

Support groups help members of clergy cope

By Cassie Fuerst

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David Perry | Staff

From left, the Rev. Cynthia Cain of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington; the Rev. Mike Ward of Walnut Hill Church; the Rev. Mark Johnson of Central Baptist Church, Lexington; and Rabbi Marc Kline of Temple Adath Israel enjoyed a weekly meeting Sept. 18 at Joseph-Beth Caf. Kline says, There are no conversations that are out of bounds we really do take care of each other. Photo by David Perry | Staff



Chuck Cooper, pastor of Daybreak Community Church in Lexington, never knows what his workweek will look like. One day might begin as the sun peeks through the window of a hospital room where he waits with a family while a loved one is in surgery. The next day might not end until the stars begin to fade from the sky, as he counsels someone whose spouse has left him.

No matter what happens during his week, Sunday -- with its expected sermon -- still arrives.

Being a member of the clergy is not a 9-to-5 job, Cooper learned long ago. The job also doesn't happen just in a cozy office at the church or in the pulpit, but also out in the community. In addition to working at his parent's human resources business during the day, Cooper clocks 40 hours a week in church ministry.

"There are times you just can't say no to people," said Marc Kline, rabbi of Temple Adath Israel, who works about 100 hours a week. "You can't say, 'I put my 60 hours in this week. I can't counsel you, no matter what you need.'"

Sometimes responsibility calls even on clergy members' days off, said Mark Dreves, rector of the Cathedral of Christ the King.

"My day off is Monday, but many times something like a funeral is scheduled on that day," he said. "Sometimes I will take another day off, but most of the time I can't, because my first responsibility is to the congregation."

With such demanding schedules, clergy often neglect their own spiritual, physical and emotional health and can be pushed to the brink from little sleep, meals eaten in a rush and high levels of stress, coupled with little exercise.

"A lot of ministers are burnt out -- sometimes from the sheer amount of things they have to do, the amount of meetings, the amount of people to see in the hospital," said Rick Landon, director of the Interfaith Counseling Center, who focuses on clergy and their families. "I find many clergy don't have safe places. Their church community, their denominational community, their friends -- it's all the same. How can you say to someone in that group, 'I'm not doing well,' when in fact that person might be the reference you need for the next job?"

But some clergy in the area have found a place of refuge and respite with groups of people who understand the challenges they face and can offer the same sympathy, prayer and comfort they give to their communities -- support groups of their peers.

Group members, sometimes from various faiths, turn to each other for solace at weekly or monthly meetings or in daily chats when necessary.

"The thing we've found to be true is that the best ministering (for ministers) can come from peers who are going through similar things," said the Rev. Charles H. Chandler, executive director of Ministering to Ministers Foundation Inc. in Richmond, Va.

Support among peers

Chandler, who serves as an advocate of ministers with Ministering to Ministers, said support groups give pastors a safe place to talk about concerns and get inspiration. He points to research that suggests that as many as 70 percent of ministers felt they had no close friends to talk to.

The foundation is an advocate for ministers and their families in all faith groups who are experiencing personal or professional crisis because of deteriorating employment or congregation-minister relationships. It works as a mediator to reunite minister and congregation when resolution of issues is needed.

The group also holds several wellness retreats for ministers and their spouses each year. The next retreat will be Oct. 29 through Nov. 2 in Cullman, Ala. Another retreat will be Jan. 7-11 in Jefferson City, Tenn.

Pastors, Chandler said, "especially carry a heavy burden, and sometimes that load can become too much. Ministers must be diligent not to let their congregations' problems become their own problems. If they do, depression can sneak up on them, and it lessens their effectiveness."

Chandler, who has been involved in various ministers' support groups since 1961, feels that the groups have been a "major source of support" in his own career. In addition to emotional and spiritual support, group members can give much-needed feedback and criticism. For a support group to work well, Chandler says, it must have a balance between affirmation and confrontation. Too much of either tends to damage the group's effectiveness, he said.

"They are people you can go to to tear your gut out," he said. "You can't do that with people you don't know well. It has to be a safe space."

When Kline first stepped into the role of rabbi in South Carolina, he found respite in a group of clergy who met for lunch on Tuesdays. One Tuesday morning he read a local newspaper article by a minister stating that Hitler had done God's work, concluding that blessing could only be understood after suffering. Before Kline penned a response, he met with his fellow clergy for lunch. As he sat down at the table, several Christian ministers handed him their written rebuttals. The weight of responding was lifted off his shoulders.

Kline has found a similar haven in Lexington as a few local clergy members meet for breakfast on Tuesday mornings. "I'll be candid; it is completely social," Kline said. "There are no conversations that are out of bounds. There are no text or Bible studies, but we really do take care of each other."

Dreves has found similar support among other priests. Catholic priests attend monthly clergy support groups where they listen to each other's victories and burdens, as well as pray for one another.

Spiritual directors also needed

Landon said he found that clergy are often drawn into ministry because of a profound encounter with God, but as they begin to minister, their experience with God becomes more professional than personal.

"You read the Scripture looking for materials for sermons. You pray because that is what you are supposed to do; plus, you've got this prayer list you have to pray for," said Landon.

Landon suggests clergy find a spiritual director who will ask them questions that help them maintain a personal relationship with God. For about 15 years, he has sought the counsel of a Catholic priest. The priest became a source of encouragement as Landon led Trinity Baptist Church, and later as he stepped into the role of counselor.

Kline jokes that his phone automatically dials the numbers of his mentors, a Methodist district minister, a retired Baptist pastor, and an African Methodist Episcopalian pastor.

Guidance can also be found during times of rest and in moments of solitary silence in sacred spaces.

Cooper often seeks this stillness in a fishing boat. In late July, he watched the moonlight dance across the water as tried his hand at reeling in fish at 3 in the morning.

"There is something about getting out and getting in nature," Cooper said. "That is what I do to take care of me. Sometimes God speaks to me."

Clergy's self-care benefits both them and their congregations.

"When we are talking about self-care and care for the congregation, often they are the same thing," Kline said. "If things aren't good with the congregation, they aren't going to be good with me. If things aren't good with me, it is not going to translate well for the congregation."

Dreves sees self-care as a vital component of ministry.

"In order to take care of others, it is important to take care of yourself as well," Dreves said.

Robin Roenker contributed to this article.
