Clergy Self-Care - Roy M Oswald

Clergy Self-Care
by Roy M Oswald
Reviewed by Rowland Croucher

Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry, by Roy M Oswald (Alban Institute, 1991) is still one of the best books on stress and burnout in Christian ministry.

Roy Oswald has been through it - his own burnout, mid-life crisis, divorce, four years of heavy psychoanalysis etc. - and for a couple of decades he has led popular seminars on this subject with the respected Alban Institute in the U.S.

Main ideas:

- Many voices say to the clergy: ‘You can do it better’ rather than, for example, ‘Are you having any fun lately?’
- Let us encourage clergy and congregations to reject what I believe is a dysfunctional ‘medical model’ that treats pathology in isolation from the whole person
- Approx. 20% of clergy score extremely high on my Clergy Burnout Inventory. If they’ve been in long pastorate (ten years or more) it’s 50%. No wonder many clergy have a recurring dream of leading Sunday morning worship while stark naked
- The goal should be to take care of myself, not only for my sake, but also for the sake of others – finding a balance between healthy self-care and unhealthy narcissism
- Matthew Fox says the clergy’s worst sin is not being heretical or unethical, but just being plain dull
- At least 70% of all ailments may be stress-related, and studies indicate that people who have recently lost a loved one or had a job had a higher than average rate of illness and death
- Pastor Bill always had this voice in his head: ‘Don’t be your authentic self. Be like your predecessor!’
- Clergy ought to strive to do their ministry in 50 hours a week or less (Oswald reiterates this at least half-a-dozen times) – and also take two days off per week like everyone else. (Sunday can’t be a pastor’s Sabbath). Many overuse their listening or caring capacities, and are consumed by too many needy people
- Jesus never seemed to burn out... The wordous phrase that keeps showing up in the Gospels is ‘he dismissed the crowd’
- Much of the stress of ministry comes from trying to resolve conflicts that cannot, and should not, be resolved. Polarities can never be resolved; they can only be managed
- Go for a walk rather than have that extra piece of cake. A ten-ounce can of Pepsi contains ten teaspoons of sugar. Cut down on your consumption of red meat (perhaps just once a week), eat stainless chicken and fish instead. Fasting is good for you. Hatha yoga says we either use our muscles or we lose them. Walking a mile burns the same number of calories as running a mile
- In my seminary years no one asked me if I prayed or practiced any sort of rule of life. Christianity? Yes, but not as I believe in Christ. Clergy need a deeper spiritual life more than they need better knowledge or skills. Take at least 15 minutes to move into a meditative space before you rush out of the door. Sometimes turn off the car radio when driving (perhaps get the audio-cassette ‘Charts for the Road’)
- Smart parishioners know it’s in their self-interest to offer a competent pastor a periodic sabbatical
- Try not to take your worries home, or they’ll take precedence over family and personal activities
- Try not to handle a piece of paper (these days, an email) more than once: don’t open your mail until you’re ready to answer it. Manage your phone calls with an answering machine
- Norman Cousins claims to have cured a crippling (supposedly irreversible) disease with laughter. A ten-minute belly-laugh gave him at least two hours of pain-free sleep. (Oswald: ‘I believe that God is able to laugh and cry at the same time’)
- When Peter said I’m going fishing’ it was as though he’d done enough worrying and it was time to do something else
- Does your church practice a healing ministry? Jesus sent his disciples out to ‘preach, teach, and heal’ (see also James 5:14-15). Good ‘healing ministers’ feel a sympathy for the patient and tend to ‘blend in’ emotionally and spiritually with him or her

More: put the words stress, burnout etc. into the search facility of the John Mark Ministries website (jmm.aaa.net.au)


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