

Caring for our pastoral leaders and care-givers

The following comments have been pulled together by Pr. Tom Taylor, deputy coordinator of LDRNY for Long Island, and pastor in North Bellmore.

1. It's important for pastors to know that people may have one, some or all of the following feelings after a trauma or disaster. These are common and normal reactions to a traumatic event:

- Anger at God
- Feeling distant from God
- Withdrawal from church
- Uncharacteristic church involvement
- Sudden turn toward God
- Familiar faith practices seem empty (prayers, scriptures, hymns)
- Church rituals and sacraments seem empty
- Belief that God is powerless
- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Sense of isolation (from God, church members, clergy)
- Questioning of one's basic beliefs
- Anger at clergy
- Believing God is not in control
- Believing God doesn't care
- Belief that we have failed God

2. Pastors should never defend God. As my CPE supervisor reminded me after one of my verbatim reports: "God doesn't need a defense attorney. God needs you to listen!"

3. When words are in doubt, silence is golden, Physical presence is more important than carefully constructed theological statements.

4. Don't say "I know how you feel" if you don't. It is better to say, "I don't know how you feel; can you share with me what it is like?"

5. This may sound negative, but I've heard these things said by chaplains/clergy and they make me shudder! Pastors should never say under any circumstance: "This was God's will," "God took your loved one because

he needed an angel in heaven," "Your husband is better off in heaven with Jesus." Also, if someone makes these statements to a pastor, pastors should never correct them, I know the temptation is there but don't do it!

6. On self-care: Pastors need to know that listening to another's trauma automatically gives them secondary trauma. Some handle it better than others.

7. Have a mentor/friend who will listen, not judge, but also will be honest in reflecting back what he/she sees how you are functioning.

8. A spiritual director is as important as a therapist. Absolutely!

9. Have an interest outside of the church -- a hobby, sport, reading....etc. For me it's oil painting.

10. Writing is a powerful way to help heal. Keeping a journal or just writing feelings and reactions is very important.

11. Let family members know if you are stressed out or zoned out because of dealing with a trauma or incident. Spouses and children will automatically think it is their fault, if a pastor is moody or spaced out. I know from personal experience!

12. Keep a sense of humor, where appropriate, of course! It is a lifesaver.

If you feel you are suffering from burn out, contact Pr. Tom Taylor at tom@LDRNY.org. He may have some extra tips and suggestions for you.