A clergy mental health crisis

The stress of the past few years has brought many to the breaking point.

by Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans in the January 2023 issue

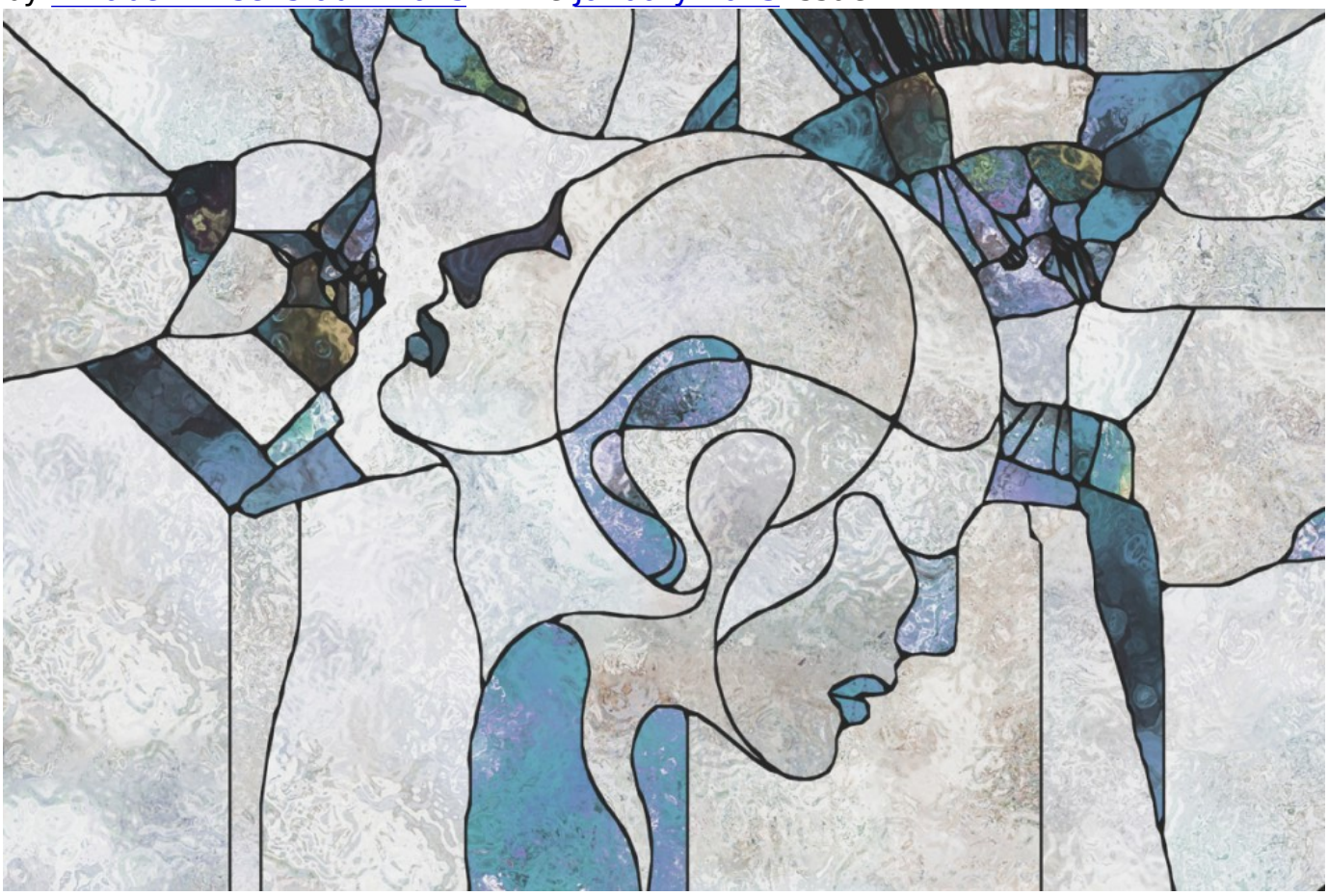

Illustration by agsandrew / iStock / Getty

It was the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and David Peters thought he might be dying. It wasn't COVID; it was his liver—but his illness was directly related to the conditions the pandemic had created.

