Recovery Experiences for Ministry: When Quality and Quantity Matter

William B. Kincaid

Matt Bloom and his colleagues make a timely and potentially transformative gift to the church and its leaders by providing pastors with a hopeful vision. After all, who would not want to "flourish in ministry"? At the same time, the searing honesty of their data and interpretation likely will cause some to pause before following their calling and interrogate their vocation even more thoroughly as they consider such a challenging role and arena.

Bloom reminds us that flourishing in ministry cannot happen apart from recovery from ministry. We cannot give ourselves over to the work of ministry, with all its joy and vulnerability, while carefully sidestepping emotional bruises, spiritual deserts, and conflicted situations. Flourishing in ministry does not occur in a vacuum. Some paths may offer kinder features and softer landings due to privilege, connections, and various systemic dynamics, but every path holds challenges, disappointments, and profound uncertainties.

The term "recovery" does not appear in Bloom's book *Flourishing in Ministry*,[1] but it can be found in his earlier work, notably his essay capturing the emerging insights from early stages of his research.[2] I first heard Bloom talk in depth about recovery experiences in ministry at a presentation to

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ministry students at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. While the term *restorative niche* lends a poetic flair to valuable wisdom, I have continued to find recovery to be a helpful framework when working with ministry students and new pastors. Both groups report that the concept rings true to what they have observed and experienced.

The danger of using the framework of recovery, of course, can be found in any comparison to recovery programs and to anyone who is "in recovery," though students in recovery, especially those with considerable life experience, indicate that the term resonates with them. I borrow this term from Bloom to compare it more to a physical injury or ailment from which one is typically able to heal given the time, attention, and care that accompanies such a recovery.

This essay asks three questions. From what do ministers need to recover? What types of recovery experiences renew ministers for sustainable, fruitful ministry across many seasons? And, what kinds of supervised ministry experiences and institutional investments are needed in order for recovery perspectives to be present in the formation and ongoing support of people called to serve the church?

From What Do Ministers Need to Recover?

I begin with Bloom's helpful identification of what contributes to the need for recovery in ministry. I briefly describe recognizable causes, including two that I believe call for more reflection than what Bloom offers.

First, a paradox of ministry is that the need for recovery can spring from some very enjoyable and fulfilling work. Bloom writes,

> But the very things that make pastoral work so meaningful can also make it extremely taxing. The potential for overinvestment in ministry work is high because it can be difficult for pastors to find the tipping point between positive engagement and oversacrificing, between fatigue due to a ministry job well done and exhaustion due to overinvesting.[3]

He follows up this helpful framing by noting six ministry challenges, any three of which can undermine wellbeing when they collude to exert pressure on the pastor. The list is familiar and can be summed up by describing ministry as complex, high-stakes work in an environment of surprises and rapid change.[4]

Second, the person in ministry may carry wounds and feelings of inadequacies from their life before ministry. These may eventually become sources of compassion and wisdom, but they likely will present first as awkwardness and even weakness, at least to themselves. They may struggle with frequent episodes of imposter's syndrome and try to make up for their perceived deficits by over-extending themselves and ensuring that they are at least well liked. This dynamic likely reveals some measure of neediness on the part of pastors. It also makes staying in difficult conversations very challenging because disagreement will feel like persecution. The longer this plays out, the longer the string of recovery needs will be. That said, the religious and political climate in the United States and much of the world is currently working overtime generating moments and situations that put pastors in the spotlight and keep the rest of us on edge.

Pastors, like all humans, tend to overcompensate for any uncertainty about who they are and what they should be doing. This often leads to over functioning, especially among new pastors. And, in the process, over functioning covers over wounds and inadequacies in the moment only to have them surface at the least opportune time and, often, in the least appropriate way. All of this crowds out the ever-important question for all of us, which is, "What am I learning about myself in this situation?"

