

Setting Limits:
the Flip-Side of the Boundary Issue

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"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." *Philippians 4:13* These words are "front and center" for me each day. It is the powerful message of a plaque that hangs above my desk, surrounded by a variety of items which identify me: certificates of graduation, ordination, and counselor certification, etc. The point for me, in the arrangement on my wall, is that, while a variety of endeavors have led to credentialing me for my task, the power comes from the One in whose name I serve—indeed, who has called me to this ministry. And, as we all know, this power is gracefully given. It cannot be earned. It is readily available.

However, as I work with pastors who are clearly under stress, some close to burnout, I have begun to reflect on the meaning of these words of St. Paul in new ways. As always, the privilege of being invited into the journey of others causes me to reflect on my own nearly thirty years in the pastorate. As a matter of fact, nineteen years ago I came to Midwest as a client under stress. What occurs to me is that this wonderful scripture passage, empowering as it is, also points to a seductive trap. How many of us place much too much emphasis on the first five words? *"I can do all things. . ."* Never mind how empowering our relationship to the Master is, *there are limits!* We are human, after all.

Twenty years ago I thought I had taken appropriate steps to bring some focus to my ministry which would enable me to establish some clarity in my responsibilities — *to set limits*, if you will. I had served as solo pastor for the previous eleven years in a community that had a history of looking to my United Methodist Church for pastoral care. I found myself doing many of the funerals which were not clearly Roman Catholic or Lutheran. I became a counselor to the community and a visible leader in civic and school affairs. In the middle of this, my congregation relocated and built a new church. I spent many hours helping people who were in pain regarding

leaving the historic old building behind. The hospitals to which my flock were taken were scattered in different directions, some at a considerable distance. Each Sunday I was expected to bring a fresh and vital message to a hungry people. Is the picture clear enough? It is repeated in some measure over and over again, isn't it?

So I requested the bishop to appoint me to a staff in a church where I would have a clear, *and limited*, job description. I went, then, to serve as associate with a man who, unfortunately, brought some serious health problems with him to that new appointment for both of us. When I came to Midwest, it was because I had now, in essence, become the solo pastor of a much larger and more complex congregation than my previous one. I was, frankly, overwhelmed! The good news for me is that I was guided by my counselor toward being able to identify my unique gifts for ministry more clearly and, thus, to work with church leaders to *establish appropriate limits*. This was done by clarifying expectations and soliciting more help from the laity as well as bringing a wonderfully gifted man out of retirement for part-time support. When the senior pastor took disability retirement, after nearly four years, I was able to respond to the bishop's request that I assume the role of senior pastor with clarity regarding how staffing needed to be done in order to maintain *healthy limits* for all of us.

To me the important message, in sharing my personal journey, is that, while we all stand in need of the power which Christ supplies to equip us for effective ministry, he does not really expect any of us to *"do all things."* Paul is not challenging us to "go now and be all things to all people." Certainly he is not suggesting that to be faithful to Christ and trust his power is to give ourselves away until there is nothing left to give. Rather, the meaning of that important passage, I believe, is this: *as we seek to be faithful to Christ's call, we can count on him to empower us*

for the task. But that empowerment includes the ability to discern what we can faithfully do and where the limits need to be drawn in order to avoid undue stress and possible burnout. There In the last several years, Midwest has been doing some important work in the area of establishing professional and ethical boundaries in ministry. In addition, I have been focusing on the whole matter of *clergy self-care*. I'm convinced that setting limits is a very important dimension of the whole self-care dynamic. What has occurred to me just recently is a new sense of how observing professional boundaries and setting personal limits are related. We often find ourselves talking about boundaries and limits in the same phrase—almost as if they are interchangeable. In a recent *Commentary*, the following guideline was offered: “A boundary violation occurs when a pastor places his or her needs inappropriately above those of the parishioner.” Here’s what I would suggest is the “flip side” of that definition: *Personal limits are violated when a pastor inappropriately places the needs or expectations of parishioners above his or her own — resulting in overload and the possibility of burnout.*

Our task, as pastors and church leaders, is first, to be able to *identify our limits*, and then to utilize them to *achieve balance* in our life and ministry. Richard A. Swenson, M.D., provided some very helpful suggestions in his article, “Overload: Learning to Live with Limits,” in the summer, 1996, issue of *Christian Counseling Today*. He notes that the fact of limits is important for the culture of today in general — for everyone, not just those of us who work within the context of the church. However, the very fact of the rapid changes that are taking place in our society — “largely due to progress always giving us more and more of everything faster and faster” — means that we are exceeding our limits all the time in so many facets of our lives. The result is painful! Swenson affirms: “People everywhere are collapsing in exhaustion, wondering what hit them.” What hit them, of course, is *overload*. This is defined as “*the point at which our limits are exceeded.*”

will always be choices to make. The plate of a parish pastor is always full to overflowing. No one can do it all!

