



Reflections on Well-Being in Ministry

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There is an apparent growing search for wellness and a reassessment of work/life balance that has been re-sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic. This search has, of course, been going on for decades, and many denominations have asked how they might help ministers thrive or flourish and not burn out. Within my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our Board of Pensions and now Portico Benefit Services have provided for pastors and church professionals great programs with a variety of incentives to encourage practices of wellness. I have benefited from the programs and resources promoting mindfulness about exercise, diet, sleep, social and emotional health, and financial and vocational stability. But I confess I was slow to apply myself to them, and when I first heard of the Wholeness Wheel of Spiritual Well-Being,¹ I did not react too well to it. Perhaps it was the setting, the timing in my career, the presenter, or even the conspiracy of events in my congregational context, but I heard it as another set of assignments or measures I needed to add—another set of tasks piled on top

¹ Created by the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee on Ministerial Health and Wellness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in 1997. <https://porticobenefits.org/resources/the-wholeness-wheel/>.

Often the term “well-being” automatically leads people to a consideration of their physical, social, and financial status. These are important elements, but for Christian leaders, there is a much deeper element to the term, one that transcends these considerations toward a sense of spiritual or religious well-being that is crucial to ministry.

of too many other demands. I was wrong. As I found my path toward a sustainable balance in ministry, I rediscovered the Wholeness Wheel with new eyes and attended to the way the core identity, what they call “In Baptism—a New Creation in Christ,” radiates out to each of the six aspects of well-being. I realized that what I found to be true for myself was well described by this holistic wheel, and had I seen that sooner, perhaps I would have sooner found the balance I needed. With my apologies to the many dedicated and wise practitioners who created the concept of the Wholeness Wheel and to those who have been promoting clergy wellness—you have done great work—in these pages let me share with you how my journey has brought me to a deep and convergent appreciation of the heart of the matter in our well-being, which you have described so well: that our core identity in the grace of God remains the key to wholeness and well-being.

Well-being for me is not the same as being well. When I feel well—that is, when I feel I am in a state of being reasonably healthy, or that things in my life are working well—I can also realize a state of well-being. But that sense of well-being is not dependent upon my health alone. I am convinced that well-being is deeper and more lasting than that. When I entered pastoral ministry, I experienced for the first time the privilege of kitchen table conversations with members of my community and congregation for whom health was severely challenged by chronic, serious, and even terminal conditions and disease. And yet those I had come to comfort with sacramental presence and prayer sometimes embodied and even exuded a peace within themselves in such manner that the phrase we hear quoted from Paul, “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil 4:7), was manifested before my eyes. Like so many clergy colleagues, on occasion I have had a near mystical feeling while visiting in a hospice setting of being in the numinous presence of a person so touched by God that they defy human categories. In my pastoral ministry, I have seen in these individuals what Paul describes as “our inner nature . . . being renewed day by day,” and how affliction itself is put in perspective, described by Paul as “momentary” compared to the prevailing presence of God (2 Cor 4:16, 17). The person I was visiting seemed to be listening to a voice, to words of comfort, and indeed experiencing assurances before and beyond my pastoral visit. Those moments made deep impressions on me and shaped my own grasp of well-being. I would call that well-being in its very core, in its most radical sense, which is rich and significant.

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In similar manner, I’d say that well-being is not equal to having all my financial ducks in order, my familial relationships working, or even everything running smoothly in the congregation. I seek and trust in a sense of well-being that puts these concerns in perspective. I seek a well-being that makes all other things

ephemeral in contrast. I have not always felt that well-being in myself; sometimes it seemed beyond grasp, more of a hope or trust. Although there have been occasions when the sense of it has been palpably present, in all honesty, well-being has not always been what I sought. Now in retirement and reflecting on my years serving as a pastor, I know there were times when the motivating force in my life was the drive to fit the conventional image of the good pastor, or when worry over synodical guidelines and anxiousness over congregational expectations occupied the forefront of my concentration and seemed to define me more closely. During that time, I know I was effective and certainly approached my work with energy and joy. And in some measure ego, drive, and pride in work, along with seeking to maintain standards, are excellent things. But they are not the heart of the matter.