Third, Bloom captures in careful and diverse ways the impact of interpersonal encounters between pastors and congregation. He writes, "While most people recover from mistreatment in one-time interactions, our sense of dignity is strongly affected by the people with whom we interact the most and those who occupy important places in our social worlds."[5] Later, he rightly observes that many pastors treat personal and professional boundaries like a high wire,[6] often because of strong and uncritical counsel from seminaries and judicatories to not cultivate friendships within the congregation. But the research is unequivocally conclusive; flourishing in ministry with all its accompanying recovery experiences depends on a communal response. Congregational awareness and support are essential.[7] In other words, our ministry context likely will serve as a source for recovery experiences as well as a source that generates the need for recovery. This poses its own challenge, especially to new pastors who are sorting out the priorities of their ministry and beginning to set patterns that likely will continue for much of their ministry careers. This paradox around the bless-

ing and challenge of relationships adds further ambiguity and exhaustion to a circumstance that already is chock-full of both.

Fourth, attempting to understand people and read situations can bring a level of frustration and fatigue beyond that of discerning appropriate, life-giving boundaries. And yet, in a posture that seems to parallel gaslighting, the needed recovery is not from meanness but from neutrality. Pastors question their own sanity and ability as a result of neutrality. Bloom sums it up this way: "Even repeated neutral treatment can be corrosive of dignity, if it is perpetrated by people from whom we properly expect to receive positive treatment."[8]

Bloom's comment strikes me as exposing the fragility of many pastors, that is, until I remember Eunice, a very gifted leader in a congregation where I served for eleven years. Eunice was not neutral on our congregation's values and mission when judged by her participation, financial support, and willingness to fulfill key roles, but she maintained a neutrality bordering on indifference when it came to my presence and leadership. Perhaps she was attempting to temper the broad, enthusiastic support for my ministry within the congregation with something of a critical eye, which is something from which I would have benefitted, but she never came forward with that constructive perspective. When Eunice consistently went out of her way to present neutrality, withholding opinions seemingly to keep me off balance, I found that corrosive to my spirit and dignity, just as Bloom describes.

Fifth, it may seem odd to discuss burnout this late in a list of recovery needs. I intentionally have delayed mentioning it, in part because of its very character. The insidious nature of burnout complicates the need for recovery in ministry. Bloom describes burnout as "a harbinger of darker things: mental breakdown, physical collapse, even self-harm."[9] That burnout can feel like and result from death by a thousand paper cuts accentuates the need for continued investigation into individual experiences and circumstances. I contend that the diagnosis of burnout often masks other realities in the pastor's life and ministry. As an example, I believe depression just as often leads to burnout as it is produced by burnout.

Sixth, and the first of two points that call for further development on Bloom's part, we in the United States are living through a contentious political time wherein almost any social media post that gets as many as three "likes" is purported to stand as truth. This environment has left all

of us with the need for significant recovery. However, Bloom seems to concede that the contentious environment is unsurmountable and unnavigable when he writes, "Values misalignment requires either that a pastor compromise his or her identity or engage in the difficult work of trying to change the theology of the church."[10] This statement stands in opposition to his later call for "mutually responsive relationships"[11] and suggests that the church cannot resist the polarizing forces of the culture. If that is the case, the path to recovery will not only be one of repetitive setbacks, it also will be one totally lacking in learning, mutuality, and the joy and fulfillment of working for good with people with whom we disagree. Joy and fulfillment provide the renewable energy for recovery. Their absence diminishes the possibility for recovery as well as for the daily wellbeing that Bloom highlights.[12]

Finally, while I acknowledge that sheer busyness can create a need for recovery, I want to challenge Bloom's assertion that pastors have little control over how they spend their time.[13] I do so knowing that the all-out scramble of the COVID-19 pandemic skews the picture greatly. I also acknowledge that some ministry contexts and realities do not afford much latitude in time allocation. And yes, I concede that Bloom is right that pastors receive insufficient guidance on prioritizing their work.

Having said all this, the great preachers Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor are still also right. Along with the great variety of pastoral roles and responsibilities comes enormous freedom in determining how a pastor will spend their time. Proctor and Taylor lament that many have not been able to bear that freedom toward a sustained focus of their time, energy, and commitments.[14] Pastors feed the monster by always saying yes. And they render undetectable what characterizes their ministry when they never say no. This creates a situation that makes recovery incredibly difficult, but responsibility falls at least equally on eager-to-please, uncertain-of-the-core-of-ministry pastors as it does on universally unrealistic expectations on the part of the congregation.

