

Maintaining Clergy Mental Health Proves to be Complex Puzzle

Like others, I started a jigsaw puzzle several weeks ago, but today mine remains unfinished.

It has been energizing, frustrating, rewarding, often confusing; it seems an apt analogy for how clergy are feeling these days.

Several years ago, at a family reunion, someone brought this puzzle that we completed together. So, with good memories I had pulled it out with a naïve belief I knew what I was doing.

I had the picture on the box and past experience in putting it together, so I assumed I had all I needed. I spread out all of the pieces and began.

This is basically what I've heard from clergy who have led their congregations from in-person to online ministry and are now struggling with what comes next.

They thought they knew what to expect. They have ministerial expertise, knowledge and experience.

They knew how to plan and deliver worship, provide pastoral care, lead staff and governing committees, develop programs and educational offerings, interact with others in the community and generally bring in stewardship offerings.

And so, they spread out the pieces and began.

I automatically started looking for the edge pieces in order to put the "frame" of the puzzle together, but quickly realized that because of the way the pieces were cut, there weren't any clearly definable edge pieces.

Clergy, too, thought they could find the edges for how long the shift would need to happen, but the edges quickly became hard to distinguish.

When will we return? What about key liturgical holidays? Overtime hours? Can we survive financially? What about summer activities or fall programs?

I shifted strategy and began looking for the pieces for a single image in the puzzle

that was different from everything else. That's when I got an inkling of how difficult this might actually be.

The puzzle is of horses running through a stream with reflected images in the water of the horses, sky, clouds and mountains. I focused on a cowboy riding one of the horses and that's where I started.

In the same way, clergy started with what they could see clearly. They began reconstructing ministry, focusing on the main elements of preaching, music, technology and pastoral connections using old-fashioned phone trees, as well as online Zoom and emails.

Community came together in new ways but from familiar patterns.

I then began building off the cowboy - finding the black horse, then the brown horse, the horse with a star on its forehead, followed by splashing water and the reflected watery image of the various horses and the cowboy.

But is that white piece the splashing water, a cloud in the sky or their reflected image? Is that deep green a tree branch, some grass or a watery reflection?

Slowly and sometimes haphazardly, portions of the picture came together, which felt good. Yet, frustratingly, I realized some pieces were definitely missing.

In the ensuing weeks, clergy have built off their main elements by talking with other clergy about best practices, even collaborating with technology and worship, switching to online classes and becoming creative with video inserts in worship and how participants can have online "coffee hour."

But there are gaps in the ministry offerings. What they thought would work will need to be handled differently.

It felt good to be launched, and clergy are getting better with it all. Yet, it is frustrating to know there are gaps that can't be filled.

This is particularly true for those traditions where the in-person sacraments, such as Holy Eucharist or sitting Shiva, are central but are now currently suspended, creating big, aching gaps.

Much of what's needed is there, but empty spaces make it hard.

As I struggled to complete the puzzle, I realized some – most? – of the edge pieces aren't just oddly shaped, they have disappeared. I don't know how that happened. The frame is missing.

The reality is dawning that I won't be able to complete this puzzle. My desire to get this finished is in competition with my exhaustion.

Many clergy are also feeling the effects of the missing frame. Grief and loss are coexisting with creativity and joy.

Faithful 90-year-old congregants, who only a few weeks ago disdained online services, have become dependent on them and want them to continue.

Reality is dawning that some form of hybrid ministry will need to be offered, possibly permanently, but the framework is missing.

There is another major shift coming in how congregations will function and what clergy are being called upon to do.

Clergy will be weaving a way forward with “reopening” that will be laced with tension and potential for liability. And no, seminary did not prepare them for this.

It will be important to clarify the congregational priorities and the critical mission.

Even more important, clergy will need to clarify what are their personal priorities and personal critical mission. Family? Education? Ministerial responsibilities? Health? Spiritual disciplines? Re-imagining leadership?

What we thought was important and real is now seen as only its watery reflection.

The capacity to keep changing, keep looking, keep focused on priorities and keep exploring the edges is exhausting.

Once again, it is important to remember that, for good or for ill, whatever has been a person's pattern for coping with stress, overhyped expectations, loss and uncertainty will become their coping mechanisms now.

As I discussed in a [previous article](#), all of the standard, practical tips for physical, spiritual and mental health remain applicable. Self-awareness and grace will continue to be needed in abundance.

In working the puzzle, what I thought I knew, what I thought would be a do-able challenge, what I thought had definable edges is not what actually happened.

Now I have to be graciously OK with gaping spaces and an unfinished, hard-to-construct yet still beautiful puzzle.

For clergy, the edges of the frame are missing. This process is incomplete and cannot be finished, and we don't know when this will "be over."

But I pray that frustrated, tired and yet grace-filled clergy will also learn to be OK with gaping spaces and an incomplete, hard-to-construct yet still beautiful puzzle that is their ministry these days.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series this week for Mental Health Awareness Month. The previous articles in the series are:

[*How Coronavirus Affects Your Mental Health and What You Can Do*](#) | Cate Schilling

[*Despite ACA, Not All Insurance Provides Mental Health Care*](#) | Monty Self

[*7 Issues Your Family Must Navigate During COVID-19 Crisis*](#) | Kristyn Arnold

[*Young Adults Face Mental Health Issues in 'Emerging Adulthood'*](#) | Rebekah Gordon