

Clergy burnout, clergy health

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

January 8, 2013

A couple of articles are making the rounds among my friends right now. The first is this *Century* article by Craig Barnes (the new president of Princeton Seminary), who provides his reflections on why [pastors cannot \(or should not\) be friends with parishioners](#). Of course there can be close and intimate relationships, and pastor and flock are friendly to one another. But Barnes argues that the clergy role is such that true mutual friendship is impossible, or at least inadvisable.

[The second article](#) is about a pastor of a large church in Charlotte who's on a leave of absence at a treatment center after struggling with depression and alcohol abuse.

Lots I could say about these articles. To the question of friendship, I give it a big "it depends." It depends on the church and it depends on the pastor. I think small churches ask for more transparent relationships than larger churches do. It also depends on what we mean by friendship. Human beings have a lot of different kinds of friends. Hopefully we have deep soul friends who know all there is to know about us. We also have friends with whom we can relax and be ourselves but who don't necessarily know where all the bodies are buried. We have friends who help us remember to have fun. We have friends who are friends for a season of our lives. Pastor-parishioner friendships, to the extent that they exist and can be healthy, may be in that category.

As for the second article, I wish Pastor Shoemaker and the congregation well, and I commend the vulnerability and authenticity required to be up front about what he needs at this time.

But two quotes stuck out to me. First, Craig Barnes:

The professional literature supports this call to maintain a distinction between relationships of mutuality and those of service as a pastor. I get that. But there's a math problem—there isn't enough time left over after serving the church to have healthy friendships. Or at least that's what

pastors tell themselves.

It sounds like that's what he tells himself... since he goes on to say:

I suppose I could have pulled back from the church and tried to meet more people through the PTA, the Little League, a political party or the volunteer fire department. I could even have convinced myself that this is part of my local mission as a Christian. But I love being a pastor, and I love the churches I've served. And they are demanding lovers.

The other quote is in the second article and is from Jody Seymour, pastor of Davidson United Methodist Church and someone who works with clergy who are struggling with burnout:

If you're a good pastor, you're never 'off.' If you're on vacation and somebody dies, you have to come back.

Really? Because [even Jesus took his time getting back after somebody died.](#)

Look. Are pastoral boundaries important? Absolutely. And different kinds of friendships have their boundaries too.

And have I responded to a pastoral crisis while on vacation? Yes.

But generally speaking, both of these comments (and perhaps the articles in general) reveal a model of ministry that is, frankly, passing away as the guild becomes younger and less male-dominated. Younger people want a leader they can relate to more than one who holds up a lofty ideal; they seek identification more than inspiration. And women, well, we have a different way of negotiating boundaries than do men. Again, I'm speaking generally.

Also, as churches get smaller and more and more pastors become part-time, the dynamics will change even more.

What do you think?

*Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)*