

Voices: Relational self-care in the ministry

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NOTE: This is the sixth article in a six-part series.

Think about the impact of relationships in your life and ministry—specifically, the positive impact and how relationships have shaped, helped, grown, guided and guarded you over the years.

The relational aspect of taking care of ourselves in the ministry is crucial. So, what is relational self-care?

It is realizing we are relational beings who need healthy relationships. It is realizing we will not be whole or healthy apart from some good relationships, and apart from the influence of those relationships, we risk self-destructing in some way.

So, relational self-care involves seeking, identifying and nurturing healthy relationships that help us function as whole persons and as healthy and effective ministers.

Importance of good and God-honoring relationships

About 15 years ago, I got to an unhealthy place regarding relationships and ministry. I was a loner who focused on tasks and relied on my own stubborn resilience apart from relational support.

Our Baptist General Convention of Texas congregational strategist challenged me at this point. I believe his exact words were, “It’s all about

relationships.”

God began providing helpful relationships. Here are some of my observations about that.

- We are relational beings, and nothing about how God designed us or Christ’s body suggests we can or should do life and ministry in isolation.
- We may need to pray for, seek or at least be able to identify beneficial relationships when they come along, then seize upon them and cultivate them.
- Good and God-honoring relationships provide support, perspective and encouragement in the difficult, lonely and often discouraging field of ministry.
- Good and God-honoring relationships help us guard against pride, sin, despair and blind spots that can cripple kingdom witness and work and can destroy us and others.
- Your own personality will determine the type and amount of relational interaction you need. Some benefit from peer study groups. Or you simply may need to grab coffee with a friend and visit.

You may need to process a ministerial situation with a good “sounding board.” You may need advice or coaching, or you may need a supportive friend or one who will challenge your perspective. Each of us must figure out what we need, and I suspect that varies from time to time.

- Maintaining relationships will take intentionality, effort and discipline.

As I wrote this, a pastor friend mentioned the need to examine our desire for and sense of need for relationships, as well as the need to pray about this. We may need to ask the Lord to help us want supportive relationships strongly enough to find and nurture them. And, we may have to ask him to

give us helpful relationships if we struggle to find them.

Two other colleagues mentioned the support of specific relationships in key seasons of life and ministry—relationships that provide specific help at crucial junctures.

Some relationships will be fairly one-directional and others more egalitarian. Some involve you pouring into another without receiving care and ministry in return. Conversely, you may have a mentor or advisor who pours into you more than you help that person. Then, there will be relationships of mutuality where sharpening, support and benefit flow both directions.

Keeping relationships in their appropriate lanes

Think about the categories of relationships you have as a minister. There are family relationships, ministry-setting relationships, friendships and business relationships.

One part of relational well-being is allowing each type of relationship to function for what it is and not allowing that relationship to function improperly in ways or meet needs it should not.

A seminary professor once advised us to ask in every interaction, “Whose needs am I trying to meet?”

Some relationships legitimately may meet our needs, but in others our responsibility is to function professionally and/or pastorally and not abuse the relationship to get our needs met.

Part of relational self-care is discerning between types of relationships and keeping each in its own lane. A related aspect of relational self-care is

finding supportive relationships, so we are not tempted to misuse professional or ministerial relationships to meet our needs.

Appropriately guarded in relational connections

Not every relationship is beneficial, and not everyone who offers you relationship should be allowed into your circle.

When it comes to friendships, potentially supportive relationships and professional connections, we need to be selective and discriminating. People have various motives for offering relationships and support.

John 2:24 has stood out to me over the years as helpful at this point. It says, “But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people” (NIV).

Additionally, in *Well-Intentioned Dragons: Dealing With Difficult People in the Church*, Marshall Shelley observes that people anxious to be the pastor’s friend may end up being “dragons.”

You and I cannot and should not be close to everyone, and we need to build relationships with care.

Watching out for relationship substitutes

For various reasons, we might be tempted to settle for relationship substitutes. Two I think of readily are work and social media.

We may be task-oriented, very busy and/or somewhat introverted. We may be uncertain how to pursue healthy relationships, may suffer from past hurt or may fear betrayal or rejection. So, we bury ourselves in relationship

substitutes such as work or the artificial sense of connection of online interactions or social media.

Early in my doctoral work, I started feeling very isolated. So, I got on social media to find some connection to others. I mentioned that to a friend who was quick to correct my thinking, reminding me social media is not relationships.

Over the years, the Lord has blessed me with supportive and transformational relationships and has sustained me in times when I lacked those connections.

Let me encourage you to identify, find and nurture relationships that will help you function as a healthy Christian and an effective minister.

Questions for reflection

1. What relationships have been particularly helpful in your life and ministry?
2. What makes a relationship helpful for you?
3. In what ways have relationships grown you, guided you, guarded you, supported you or offered you meaningful pushback and correction?
4. What are your biggest obstacles to finding and maintaining helpful relationships?
5. How might you address those obstacles?
6. Do you want and sense a need for healthy relationships? Will you make this a matter of prayer and intentional effort?
7. Who can help you think through how to find and nurture meaningful relationships?

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