Shepherding the Shepherd in the Midst of a Pandemic

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Abstract: This essay explores two key themes in practical theology. First, I offer an evaluation of how ministers fared through the COVID-19 pandemic and consider its impact on life and ministry via reflection on literature as well as on my own practice as a pastoral care worker who “shepherds the shepherd.” Ministers encountered in my line of work frequently display symptoms of burnout. In exploring whether pandemic-related stresses contributed to this burnout, I found that prepandemic studies consistently identified a higher risk of burnout in ministers than people in the general population. This begged the question, why are ministers more susceptible to burnout? Within the scope of this essay, I explore this question via theological reflection.

Secondly, in exploring the importance of spiritual disciplines, specifically the Judeo-Christian idea of Sabbath in preventing burnout, I propose adding the idea of Sabbath rest to theological reflection models and present my rationale for how this contributes to health and flourishing in life, praxis, and theological reflection.

Keywords: burnout prevention • shepherding • Sabbath • flourishing • theological reflection models

Introduction

Living and ministering through a period of great upheaval has presented previously unencountered stresses and strains. So how are pastors and missionaries faring through the pandemic? This reflection explores the impact of COVID-19 on pastors and missionaries through the lens of pastoral care through information gathered in semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry. This data is then placed in conversation with practical theologians Emmanuel Larrey, Jane Leach, Laurie Green, Andrew Todd, Patricia O’Connell Killen and John DeBeer, as well as with insights gleaned from experience. In alignment with confidentiality agreements and ethical standards, all identifiers have been removed and replaced with pseudonyms to protect individuals and maintain the integrity of pastoral care.

After a brief introduction to my specific context in ‘Shepherding the Shepherd,’ a ‘kaleidoscopic’ approach, defined by a varying choice of relevant tools from different scholarly approaches, is used in theological reflection. I specifically integrate facets from models proposed by Leach, and Killen and DeBeer, including Todd’s kairos moment (2019) into a broad outline created by three stages in Kolb-based models to explore experience, theory, analysis, and action. As pandemic-related challenges are explored, a deeper issue that underpins the exhaustion...
seen in ministers is identified. I then present an insight that offers a healthy way forward for the flourishing of practitioners and praxis. I also present a proposal: integrating the idea of Sabbath-rest into theological reflection models. I conclude, based on the literature and experience, that while the call to partner with God in sustaining the world remains unchanged, commitment to living and ministering from a place of biblical rest is more indispensable now than ever before amid broken-world realities such as a pandemic.

Shepherding the Shepherd

Historically, pastoral care has been viewed as crisis intervention acts ‘done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling of troubled persons, whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns’ (Clebsch and Jaekle 1967, 4). Through the contribution of practical theologians such as Lartey and Poling (2003) and Green (2009), this definition has since grown to include crisis prevention, empowerment, nurture, resilience, liberation, prevention, discipline, and resistance. Individuals engaged in ministry as a vocation are the ones who typically offer pastoral care, within, and sometimes outside, the congregations and communities they serve. Intentionality is necessary for sustaining authenticity in such practice (Cameron et al. 2010).

The very idea of pastoral care begs the question: who pastors the pastor? This question points to a broader issue in the church of caring for those in ministry and identifies the need to train ministers in self-care as an integral part of ministry training. It also highlights the need to develop trustworthy and reliable supervision of ministers and provide opportunities for healthy reorientation as important themes in pastoral theology. However, systemic problems within communities often contribute to the lack of safety, objectivity, or confidentiality. This has led to the emergence of new independent, interdenominational models that serve those in Christian ministry by extending safe and objective spaces for rest, evaluation, and counseling, within which healing, renewal, and strengthening against burnout might happen (Dodd and Magnuson 2016).

This reflection is written from my perspective as a practitioner that works with a U.S.-based, interdenominational organization that ‘shepherds the shepherd’ via guided spiritual retreats. Generous hospitality is intended to create a safe and sacred space within which change can take place (Nouwen 1986). With abundant time for enjoyment, rest, and reflection, guests participate in discussions that address challenges typically faced by those in ministry and receive personalized attention in the form of counseling sessions and follow-up care, with refreshment, renewal, and lasting transformation in mind. Encouraged to think long-term, they develop a discipline of consistent self-care (along with supervision and accountability plans) so that they can flourish, build sustainability into life and ministry, and avoid burnout.

1. Exploring Experience

A ‘zooming in’ to focus on concrete details that allows for immersion in details of the practitioner’s experience is the starting place for theological reflection (Lartey and Poling 2003). ‘A concrete, real, and accurate description honors human experience and disposes us to be able to hear what God might be saying to us through it’ (Killen and DeBeer 1994, 25). In reentering an experience, the who, what, why, etc. are detailed without judgement. Thick descriptions, verbatims, letters, journaling, poems, and prose allow for detailed descriptions. In ‘paying attention to the voices’ within the scenario, the practitioner also identifies voices that may be absent, silent, or silenced (Leach 2007).

