

Taking Care

Rev. Molly Carlson, Conference Minister

Several years ago, when I was serving as Senior Minister at a local church, I realized I was really starting to feel burned out. All sorts of things seemed to be going wrong and I felt like all of it was coming down on me. I remembered that a colleague had said that being a pastor was like being the lightning rod and I was feeling each and every one of those hits.

One day as I was prayerfully bemoaning this challenge with God, I had a vision of an actual lightning rod. It was shiny and clean. And it was GROUNDED. Of course! The lightning rod is not damaged, it just directs the energy away from the gathered community and into the ground where it can dissipate and cause no damage. *That* is how I need to be the lightning rod for my community.

The work then is to become and stay grounded. Grounded in God. This insight has fundamentally changed how I spend my time and what I prioritize in my life. I need to be reading and learning. I need to spend time in personal prayer and devotion. I need to practice weekly Sabbath and regular self-care practices. I have a therapist I meet with regularly. I schedule a weekly date with my spouse. I exercise and improve my eating habits. I get plenty of sleep.

These changes and these commitments were really challenging to implement. I felt like there was so much to do that I could never really get away. I grew up as a preacher's kid and I had fully embraced the narrative that a pastor's work is 24x7. However, I found that once I prioritized the activities that kept me spiritually grounded, I had more time than ever. Because I could remain a non-anxious presence, there was less anxiety in the entire system and fewer crises. Because I wasn't tired, I became much more efficient in the thinking/writing/preparing tasks that are required. Because I wasn't distraught, I could be much more present and supportive in my pastoral care work. Because I was grounded, I no longer needed time to recover from the hits that just seem to keep on coming.

I know that this season of the pandemic has been exceptionally hard on all of us. I was still serving a local church when the pandemic started and I felt the creativity fatigue, decision making fatigue, vigilance fatigue. And as Conference Minister, I see the toll it continues to take on so many of you. I also note how many pastors have felt that they could not step away during COVID – who else would run the new tech equipment, keep the disjointed community together, care for EVERYONE? And now I'm noticing a high rate of exhaustion, burnout, and just leaving ministry entirely.

God still has work for us to do. There is still good news to share. The gathered community still needs care and shepherding. And those that God has called to this wild and holy work need to be grounded.