

The pastor as person: Ministry counselor Ross Peterson

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue



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Ross Peterson, a minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church and a clinical pastoral counselor, is executive director at the Chicago office of Midwest Ministry Development, an organization that serves pastors who are wrestling with questions about ministry and vocation. He earned a doctor of ministry degree from Chicago Theological Seminary.

Why do clergy come to Midwest Ministry Development?

Some come because they know they are in the midst of a significant time of discernment about their vocation: Do I stay in this church? Do I go? Do I move toward a different kind of ministry? I am feeling dissatisfaction—what does that mean?

Some are referred to us by their denominations; maybe they are struggling to be effective in ministry, or there may be some misconduct involved, or fitness for ministry questions might have arisen.

There are several points in life at which people come to Midwest. One is during first call, when people are experiencing the reality of church life, which can be disillusioning. First-call pastors are often trying to understand if they made the right decision.

At midcareer and midlife, a lot of questions come up. People are asking: Who am I, and is this what I want to be doing?

And toward the end of their careers, people often want to finish well and wonder what that means for them. We often see pastors in their midfifties who feel trapped: “I can’t move out of the ministry because nobody else is going to want me.” Or maybe their ideas of what they were going to accomplish someday look like they aren’t going to happen.

What do you see as trends in seminaries regarding discernment of vocation?

I see an increasing focus on the pastor as a person—an increasing awareness of the importance of self-care and of developing strong spiritual disciplines. It used to be that seminary was a time when people’s spiritual discipline waned and their academic discipline increased. Now many seminaries emphasize integrating the spiritual, reflective process with the academic, which I think is all to the good.

We often talk about burnout as a problem among clergy. How do you understand that term?

When we see pastors who are experiencing burnout, sometimes it is simply because they are working too hard. But more often they are doing a lot of things that are not central to their sense of call. When people are working close to their sense of call and purpose and meaning, they can work really hard without feeling burned out. But when they are doing a lot of things that people are telling them should be done or that feel urgent but aren’t close to the heart, that is a strong indicator of burnout.

It’s been said that most pastors are a “quivering mass of availability,” eager to please everybody. That is a path to destruction.

When a pastor comes to Midwest, what happens next?

Most of our work is done in a two- or three-day intensive process. It includes inventories that people take on personality, vocation, and wellness.

These profiles give us a context, but in order to come to life, they need to be integrated into a person’s story. So most of our time is spent in individual conversation. People often come in with a lot of anxiety; they may come in guarded and defensive. But 90 percent of the time, we find that people want to be

understood, and they want to minister well. Once people engage in the process, they tend to be open and reflective and ready to think more deeply as a person and as a person in ministry.

Can you describe a success story that came out of this process?

A pastor who came to us was a hard-driving person and had been successful in pastoral leadership, but she was rough on other people and perceived as being angry and too hard on her subordinates. These problems derailed this pastor in ministry.

In exploring this reality, it became clear that the pastor was under tremendous self-induced pressure “to be the hero.” Every situation was critical, and there was no margin of error. She experienced a chronic sense of crisis and strain. Along with that, the pastor had a hidden need to be appreciated. Not being in touch with that need, the pastor didn’t know how to reach out for it.

After an initial and very natural defensiveness, this pastor became genuinely curious: Why am I treating myself and other people so badly?

Our recommendations had to do with developing more compassion and self-acceptance, which would lead naturally to more compassion and acceptance for others. The pastor pursued those traits in a number of ways: seeing a therapist, doing some physical activity, and attending to some family issues.

When we saw this pastor later, we saw a person who had developed a considerable capacity for gentleness and was ready to reenter ministry. Her unconscious need to minister in a way that was almost panic-driven had been dealt with. When people begin to understand some of the unconscious factors that are underneath their call, they are freed up to manage them well.

The dynamic of running on empty and then getting angry when no one notices one’s efforts—I think that dynamic is common among pastors.

What are some of the most helpful practices for clergy who want to stay effective?

You need to have a good network of people that you can process things with. Resilience in stress is not a quality that I have as an individual. It is much more related to the quality of my relationships. The vast majority of pastors who get into

trouble are people who are working in some kind of isolation or depletion.

Having contexts in which you engage with colleagues who are supportive is so life-giving for pastors because they often can't share what they are going through in their church or sometimes even in their families.

Attention to physical well-being is important. Getting enough rest, eating well, and exercising—that sounds trivial, but it contributes considerably to people managing ministry well.

Having a workable balance among the dimensions of one's life is central—so that one's personal life and ministry life are not at war with each other. At Midwest, we talk a lot about the boundary and the intersection between one's personal identity and one's pastoral identity. This is crucial for pastors who minister in small towns. Wherever they go, they are still Pastor Jones. Finding someplace where you can just be yourself is a health-giving practice.

How is the cultural context for Midwest's work changing?

The Midwest region of the country is an area where churches are dying and many are in retreat. It's hard to feel good about your success in ministry if your measure of success is: "I'm not losing members as fast as the other churches are." Denominational structures are laying off a lot of people. It can be depressing.

But I am seeing a shift. For a long time, I saw an attitude of "Our ranks are thinning, but we are going to keep up doing the same thing." Now, people are saying, "We have entered a new era." Denominational structures are being reenvisioned. The mission of the church is being separated from the institution of the church.

Bivocational ministry certainly plays into this; it allows a way of doing ministry that gives the pastor some flexibility. This is a time of openness to experimentation that would not have been possible 15 years ago.

How does that affect your center?

The original name for centers like ours was not "Ministry Development Centers" but "Career Development Centers." That was when a pastor thought of having a "career" in ministry. People don't think in quite that way anymore. Ministry has become less institutional, more of a verb than a noun.