



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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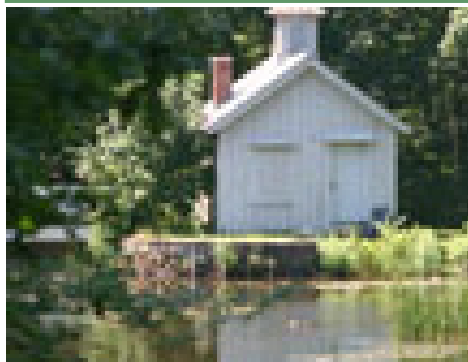


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

## Self-care

## Growing and Learning Through a Health Crisis

Carol McVetty



I always thought I was pretty good at self-care. I guard my day off the way a dog guards a bone. I eat my fruits and veggies...even enjoy them! I take a walk most mornings. Before that, I spend a half-hour praying and journaling. And for years, ever since my kids stopped waking me in the night, I have gotten my recommended eight hours of sleep. But in recent years I struggled with a growing realization that the pace of my ministry was unsustainable. The

preoccupations and worries of my work took up an ever larger space in my life and psyche. Especially with the children out of the house, there didn't seem to be much left beyond work and rest. I was often weary and anxious.

So when my husband and I were granted a sabbatical for the fall of 2008, I knew what my goal was: to figure out a better work/life balance. That three month sabbatical proved to be a blessed gift. It was a time of rest, prayer, study, travel, reflection and delight. I got reacquainted with myself outside of the role of pastor. Today, I am in a profoundly different place. I have found a sustainable pace and a significantly less stressed approach to ministry. The sabbatical surely cleared away the debris and laid a solid foundation for that new approach. But I am convinced that the profound inner shift I have experienced came about as the result of a health crisis.

We returned from our sabbatical just in time for Advent and Christmas. It was January by the time I began to integrate and apply my sabbatical learnings. I was just beginning to plan for the coming months, and to consider how I would do things differently, when I got sick. It was simply an upper respiratory virus. But then it didn't go away. February was lost to a serious case of pneumonia. Throughout March and most of April I was functioning, doing whatever most needed to get done, but distracted by a series of ever more invasive tests and moving up the chain of medical specialists at my hospital. It gradually became apparent through those weeks that while I felt okay, something was definitely wrong with my lungs. I was diagnosed with a very rare carcinoid tumor blocking a bronchial tube. Treatment was surgery to remove one third of my right lung. Recovery took three months of medical leave and vacation. (Although I'm being followed carefully for a number of years, this low grade cancer is unlikely to return. My prognosis is excellent.)

When I returned to work at full capacity in mid-summer, I was surprised to see significant changes in my work life. My attitudes and feelings were different as well, significantly so. And yet, the changes were subtle. They were not easy to pinpoint. Eventually I decided that the changes I could see were the result of a deep, hidden transformation that had occurred, without my awareness, as a result of my illness. It isn't easy to articulate exactly what happened, but I will try.

First, I felt less driven to perform and achieve, and therefore able to keep a better balance between work and life. I realized I had often taken a perverse kind of pride in racking up more and more hours. My approach to ministry now feels less like constant striving. I am more often able, even while hard at work, to rest in God's blessing. Of course while I was weak and recovering from cancer surgery, that was my only option. Throughout that time I had a palpable sense

of being held and cradled in God's grace. It was a definite physical sensation that emerged as an image in my mind: I was curled up in a nest created by the prayers of God's people, a nest that held me up in the warm light of God's loving care.

Of course the members of the congregation did all the things church folk are good at, with cards and emailed words of support, casseroles and help with chores. These acts of love became truly sacramental for me, outward evidence of the grace through which I was being sustained. We had even more opportunity to welcome these gifts of kindness since our daughter's wedding was just six weeks after surgery. I had to let others do things the mother of the bride enjoys doing (but that also usually leads to a lot of stress and overwork)...things like planting flowers in the yard, decorating the sanctuary, preparing a morning-after brunch for out-of-town relatives, even buying my husband's tie.