In the United States, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on January 21, 2020. The virus spread rapidly through February and March, requiring mitigation to control transmission (Schuchat 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) published recommendations addressing suspension of travel and mass gatherings, stay-at-home orders, social distancing, the use of masks to prevent transmission, and hygienic practices such as handwashing and disinfecting products and surfaces (Pan American Health Organization 2020). In March, with hospitals struggling to handle escalating infection and mortality rates, a majority of the states issued mandatory stay-at-home orders, leading to closure of schools and businesses, cancellation of sporting and cultural events, as well as bans on gatherings of any nature (Moreland et al. 2020).

The church, as the body of Christ, considers gathering together as one of its defining features (Matt. 18:20, 1 Cor. 14:26, Heb. 10:24–25). As lockdowns went into effect, the church faced new challenges. Unable to gather for
worship, teaching, and other activities, shepherds had to find new convening and delivery methods to continue to shepherd their flocks. At guided retreats, pastors talked much about these new methods, often with angst. Whether using videoconferencing resources like Zoom or posting recorded services on YouTube (Todd and White 2019), learning to use new technology caused stress, anxiety, or excitement for most. Pastors expressed profound concern about the ability to lead well through these new challenges.

While video, podcasts, or digital gatherings worked well for most, Comer, a pastor in Oregon, rightfully observes, ‘…confession of sin, bearing each other’s burdens, emotionally intuiting where another person is at, hearing from God for another person’ represent challenges on digital platforms for a people used to these expressions in physical form (Warren and Comer 2020). On the other hand, digitalisation of church services also opened new doors. Packiam cites the example of those in senior care, nursing, or correctional facilities who began engaging in online services through the pandemic (Packiam and Hébert 2021).

With home and hospital visits, small group meetings and celebrations were also put on hold. Pastors grappled with the challenges of extending pastoral care through other means. The first COVID-19 wave rapidly claimed many lives (Treisman 2020). Funerals held under strict protocols and the inability to gather for memorial services restricted ministers in grieving with and comforting those experiencing loss. Initiatives focused on alleviating physical needs in the community, such as providing food, cleaning supplies, and medication; providing for emotional and spiritual needs through pastoral care also continued to grow with the pandemic.

The Barna Group, located in Ventura, California, is a ‘visionary research and resource company’ that is widely considered to be ‘a leading research organization focused on the intersection of faith and culture’ (Barna Group 2023). Through COVID-19 lockdowns, social distancing, and other challenges, the U.S.-based Christian polling firm conducted research among American churches in May 2020 which found that three in ten pastors (31%) struggled with their emotional well-being the most during the pandemic, while a quarter (26%) said this also included relational well-being. Half (51%) of those surveyed admitted they were tired, with two in five saying they were exhausted (41%), sad (41%), panicked (39%), and felt powerless (17%) or angry (16%). With social distancing, over half of church leaders (52%), admitted to having felt lonely in the month surveyed (Warren and Comer 2020). Three in ten pastors (29%) seriously considered leaving the ministry through 2020 (Barna Group 2022). The Barna Group’s research (2021) found that 22% of Americans said the 2020 election impacted a close relationship. Ministers in the retreats reported losing friendships or church members over differences. A 2022 study further revealed an alarming sharp uptick in pastoral burnout, with 42% of pastors surveyed considering resignation, with stress, loneliness, and political division nationwide as well as in congregations cited as reasons.

With the new availability of vaccinations in 2021, gatherings resumed, albeit with safety restrictions in place. Pastors found that a third of their members failed to return to church (Barna Group 2020). At the same time, research showed that around 95 million adults were exploring the Bible, many for the first time, during the pandemic (American Bible Society 2021). Pastors had to consider how to engage with this opportunity. The uncertainties that came with constantly changing recommendations by the WHO, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), or governments also contributed to restlessness and stress.

In the retreats I led, pastors identified ongoing challenges such as added labour and expenses that came with sterilising church facilities, finding new ways to serve communion and alternatives to the use of books or objects that would be touched by human hands. In the American context, the lack of handshaking, hugs, or smiles (now hidden by masks) also contributed negatively to the church experience.

Pastors further found their congregants polarized by opinions on safety mandates such as the wearing of masks and social-distancing recommendations. This, along with the divisive impact of the 2020 U.S. presidential election was described as ‘devastating.’ Barna Group’s research (2021) found that 22% of Americans said the 2020 election impacted a close personal relationship. Retreat guests identified with this, and reported losing friendships or church members over political differences. Difficulty in re-engaging with people in person after a long period of just digital engagement, the struggle to ‘extrovert’ again after ‘introverting’ for over a year, the discipline and energy required to re-enter the world of social interaction were cited as ‘exhausting.’ Most talked about how drastically some relationships had changed through the election and pandemic.

