

# **Top Ten Reasons Why Your Pastor Needs a Break**

(A Special Message for Clerks of Sessions and Elders)  
By Ryan Landio

Hello! This is a special message just for you, the wonderful clerks of sessions, boards, and elders out there. It's very simple: please, encourage your pastor to take a break. They are probably reading this right now thinking they don't really need one, so I am taking this opportunity to speak directly to you because you have worked together for years now and are in a great position to help them understand the value of their grounded presence.

So, in order to help you do that, here is a TOP TEN LIST OF REASONS why your pastor very likely needs a break right now.

I invite you each to share this list with your pastor as a way of showing them that you see them and the work they are doing, and that for all these reasons and more they should find a way to take a break.

1. **THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF BEING A HUMAN LEADER IN A CRISIS:** Those anxieties we are all feeling? Those symptoms of depression that overwhelm you whenever you see the news? By virtue of our shared humanity, your pastor has them too. Preexisting conditions we may have been managing quietly and out of notice are now an amplified struggle. Very often in difficult situations, leaders go into "emergency mode" where we put our humanity aside and take care of everyone else's needs before our own. Pastors want to do well, and they want to be seen doing well. Furthermore, there is research that one of the heaviest sources of anxiety for all people is comparing ourselves to others: when pastors see that cool thing other pastors are doing, it adds to the fear that they aren't doing enough when the truth is they are doing all that they can. Not to mention the sleepless nights your pastor has about your wellbeing and safety and those most vulnerable in your congregation (And yes, your pastor loses sleep over you.)
2. **CARRYING EVERYONE ELSE'S ANXIETY:** One of the blessings of having a pastor is being able to have someone who can be in solidarity with us through life's highest highs and lowest lows. Pastors have received self-differentiation training and a battery of tests in order to ensure they are able to maintain their sense of self through carrying the emotional energy of others. At the same time, pastors usually have high levels of empathy and are very sensitive to emotional burdens of those around us. However, at this time, when so many in our congregations are ALL experiencing low lows at exactly the same time, our pastors are carrying a lot of anxiety ON TOP of their own. This can put pastors at their full emotional capacity, which can make it harder for them to be fully present with their spouses and loved ones.

3. **LEADING SUDDEN ADAPTIVE CHANGES WITH TECHNICAL CHALLENGES:**

On exceptionally short notice, this pandemic has required a plunge into new demands of adaptive and technical thinking, which require two very different kinds of headspaces. At the most simplistic, the “adaptive” are those challenges that we have never faced before that we need to create new solutions for on the fly which require listening, creativity, and coalition building. “Technical” challenges are those tasks that require specific expertise to work through, which requires training, resourcing, and the humility to refer. Your pastors have been expected to navigate a course through uncharted waters while figuring out how to do that very thing along the way. This often means doing the adaptive work of discerning what it means to be a community during a pandemic, while juggling the technical challenges of how to work a camera phone. For both adaptive and technical challenges, this means a lot of new learning, steep learning curves, and being in that uncomfortable space of the unknown. Even for those who understand these mechanics, this is hard work.

4. **DISRUPTION OF SPIRITUAL & SELF-CARE PRACTICES:** Many of us have different self-care mechanisms to help us connect with the divine and recharge our spiritual batteries. For some, it’s walks in the park, for others it’s quality time with family. For others, it’s going to a favorite coffee shop, working out at the gym, or going to the movie theater. Consider how the pandemic has disrupted so many of our beloved spiritual and self-care routines. For pastors to be able provide meaning and spiritual grounding through this pandemic, they need to be able to provide it for themselves first. This goes for the availability of Sabbath as well. Speaking of which...