The wedding became what perhaps all weddings should be, a celebration created with joy by a whole community of family, friends, neighbors, and the congregation. I guess I learned on a deeper level a lesson I've been working on my whole life: it's not all up to me. Second, I am now more focused. I find it easier to identify priorities and see them through. I have always had a tendency to take on too much at once and become overwhelmed. Now my lists are shorter, and I get through them more often. Perhaps this comes from crashing hard against the reality of my limits. Not having enough lung capacity to walk up a flight of stairs, or even sing a hymn, dispels for good one's delusions of invincibility. Even now that I am fit and energetic again, I can't forget that my energy is limited. I know in my gut, not just in my head, that I can't do everything there is to do, or even everything I'd like to do. So I am able to let go of things with less inner wrestling. As a result, I find I'm actually getting more done. I spend less time and energy spinning my wheels.

Finally, I believe my preaching and teaching come from a deeper and more centered place than ever before. I do the biblical study I need to do, but I spend less time reading up on how a half-dozen others have applied a particular passage, and more on simply "marinating" in the text until my own message (or rather the Spirit's message for me) comes bubbling up. Surely this is growth that occurs gradually in the course of all our ministries. It just seems that I got pushed into fast forward for a time. I identify with Job when he said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." (Job 42:5) Facing life-threatening illness grants a rather large chunk of first hand spiritual experience. With that comes greater confidence that one has legitimate truth to share. Preparing for sermons and Bible studies is still hard work, but it is

accompanied by more ease and less angst. My family finds me less crabby and distracted in the course of that work. And I find the work less draining, more sustainable.

Obviously, the message here for clergy longing for more ease and balance in their work is not "get sick!" Perhaps it is this: real and lasting change starts on the inside. If you want to work differently, do whatever it takes to give your mind and heart room to change. Give priority to opportunities to breathe and grow. Pay attention to your life. Didn't Frederick Beuchner say something like that? Look to your life for the lessons God has to teach you. Listen. Be present. God will stretch your heart so that you have the capacity to live in more life-giving ways.

*Carol McVetty serves as English Language Pastor and Minister of Discipleship at the North Shore Baptist Church, Chicago. Her husband, Rev. Douglas Harris, is also a part of North Shore's multi-cultural Pastoral Team. Since it's June, while you are reading this article, Carol is likely to be outside gardening.*

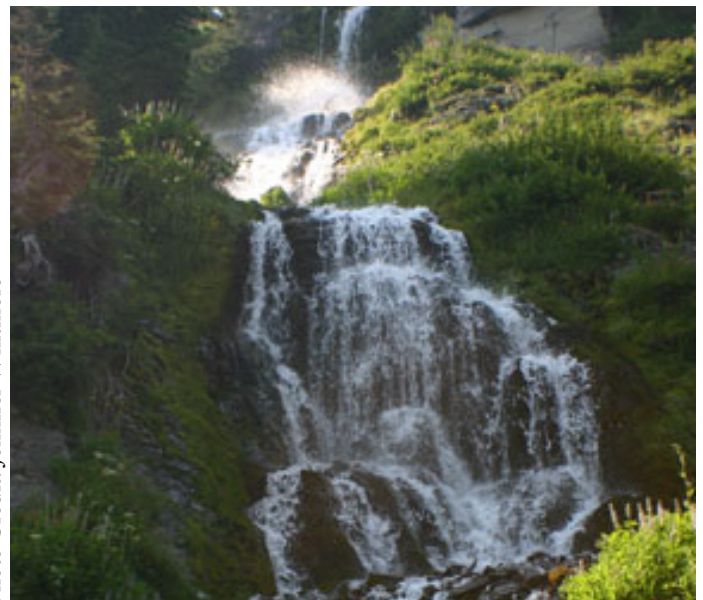


Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore



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Published periodically as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

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# ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

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- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org) under the "Who We Are" link.

# mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling



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