Missionaries that attended the guided retreats also reported complex challenges posed by the pandemic. Most struggled with uncertainty as they found themselves stranded and unable to return to regions in which they served. This disrupted continuity in their family life, children’s education, work, team efforts, etc. Setting up home and providing for their families for an extended period of time stateside were unplanned-for financial burdens. A Bible translator expressed frustration at the momentum lost in working with a specific unreach tribe that had taken...
years to build up, only to be torn down by the pandemic. Some returned only to find their churches on the verge of shutting down due to financial challenges precipitated by the pandemic. Others reported financial losses, as churches could no longer support parishioners financially.

Practitioner’s Perspectives

A ‘kaleidoscopic’ approach to theological reflection allows flexibility in choosing a ‘language’ (words, music, art, etc.) that articulates experience best. Tools here include creative approaches such as the use of parables, storytelling, music, and art (Graham, Walton, and Ward 2005). For example, in reflecting on the retreatants’ experiences, I relied on verbatim reports. Killen and DeBeer (1994) suggest that feelings manifest themselves in imagery (symbols of experience) that can then lead to discovery of meaning. I was drawn to images when reflecting on my own deeply personal experiences (Appendix A and B). Leach (2007) emphasises ‘paying attention to one’s own voice’, identifying where one is within the scenario, and recognizing where instincts and perceptions might be coming from. I found this helpful, as reflecting through the experiences of ministers during the pandemic was a reflexive process for me.

Reliance on the Holy Spirit, on scripture – a mirror that reveals what is in the heart (James 1:22–25) – and on community for discernment and objectivity in assessing one’s own voice accurately is absolutely vital for the Christian practitioner. I was aware that a posture of humility, teachability, intentionality, respect, openness, and enthusiasm helps nurture a healthy sense of self-awareness that contributes to healthy praxis. From my experience, I’ve seen psychometrics, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers-Briggs Company 2014) help practitioners grow in self-awareness, stay in tune with personal thoughts, emotions, motivations, and desires and guard against transference (Lartey and Poling 2003). Healthy practitioners are also aware of personal biases, distortions, and blind spots.

As retreat leader, I spent hours listening to pastors and missionaries talk about their experiences. Extending ‘non-possessive warmth’ (Lartey and Poling 2003, 96) and resisting judgement, I sought to listen with openness and respect, to practice a greater service by listening rather than by speaking (Bonhoeffer 1954, quoted in Lartey and Poling 2003). With the focus on extending ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers 1975, quoted in Lartey 2003, Graham 1999) a sacred space was created, and intimate sharing became possible (Lartey and Poling 2003). I persevered in setting aside my own perception and sought ‘interpathy’ – ‘the bracketing of one’s personal beliefs and values in temporarily entering a very different world of beliefs and values’ without rushing to conclusions and judgements (Augsburger 1986, quoted in Lartey and Poling 2003, 93).

I was aware that ignoring voices would lead to incomplete information and to unreliable descriptions of scenarios. Thus, I paid careful attention to the many voices in each scenario – ones that were clearly present, absent, or silenced (Leach 2007). It was obvious that while the voices of many in ministry, the mass media, the WHO, CDC, and government were heard, voices of congregants, family members or friends, and those served by the church were missing. In ‘paying attention to the practitioner’s own voice,’ I explored my own thoughts, feelings, attitudes, judgements, beliefs, biases, etc., aware that they could distort my ability to see where God is at work (Leach 2007).

Clarifying my role in the scenario (Leach 2007) helped me stay focused on caring for pastors and missionaries in the midst of the challenges described above and to resist taking on unnecessary burdens.

Noticeably missing in current theological reflection models, however, are distorted voices, blind spots, and one’s unconscious voice (repressed feelings, memories, habits, etc.), which are often more powerful than voices that are heard. As Freud writes, underestimating the unconscious voice is problematic because repressed or hidden feelings and memories exert a powerful influence on feelings, judgements, and behaviour (Freud 1915), potentially resulting in a distorted perception of reality. In understanding these influences on judgement, feelings, and behaviour, a discerning practitioner would seek the wisdom of others in community and seek personal insight via therapy, if needed. Similarly, in the search for an image that captures experience (Killen and DeBeer 1994), a prudent practitioner remains aware that subjectivity could displace objectivity in reflection.

Killen and DeBeer (1994) encourage the practitioner to ‘connect’ with the experience by pausing to discern how experience is manifested in feelings. As I paused to reflect on what I was hearing in the retreats, I was aware of exhaustion. I was also aware of a sense of impatience in wanting to ‘get on with it, and on to solutions,’ while my training told me not to rush things. I realised I was picking up what many of the retreatants were experiencing: exhaustion, helplessness, and unrealistic expectations. Aware that this stage in reflection relies on subjectivity, I was careful to guard against extreme individuality, independence, and isolation, which are detrimental to healthy
praxis. I was mindful that the next stage in reflection would lead to a broader perspective within which the scenario could be framed more objectively.

2. Theory: Reframing Experience within a Larger Context
Next, I stepped back from details to grasp the ‘big picture’ – a 360-degree, multidisciplinary perspective created by objective voices to further explore experience. In ‘paying attention to the wider issues,’ the practitioner’s ‘instinctive feel for God’s presence is brought to consciousness and tested in dialogue with others – both in the ministry situation, the classroom and in the library’ (Leach 2007, 28). As I ‘zoomed out’ of the details to frame the details within a larger context, my intuition was tested against a myriad of perspectives offered by others (Leach 2007).