An Episcopal priest and church planter in the Diocese of Texas, Peters was no stranger to close encounters with mortality. He had served as an enlisted marine and later as an army chaplain in Iraq. He'd written about his experiences, and those of other veterans, in *Post-Traumatic God: How the Church Cares for People Who*

Have Been to Hell and Back. But this was happening to him smack in the middle of a viral contagion with no end in sight.

At the beginning of the pandemic, his fledgling congregation met outside in all kinds of weather conditions, but Peters was haunted by the feeling that it wasn't enough. Two of his kids, now teenagers, lived 60 miles away, and he rarely saw them. His youngest, on the other hand, was doing Zoom kindergarten full time at home.

As the pandemic continued, Peters's regular routines started dropping off. He found it difficult to go running, something he loved. His relationships suffered.

Then there was the drinking. His grandfather had died of alcoholism, long before Peters was born. After his return from Iraq, Peters had relied on booze now and then as a way to cope with post-traumatic stress, but he didn't think it was a problem. During the pandemic, however, he began to depend on drinking for "happiness and solace," he said. "As I was already very isolated, it became more isolating."

Troubled by the memories of his grandfather's early death, Peters summoned the courage to ask for a liver test called elastography. When he got the results, he recalled, "it was bleak. They were like, you're at the stage before cirrhosis and fibrosis of the liver."

One night, awaiting a test that would confirm his liver diagnosis, he was sitting alone in the waiting room of a testing center. "I was afraid. I was so afraid." He pulled up the app for the Episcopal prayer book on his phone, and he said Compline, the daily office's service for the end of the day.

In that moment he felt that "God knew me, God was going to listen to me, and God would be with me, no matter what happened." Once he experienced that, he said, he realized that "no matter how bad it got, I could always pray. And that would be enough."

Post-diagnosis, Peters made some radical lifestyle changes. He went cold turkey on the drinking, and he consulted a nutritionist and made major changes to his diet. He also started attending a Veterans Administration support group for people suffering from substance use disorders and PTSD. He said he realized that "I'm one of those people who probably can never drink again."

Not everyone has a dramatic story of a brush with death during the pandemic. But each pastor interviewed for this story said that the past few years have brought fresh challenges to their personal lives and their ministries, adding stress to already stressful situations.

Researchers who have assessed clergy well-being over time say that they are concerned by the toll congregational conflicts and ebbing congregations are taking on ordained leaders. At the same time, they also advocate a proactive approach to managing stress and are working to help clergy develop a variety of strategies to address it.

Steven Sandage, a professor of psychology of religion and theology at Boston University, said that some of the studies they have done with religious leaders find "alarming rates of post-traumatic stress disorder–level symptoms. The levels of those trauma symptoms were higher than with post-deployment military personnel. Those studies actually fed into our level of concern and interest in recent years to see what we can do to try to work against the tide that seems to be developing."

There were already reasons to be concerned about the health effects of stress on those in ministry positions, Sandage said. But the "pandemic certainly intensified those stressors in numerous ways." In a stark indication of the dangers health-care professionals have faced recently, some of the chaplains in a recent study group died from COVID. As Sandage and his colleagues continue to study the problem, future cohorts will include clergy from a variety of religious traditions, while others will focus on mental health professionals. Sandage and his team at the Boston University's Danielsen Institute also are planning to help seminary students find ways to prevent burnout, as well as learning from clergy who have spent years as pastors and report positive experiences in ministry.

"We're not just trying to prevent burnout, we're also trying to promote well-being among those folks," said Sandage. That means offsetting isolation and creating spaces where clergy and other leaders on the front lines can be authentic, learn to navigate conflict-related anxiety, and avoid the temptation to let congregations put them on pedestals. In October, Sandage and his team offered a free seminar for therapists and spiritual care providers.

For decades Duke Divinity School has been assessing clergy health through the Clergy Health Initiative. One of the latest Duke projects is focused on Protestant

groups and individuals who provide help for clergy, including funding agencies, pension funds, therapists, retreat centers, and educational institutions.

Thad Austin, senior director of strategic initiatives and congregational engagement at Duke Divinity, and his colleague Katie Comeau just produced a book summing up their research called *Caring for Clergy: Understanding a Disconnected Network of Providers.*

They found, said Austin, that the "underlying foundation of support available to clergy is fractured, disconnected, and uncoordinated. There is a large-scale lack of training and formation. There is little meaningful connection between what is happening in research and practice. In some cases, people are making up the support they provide as they go along. In other cases, they are pulling from their own experience, which often is related to their own unhealed wounds."

