

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

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Caleb is from the Midwest. Jay is from the South. Caleb serves a congregation on the West Coast, Jay on the East Coast. Caleb's congregation is predominantly White, and Jay's is predominantly Black. In Caleb's call process, clergy interview with the congregation before a vote to select the senior minister. In Jay's Methodist itinerancy, a bishop makes clergy assignments as the congregation waits to see who their pastor will be. The minister prays for a receptive congregation.

We each have varied experiences that influence who we are. Both of us have earned four academic degrees, including the doctor of ministry, and we both have served multiple congregations in pastoral ministry. The rich diversity of our perspectives influences our interpretation of Matt Bloom's *Flourishing in Ministry* and how we view the ultimate goal of clergy wellbeing as requisite to flourishing!

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OUR INTERPRETATION AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

I (Jay) grew up in the church, with the cultural influences of being African American in the Deep South. My pathway to ordained ministry was a combination of exploration and thunderous calls.¹ I was called to a career in social justice, initially as a lawyer, then as a minister. During a legal career that also included serving in public office, I experienced the thunderous call Bloom describes, but in a much more discerning and contemplative fashion. Indeed, "Many pastors who experienced a thunderous call were also discerners, and those pastors usually found their way to fruitful ministry."²

Bloom speaks to several nuances that I find deeply moving, especially as a second-career minister, given my pathway to ministry. He regards "thriving" as a dimension of wellbeing that includes, at least, (1) the presence of a meaning/value system, (2) a sense of contributing toward goals related to that value system, and (3) experiencing connectedness with others, especially those with whom we share common beliefs and values.³ Inasmuch as I feel as though I am "thriving" at St. Joseph, especially because my social justice-oriented service in ordained ministry aligns with my initial calling to social justice work as a lawyer, the itinerancy of Methodism allows me to appreciate that Bloom's third element, connectedness with others, cannot be overstated.

Of the four congregations I have served (from rural parts of Louisiana, to downtown New Orleans, to St. Joseph in Durham, North Carolina), I see a connection with others as especially important because in my current assignment I enjoy "authenticity." As Bloom describes, "Authenticity does not mean [people] saying or doing whatever they want whenever they want, but rather it means being able to act and behave in ways that are more consistent with their true selves."⁴ In my appreciating the three requisites of "thriving," the third is most important for me because I bring my entire self to work.

Considering the sense of belonging I currently enjoy, I believe Bloom is correct that "strong, positive relationships between pastors and members of the church they serve is one of the single most important causes of flourishing."⁵ Moreover, because of the natural relationship between connecting with others and authenticity, I also appreciate support from "similar others," or other pastors who are similarly situated and with whom I

share common values.⁶ Candidly, however, to allow vulnerability, my similar others are usually from other denominations.

I (Caleb) grew up in the church and experienced the path to ministry that Bloom calls the “discernment path,” which is marked by a “process of self-discovery, mentorship, imagining possible futures, and an eventual and often powerful acknowledgment of the pastoral call.”⁷ Even so, when I left seminary the task of ministry felt a bit daunting. I was still trying to discern my gifts, I continued to hear that the trajectory of the church was in gradual decline, and there was the nagging narrative that a significant number of clergy would not make it past the five-year mark. What hopeful news for someone who has spent most of their life preparing for a call!

Over time, I have settled into my calling, and I have now been serving for over a decade. As I have become more grounded in ministry, I have discovered the resilience that Bloom describes in chapter 2. I have found a congregation that allows me to be my authentic self while embracing my gifts and letting go of those areas in which I have less energy and—let’s be honest—talent. Bloom says that congregations need to “create reasonable workloads for their pastors” and “find a way to alleviate or end at least one-third of their pastor’s duties.”⁸ For me, both have been possible, in large part because of clear communication with the congregation about my needs, finding competent staff whose gifts complement my own, and empowering lay people to do a great deal of work in the congregation.

I have one designated meeting night per week, and I spend most nights at home with my family. I have a team of lay volunteers who serve as our primary conduit for congregational care so that I’m not “on call.” This has allowed me to plan my days without the worry of having to drop everything in my personal life for church work. I feel excited at the end of most days about what is going on in ministry.

Bloom’s analysis fits very well with what I have experienced to be true in nurturing my own wellbeing. Cultivating a support system, enforcing firm boundaries, developing healthy habits, enabling capable lay leaders, and embracing my gifts while acknowledging my own shortcomings have helped me to find sustained joy in ministry, and I am grateful.

CONCLUSION

Although we serve in different denominations and have had different paths to ministry, we have both found great joy in serving God through congregational ministry. Congregations that allow us to be authentic and utilize our gifts have been key to our flourishing. We currently serve in roles where we can pursue our passion for ministry while our congregations support us in the work.

Many of Bloom's suggestions for flourishing may seem idealistic if one is new to ministry or navigating a call that is a poor fit, but we believe that they are possible with firm boundary-setting and clarity of call. If seminaries, denominations, and congregations spent more time creating flourishing environments, we might just find that we would have lower levels of burnout and higher levels of satisfaction in sustained ministry. May it be so.

NOTES

- 1 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 62–65.
- 2 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 64.
- 3 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 43.
- 4 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 30–31.
- 5 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 82.
- 6 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 85–87.
- 7 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 56.
- 8 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 27.