While Pattison’s and Killen and DeBeer’s approaches focus on theology as foundational to theological reflection, a practitioner seeking a holistic approach would naturally invite multiple disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, history, and economics into the conversation. Most models separate theology out from other disciplines and focus on the latter first. While this ultimately directs reflection towards theology, it creates an artificial separation between what is considered secular or sacred. This is problematic for the practitioner who sees all of the created order as sacred. Neglecting other disciplines would lead to incomplete analysis. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge all disciplines as ‘equal players,’ while maintaining theology’s central position in theological reflection.

Scripture affirms that there is wisdom in the counsel of many (Prov. 11:14). A multidisciplinary approach helps create comprehensive understanding of possible scenarios. An interdisciplinary approach is essential in addressing diverse world views, in identifying cultural nuances, differences, and inferences specific to situations; in assessing contexts accurately; and in the execution of action plans. As issues are examined in the light of different disciplines, rich perspectives that emerge reveal an informed way forward.

Ministers at the retreats expressed the need for discernment, to listen with openness, to resist misinformation and distortion. Science offered much information on the virus, disease, safety recommendations, treatment options, and on learning how to live with the pandemic. Likewise, politics, sociology, economics, psychology, and history offered important perspectives and insights. Psychology addressed topics such as stress management, setting healthy priorities and expectations, and explored the impact of isolation, digitalisation of services, social distancing, social isolation, and lack of physical touch on individuals and communities. Local church history shed light on values and expectations set by a church’s leadership and congregation. Economics addressed financial challenges caused by the pandemic. Questions such as ‘who decided it should happen?’ or ‘who benefited most from that?’ helped clarify power structures that exist (Green 2009, 21). Other perspectives such as ethics, personal values, family history, and academic perspectives also offered insights. Theological perspectives on work and rest proved to be key, as they ultimately led to action steps discussed later in this reflection. These were drawn from a variety of sources: scripture, Christian tradition, and community.

A Deeper Issue is Identified
The Barna Group’s research (2021, 2022) cited earlier clearly provides a tangible picture of the impact of the pandemic on pastors and churches. This was confirmed consistently by my experience at the retreats. Three out of four ministers encountered in retreats said they were exhausted, overwhelmed, or discouraged. However, in zooming out of pandemic-related scenarios and looking at other data that are available, another perspective emerged that is illuminating.

Barna’s 2021–2022 findings show striking similarities to their pre-COVID era data. Emotional exhaustion, loneliness, a lack of safety within congregations, and inadequate authentic support systems are experienced frequently by pastors (Barna Group 2017). While pastors interact with numerous people on a regular basis, they frequently lack life-giving relationships (mentors, friends, or counselors) from whom they can receive the care they need (Barna Group 2017). This corroborates Irvine’s findings from 1997, that ‘geographical, professional, interdisciplinary, inter-professional, social, and spiritual isolation’ are stressors frequently experienced by pastoral workers (Irvine 1997, quoted in Lyall 2001, 149). Dodd and Magnuson (2016), in the context of their pastoral care work, confirm that pastors often minimize or ignore their own needs, lack adequate self-care, and as a result often serve from a place of emotional ill-health, which results in incongruent public and private lives.
Based on Barna’s data, it is evident that rather than creating a new crisis in clergy, the pandemic has brought to the surface pre-existing, underlying, unaddressed, and unresolved issues that put ministers at high risk for burnout. This was confirmed by pastors and missionaries in the guided retreats, who admitted to lifestyles in which ‘doing ministry’ takes priority over ‘being.’ Excessive ‘busyness’ and a lack of healthy margins and boundaries were often cited as causes for sustained adrenaline arousal, which led to exhaustion, stress-related diseases, and dysfunction (Hart 1995). Even though ministers were around people much of the time, they said they lacked life-giving relationships and people they could trust with their personal problems and challenges. A lack of healthy margins and boundaries, the inability to say ‘no,’ anxiety in being judged by others, and being excessively busy were other scenarios described by retreatants. This lack of self-care and exhaustion was clearly confirmed by results seen in psychometrics used in counseling sessions at the retreats, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers-Briggs Company 2014) and the Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis test.

Kairos Moments

While theory is helpful in theological reflection, I agree wholeheartedly with Todd’s perspective (2019) that insight often comes when the practitioner resists being driven by time (chronos) and discerns God’s gift of a kairos moment – the culmination of prayer and contemplation, not merely an academic or cognitive accomplishment. This cannot be rushed or forced. It emerges when God interrupts and breathes insight and life into dry bones (Thompson, Pattison, and Thompson 2019).