At worship recently on the fourth Sunday in the Epiphany season, our pastor opened the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12) for us and made the point that these statements of blessing from Jesus are much more than “be-happy-attitudes.” He said they were not attitudes at all, but rather a gift of understanding the abiding presence and peace of God, the belonging and the esteem of God. The people listening to Jesus may not have comprehended the blessing through their outward experiences of life. Their blessing was not an accomplishment of doing. It was a gift; it was grace for them simply to receive. That resonated deeply for me as well-being. That is well-being that is durable and enduring, no matter what—and especially so amid situations and conditions that would seem to preclude a sense of well-being. That morning we also sang “When Peace like a River” (ELW 785), and we proclaimed the truth that “whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.” When we sing this hymn, we know that our well-being is about much more than health in physical or financial terms or even balance between work and rest. We know a wellness that is capable of carrying us through tough times. But I think we approach too many things with that “if-then” equation. If only I can work harder, or smarter, or if I can achieve balance, or if I use my vacation and study time better, then I will have spiritual well-being. But the problem there is the “I.”

I remember a pastoral visit years ago at the University of Minnesota hospital when the sense of wellness transcended the momentary illness that brought this man in for treatment. He shared his trust in God with me, and as we prayed, he hummed his responses to the petitions for strength, grace, and healing. Afterward he declared, “It is good, Pastor, God is here.” He spoke it with what felt to me to be a grateful heart. Not grateful that I was there and had broken the monotony of his hospital stay, but from his confidence that God was there, and therefore to God he gave gratitude. Nothing had changed in his diagnosis and prognosis by my visit, but he never lost that sense of “God-with-him,” and he emanated a well-being that was infectious. Indeed I was “infected” and I had a sense of elation that carried me forward for hours. That moment was memorable for me; it is what Ralph Waldo Emerson would have called an “hour of authority,” for it remained with me as a testimony of faith that mattered and shaped a young pastor, nurturing me as much as or more than the person I thought I had come to nurture. And the experience

engendered in me deep gratitude for the privilege of the pastoral role I had been given and gratitude to God for the call which led me to that moment and many similar moments in ministry. I share this pastoral snapshot because of the way these duties became my delights, little epiphanies on the journey, and how being aware of these glimpses of well-being was doing something significant for me.

For me, comfort and contentment come from connection and belonging—the attachment to the greater, the significant other of God—and that is where I find my core identity as child of God. I found this sense of belonging and attachment continually reaffirmed in the simple pastoral acts, the host of people I have served, and the Word we shared in those times. Conversely, this comfort and contentment could be eroded by the very same, when the performance of such pastoral acts became the goal, when the pace of work overshadowed the moment of prayer, and that can easily happen. I found, however, that the sense of belonging fosters identity that remains amid trials and troubles. Connection gives me a handhold of sorts when I feel pushed off balance. Connection to spouse, family, group, friends, place all have this power. And for the Christian, looking for and experiencing connection in Christ and with the faith community provides the affirming place of grace in which to belong. Such belonging and assurance of connection then provide gratitude, which I believe is not only symptomatic of a deep wellness, but also becomes a positive-feedback loop of increasing wellness. Touched by the surprising depth of grace, the Christian is able to experience life as “a eucharistic action, a life of thanksgiving in a community of grace.”² Gratitude reorients one’s perspective of life. Gratitude becomes good medicine for people, communities, and also the earth. Finding—or, more properly, experiencing—the belonging in God which results in a life of gratitude is a radical idea in a consumerist society or a merit-based culture. Contentment is a radical proposition. Gratitude practice increases the vision of grateful appreciation. Many claim that gratitude relieves stress and improves physical and mental health. To be aware of the whole giftedness of creation and the human family and the nonhuman families into which we are born spills over into a feeling of inner wealth and well-being. To be grateful for so many things is indeed good medicine. Gratitude as the starting place protects one from the dis-ease of seeing all of life from a lens of earning, achieving, acquiring, as if the individual makes all things so. Gratitude points back to the Giver, the one in whom we find our belonging.

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² Harold H. Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 272.

