



# minister

## MAGAZINE

A Journal of the American Baptist Ministers Council • Speaking to the Practice of Ministry

Volume XXXIII, No. 1

Published Periodically at Valley Forge, PA

Spring, 2010



## Sustainable Ministry

Margaret J. Marcuson

How can women in ministry sustain themselves? The challenges can seem never-ending. I remember hearing Nancy Hastings Sehested, speaking at a Women in Ministry breakfast years ago, say that she had moments when she thought, “For this I struggled...?” Leading a congregation is not easy. Leading a congregation and juggling a family—or trying to date while being a pastor—is not easy.

How can women engage in ministry with energy and vitality in a way that can sustain us and those we serve over the years?

Edwin Friedman said, “Stress comes less from overwork than from taking responsibility for the problems of others.” Yet pastors, male and female, are practically trained to do this. And, of course, many women are groomed from birth to take responsibility for others.

The road to sustainable ministry starts not with others but with ourselves. I like to say it’s a matter of shifting from the impossible — controlling others, to the merely difficult — managing myself. This is a process; there are no magic tricks. Rather it is a way of being in ministry that is different, and has more potential for growth for ourselves and for those with and to whom we minister.

Here are five ways women can work toward being the kind of leader who does not burn out, who can sustain herself for the long haul, and even enjoy it!

### 1. Be clear about who you are and what you are after.

You can find no substitute for the hard work of thinking through your own deepest values, principles and practices in ministry. These do not emerge overnight, but take time to develop. Start with whatever clarity you’ve got. You may want to begin a practice of taking periodic retreats to reflect on this issue. In my experience, my brain works better out of town. Jesus’ own time in the wilderness, as well as his periodic withdrawals for prayer, was critical to his ability to sustain his ministry right to the end. God may better be able to speak to us about our unique calling when there are fewer voices trying to drown God out. It’s critical to take time out from the busyness to do this kind of thinking, praying and listening.

### 2. Work on relationships with your congregation.

Clarity of vision can never be lived out in a vacuum. Ministry is a community matter, and relationships are critical. Look for ways to stay in touch with important people in your congregation or other ministry settings. Don’t wait for a meeting or a pastoral need—initiate lunch or coffee. Taking time to build relationships lays the groundwork for our future leadership. I found when I was a pastor in Massachusetts that when I got interested in Red Sox baseball, I automatically had a great way to connect with the men in my congregation.

When things heat up, we sometimes want to isolate ourselves, especially from those who are critical of us. Many women in ministry, myself included, are emotionally vulnerable to criticism. If I’m honest, I admit I just want everyone to love me and everything I do! At times of conflict and criticism, it is even more important to stay calmly well-connected.

### 3. Manage your own anxiety and not the anxiety of others.

Ministry gives us lots of opportunities to be anxious. Will the money come in? How is church attendance? What will people think about the new worship format? What do people think about having a woman pastor for the first time? And others are happy to give us their anxiety: “Pastor, you’ve got to do something about this!” “People are talking about (fill in the blank).” Taking on the anxiety of others is one of the key temptations of ministry. But we’ve got plenty to do just dealing with our own.

Throughout the gospels we see examples of the way Jesus gave people’s anxiety back to them. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” “Let the dead bury the dead.” He was always clear about which responsibilities belonged to him and which belonged to others. The less anxious I can manage to be—always a relative question—the more effective a leader I can be. If I don’t react to other people’s reactivity, I will be better able to help them move into the future. Change always raises uncertainty and anxiety, in ourselves as well as in others. When we are aware of this process, we are better able to think clearly and lead effectively.

### 4. Give others room to make their own choices.

Willing others to change is a big temptation for all ministry leaders. When we set a ministry direction and others don’t want to follow, we often just try hard to convince them we are right. We may be tempted to argue with people about their position on women in ministry and to convince them of our right to our ministry.

Similarly, in pastoral care we may have a very good idea for someone’s life, but they don’t want to make that choice. So we try harder to help them, which often results in them resisting further our “good ideas.” Each individual’s life is his or her own, and we cannot control the choices they make. Jesus never chased after people or tried to will them to accept him or his views. Instead, he gave them space to choose. There is great freedom in saying, “This is how I see it,” and allowing others to respond with their own view. In that exchange, something new and creative may emerge.

### 5. Cultivate your own persistence, patience and resilience.

Being a persistent leader is not the same as being autocratic. Church leadership at its best is collaborative. But ministry does require a tremendous amount of determination and resourcefulness. The status quo is a powerful force, and moving a static congregation forward can feel impossible. I always say, “Everything in church takes five years.” We may get frustrated and impatient at times. Yet the God-given forces for life within people and within the church are powerful, and as we patiently cultivate them,

signs of hope will emerge. We can foster our own ability to rebound from setbacks, laugh at the glitches and at our own missteps, recognize the learning potential in every encounter, and take the long view.

We can sustain ourselves in ministry over time, and live our lives in and outside the church in ways that are healthier and more productive when we:

- focus on our own clarity
- work on relationships within the congregation
- manage our own anxiety, not that of others
- give others room to make their own decisions, and
- cultivate our own persistence, patience and resilience.

These are not one-through-five steps to perfect ministry, but ways of being with others. Some days we will do it better than other days. But what I see in the women (as well as the men) in ministry with whom I work is an ongoing process of growth in the ability to courageously follow God’s calling while generously dealing with the people God has given us to serve. Can we be a little clearer today than yesterday, a little better at relating to others than yesterday, a little less anxious than yesterday, a little more open to the choices of others than yesterday, a little more persistent and patient than yesterday? That is part of the ongoing process of growth in ministry—with the hope that one day God will say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

---

*Margaret J. Marcuson works with clergy who want to be better leaders and churches who want to develop their ministries. She is the author of Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry (Seabury).*

## The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ’s church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.

# THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

## for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

**H**aving accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with, the help of the holy spirit, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself.

In affirmation of this commitment, I will abide by the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches and I will faithfully support its purposes and ideals. As further affirmation of my commitment, I covenant with my colleagues in ministry that we will hold one another accountable for fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.

I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of our American Baptist Churches; I will not accept a position in the American Baptist family unless I am in accord with those traditions and practices; nor will I use my influence to alienate my congregation/constituents or any part thereof from its relationship and support of the denomination. If my convictions change, I will resign my position.

I will respect and recognize the variety of calls to ministry among my American Baptist colleagues, and other Christians.

I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues in neighboring churches.

I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues to understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or require fees for pastoral services from constituents they serve, when these constituents are helping pay their salaries.

I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my ministerial status.

I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.

I will recognize my primary obligation to the church or employing group to which I have been called, and will accept added responsibilities only if they do not interfere with the overall effectiveness of my ministry.

I will personally and publicly support my colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability.

I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.

I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.

I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information in private or public except when, in my practice of ministry, I am convinced that the sanctity of confidentiality is outweighed by my well-founded belief that life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.

I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone, especially children.

I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.

I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.



# minister MAGAZINE

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

Editor: Michael Saylor

Associate Editor: Sue Sechrist

Publisher: Joe Kutter and the

Ministers Council Communications Committee

Contact:

The Ministers Council

PO Box 851

Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

Phone: 1 • 800 • 222-3872 ext 2333, 2334

Fax: 610 • 768-2066

Signed letters and comments are welcome, and may be used for publication. Send to [www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org](mailto:www.pastor@firstbaptist-cs.org). Please include your return and email addresses in any correspondence.

## 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

## ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

- ordained
- commissioned • a lay professional or
- a student in seminary
- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- 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.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor