

Perceptions of Matt Bloom's *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing*

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The publication of Matt Bloom's *Flourishing in Ministry*¹ has garnered well-deserved attention for its social scientific approach to the question of what constitutes clergy wellbeing and how it can be nurtured. Bloom brings to this book over two decades of researching wellbeing in workplace contexts. The results of Bloom and his team's work is also available at <https://wellbeing.nd.edu/flourishing-in-ministry/>.

In conversation with each other, we expressed deep appreciation for Bloom's work but also wondered how persons at different stages in ministry would perceive his findings. To get at this question we each committed to bring together a particular group representing a stage in ministry. Jennifer Davis (Yale Divinity School) gathered a group of third-year divinity students. Tim Coltvet (Luther Theological Seminary) recruited a group of pastors serving in their first call. Matthew Floding (Duke Divinity School) identified two veteran pastors, so designated because they had completed D.Min. degrees. We served as conveners of these groups that first read and

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discussed *Flourishing in Ministry*. Each group was then asked to write an in-situation review with an accent on their experience or perception of the book's affirmations. Their three reviews follow this introductory article.

The groups met over several months to read and discuss Bloom's book. Each then contributed a written statement of how they experienced the findings and suggestions for "wise 'small step' wellbeing practices."² The nearly exhausting pandemic pace of ministry and divinity school accompanied each on their community experience of the book. We believe it served to heighten the interest in the topics of flourishing and wellbeing.

The third-year divinity school students were deeply appreciative of the research method that allowed for a "bird's-eye view" of ministry experiences that impacted flourishing. They specifically valued the practical pieces of Bloom's writing, like the importance of social support, theological alignment, and having a system of meaning. The use of the image of a "backstage" support system resonated, and one student remarked, "I believe social support is a topic that is often discussed but not implemented until it is too late."

However, reading the book posed many new questions for the seminarians, such as, What happens when our congregations are politically divided, as is so often the case now? Does privilege play a role in which some would-be pastors are able to find jobs that align with their theology while others cannot?

Pastors serving in their first call communicated clearly that they were in the middle of struggling with the concepts that Bloom identifies. At the same time, they expressed an insatiable desire to open themselves to practices for flourishing in ministry. First calls in ministry, as we know, are challenging. Rather than having the safety net of being a learner in context—as one's seminary experience provides—now, the full weight of pastoral responsibility and authority is real. Early in the book, Bloom alludes to data that exposes the vulnerable nature of life in the early years of ministry, heightening our awareness that the stakes are very high.³ Some ministers will find a way forward with practices that sustain them over time, while others may choose an early transition out of ministry or, worse yet, burn out altogether.

This serious tone in chapter 1 frames the entirety of the book and gives us reason to have concern for pastors in their early years.⁴ Reading deeper into the work teaches us that it is essential that new pastors have the full

complement of the research-based recommendations: wise guides, similar others, colleague groups, and the like.

What we can all appreciate about the first-call pastors in this essay is their raw honesty as to the enormity of the ministry tasks at hand. As each of these pastors express their sometimes exhausting, sometimes energizing ministries, we can see signs of “pastors in formation.” Talented and called individuals such as these pastors need to work intentionally and thoughtfully towards a flourishing present and future. Perhaps they are not there yet, but their commitment to finding balance and stability coupled with faithfulness and authenticity seem to be in sync with Bloom’s findings.

A note on authenticity should be underlined here as well. For ministers who travel into public ministry spaces with nondominant or minoritized identities, we must heed the words of one of the first-call pastors. Being authentic means being one’s full self. But, as this pastor relates, this very identity can (and has) run up against age-old arguments and debates within communities that do not affirm particular ministers. This, in fact, can be an added burden that falls squarely upon the shoulders of the minister themselves and compounds the already tangled web of ministry demands. In this case, finding flourishing will necessitate proper alignment between the ministry site and the minister.

Our veteran pastors affirm Bloom’s categories for flourishing, particularly alignment and authenticity. In an interesting way that relates to church polity, they also especially affirm the need for “connectedness with others.” Rev. Augustine notes that participating in an itinerancy system underscores the value of connectedness and is grateful to Bloom for calling readers to attend to this feature of flourishing. Rev. Lines has been serving at his congregation for over a decade. The fruit of deeper relational connections has led to a greater sense of ministering from his authentic self and empowering others to minister in areas of “less energy and—let’s be honest—less talent.” Their shared witness to the value of Bloom’s work in their current ministries is inspiring.

We are grateful for the willingness of these good colleagues in ministry to undertake this project amidst their very full lives. We also are grateful that, having encountered Bloom in a community reading, they feel empowered to take Bloom’s “wise small steps.” We pray that *all* ministers may flourish.

NOTES

- 1 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019) .
- 2 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 103.
- 3 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 18.
- 4 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 6–7.