What Types of Recovery Experiences Do Pastors Need?

Ministers blend and blur their personal and professional lives to the point that they may not be able to say whether their recovery is tightly focused on a personal issue or a professional one. Bloom says that things rarely get better for the 25 percent of pastors who burn out. They often suffer

a decline in physical and mental health and experience shame and guilt. Many of them look to leave ministry. Their downward spiral is felt in every aspect of their lives.[15] It is easier to prevent burnout than to recover from it. It is easier to set good patterns early on than to attempt mid- or late-stream corrections of bad patterns. With that understanding, I am focusing on the middle 50 percent who are not burned out but may be maintaining a precarious level of wellbeing, especially given the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bloom urges us to think through our use of the term "self-care." Writing this essay while a debate about self-care rages on the print and digital pages of *Christian Century* is an interesting exercise.[16] William Willimon says we can trace the problem back to theological schools where "there's an overemphasis on self-care, keeping the Sabbath, and finding emotional support, as if that's the purpose of the church and its ministry. Better than self-care is responding to the call to care about what Christ cares about."[17] As one might imagine, many have risen to challenge this and other things that Willimon said in his exchange with Stanley Hauerwas.

While Willimon goes the extra mile in rejecting the cult of self-care for its lack of theological substance, Bloom wants us to understand that the ways ministers find renewal and maintain wellbeing depend on far more than the self. In fact, an uncritical, obsessive focus on self-care can have the unintended consequences of disconnecting pastors from their support system and of raising questions in people's minds about whether their ministers are invested fully in the life and ministry of the church.

Bloom writes, "The term 'self-care' does not draw attention to the ways we impact each other's wellness and wellbeing. We need both 'self-care' and 'other care' because we all live in ecosystems of wellbeing."[18] A community setting not only allows us relational opportunities to discover our most genuine self, it also provides an important context for pastors to live from the center of their integrated life stories outward.[19] This re-authoring of life stories allows for a recovery beyond simply being able to get back into the game and perform minimally well. It also offers both an experience of authentic presence and practice and a foretaste of wellbeing that inspires further attention and commitment to deeper dimensions of wellbeing.

However, paths to recovery differ for various reasons. Cultural, gender, racial, ethnic, financial, and geographic barriers come into play for some, while others are shielded from at least the harshest expressions of

these barriers. The three pathways to ministry[20] present an uneven set of barriers as well, especially when we consider the support systems in place over time and the balancing of other commitments for those following the "exploration" or the "thunderous calls" pathway. One's season of ministry reveals particularities about recovery. For example, new pastors face enormous challenges, but they also have a longer runway for recovery. Older pastors may have a shorter horizon for recovery but more wisdom and hard-earned confidence in their being able to navigate the challenge. While Bloom does not name this explicitly, women and men who enter ministry in the midst of seriously diminished wellbeing will face daunting challenges as they pursue meaning and resist faces of uniformity.[21]

Recovery experiences come in all shapes and sizes. I will reflect briefly on the quality of recovery experiences in ministry before moving on to what I view as one of Bloom's most important contributions, that of quantifying various aspects of wellbeing and recovery.

Bloom's imagery of the three stages of ministry—front stage, back stage, and off stage—point to a particular opportunity that many pastors do not take advantage of or enjoy. Pastors know well the front stage where the performance of ministry takes place, as well as the back stage where the preparation and nurture for ministry occur.[22] Quality recovery experiences, however, count on having and accessing an off stage.

The off stage is the week (or two!) at the beach, the long-awaited international trip, or the cabin in the snowy woods the week after Christmas Day. We plan them, wait for them, tend as best as we can to everything else along the way, and then hope we have enough emotional and physical energy to drive to the coast or board the plane for Rome or Cape Town. We crave not just the chance to get away but also the awe and wonder that enhances wellbeing, nurtures humility, and encourages prosocial behavior.[23] We find increased meaning months and even years after "awe and wonder" experiences. However, pastors—and probably people in general—tend to defer recovery by overemphasizing the quality of these exceptional life opportunities and events. Apart from an intentional rhythm that fosters wellbeing in an ongoing way, we may find ourselves asking for more than these experiences can deliver.

