

Self-care for the beloved community

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In 1963, at the height of segregation, [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) called for creating the beloved community. He exhorted all Americans to stand for justice, not by eradicating our differences but by affirming and claiming our identity, heritage, and legacy.

His vision of the beloved community embraced principles of inclusion: sharing the rich resources of the earth; [eliminating poverty, hunger, and homelessness](#); and combating racism and discrimination. At the heart of King's vision was a reverence for caring for others and honoring the values of fairness and equality that arise from the gospel.

More than 50 years since [King's historic march on Washington](#), despite a massive multicultural following, his dream of the beloved community is far from realized. His famous speech on nonviolence reminds us that building the beloved community necessitates faith and requires a radical transformation in how we put our stated values into action.

King did not envision a utopian society, idyllic and free from conflict. But he did believe that the skillful practices of embracing inclusion, empowering others, purposeful living, and ethical behavior could make the beloved community possible.

[King's clarion call](#) to make "a qualitative change in our soul and quantitative change in our lives" is not only a challenge to individuals. It also means accepting responsibility for how we educate, train, and mentor our future religious and spiritual leaders as they live into their calling to build the beloved community. Given the current condition of our national landscape, three key questions are worth considering:

- What does it mean to be a compassionate religious or spiritual leader?

- How do we prepare ministry students to meet the challenges of building the beloved community in the modern world?
- What resources are needed for this kind of ministry to be effective?

Our complex world requires ministers and chaplains who can integrate doing and being. This integration requires practices of self-care: nurturing one's own health and wellbeing, promoting a sense of balance in life, and deepening compassion. In healthy relational ministry, a fluid and dynamic process exists in which religious leaders come to appreciate that taking care of themselves is critical to any work they do with others and helps foster their connection to the community.

[As King's work acknowledges](#), all human beings suffer. In light of this reality, ministers are charged with the dual task of caring for others and caring for themselves within the context of community. Healthy relational ministry requires that ministers bring to themselves the same quality of attention, kindness, and compassion they offer others.

Finding this balance in ministry work can be daunting. But it's necessary. Because self-care is integral to creating the beloved community, ministers must strive to be as physically and emotionally healthy as possible. Committing to this work as a lifelong endeavor is as important as learning the scriptures, doctrines, and skills required by our faith traditions.

Those who provide spiritual care often envision themselves as creating space for other people to open their hearts and face their suffering. But such work begins with loving and honoring the self. Understanding and practicing self-care in this way is not easy. Religious leaders must be honest with themselves and be in touch with their own struggles, so they can hold what is unpleasant and painful in themselves without running away. This difficult work of recognizing and accepting one's own humanity opens space for renewed energy.

The term self-care begins with the term *self*. But it is not an individual endeavor. It involves engaging the self in communities that provide holding space and sustenance. Those who regard self-care as an individual activity, rather than a lifelong practice that demands connection to community, risk falling into self-destructive patterns. Isolation, loneliness, self-criticism, depression, burnout, and chronic health issues often arise for ministers who lack healthy relationships.

In our world of injustice, there is much work to be done. It may seem that there is not enough time for self-care. But ministers must be diligent about making a commitment to their own health and wellness. And congregations must actively support and advocate for their clergy to embrace self-care. When ministers live more balanced, connected lives, everyone benefits. The beloved community that King envisioned draws closer.

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