In response, Austin and Comeau have launched the Common Table Collaborative, a way to share resources and support among those caring for clergy and congregations.

Clergy themselves are also finding creative responses to the pressures they have been confronting. "I really think that this was a time for clergy to stand up, shine, and be a strength for their congregations," said Robert Lyons, an air force veteran and retired army chaplain who currently serves as pastor of Young Memorial UMC in Thomson, Georgia.

When shepherding the congregations he served during the pandemic, Lyons brought his military training to bear. When the churches were closed, he said, he saw those moments as "strategic pauses" when they could plan ahead for reopening. "One of the things the military taught me was doing risk assessments. The second thing is planning. The Centers for Disease Control looks at the big picture. They don't look at my space, my building, my people. That's what I'm paid to do."

A church, he said, will reflect a pastor's personality. "That's why I thought it was very important to present a picture of strength, of courage, of saying we're going to work through this—rather than saying, oh gosh, they are telling us we can't worship. I didn't want to be afraid."

His takeaway from the pandemic years? "Our people believe that matters of their soul are equally as important as their physical lives. They want pastors who will

stand up and be confident, [though] not foolhardy.”

Kate Warn, pastor of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Manheim, Pennsylvania, found new resources within her congregation. The key to her congregation’s success during the pandemic, she said, was their ability to acclimate to the changing circumstances they faced. “I think there was a lot of grace and that the congregation showed itself to be very resilient and adaptive, much more so than anyone would have expected, given that it’s a kind of traditional, older congregation.” Their flexibility made it possible to meet outside during the height of the pandemic and then to tweak the sanctuary space to allow for social distancing.

For more than 20 years, Ruth Ollison, pastor of the multidenominational Beulah Land Community Church in Houston, has had a ministry “totally focused,” she said, on people who either have no church tradition or have been part of a different one. During the pandemic, they met online for a year and then moved into a hybrid format, said Ollison, who noted that their building allows for plenty of social distancing. She personally “moved my family to the head of line” during the pandemic. She and her husband had multiple opportunities to spend time with her son and their two grandchildren.

Ollison, an energetic woman who also runs a communications training business and rehabs old houses, has learned the virtues of strong, positive self-talk. “Whenever my schedule gets out of whack, I look at myself in the mirror and say, ‘Who made your schedule?’”

In addition, she’s learned to set boundaries with others. “‘No’ is a complete sentence,” she said.

Now that the pandemic is easing up, she and her team are offering a host of events to further deepen their engagement with the community in Houston’s historic Third Ward. Plans include a men’s ministry, a women’s ministry, and a van with a “Pop-Up Church” sign that will offer hot dogs in city parks. “That’s the kind of fun stuff we’re now getting back into.”

Some pastors found that the pandemic itself provided a surprising opportunity to connect with their neighborhoods and communities. Cynthia Kepler-Karrer pastors Memorial United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas. Many members of her congregation commute to church into a neighborhood stressed not only by generational poverty but by the impact of gentrification. She and her husband, both

younger than most of the congregation,“had skills that were being underutilized in terms of video and other creative ways to do ministry. When the pandemic hit, we amped those up, got some good advice, and kept going,” said Kepler-Karrer.

Soon they were finding unique backdrops for Bible stories around the city, bringing readings to life for congregants cooped up inside their homes and helping them learn about the broader community in which they lived. “For many people it was a powerful reminder that wherever they were, God was in their midst, not just in the sanctuary,” she said.

At the same time, Kepler-Karrer said, they had a whole cadre of members who didn’t have access to streaming—or even to email. She started to send them physical copies of liturgies and sermons. “Our population had been through a whole bunch and was sticking together with each other no matter what.”

In addition, Kepler-Karrer became active in her local Buy Nothing group on Facebook, helping to connect people with resources. Her church already hosted a number of neighborhood groups, including Bread Church, a monthly loaf-creating get-together where participants discuss their spiritual lives. The pandemic, she said, gave her an opportunity to find new ways to tell the “story that is core to our understanding of faith, but also to tell that story in a way that gives people the ability to take it in their own hands. So I now am Pastor Cynthia to most of the neighborhood. That really solidified over the course of the pandemic.”

