



Promoting healthy ministry:

a study guide

Introduction

This aims to help ministers think about how they can optimise and enhance their health and wellbeing, both within the context of their ministry and their life in general. It is recognised that Christian ministry can be both extremely fulfilling and very demanding, and because of this it is important that we take appropriate measures to protect and enhance our health, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The various sections in this guide are designed to help us do that.

The biblical basis

The Bible provides some interesting passages which can help to inform our conversation in the subject of health and wellbeing. They may be broadly divided into three areas:

a. The place of work in our lives

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it” Genesis 2:15.

Work appears to be designed to be fulfilling and important to us. This is especially so within the context of ministerial vocation.

Some questions to think about:

- How does your sense of vocation and call impact upon your day to day ministerial role?
- How do you understand ministry?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of this?
- What impact does this have on how you experience your ministry and your wellbeing?

b. Pastoral care and support

Many of us are familiar with the principle of ‘watching over one another in love’, and in Galatians 6:2 we read “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ”. These words imply a mutual accountability and honesty with one another as ministers which includes those times when we or our colleagues suffer ill health.

Some questions to think about:

- How able are you to be honest with your circuit colleagues about your health and wellbeing?
- Do you allow yourself to seek support?
- What role does your family and friends have in supporting you?

c. The principle of sabbath rest

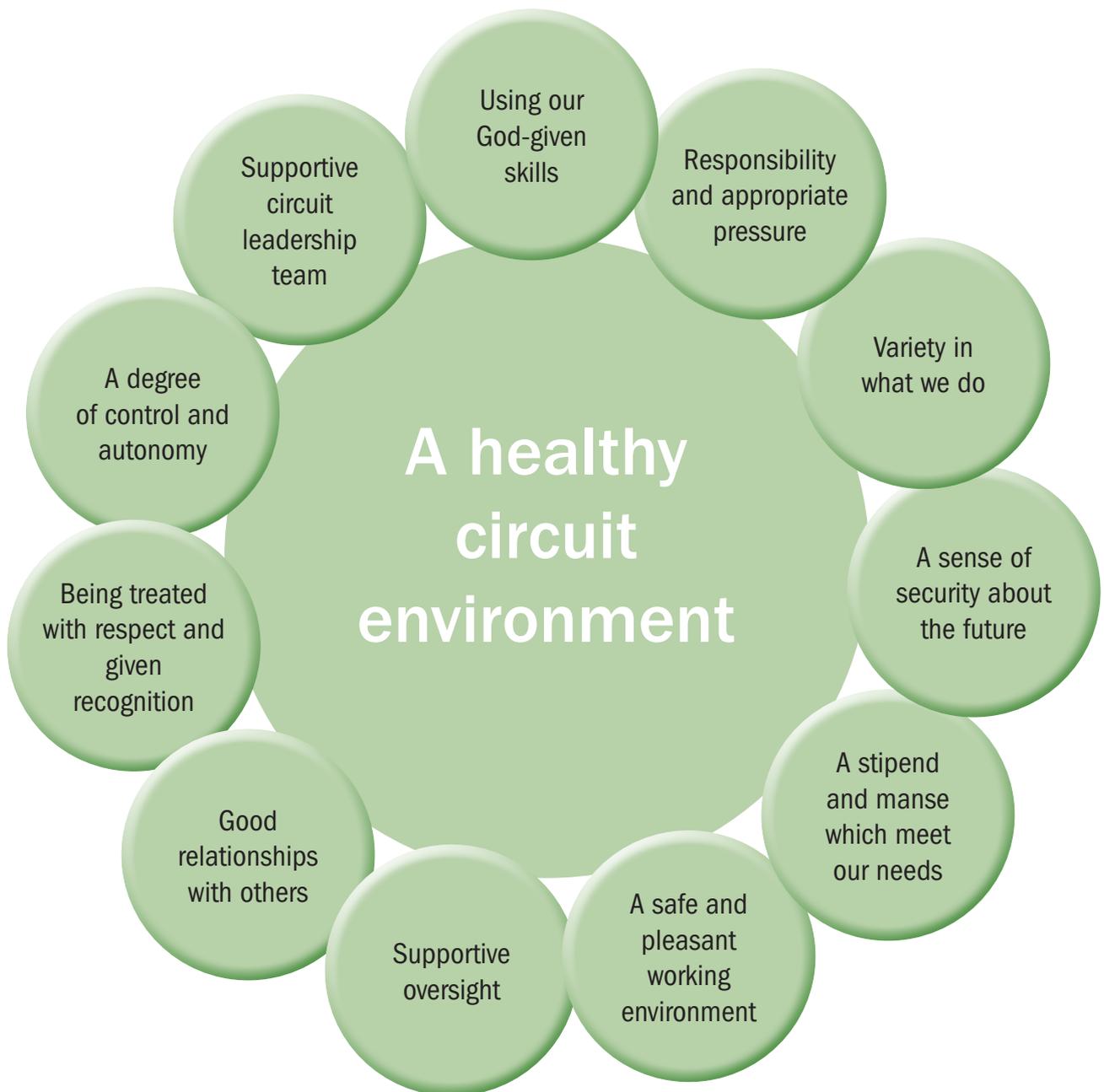
There are many instances in the New Testament where Jesus withdrew to a lonely place and prayed (eg Luke 5:16). He clearly needed time for refreshment. In 1 Kings 19:5 we read that Elijah lay down under a tree and fell asleep. Elijah had completed an intense period in his prophetic ministry, and was exhausted.