What happens when we exceed our limits? Roy Oswald in his very helpful book, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry*, lists some of the results. Perhaps this is one way to recognize when we have gone too far. Are any of these symptoms present for you?

First there may be a *decrease in perception*, the inability to see clearly or simply to “absorb any more information.” Next, he suggests a *perceived loss of options*. When we are able to think clearly, possible options are an important resource we offer our parishioners. The next result of overload may be a *regression to infantile behavior*. How did you relate to stress as a child? Neither a tantrum nor a retreat to a fetal position will strengthen your image as pastor. Another result may be *the inability to make appropriate changes in destructive relationship patterns*. When people make unreasonable demands, in our weakened condition (beyond the limits), it is simply easier to say “yes” than it is to muster up the necessary emotional energy to say “no.” *Fatigue*, of course, is a huge result and an obvious one. The truth is that when we are overloaded, we need even more rest and sleep than usual. But how hard it is to give ourselves permission to do so, when there is so much to be done! *Depression* often strikes those who exceed the limits. There can be a sense of loss when we have gone beyond the framework of our “dependable world.” Finally, Oswald points to the reality of *physical illness* as a result of overload. This can affect several systems such as: the cardiovascular system (heart disease, high blood pressure, etc.), the gastronomical system (ulcer, colitis, acid stomach), the structural/skeletal system (back and neck pain) and the immune system (colds, flu, etc.).

How do we achieve balance? There are a variety of strategies for self-care: meditation, taking regular time out (daily walks, weekly recreational activities, yearly vacations, sabbaticals), support systems, physical exercise, proper diet,

psychotherapy, time management, and assertiveness training, among others, need to be considered. All of these hold important possibilities. The key, of course, is to *be intentional*. Balance in life will not be achieved if Swenson notes, after spending a decade in research, that one contemporary phenomenon impressed him as being responsible for more pain than he would ever have imagined. *It was the absence of margin in people's lives. Margin*, according to Swenson, is related to our reserves and *is best defined as the space between our load and our limits*. Margin and overload are opposites. Yet, he points out, overload is almost a valued way of life in our American society. Maximizing everything has, of course, become the American way. We push the limits as far as possible. We spend 10% more than we have — whether it be money, time, or energy. We work hard, spend hard, entertain hard, vacation hard, and crash hard.

Just think what a 10% margin might mean. (O.K., be reasonable, aim for something less than that if you must, but be sure it is a margin in the right direction.) If we intentionally designed a plan to establish reserves in terms of time and energy, it could mean so much in the way we might respond to life's possibilities. The trick in establishing margins is in being able to identify the non-essentials which drain our time and energy and realizing that we simply cannot do it all! Then, if we found ourselves challenged by something exciting, we would no longer have to add it to an already overloaded schedule with depleted energy. By the same token, as parish pastors, the unexpected calls from folks who need us would be received and responded to with a much different feeling and, certainly, more energy and enthusiasm. Instead, no matter how much we want to be there for those in need, we frequently are so stretched that we discover feelings of resentment creeping into our pastoral care. On the other hand, (challenge me if I'm wrong) *we tend to feel guilty if we find ourselves with time to spare*. The whole concept of margin seems, somehow, too selfish and self-serving. By what authority do we claim that space? Do we have any models?

it is only an after thought. Or if it becomes something we try "after the fact." Dr. Swenson offered a suggestion which has intrigued me. He offers the concept of *margin*.

Look to the Master, if you will. Swenson points out that Jesus never seemed to be in a hurry. The scriptures never mention him running. There is no indication that he worked 24-hour ministry days. He went to sleep at night without having healed every disease in Israel — and he apparently slept well. Neither did he visit all in need nor teach all in need. What is this implying? *It affirms that Jesus knew what it meant to be human. Jesus knew what it meant to have limits. Jesus knew what it meant to prioritize and balance in light of those limits and how to focus on the truly important.* You might be well served to consider some of the times when Jesus demonstrated good self-care habits. See, for example, Mark 3:7; Luke 5:15; 6:12; 9:10; Matthew 14:22.

Eugene H. Peterson, in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*, points in the direction of using the appointment book as an effective tool for setting margins. Time can be blocked out, of course, for the truly important (*somewhat marginal*) activities such as meditation and prayer, reading, time with spouse and family, hobbies, and so forth. I'm wondering if we can't also block out *open space* which would truly provide the margin Swenson is referring to. Then the appointment book can also be referred to helpfully in responding to yet another request for your time and attention: "I'm sorry, my calendar won't permit it." Don't you dare let guilty feelings sabotage this important means for preserving your energy and enthusiasm for your ministry!

Perhaps, as pastors and church leaders, we can model something for the rest of society. The disease of overload is widespread across society, as we've already noted. If our people find us rested and responsive to their needs with renewed energy and enthusiasm, they may want to know the secret. *The goal of setting margins is not to limit your effectiveness in ministry by shortening*

your response time. Rather it is to strengthen your ministry because of the possibility of available time and renewed energy for the things that matter most. Give it a try!

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