontaneous prayer, or emotional purging. Each pastor must respectfully be afforded the freedom to share (or not). This

175 Bruce G. Epperly, Starting with Spirit: Nurturing Your Call to Pastoral Leadership (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 159.
practice validates the pastor and honors her voice in the group, regarding speech or silence as holy contributions.

Secondly, holy friendships among clergy must commit to gathering in a safe and specific location for comfortable and confidential fellowship. It is critical that clergy find a location that honors their collective proximity and is isolated enough to provide meaningful, private companionship. Ministers who gather to develop and deepen their holy friendships with one another must find a place that is quiet, safe, and free of unnecessary interruptions. Unused or underutilized rooms in a minister’s church, a reserved room in a restaurant, or even a prepared video conference room online can serve as safe spaces for fellowship. The key is for clergy to be in a space that offers both a comfortable environment for sharing and comfortable seating for church leaders to enjoy. Additionally, whichever minister friend hosts the meeting, that person is responsible to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of that space for the duration of the meeting. Vulnerability thrives in safe, comfortable places where the minister sharing her heart is assured of personal privacy.

Finally, holy, clergy friends must resolutely commit to reciprocate personal vulnerabilities and provide uncompromising acceptance. This is perhaps the greatest difficulty for pastors seeking holy friendships with other pastors, particularly if they are not used to sharing personal weaknesses, struggles, or pain with others, especially among fellow clergy. Yet, the total commitment of all gathered clergy to value and honor one another’s true selves should dissuade any pastoral fears or desire to hide. After all, scripture reveals that God’s power is made perfect not in spite of the weaknesses of God’s people but in light of them (2 Cor 12:9a). The secret to priestly vulnerability among clergy is to allow for empathic listening focused on hearing not just what is said but also what is unsaid. What emerges from the heart of a pastor in the safe,
confidential space of fellow clergy is nothing short of Jesus Christ; therefore, it is vital that ministers know for certain that they are truly heard. Mary Clark Moschella expresses this beautiful truth by referencing an experience of Nelle Morton:

Consider the story [. . .] of a workshop participant who, after sitting silently for most of a weekend, haltingly began to speak. “I hurt,” she said. “I hurt all over.” The woman touched herself in various places and slowly told her story to an attentive circle of listeners. The group simply sat and listened intently, without saying a word, as the woman spoke from a place deep inside. When she was through speaking, the woman began to weep with relief and expressed gratitude. “You heard me,” she said. “You heard me all the way.” She then added, “I have a strange feeling that you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story. You heard me to my own speech.”

All God’s people, including clergy, need to be heard “all the way.” When pastors agree to share their deepest selves in a safe, affirming community of clergy friends, they increase the opportunities for being fully heard. Empathic listening avails each pastor the freedom to give and receive mercy, challenge, and blessing. The free, willing exchange of vulnerability strengthens the pastors’ friendships, establishing a necessary balance to both their personal and professional lives through the reconciling work of Jesus, the Light of the world. Mandy Smith and David Hansen reinforce this reality: “Brennan Manning came to my side [. . . through the use of] a Leonard Cohen poem: ‘Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’” Metaphorically speaking, this is how shared, priestly vulnerability builds and fortifies holy friendships among clergy—the Light gets in through the cracks, and healthy community flourishes.

4.3.2 Cultivating Clergy Discussions of Prophetic Possibility

As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to discover, challenge, and celebrate the numerous possibilities God has given me and my

fellow clergy friends for growth in my relationships with God, family, and church.

—The Covenant of the Broom Tree: Pledge of Possibility

One of the goals of holy, clergy friendships is to assess and articulate the potential God plants in each minister’s heart. Over the course of consistent conversations marked by priestly vulnerability, pastors have the blessed responsibility to call attention to their fellow clergyperson’s strengths and weaknesses, placing the focus on what Christ’s power is able to do in and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when a pastor feels comfortable speaking an unpopular opinion, it must be shared in love as scripture mandates (Eph 4:15a). L. Gregory Jones supports this prophetic function by asserting the need for holy friends to “challenge the sins [they] have come to love.”