At this stage in reflection, I chose to take a Sabbath-style intentional pause from reflection: to cease from reflection, to refrain from rushing into analysis. I let experience and the theory I had explored ‘sit’ for a bit (Killen and DeBeer 1994). I opened myself up for insight. This intentional pause was a time of surrender, of relinquishing control, of laying down my ‘interests and pursuits’ (Sherman 2005, 45). I sought to experience what Buchanan calls ‘an attitude’ that both ‘empties us and fills us’ (Buchanan 2006, 3, 63). I meditated, journaled, and engaged in duco divina (contemplative doodling), which often articulated complex ideas more easily than words could (see Appendix A and B).

Allowing my mind to rest allowed me to think in new ways (Buchanan 2006). It helped me cease trying to predict or control outcomes (Dawn 1989). It helped me experience implicit trust in God and in the process itself (Wirza 2006). I stepped away from the data and opened myself to insight that comes in kairos moments (Todd 2019). It helped me listen to many voices rather than obsess over a few (Leach 2007).

It became evident to me that people in ministry held God’s call to ministry in high regard, but often at the expense of self-care. They were willing to serve even when exhausted and lacked a consistent Sabbath practice in their lives. Time for rest, spiritual disciplines, Sabbath, silence, and solitude were all too often sidelined by work. This suggested that biblical ideas of work and rest were not practiced in balance with equal conviction or passion.

In the Sabbath breaks I took after each retreat, two clear insights came to me during kairos moments in reflection: (1) the understanding that lack of adequate self-care and neglect of the biblical idea of rest, especially consistent Sabbath practice, were root causes for burnout (this theory was later confirmed by my MA research project); and (2) the idea that adding Sabbath-style pauses to theological reflection could help bring health in reflexivity, depth, and clarity into the reflection process, enabling both practitioner and praxis to flourish. I discovered that Sabbath-style pauses can help establish healthy rhythms of work and rest in reflection. While they can fit into various stages in reflection, Sabbath pauses are powerful when practiced before analysis and action, as well as at the end of a pastoral cycle.

3. Analysis and Action

An important facet of this stage in reflection is to consider strategies for assimilation and action. Journaling or sharing with a friend or group are examples of methods that can help consolidate experience. Intentionality in carving out time for articulation of concrete action plans aid the practitioner in integrating lessons learned into his or her lifestyle and foundation. For example, the practitioner that chooses to practice theological reflection as a spiritual discipline might set aside time each day for personal reflection or meet weekly with a group for reflection. The accountability, encouragement, and guidance needed can be found in community.
I agree wholeheartedly with Killen and DeBeer (1994) that transformation must be measurable whether it is a small shift in perception or attitude, or a paradigm shift towards a whole new world. Faith in action brings theology to life in experience (Green 2009). This includes action plans for assimilation of lessons learned through reflection, changes in decision-making or behaviour, foundations for new reflection cycles, course correction, realignment of values, strategies for ongoing engagement or care, and opportunities to engage in society. Theological reflection as community, regardless of differences, creates space for respectful dialogue and an opportunity for transformation. Within this space, constructive dialogue becomes possible. Oppression can be identified and challenged openly (Larty 2003). Established norms and barriers can be confronted, torn down, and replaced by new values. Such community-initiated liberation leads to healing, restoration, and lasting change that is accepted by the group as a whole. Planning action and accountability ensures accomplishment of goals (Killen and DeBeer 1994).

Leach’s model does not identify ‘action’ as an explicit stage in theological reflection. Rather, action is implicit in ‘attention to the mission of the church,’ since ministry is exercised by the church, and action must align with the church’s understanding of mission (Leach 2007). The fruit of theological reflection is insight, which leads to transformation. This includes what the practitioner would do differently as a result of reflection (Killen and DeBeer 1994). Action must be the result of ‘a hunger to see God’s will done’ (Green 2009, 24). Since mission is meant to be rooted in the church, resulting action must align with ecclesiology (Leach 2007). As new perspectives lead to transformation, new experiences may invite practitioners into new cycles that emerge (Green 2009). Action has the potential to spiral into new experiences and reflection cycles (Green 2009). For example, only time will tell what the future holds as the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to mutate and spread around the world. Much remains unknown regarding its long-term physical, emotional, and spiritual impact. Pastoral care workers will continue to invest time, effort, and energy as they discern their way in the midst of the pandemic, as well as in a world that is forever changed by it.

A Communion service at the end of each retreat provided guests with the opportunity to be ‘re-membered’ with God and others as they remembered Christ’s work on the cross (Patton 1993). It was here that they often connected commitment to insight as God met them in death so life could be lived to the fullest, and in resurrection so that the status quo could be thoroughly shaken up (Bennett 2013). Restless hearts were stilled as they found their rest in God (Augustine, quoted in McGrath 2017). Remembering Christ’s sacrifice thus lifted practitioners into the gospel story and into transformation (Ward 2017). This demonstrates a belief that is foundational to pastoral care: ministry belongs to God. The minister discerns what God is doing and has the privilege of partnering with him (Blackaby, Blackaby, and King 2008).