For that reason, I particularly appreciate the importance Bloom places on the quantity of well-placed recovery experiences and wellbeing practices

along the way. When it comes to recovery and wellbeing, Bloom turns out to be a numbers person. Here are a few examples.

First, Bloom's early research showed that pastors need a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative experiences, moods, and feelings to sustain hedonic wellbeing, which is personal happiness, fun, enjoyment, and pleasure.[24] This reinforces Bloom's point that pastors need well-integrated wellbeing experiences to complement their professional lives. Fulfillment in a congregation will be eroded by unhappiness or challenge at home, and high levels of happiness at home go only so far in compensating for stress and strife in ministry positions and faith communities.

A 4:1 ratio or above leads to a growth in happiness. A 2:1 or 1:1 ratio of positive to negative experiences results in diminished happiness. Also, Bloom argues that experiences need to be at equal strength, meaning that those who have had one really bad experience will need three really positive experiences to maintain their current state of wellbeing. Congregants usually will love their pastors and support them in times of crisis, but the initiative to find positive experiences, moods, and feelings to maintain an appropriate wellbeing ratio falls to pastors.

Second, Bloom's numbers prompt pastors to trust in small steps. His research shows that for pastors sliding downward toward possible burnout, even adopting one or two small steps will benefit them, and even if they only engage in them five to ten minutes per day.[25] Bloom also urges at least one hour of detachment per day, including Sundays,[26] reminding pastors that detachment means more than just being away from the church building. Research shows that "the sight of our cellphones or computers causes us to think about work, even when we are at home."[27] This helpful wisdom resonates with all who find their bodies at home while their minds churn and their emotional connections to work remain intact. Given those realities, a single hour per day seems inadequate for the work of recovery.

Third, Bloom quantifies four essential kinds of social relationships needed for wellbeing: significant others, similar others, members of the local church where the pastor serves, and denominational leaders.[28] In addition, Bloom encourages pastors to think broadly about these groups, especially significant others. This term includes spouses and partners, of course, but also "any person who currently or historically has a significant impact on our wellbeing."[29] To place a number on the types of essential social rela-

tionships allows pastors to inventory their support networks and actively seek out the connections needed to sustain wellbeing.

Bloom writes as a scientist. While these numbers may not constitute a consistent formula, they do provide pastors with categories arrived at through research. The breakdown within each of the various categories further helps pastors reflect on specific aspects of their lives and ministries and the level of wellbeing they experience in both.

Thinking about Formation with Recovery in Mind

We cannot build a theological curriculum around recovery in ministry. Not only would all the marketing and recruiting staff question the move, such an endeavor would not reflect what we believe about ministry as a meaningful and fulfilling path. At the same time, we cannot ignore the demanding nature of ministry and the additional stress brought on by contextual polarization and ecclesial uncertainty. What theological schools offer must ring true. We cannot celebrate and nurture the authenticity that Bloom's research lifts up if we fail to engage the real in ourselves and in the world.

What we can contribute to this wide spectrum is the normalization of the need for recovery in ministry. In doing so, we will avoid bashing the church for any difficult stretches while also painting an honest picture, as Bloom does, about the stresses and strains of being a pastoral leader.

We also can broaden the lens in order to place our lives in ministry alongside other life experiences, thus rejecting the exceptionalism of pastoral life. For example, imagine the illumination of considering how many rough patches develop in a marriage of only a few years. Or, consider how many recovery experiences nurses and other healthcare professionals must seek out over a twenty-year career. Or, think about public school teachers who love students, manage classrooms, and foster learning over a period of thirty years. Those who count on their ever-shortening summer breaks to catch up on their positive to negative ratios probably leave education at a rate as high as pastors leave ministry. The point of this exercise is not to remind aspiring pastors that it is tough all over but rather to highlight the need for recovery experiences as a normal part of any meaningful, rigorous vocational path.

I conclude this essay with three examples of how supervised ministry can contribute to normalizing recovery in ministry. Most readers will recognize at least some of these from their own programs and practices.