5. **THE TOLL OF CONSTANT REMOTE AVAILABILITY:** When we have “regular” working hours, we have much clearer boundaries on when we focus our energies on our availability, and when we can lower our “on-call” attentiveness and give our brains the blissful rest of tuning out. Without consistent scheduling however, situated against the instant availability of a number of different technological means of communicating, this often translates into the expectation of instant access to each other far exceeding our old normal. This might look like text messages during what would otherwise be off-hours, and notifications interrupting our screens whether we are working or resting. Some of us took advantage of our driving work commutes to get ourselves in and out of working headspaces, and now we don’t have that buffer time anymore. Please don’t get me wrong—the issue is not the volume (continue contacting your pastor as you need!). The issue is the overlap, when it becomes hard to tell whether we are working from home or homing from work. Because our attention spans are always present for all things, whether parenting, taking care of bills, or taking a pastoral phone call, it can make it harder for a pastor to be fully present with any one thing. That’s exhausting.

6. **CANCELLED POST-EASTER VACATION.** Sustaining any of the above for longer than two months is especially hard, but when we are sheltering-in-place it can feel like dog-years in the way two months feel like six. Right in the middle of that time was a traditional time of rest I am not sure your pastor was able to take. I don't know about your pastor, but in my eight years of parish ministry I heavily relied on that Sunday after Easter to recuperate, gather my strength, and take a breath. Because of the pandemic, it is very likely your pastor never took that vacation. Speaking of which, when was the last time your pastor had a break from preaching?
7. **CANCELLED ANTICIPATED CONTINUING EDUCATION EVENTS:** It's not only vacation that lets us recharge. As someone who recharges his spiritual and emotional batteries through learning, conferences always give me the chance to get out of my space and into a different environment to reflect on the effectiveness of my ministry. These events are often designed to help pastors get out of their rhythm and give them renewed energy when they return with new ideas and fresh enthusiasm. Springtime is PRIME conference season, and nearly all of them were cancelled or made virtual. I myself lost four out-of-state teaching/speaking opportunities, three conferences, and a seminary reunion, all of which I was looking forward to feed my soul and reconnect me to community. That loss causes me to feel grief. Those losses weigh heavily on your pastor too.
8. **LACK OF READILY AVAILABLE SUPPORT FROM CO-LABORERS:** One of the graces I am hearing from churches everywhere is how critical it's been to have good people side by side with their pastor (six+ feet apart) with tech support, secular world expertise, and other ways you have helped your pastor through this. Our collaborations together, especially as a session, are a for-granted part of our constitutional life together. However, the pandemic has isolated pastors from their key support volunteers, and they are finding, out of necessity, that have had to carry a lot of ministry alone. That's a heavy burden, and pastors need to be reminded that they are supported and they do not need to go it alone.
9. **UNAVAILABILITY OF IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK:** Pastors are used to being able to effortlessly read the room and immediately see how their presence is landing. Because sending emails and preaching into screens doesn't give us the immediate feedback we are used to receiving, pastors have no way of measuring whether their message is getting through or not. It's much like throwing darts in the dark, which will lead pastors to work harder on multiple fronts, regardless of how effective it is, in order to better ensure some form of community connection is achieved. For example, I as a church member might not need a video stream, email, phone call, AND text message—but because pastors don't always know what your preferred way of connecting is, your pastor may be doing all of the above, just in case. Those levels of redundancy can triple a workload.

10. **PASTORS HAVE NO TRAINING OR EXPERIENCE IN THIS:** There was no course in seminary that taught how to do ministry during a pandemic. There is nothing in the Book of Order, in our Committee on Ministry Handbook, or in our living experience that could have prepared us for this particular challenge unseen since the 1918 flu pandemic. This means that your pastor has been doing ministry the likes of which has not been seen for at least four generations. This means that the skills, experience, training, networking, resourcing, and best practices have all needed to be created and learned in real time.

What can YOU do? Elders and Clerks of Session: encourage your pastor to find ways to take a break and empower them to do it. For example, consider extending a Sunday without preaching sometime this month. Pastors: since I KNOW you are listening, please feel free to share this list with your sessions. (Tell them \*I\* instructed you to send it to them and you are just following the advice of the Lead Presbyter for Transformation of Great Rivers Presbytery.) For you sessions to encourage your pastors to prioritize their self-care can be a great way to say “thank you” and “I see you” for all the work your pastor is doing!

Thank you all for being such a vital part of your church’s life and work right now.

In this together,

Ryan Landino, May 7, 2020

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