My concern, born partially from personal experience, is that if we are chasing after a feeling of being well, the feeling of having done well, the affirmation of performing well in order to achieve well-being, we are in danger of missing the mark. If we approach our life and work from a deficit model of achieving and acquiring, in fact many of us will become a prisoner to a metric of some other's measure. If we confuse our vocation with our doing, then we are focusing on the metrics of life, the measurements of accomplishing. Those measurements may be important in many things, but they are not the judge of well-being. I cannot disparage metrics and standards for the good purpose they serve when in proper perspective. We seek precision and effectiveness in every field and craft. Throughout my career I made sure I got to church early to practice the liturgy for the season or day and run through the sermon a couple more times. Our congregations deserve our best effort. Every field has its necessary and good benchmarks of excellence and goodness. We hone our skills to proclaim the grace of God; we learn to listen deeply so that we may provide sound pastoral care; we study so that we can teach with discernment what is law and what is gospel. It takes work. And indeed we always receive affirmation when we make the grade. I have felt so affirmed on a Sunday when someone has said, "Well done!" I have kept a file of letters of appreciation. There were days when affirmations came close to giving me a sense of euphoria. But that was not well-being at its core. So while I acknowledge and promote the importance of doing our best and striving for better, knowing that such efforts will make us all better servants of the Word, I would never want the destination of a self-manufactured well-being to become some placebo effect that results in an endless cycle of empty striving. I am convinced, passionate even, that we must not inflate the doing to greater than the gift of grace, nor deflate the blessing to something graspable, something we can do on our own. Chasing the good feelings at the periphery of doing well has the potential danger of burnout.

Many times in my pastoral career, I have reflected on early advice my father passed along in the form of numerous articles from the 1960s to the 1980s, detailing the prevalence and concerns about clergy burnout. I was fresh out of seminary (1986) and excited to be in a congregation; therefore his advice to me was a bit surprising, as burnout was far from my worry at that time. But one piece stuck with me: Joseph Sittler's 1961 lecture titled "Maceration of the Minister."³ I recommend it to all. In it Sittler expressed regret and disappointment when visiting former theological students in their pastoral office; he saw that they had become overwhelmed by details of their office and facility that seemed incongruent with the *basileia tou Theou* (the kingdom of God), which they had been prepared to proclaim. These servants of the Word were overcome and distracted from the more theological or pastoral task of theological reflection by the physical and financial concerns of "programs" and a "plant" and not the needs of a church. He described the pastor's commentaries and biblical resources buried under asphalt

³ Joseph Sittler, "Maceration of the Minister," in *The Ecology of Faith: The New Situation in Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), 76-88.

samples, blueprints, and a plumber's estimate. Now let's be honest, everyone who has worked in a church office knows that more is required than preparation for the Sunday service. And we might say that so many things dealing with the physical and financial do support and drive the worship life of the church. Yet we understand Sittler's point. There are many details vying for priority. There are numerous things that will cause friction to the point that they become the source of the fire that burns clergy out. And the reality is that these other duties cannot be ignored nor dismissed. Nevertheless, I return to my own sense of well-being as nurtured not by these other things but by the Word that sustains. Even though I have felt a sense of personal satisfaction and even pride in previous congregations when my administrative ability may have been a boon to effective improvements to accessibility, communication, or renewable energy, which are issues very important to me, those duties did not feed my soul. These other practices and responsibilities might fall within specific gifts that each of us has and that we find true delight in accomplishing. But though we find a measure of fulfillment and pride, maybe an accolade or two at the skill of our performance, there can be a price paid as energy, time, and the minister themselves are "under the chopper," or "macerated," as Sittler called it. That is why the return to the foundation of my calling, "the calling to which you have been called" (Eph 4:1)—being in Christ—was always essential when I felt that pressure and stress. The originating call to have this mind among you precedes the specific call to particular action and orients all other distractions so that we may serve while maintaining focus "on the one thing needful" (Luke 10:42). In particular, it has been the Word shared that has been my foundation of well-being and has been able to bring me to an inner sense of balance, perspective, and sustenance for the long haul.