First, cohorts of seminary students who are developing a genuine sense of community can create a space to reflect on their own previous recovery experiences and how they translate to their lives in ministry. Theological communities do not always honor and appreciate the lives students have had prior to seminary and the wisdom that students bring with them. Many bring remarkable examples of overcoming hardship. Their stories may help the privileged and comfortable appreciate the severity of systemic challenges, put some of their own challenges in perspective, and begin to develop a scrappier recovery response.

Second, those who oversee supervised ministry programs need to give careful and discerning attention to the ministry sites the approve and the pastors with whom their students intern. We do not want field education to create excessive recovery needs!

Nearly a decade ago, I created the Learning Ministry Together program at Christian Theological Seminary. In this program, instead of field education students each going to their own respective ministry sites, a cohort of students moved together over a year's time among four strong and diverse congregations that were led by pastors who regularly demonstrated leadership effectiveness, lively imagination, and high levels of wellbeing. The pastors' high level of functioning contributed, in part at least, to congregations that exhibited similar levels of effectiveness, imagination, and wellbeing.

These students did not receive as many practical opportunities to hone their skills and shed their jitters, though they all preached, led groups, provided care, and engaged in community ministries. What they did experience was the benefit that some never have, that of being alongside thoughtful, hopeful pastors and unusually focused and energized congregations. The experience showed the students that some pastors engage in recovery experiences all the time. It also provided insight and tools for their recovery experiences they likely would need.

Third, most and perhaps all supervised ministry programs need to call upon resources beyond their own budgets and staff to support students as they deal with trauma and secondary trauma among students. This work really involves a commitment across the institution. Women and men are

coming to seminary with experiences that a reflection group or a ministry site cannot address. These are gifted, committed people with the potential to foster a more caring and generous life among the faithful, but only if they find a community of acceptance, support, and healing in which they can explore and begin to recover from their trauma. We knew of this need before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, the pandemic has highlighted numerous needs in this area, but it tragically has also traumatized and retraumatized individuals and communities.

This poses three particular challenges in supervised ministry. First, many students have been traumatized by and in the church. To expect them to begin to recover in a setting where the wounding happened will require some flexibility and truth-telling, to say the least. Second, another layer is added for people who live in communities where the focus understandably needs to be more on survival and wellbeing. Many seminaries are not well equipped or sufficiently trusted to partner with these communities, nor do they presently participate in the broad networks, as Bloom notes, that call, prepare, credential, and support pastors. Third, theological field education always has had to fight for its place at the table. Often, institutional cutbacks have begun at the door of supervised ministry programs. I attended my first Association for Theological Field Education biennial consultation in 2009. The reductions in resources devoted to our work just during the time since then—a time when our work is more needed than ever—have been startling.

Conclusion

Bloom writes, "Simple practices that often take just a few minutes add up over time to big changes in wellbeing. This is true for the ways that wellbeing improves, as well as how it declines."[30] He goes on to remind us that neither burnout nor improvement in wellbeing result from a single event or practice but come about over time. The small steps matter, both in preventing the extreme need for recovery and in the recovery itself. Bloom's naming of flourishing in ministry points to a way of being that allows pastors to explore their resilience and claim their authenticity. An understanding that recovery experiences are normal, regular, and possible represents an essential part of that flourishing.

NOTES

1 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

2 Matt Bloom, "Flourishing in Ministry: Emerging Research Insights on the Well-Being of Pastors," the Flourishing in Ministry Project, Mendoza College of Business, University of Notre Dame, 2013.

3 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 22.

4 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 22–26.

5 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 33.

6 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 87–90.

7 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 87.

8 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 33.

9 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry,* xi.

10 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 13.

11 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 89.

12 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 1–15.

13 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 24.

14 Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), 55.

15 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry,* 7.

16 "The Dangers of Providing Pastoral Care: William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in Conversation," *Christian Century*, August 11, 2021. Numerous responses have appeared in *Christian Century since* the original article was published.

17 "Dangers of Providing Pastoral Care."

18 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry,* 92.

19 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 37–40.

20 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 56–66.

21 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 94–95.

22 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 99.

23 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 8.

24 Matt Bloom, presentation to the Discipleship Project, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, April 26, 2013.

25 For a list and description of helpful small steps, see Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 102–7.

26 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 111.

27 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*.

28 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 82.

29 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 83.

30 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 102.