Retreat guests in 2021 and 2022 left with tangible action plans towards better self-care. This included follow-up counseling, therapy, or pastoral care; setting a consistent Sabbath practice in place; building healthy margins into lives and ministry; investing in life-giving relationships; or spending more time with their spouse and family. Plans were set in place for accountability. As their retreat leader, I would follow up with them for a year, providing opportunity for further conversation and processing.

My action plan included consistency in my own personal Sabbath practice. I rested after each retreat and took intentional time for theological reflection. I also took intentional Sabbath-style pauses during reflection – before and after action. The idea of incorporating Sabbath rest into the pastoral cycle began growing on me as I saw value in slowing down and resting during reflection. I experienced growth in self-awareness and in the ability to flex and grow with praxis. I concluded that these insights gleaned from reflection (discussed in the next section) are foundational to flourishing and health in life and ministry.

Insights Gleaned through Reflection

1. Sabbath as Integral to Imago Dei and Missio Dei
According to Wenham’s (1987) exegesis of the Genesis account of creation, humans are blessed to be successful. God provides generously for all of humanity’s physical, emotional, and spiritual needs and functions: a beautiful world to live in, food for nourishment, relationship for connection, and work and partnership for deep fulfilment. A significant blessing that is often overlooked is God’s provision of rest, which sets the Genesis account apart from ancient creation myths such as the Enuma Elish, in which the gods enjoy leisure while humans labor (Atkinson 1990). God, in contrast, rests after his work of creation and invites his creation into his Sabbath (Gen. 2:2–3). Rest
is as much a part of God’s nature as is work. Therefore, it is only rational that work and rest are important aspects of the imago Dei that humans bear.

According to the Genesis account, humans are created on the sixth day, just before the seventh day, when God rests. Humans thus begin their existence from a place of rest, in intimate relationship with their Creator, understanding their place and role in creation. Eugene Peterson (2004) offers a theological perspective that supports this argument. In Jewish tradition, a new day begins in the evening. It begins with rest. The work that follows rest is understood to be a response to God for this gift of rest. This sets a rhythm in place – rest is not meant to follow work and exhaustion; it is meant to precede it. It is understood as God’s gift of grace for each new day. Peterson cautions pastors against ‘the sin of reversing the rhythms’ (2004, 55).

Sustained adrenaline arousal in life and work leads to exhaustion, stress-related diseases, and dysfunction (Hart 1995). I agree with Buchanan, who suggests a healthy way forward: ‘Sabbath imparts the rest of God – actual physical, mental and spiritual rest, but also the rest of God – the things of God’s nature and presence we miss in our busyness’ (2006, 3). This rest acknowledges God’s sovereignty; invites the practitioner to relinquish control and practice God’s presence and provision; declares ministry belongs to God; creates sacred space for healing, new perspectives, and strategies; and strengthens the soul with resilience and celebration (Buchanan 2006).

Sabbath is thus a life-giving rhythm instituted by God for human flourishing, including ongoing effectiveness in ministry. In establishing and guarding a consistent Sabbath rhythm, humans stay connected with their creator and enjoy his presence (Matt. 1:23) and full provision (2 Cor. 9:8). As a result, they flourish (Jer. 17:8), even in the midst of fallen world realities such as a pandemic. God invites all of humanity, including pastoral care workers, to live and serve from this place of rest. Neglecting the biblical idea of Sabbath, which includes consistent and adequate self-care as part of a healthy lifestyle, leads to serving out of unrest, exhaustion, and dysfunction.

### Defining Sabbath

Mark Buchanan (2006), in The Rest of God, defines Sabbath as an invitation to stop and rest: a ‘stopping’ that imparts not just the physical, mental, and spiritual rest of God, but also the ‘rest of God’ – everything about ‘God’s nature and presence we miss in our busyness’ (2006, 3). He suggests this gift from God is essential to one’s well-being, as it strengthens the soul with resilience and celebration. He describes different facets of acknowledging God’s sovereignty in ‘stopping’ – stopping to think in new ways, in looking for what’s missing, in seeing how big God is, in finding redemption, in relinquishing control, in guarding against legalism, in being centered in practicing the presence of God, in enjoying creation, in becoming whole, in tasting the kingdom, in hearing God’s voice, in picking up the pieces, and in glimpsing what eternity looks like (Buchanan 2006). Sabbath-keeping, in Buchanan’s opinion, is ‘a day and an attitude’ that both ‘emplies us and fills us’ (Buchanan 2006, 3, 63).

The Judeo-Christian idea of Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word Shabbat, which means ‘to cease, to desist’ and points to a weekly rhythm in which humans are to cease work, to cease ‘our trying to be God’ (Dawn 1989, 28–35). This suggests absolute surrender, relinquishing control, ‘laying aside our own interests and pursuits’ (Sherman 2005, 45). It implies implicit trust in God (Wirza 2006). It acknowledges that ministry belongs to God, that humans have the privilege of participating in it. Barton (2006) views relationship with God as central to this idea, since rest flows from God and cites intentionality as key in cultivating a rhythm that is predictable, personal, and realistic. This investment of time, effort, and commitment in developing a relationship with God and healthy rhythms makes Sabbath practice a spiritual discipline. In arranging life around a pattern of six days of work and one day for rest, Sabbath practice becomes ‘a way of doing life’ (Barton 2006, 134).