Holy friendships among clergy can be broom trees of hope and possibility, especially when confession and repentance are welcomed and celebrated. When relationships are forgiven and restored, the possibilities become clearer for those God equips to serve the local church. Jones and Armstrong exclaim: “There are times when holy friendship requires speaking difficult truths plainly. It does not mean that we articulate every thought, especially if those thoughts do not serve the holy alliances of the community.” As time passes, these holy alliances grow closer and develop an intimacy that permits the calling out, not just of sins but of opportunities for renewed purpose, vision, and strategy. Pastor friends give and receive from one another their very best—and this is a critical point—in order that they prioritize God, family, and church according to the character and will of Jesus Christ. Jones and Armstrong continue: “It is [. . .] crucial that pastors cultivate holy friendships with other pastors, their peers

An authentic set of peer friendships can be a critically important source of sustenance for faithful Christian living.\textsuperscript{180}

Another valuable blessing that helps to balance a pastor’s personal and professional life are the various suggestions and advice that pastor friends can offer each other, especially amid crisis or tragedy. Imitating the humility of Christ, a needful word, hug, or moment of silence can be given, offering the necessary healing that a stressed, grief-stricken pastor might need.

Participating in The Covenant of the Broom Tree means that, since Jesus Christ is the hope of glory, all things are possible (Mt 19:26). Victoria Atkinson White illustrates how holy friends promote possibility in the face of tragedy and grief:

Holy friends are the cheerleaders in the path shouting, “It’s OK if you don’t know whether your idea will work. Try it! Try something! You’ll learn in the process.” We should listen to them. Your hold friends are qualified to dispense this advance because they know you, they know your context and they know how committed you are to your calling and vocation. Who is the person who speaks truth to the lies your shadow self hisses in your ear? Who is the one who pushes you to claim unused gifts? Who is the friend who encourages your hunches and helps you feel creative and generative? These are your holy friends. These are the voices you need to hear. Holy friends are critical to human flourishing.\textsuperscript{181}

As Elijah discovers and consumes spiritual food for the journey under the ample shade of the broom tree, so does the pastor, whose clergy friends offer her the spiritual energy necessary to achieve all that God planned in advance for her to accomplish (Eph 2:10).

4.3.3 Sustaining Holy, Clergy Friendships through Spiritual Mutability

As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to submit to Jesus Christ as the sole agent of spiritual transformation for both me and my fellow clergy friends. In all that we say and do we place our total dependence on

\textsuperscript{180} Jones and Armstrong, Resurrecting Excellence, 76.
Christ’s power to reform our hearts and make us holy vessels for the work of God’s Kingdom reign on earth.

—The Covenant of the Broom Tree: Pledge of Mutability

Pastors who engage other pastors in a covenant of holy friendship find grace and peace necessary for the ministry journey. However, though these clergy friendships provide priestly and prophetic blessing, they are only sustained by the power of the King—Jesus Christ. Through spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture reading, and holy silence, each clergy gathering is empowered by the hand of God. Furthermore, no spiritual transformation takes place without the equipping Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is necessary here to reemphasize the wisdom of Wells and Hauerwas regarding Christ’s mediating ministry of royalty:

The Church does not have a kingly ministry [. . .]. To take upon itself a kingly ministry thus either assumes that Christ was not victorious, or that he no longer reigns [. . .]. The Church’s role is [. . .] to bring their resources to Christ, to wonder at his work, to distribute his gifts, and to ensure that nothing is wasted by gathering up what is left over. But Christ alone presides and multiplies.182

Christ is the most loyal participant of The Covenant of the Broom Tree. “Christ alone presides and multiplies” the health, well-being, and effectiveness of clergy friendships who consistently meet for fellowship centered on vulnerability and possibility.183 There are no holy, clergy friendships without the presence of Christ informing, challenging, celebrating, teaching, forgiving, healing, and reconciling those who have pledged to keep and honor The Covenant of the Broom Tree. Using the aforementioned words of Wells and Hauerwas, the role of holy, clergy friends is also “to bring their resources to Christ, to wonder at his work, to distribute his gifts, and to ensure that nothing is wasted by gathering up what is left over.”184 When pastors prioritize Jesus Christ in their clergy friendships, they benefit from the Holy Spirit at work in one