A pastoral practice that became hugely beneficial in maintaining the focus on the centrality of the Word for my sense of well-being was recommended during my senior year at seminary. In a gathering of seniors sharing case studies from our internships, our professor made the recommendation that we make full use of the weekly worship texts. His advice was to use the appointed texts in as many of the visits and meetings as possible during the week prior to the Sunday in which the texts would be heard read and proclaimed. His reason for the practice was to find how the texts applied to each situation, and also to hear the response of the congregation members. It took me years before I made this my regular practice. At first, I had thought such a practice would limit my creativity in applying a greater variety of texts. I discovered, to the contrary, that my creativity was further challenged in a good way and that, rather than limiting my repertoire of biblical application, the practice expanded it. Moreover, the appointed texts provided a structure that always pointed back to the worship life of the community of sisters and brothers and all to whom the hospitalized or homebound one was connected and might be separate from at the time. Additionally, it was a workshop for me to be continuously considering the place the appointed texts occupied and find the other interpretive texts I needed. Members of the congregation shared their interpretations with me and revealed God's work within their lives.

I believe this practice factored strongly into my sense of well-being as a pastor. It certainly became a wonderful way to prepare earlier for the Sunday proclamation. The practice of fully using the Sunday texts became incorporated into an early-morning *lectio divina*; into three text studies per week, one with local clergy, two with congregational members; into a gathering for communion at our local care center; and into my communion visits with the hospitalized or homebound. During the hiatus from in-person gatherings due to Covid-19, we added a daily email reflection on a Sunday text and called it *Daily Manna*. I certainly don't mean to add a burdensome checklist to already busy schedules but, rather, to share that for me, all of these repeated applications of the Sunday texts became a discipline of dwelling in the Word that nurtured me, revealing the Word that abides in us all. I am sure you have experienced the same or similar in being fed and nurtured by the Word. I find it common in clergy conversations as well in conversations with the people we serve that the Word delivers the promise of the presence we seek. It puts me in mind of a refrain from Dr. Harry Wendt in his Bible study course *Crossways*: "The Word works, but you have to work the Word." This process brought me back to listening to the voice at the center, appreciating the prevailing presence of God, recognizing my core identity as baptized in Christ, which brought me back to grace, back to gratitude, and back to well-being.

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There is a risk in this churchly vocation. The mistake is to believe that the minister is responsible for every real or imagined complaint until burnout is inevitable. The end result is a minister who is not well, and a community which may not be well either, having lost its own sense of fulfilling its own calling to respond to the gospel in the exercise of gifts particular to itself. When we identify the ministerial vocation too closely to the doing of ministry, we fall victim to the metrics of achieving. Likewise, the weakness of seeking wellness by working harder on the outer definitions of what currently constitutes a well-balanced life, whether that is portrayed as a checklist or a wheel or any other image or metaphor for achieving inner peace or self-satisfaction, is the overattention given to the multiple outer aspects of wellness without a strong-enough emphasis on the hub of the wheel. To focus on the outer manifestations could result in a preoccupation with details and doing, maybe even a faith in a Pelagian system of self-rescue, a DIY of well-being. I do not see that as a contradiction, but rather the acknowledgment that the wheel cannot function without the hub. And that hub is precisely the focus of the ELCA's and Portico's Wholeness Wheel. There are many areas of wellness the minister should pursue; however, absolutely essential is to attend to—that is, to listen to—the voice at the center, which is the calling to which we have been called. That attention will affirm the identity and belongingness of the minister. Sustained

by their identity in Christ, the minister can better overcome the negations experienced at the edges where a minister's life and work encounter the obstacles lurking in the daily and weekly grind. Many cannot claim wellness in all of the aspects that constitute a thriving life; studies, in fact, reveal a shockingly small percentage of individuals who do make that claim.⁴ But I am convinced, and it is a tenet of my trust in God, that even in momentary or longer failures, even in regret, even in deepest woe, attending to the center of wellness and the experience of grace in Christ reveals a presence that prevails, no matter what, and meets the minister wherever they are. It is then more likely that the minister will be renewed and their heart can sing, "It is well, it is well with my soul." For our core identity in the grace of God remains the key to wholeness and well-being. ☩

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⁴Tom Rath and Jim Harter, "Five Essential Elements of Well-Being," *Gallup*, May 4, 2010, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/237020/five-essential-elements.aspx>.