The importance of community is implicit in Sabbath. The Sabbath meal is a celebration with family and friends. Within the context of fellowship, Sabbath is restful and enjoyable ‘family time’ – an invitation to cease serving and join our heavenly father at his banquet table as his beloved (Abraham 2012, 43). It is also time to delight in God’s good creation, as modeled by God himself. Buchanan adds ‘play’, ‘dance’, and ‘laugh’ to this list (2006, 144). Some Jewish sources view Shabbat as derived from Hebrew words shevet, ‘to dwell’ (FIRM Staff 2018). Thus, the traditional Shabbat greeting, Shabbat Shalom, implies that dwelling or resting in God leads to shalom – wholeness, completeness, and peace.

Scripture posits Sabbath as an important part of God’s design for humanity’s existence, purpose, and flourishing. ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27). It affirms that humans are meant to live in fellowship with their creator, with one another, and with all of creation. It positions humans as
sons and daughters, and representatives of God. Rest ensures creativity and fruitfulness and is a safeguard against exploitation, neglect, or abuse (Atkinson 1990). Sabbath is therefore a blessing that promises rest, renewal, and celebration amid the brokenness and busyness of life so humans can thrive, not just survive; it is a weekly rhythm set in place by God for the flourishing of his people. I argue that when humans live and serve from this place of rest, wholeness, and abundance in God, they are positioned to represent him well to all of creation.

Within this discussion, there are nuanced reasons why people in ministry find it challenging to embrace a consistent Sabbath practice and healthy self-care rhythms in their lives. For example, successful ministers may struggle with releasing control. They may ‘own’ the ministry they are involved in rather than work from the biblical perspective that ministry belongs to God. They may struggle with trusting God or surrendering to him. They may stay overly busy and fail to take restful breaks, with the tyranny of the urgent or unending needs around them eroding the possibility of establishing healthy rhythms in their lives. Rest may happen only when exhaustion forces one to cease work. There may be concern that rest is wrongly perceived as laziness or luxuriating by congregations or financial supporters. Ministers may have false images of God (Ignatius 1996). Goldsberry (1989) cites three examples: God as mind reader blocking communication, God as controller blocking personal responsibility, or God as demanding executive blocking rest. Also, ministers may fail to embrace God as the giver of good gifts who invites them to delight in the Sabbath experience (Wirza 2006).

In summary, Sabbath is a life-giving, weekly rhythm instituted by God for human flourishing, including ongoing effectiveness in ministry. A Sabbath practice is an intentional cessation from work one day each week in a way that establishes a predictable, healthy, weekly rhythm of work and rest (Barton 2010). Sabbath includes rest, play, life-giving activities and people, and community time. It is time for silence, solitude, and prayer within which evaluation, reflection, celebration, and course correction are possible. By establishing and guarding a consistent Sabbath rhythm, humans stay connected with their Creator, enjoy his presence and full provision, and flourish, even amid broken world realities (Matt. 1:23, 2 Cor. 9:8, Jer. 17:8). God invites all of humanity, including people in ministry, to live and serve from this place of shalom. With all these benefits, it is hardly surprising that the Sabbath is a commandment requiring obedience (Exod. 20:8–11). It also resonates with the law of Christ in the New Testament – to love God and love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:28–31) – because loving oneself implies generous self-care, which includes embracing God’s desire that we live and serve from a place of rest. Neglecting this invitation leads to serving out of unrest, exhaustion, and ultimately dysfunction. Thus, I argue that just as Sabbath is integral to imago Dei, it is also central to participation in missio Dei.

2. Proposal: Sabbath Rest as a Stage in Theological Reflection

I next explore how the idea of Sabbath rest can be integrated into theological reflection. Current models provide the practitioner ample structure to reflect on experience and to move towards insight and action using a variety of tools that aid in reflection. However, they do not offer an intentional pause in the cycle. My argument is based on the idea that the discipline of Sabbath rest is foundational to human flourishing and human participation in missio Dei. Drawn to ideas of sitting in stillness, kairos moments, and the centrality of Sabbath rest in both imago Dei and participation in missio Dei, I next explore the idea adding Sabbath rest to a framework created by three broad stages based on Kolb’s learning cycle: experience, theory, and analysis and action (Fig. 1).

I argue that when used within the context of theological reflection, the idea of intentional Sabbath rest creates sacred space for image, imagination, and kairos moments to emerge. Ceasing reflection and entering Sabbath-style rest sets the stage for insight, celebration, and renewal. An intentional pause for celebration allows the practitioner to acknowledge God’s presence and provision, to express gratitude, and to set up ‘stones of remembrance’ at the end of each cycle (1 Sam. 7:12). It allows for celebration at any point in the cycle (Green 2009). Green’s (2009) idea of celebration resonates with God’s perspective of celebrating his creation as good and which can be expressed in different ways – through prayers, parties, commemorative meals, activities, etc. Communities are strengthened as gratitude for the past, joy for the present, and hope for the future are cultivated by intentional pauses for celebration. In releasing control and resting in God, the practitioner affirms that ministry truly belongs to God, and trusts him for the outcomes. Rest ensures healthy movement into new pastoral cycles, healthy rhythms in praxis, and, potentially, protection for the practitioner from burnout. This nurtures both faith and praxis.

