

An In-Situation Review of *Flourishing in Ministry* by First Call Pastors

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Matt Bloom's research and findings, published in his book *Flourishing in Ministry*, provide a framework for clergy of all levels of experience. With it, they are able to carefully analyze their situation and identify areas needing attention or cultivation for wellbeing and flourishing to occur. All pastors want to develop the skills and strategies needed to be confident and competent for many years to come. This can be even more challenging for relatively new pastors as they are also working to bridge the gap between classroom learning and what they encounter every day in their communities. At times, flourishing can seem like an unattainable goal, and yet Bloom provides concrete steps for a clergy person to take to make it possible.

Early on in the book, Bloom shares that there are sixty-four skills that clergy need and that they are often expected to be experts in each.¹ Since the book has a 2019 copyright, this number may have increased because many clergy learned additional skills to produce and edit online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most clergy realize there are many skills they

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should have and even more that parishioners and others assume and encourage them to know. It's a tough reality check seeing that number in print along with job analysis expert Richard DeShon's quote: "It is almost inconceivable to imagine that a single person could be uniformly high on the sixty-four distinct knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics."²

This may be why some clergy would love the following statement to be true, "Most days should end well, not end with exhaustion."³ Too often, the reality is the exact opposite. Most days, or too many days, end in exhaustion, especially when you are a solo pastor in a small rural church with an older congregation.

Bloom suggests decreasing the workload of the pastor by one third, which sounds lovely but can be a challenge based on resources, such as being able to financially afford more hours for a secretary or finding someone with the skills and schedule to truly make a difference.⁴

Being your authentic self can also make a difference in flourishing, in ministry, and in life. Bloom dedicates a whole chapter to authenticity and states, "Research is emerging that shows how authenticity can create the kind of humility that leads to both effective pastoral leadership and flourishing."⁵

One of our group members shares: "Being authentic can be a big challenge when your authentic self is still a struggle for many to understand and accept. This is especially true for BIPOC, queer, and/or trans leaders seeking their first calls in ordained ministry or even navigating the credentialing process. Unfortunately, they often need to compromise their beliefs or diminish their authenticity in order to be ordained. The concession made to jump through the hoops to fulfill their vocational calling doesn't just go away once ordination happens. Finding a support network of clergy in similar situations and circumstances can provide the respite and rejuvenation needed to continue the journey."

Another important concept that is also often overlooked is daily well-being, which Bloom talks about in chapter 1. This is when a person has more positive feelings than negative ones over the course of a day. As clergy, we must remember that we are not just one thing. We are not just pastors. We are also family members and friends. We must balance the soil of our complete lives for our overall wellbeing and to be able to flourish in ministry. Josh writes,

What keeps me from feeling like I am fully flourishing in ministry is trying to balance my responsibilities as a pastor and my personal life. I struggle to find time and headspace for my own wellbeing. Usually, I spend my free time doing chores like laundry and yard work—important things, but not necessarily things that fill me with positive feelings. I should be more intentional in my scheduling. Lately, I've been spending some time each morning with no agenda, just a book and some coffee. It's made a big difference to confront daily anxiety with a moment of peace and calm!

Too often, we and others think that once we are ordained, we have been planted permanently as pastor. Bloom says this in chapter 4, noting there are very few times in which pastors feel “off the clock.” He suggests pastors do small things like take a walk outside or read a book for leisure. These are things that may make pastors happy and tip the scales on any lingering stress and anxiety.

My wife wishes I [Josh] was more conscious of my time. She works long hours as a nurse, and there are only a few hours each day in which our paths cross. Unfortunately, if I don't actively write her name in my calendar, then we could go a week without seeing one another.

Personal relationships need tending as much as pastoral relationships. Tending to the soil of your life is a must as well.

Meaningful relationships help one thrive and flourish. In a career that is so social and people-oriented, it can be difficult to distinguish between parishioners and friends, colleagues, mentors, etc. In chapter 8, Bloom talks about having backstage partners such as fellow pastors to offer advice and affirmation. They empathize with you and challenge you. That is another area of personal life to nurture.

I [Josh] realize that the times that I've had backstage partners to lean on, I've been able to learn, grow, and feel confident in my pastoral identity. When I've been more isolated, I've felt rigid and unfulfilled.

Having people help till the soil, clear out the thorns and weeds that surround you, and bring you water on a dry day will help you survive, thrive, and hopefully flourish.

Bloom makes it clear: No matter what stage of ministry you are in, you will experience a variety of challenges. For clergy early in their careers, especially those flung far from their established support systems, it may take extra time, energy, and effort to develop the practices and habits Bloom documents for flourishing to occur.

NOTES

- 1 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 9.
- 2 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 9.
- 3 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 27.
- 4 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 27.
- 5 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 35.