183 Ibid., 22.
another. Moreover, Matt Bloom describes how clergy well-being is a product of compassionate social support from other ministers, those people he terms “similar others.”\textsuperscript{185} Oftentimes, perhaps inadvertently, clergy friendships serve as exemplars, or role models, of King Jesus:

Exemplars are pastors who are held in high esteem because of their commitment to and excellence in ministry. Exemplars can be emulated because there is clear evidence about the efficacy of their ways of doing ministry and being a pastor. They can inspire hope by fostering a positive sense of self in other pastors. Similar others are very positive and often very powerful sources of social comparison. They can help other pastors imagine their best selves; envision a better, brighter future; and ultimately flourish. And exemplars can provide personalized advice and counsel to other pastors, helping them to strive to become betters pastors and better people.\textsuperscript{186}

The tremendous benefit to holy, clergy friendships is the reflected gift of Christ, Divine Royalty, demonstrating his reign and rule in and through their shared reciprocated priestly and prophetic activities. As pastors, priests, and church leaders consistently meet to develop their companionship, new ways of embodying the Kingdom can emerge, new ministry ideas and tools can be tested and tried, and creative, novel mission endeavors can be considered. As clergy friends express and embrace their vulnerabilities, explore and expand their possibilities, and accept and affirm their mutability, the health and well-being of pastors is nurtured, strengthened, and reinforced with every gathering. Peter Wohlleben and Tim Flannery write about trees as metaphors for how friendships thrive in community: “Every tree is [...] valuable to the community and worth keeping around as long as possible.”\textsuperscript{187} So it is with clergy, too. Pastors need the company of other pastors because, as their roots grow deeply, they begin to intermingle with one another in mysterious, holy ways that can only occur within the fertile soil of Jesus


\textsuperscript{186} Bloom, \textit{Flourishing in Ministry}, 87.

Christ and his Kingdom. And when their root system is fully developed, the intimacy that is forged, cultivated, and sustained is pure, unadulterated worship that pleases the ears and heart of God. When holy, clergy friendships thrive, it follows that so does the church.

4.3.4 The Benediction

What will become of pastors who serve their congregations in solitude? How will priests be able to manage their parishioner’s conflicts and congregational struggles alone? Will church leaders ever acknowledge their desperate need for personal and professional health and well-being? The good news is that God provides a framework for clergy friendships to flourish through the threefold mediating ministry of Christ. By surrendering their will to Jesus and pledging to commit to The Covenant of the Broom Tree, more pastors, priests, and ministers can find greater peace, freedom, and joy as they serve God, their families, and their churches. Every member of the clergy deserves at least one soul friend, and that is why I conclude this thesis with tender, loving words from John O’Donohue:

In everyone’s life, there is a great need for an anam cara, a soul friend. In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of social acquaintance fall away, you can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the shelter of another person’s soul.188

For all clergy who God lovingly calls, let it be so. Amen indeed.

Appendix 1

The following graphic is provided for those clergy who wish to create, build and sustain holy friendships with one another. Using the pledges listed below, this one-page graphic serves as a reference for clergy attempting to engage The Covenant of the Broom Tree. I recommend that individual and collective commitments to this covenant be made within the confines of these forged, clergy friendships. Equally, these personal commitments must be prayerfully offered to God so that what will be forged and cultivated may be sustained by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, who remains the group’s transforming presence and is the paragon of holy friendship.

The Covenant of the Broom Tree

The Pledge of Vulnerability

“As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to commit consistent intervals of uninterrupted time for equal exchange of individual stories, gather at a safe and specific location for comfortable and confidential fellowship and offer my resolute willingness to reciprocate personal vulnerabilities and provide uncompromising acceptance of fellow clergy.”

The Pledge of Possibility

“As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to discover, challenge and celebrate the numerous possibilities God has given me and my fellow clergy friends for growth in my relationships with God, family and church.”

The Pledge of Mutability

“As a participant in The Covenant of the Broom Tree, I pledge to submit to Jesus Christ as the sole agent of spiritual transformation for both me and my fellow clergy friends. In all that we say and do we place our total dependence on Christ’s power to reform our hearts and make us holy vessels for the work of God’s Kingdom reign on earth.”

Fig. 2. Figure by author.
Bibliography