Integrating Sabbath rest into theological reflection resonates with Killen and DeBeer’s (1994) perspective that practitioners adopt a standpoint of exploration – a defining value in spiritual disciplines that allows for new perspectives. It affirms that ‘sitting in stillness,’ rather than rushing through analysis, can lead to the discovery of
Figure 1. Author’s Model proposing Integration of Sabbath rest into the Pastoral Cycles.

The biblical idea of Sabbath rest transforms the pastoral cycle into a dynamic wheel that has built-in safeguards to promote healthy rhythms and flourishing in pastoral care workers; thus protecting them from burnout in midst of broken world realities the busyness of ongoing life, as well as in ministry and reflection.

The image that symbolises experience, clarifies what is unknown, and, by offering a safe distance from the intensity of experience, opens the door to new ideas leading towards meaning, towards action (Killen and DeBeer 1994). It agrees with Todd’s (2019) idea that underpinned by prayer and contemplation, theological reflection becomes a spiritual discipline and opens the door to *kairos* moments that can come at any point in the cycle. In recognising the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word in the world, it resonates with Green’s idea that theological reflection is a tool for ‘following Jesus in the Way’ (2009, 27). Spiritual disciplines nurture healthy self-awareness, growth, and transformation, as well as better understanding of God and his work in the world (Munitz and Endean 1996).
They can help practitioners flourish as well as remain relevant in a constantly changing world. Moreover, an intentional, meaningful pause to discern what God is saying in the reflection process facilitates deeper personal and corporate understanding. Ceasing reflection also engages the unconscious (which is not mentioned in current models of reflection) and creates space for the revelation of strong and driving underlying thoughts and motivations (Freud 1915). It also allows groups to take responsibility for action plans together, which builds trust in communities.

In terms of practical application, integrating the idea of Sabbath rest into models of theological reflection is simple and versatil. The practitioner may choose to pause after gathering details through exploration and theory stages before the analysis and action stage in reflection. An intentional pause taken at the end of a pastoral cycle enables the practitioner to intentionally cease work and celebrate accomplishments. This allows the practitioner to finish well, to celebrate, to release control, before moving on to the next stage or cycle. It also allows the practitioner to enter the next stage in reflection or a new pastoral cycle from a fresh place of ‘restedness’ and health (Peterson 2004).

I propose that using a ‘kaleidoscopic’ model with built-in room for Sabbath-style pauses, such as the one I outline, can help bridge some gaps that exist in current models of theological reflection by providing intentional space for incubation, contemplation, discovery, and celebration. Pausing from reflection encourages the discovery of important hidden unconscious voices, for the emergence of image and imagination. It also encourages constructive ways forward in consolidation of lessons learned through reflection, action, celebration, and rest before new cycles. It ensures health in both the completion and the beginning of pastoral cycles. Further research and testing of such a model is necessary, and outcomes would add value and depth to theological reflection, and it is my hope that this article may serve to offer a foundation for this.

Conclusion

In exploring the impact of COVID-19 on ‘shepherds,’ it became apparent that burnout was not caused merely by the pandemic. Rather, it was precipitated by underlying issues that had been simmering beneath the surface long before the pandemic. Lack of adequate self-care and neglect of the biblical idea of rest, especially consistent Sabbath practice, presented themselves as root causes of burnout.

A constructive way forward emerged from two insights gleaned through reflection. Firstly, an understanding that when the discipline of Sabbath rest and participation in God’s ministry are valued and embraced equally by the practitioner, life and ministry flow from a place of biblical rest and health. This enables the practitioner to thrive and go the distance without burning out, even amid broken-world challenges such as a pandemic. By committing to Sabbath rest and consistent self-care, practitioners are better equipped to represent their creator well, with authenticity and integrity, as they partner with him in his work in redeeming a broken world.

Secondly, the notion of adding Sabbath-style pauses is essential to the pastoral cycle. Using stages from Kolb-based models, elements from other models, and Todd’s kairos moment, I offered a kaleidoscopic approach to theological reflection and incorporated the biblical idea of Sabbath-rest into its stages. I conclude that incorporating the biblical idea of Sabbath rest into the pastoral cycle seeks to carve out intentional time and space for deep insight as well as ensure healthy rhythms in practitioner and praxis. In manifesting the above, practitioners would not only find the life-giving time and space they so richly deserve but also experience personal edification in the process.

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Appendices

A. Sample from practitioner’s reflection on living and serving from a place of rest

Practitioner’s Reflection:
Sabbath rest and theological reflection as life-giving rhythms
B. Sample from practitioner’s reflection on practice

Practitioner’s Reflection on Practice:
Serving as Christ Serves