

Supporting Our Pastors

By Barry Bartel, Transition Conference Minister



It has been a pleasure to extend my term to serve MSMC in a transition role to provide overlap as Amy begins as our Conference Minister. In this final column, I would like to give a shout out to the pastors and other leaders of our conference churches. In this challenging time, they have demonstrated extreme flexibility and creativity in continuing to provide meaningful worship experiences in virtual or sometimes hybrid forms that most of them had never experienced before. The need for physical separation also highlights how high a value we place on community in our congregational life.

The flexibility and creativity demonstrated by our pastors takes a new level of energy, and our congregations would do well to understand the need to care for and advocate for our pastors, so that the new pressure on our pastors does not come at a cost. Clergy and congregational coach Laura Stephens-Reed wrote about “the coming tidal wave of pastoral departures” at www.laurastephensreed.com/blog/the-coming-tidal-wave-of-pastoral-departures. I encourage congregational leaders to review her thoughts on how dramatically this time of pandemic has changed the pastoral role, and to consider some of her recommendations on supporting pastors:

- **Check on your pastor.** Many clergy don’t have anyone outside of their family to ask how they are and to listen to the answer.
- **If you have the bandwidth, ask how you can help.** As mentioned above, ministers took an unsustainable amount of work on themselves early in the pandemic because it was easier in the short term, they didn’t want to bother others who were struggling, and they didn’t know they’d be doing all the extra tasks six months later.
- **Speak well about your pastor to others.** If other church members talk disparagingly about what they think the minister is or isn’t doing, reply with your belief that she is working hard and, like all of us, doing the best she can.
- **If someone mentions a specific pastoral care need to you, urge that person to contact the pastor.** She wants to know so that she can respond!
- **Engage bigger questions with fellow church members.** What are we learning about our church or our community during this time? What do we need to keep or stop doing as a result? If you can think beyond the moment and help others do so, your pastor will be so grateful.
- **Send your minister an encouraging card, text, or email.** Name specific things you see her doing that you appreciate. This noticing goes a long way in helping a pastor feel valued.

As the virus surges in many parts of the country, the anticipated return to something close to the old normal gets further away. My prayer is that the church can emerge from this challenging time with a renewed sense of what we value and of our mission. Allow me to conclude this column the way I concluded my last, by encouraging that we not simply long for things to return to “normal.” My prayer is that these uncertain times may transform us and our church in ways we could not imagine and did not plan.