Kelly Jackson Brooks, a therapist and Methodist deacon who founded New Mexico’s Chrysalis Consulting Center, said she saw an uptick in clergy seeking mental health services during the pandemic. (It has since returned to prepandemic levels.) Along with offering mental health services, retreats, and the opportunity to participate in “covenant groups” for clergy, Chrysalis provides continuing education for therapists. “Most of the things we’re seeing with clergy in mental health are not new in any way, shape, or form,” said Jackson Brooks.

She has noticed that whether clergy blossomed or struggled during the height of the pandemic, many went into overdrive when congregants returned. “Now people are trying to make up for that time and expecting more than they did before,” making a clergy job even more complex, she said.

Some clergy are distressed that people have not come back to church, but new generations, who grew up in a digital world, experience church in a different way,

she said. “The idea is that you don’t give up on church because people aren’t coming into a physical space. I think people who have been successful have been able to navigate a hosted hybrid experience so they can see the sacred in different places.”

Matt Bloom directed Workwell at the University of Notre Dame, which included a research project called Flourishing in Ministry. He agrees with Jackson Brooks that many of the challenges clergy face post-pandemic are not new. “I do think the pandemic exacerbated some preexisting problems and made them stand out in stark relief,” he said. Over the years, Bloom’s team interviewed a diverse group of hundreds of Protestant and Catholic clergy. For a variety of reasons, he said, “it’s tough to be a woman in ministry. It’s tough to be a person of color in ministry. It’s tough to be a young person in ministry. And those have been challenges that have existed for quite some time and are not getting any easier.”

But the opportunity exists to re-create what it means to be a clergy person. A number of younger pastors aren’t sure that local congregations are the most optimal ways for them to engage in ministry, he said. “I’m not going to be surprised if we do see more clergy resigning from local church work. It’s not because they want to leave ministry. Not at all. But what they want is to be able to do ministry of the kind they feel called to do.”

He’s got some down-to-earth advice for clergy. Get enough sleep. Find time for scripture reading, contemplation, and prayer. Do something every day that you find enjoyable. And practice creating a narrative, whether that is writing in a journal or creating stories, that can “help you stay connected with who you are.”

When dealing with conflicts in congregations, whether they be about clashing expectations or politics, said Bloom, the best answer he can offer clergy (or others) is to bring small, manageable well-being practices into their own lives.

Clergy need to get over feeling guilty about self-care, he suggested. Giving themselves permission to do things that enrich their lives—and being aware of why they are doing them—will boost their sense of overall well-being, he said.

Sister Mary Luke Jones is program director of the Benedictine-led Women Touched by Grace, a support program for women engaged in pastoral ministry. She said that in the wake of the pandemic women clergy report being tired, both from losing the ability to connect directly with parishioners and from conflicts related to when and

how to open. “They see people coming back, but not in the numbers that they had prior. And that’s anxiety-producing for them as well.”

In the group’s retreat program, each participant is assigned a sister as a prayer partner, and they gather with the community for the daily office. It’s “just been phenomenal how each of them has become committed to each other,” said Jones. “It’s been a remarkable experience for us, as a religious community.” Women clergy participants say the same, she said.

Carrie Combs, priest-in-charge at Trinity Episcopal Church in Torrington, Connecticut, agrees with Bloom that the answers for her lie in daily life. “I’m looking for God,” she said—in every television show she watches, every game she plays, and every book she reads.

Her colleague Adam Thomas, rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal in Mystic, Connecticut, agrees. “I think what we’re being called into these days is to look for the sacred in all things, not just in the things we have deemed to be holy,” he said. In that spirit, Thomas has begun to be more intentional about his exercise routine.

Combs, who discovered in 2020 that she has an autoimmune disorder triggered by stress, left a “toxic church environment,” ultimately finding another parish setting. “God did not want me to be a stressed out, overworked, overburdened, and untrusted living sacrifice.”

Sometimes, said Thomas, quitting happens because something new needs to grow. “A lot of the angst we see both in the church and in the world is the fear of letting go of things as they’ve always been, because we can’t envision the way they are going to be.”

As for David Peters, when he went back six months later for another liver test, he was told his liver was back to normal, though he may be at increased risk of liver cancer. “I was really happy. It felt like kind of a resurrection, because I got part of my life back that I didn’t think I’d be able to have.”

His harrowing experiences taught him that he could lean on his friends for prayer—and that God would come through for him. “I can trust him, even though I’m really scared.”

Read the companion piece about pastors who are finding imaginative outlets by playing Dungeons & Dragons.