Some questions to think about:

- How do you make time for rest from your ministerial work?
- How does your sense of vocation and calling work itself out in terms of protecting time for yourself and your family or friends?
- Are you able to switch off when relaxing, or is there a sense of always being ‘on duty’? If so, why is this?

A healthy environment in which to minister

The diagram on the next page shows some of the elements which may contribute to us being able to flourish in our vocation within the context of the circuit. These are based upon feedback from ministers and research.



Thinking about the diagram,

- How do you react to the various elements which may make up a healthy circuit?
- What strikes you as being particularly positive and fulfilling in your circuit life?
- What appears to be negative and unhelpful, adversely impacting on your health and wellbeing?
- What can you or others do to improve things?
- How do you understand and own the different ministries in your circuit? What tensions and opportunities does this create?
- How do you function together as a team, for example dealing with conflict, providing cover for each other?
- How do you work with a colleague who may refuse to work collaboratively, or has a different view of ministry to you?
- How are you accountable to each other?
- How are you able to raise difficult issues in a safe way?

What can we as individuals do?

Whilst no circuit is perfect and will have both its strengths and weaknesses, the other element we need to consider is the part we can play in enhancing our own health and wellbeing. The diagram above provides some ideas about positive approaches to personal health, resilience and sustainability in ministry.

- Which aspects in the diagram are you using to enhance your health and wellbeing?
- Where could you make improvements?
- What are the factors that make it difficult to take steps to improve your health and wellbeing?
- Who can you talk to when you need to access support in any of these areas?



Should we put boundaries round our ministry?

There are of course many models and understandings of ministry. However, for many of us, ministry is not what we

do but what we are, and our calling goes to the heart of our identity. This can be an enhancing and positive experience, but conversely it can lead to issues about boundaries between ministerial 'work' and the rest of our lives. If we don't get these issues in a healthy and balanced perspective

we may find ourselves in difficulties over (for example) how to switch off, when to make ourselves unavailable, and the guilt that can easily result.

Here are some issues to think about:

- Is praying on one's own for a member of the congregation who is ill defined as 'work', or something that the minister does as a fellow disciple? Where do the boundaries lie?
- If church members who have demanding full time jobs give up two evenings a week to run a youth club should the minister also 'volunteer' beyond the expectations of their circuit role? What would be defined as ministerial 'work' in this example?
- In secular employment people who hold down responsible jobs will often think about their work at the weekend and in the evening. They don't consider they are at work. Where would the boundary sit for a minister who is working from the manse for much of the time, and in an idle moment turns a thorny problem over in her mind?

Inevitably, your own response to these scenarios will be personal. However, in practical terms you may want to think about the boundaries you put around your ministry in the following areas:

- When are you contactable by phone and how do you filter out calls when you are 'off duty'?
- How do you manage email contact, with the expectations people often have of receiving an instantaneous reply?
- Are you able to set boundaries to the working day so that you have time for yourself? What about physical boundaries in the manse to ensure you have a separate area which doesn't relate to work?

Next steps

In working through these questions it is likely that some issues may resonate with you. If so, it is important to follow these up with further reflection and action. You might want to try to identify what particular steps you and others can take in order to improve your health and wellbeing.

Further resources and guidance

There are a growing number of documents and other resources about ministerial health and wellbeing. This study guide has sought to focus on this topic in a broad way, looking at major issues which can impact positively or negatively on ministerial resilience. There are also resources targeted at specific issues such as long term sickness absence, setting

up a phased return to work and mental health. A first step is to look at the wellbeing section of the Methodist Church website: www.methodist.org.uk/ministers-and-office-holders/wellbeing.

In addition:

Supporting ministers who experience ill health - a good practice guide (part 1)

This was agreed by the Conference in 2011. It contains guidance about reporting absence and accessing support when you are, principles for supporting someone on long term sick leave, advice on how to construct a phased return to work (with worked examples), a case study about supporting a minister experiencing mental health issues, guidance about confidentiality and record keeping, and details of sources of further advice.

Supporting ministers who experience ill health - a good practice guide (part 2)

This was agreed by the Conference in 2013. It contains information about healthy working environments and ways of working, practical suggestions on work/life balance issues, stress and wellbeing, and suggestions about approaches to take when relationships become strained or break down with the circuit. Finally, it looks at how to approach situations which arise when, for example a minister refuses to acknowledge they are ill or hides the fact, and how to support those on long-term sick leave.

Support for those living with disabilities

This guide looks at what we mean by disability and impairment, both from a legal perspective and more broadly. It gives advice on how to obtain professional assessments, for example for those living with dyslexia, and what practical support may be available. It takes a case study approach, looking at conditions such as arthritis, depression and Parkinson's Disease and what adjustments may be made to the ministerial role to support individuals. There is also some guidance on aspects of the Equality Act.

Supporting those experiencing stress

This looks at stresses in the ministerial role in terms of:

- the demands of the work;
- the control you have in doing it;
- the support you receive;
- the quality of relationships in the circuit;
- the clarity of your individual role;
- dealing with change.

The emphasis is on locating the sources of stress in an individual minister and identifying practical support measures. Stress can be a concept which it is difficult to define, and this guide helps to do this, and provides ways to deal with it.

General risk assessment methodology

This takes a case study based approach and looks at how to support a minister returning to work following cancer treatment. It identifies presenting symptoms of tiredness, a compromised immune system, dizziness due to the drug regime, after effects of surgery, low mood, and loss of confidence as minister and in the person's relationship with God. Suggested strategies for support and adaptations to the ministerial role are offered.