

Wounded Pastors

*Navigating Burnout, Finding Healing,
and Discerning the Future of Your Ministry*

CAROL HOWARD

AND

JAMES FENIMORE

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“Here is a book that should be required reading for every seminarian and should be a gift to every pastor and church board. Thank God that Carol Howard and James Fenimore have said out loud the things that are usually expressed only through sighs and tears. The diagnosis is sound, and the prescriptions are wise indeed.”

—Brian D. McLaren, author of *Do I Stay Christian?*

“Every pastor I know right now is experiencing some degree of burnout, pain, or desperation. None of us are okay. I can’t think of a more important book for clergy and those who wish to help them. Howard and Fenimore speak with authority, care, grace, and knowledge. A must-read.”

—Traci Smith, author of the Faithful Families series

“I wish this resource had been available when I suffered through my own brutal pastorate, leaving me burned-out and wounded to my core. It’s a compassionate, life-giving, and practical guide for wounded clergy (and who among us isn’t in some way?) and the people who love them.”

—Martin Thielen, author of *What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* and *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*

“Howard and Fenimore love the church and intimately know its capacity to wound its pastors. Their book is a gift to clergy and to the congregations they serve. Pastors, let them come alongside you and accompany you with care through the wounds of ministry and into greater healing and wholeness.”

—Cody J. Sanders, Associate Professor of Congregational and Community Care Leadership, Luther Seminary

“With every turn of the page, pastors will see themselves reflected in the stories of congregational leaders facing the fragility and flaws of Christian communities. As in holding up a mirror to ourselves, the text will return images of wounds that crave for healing. Whether these wounds show up as skin-level scratches or deep cuts on the soul, Howard and Fenimore’s book offers us a much-needed balm.”

—José R. Irizarry, President,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Healthy churches need healthy pastors, which means every pastor needs this book. *Wounded Pastors* charts the course for clergy to live out their vocation without sacrificing their health, privacy, and jobs in the process. Howard and Fenimore help clergy feel seen and heard as they offer tangible first steps for weary and wounded clergy, whether on the job or recovering from it.”

—Carol Harston, pastor and founder, Eden Hill Initiative

“In *Wounded Pastors*, Howard and Fenimore offer us a compassionate resource for clergy to pragmatically care for themselves. When we think of care as something more than a fuzzy feeling proximate to love or kindness or even ministry but as a necessity for survival, something like food or air, then we see just how important this book is for sustaining our vocation. The authors come alongside us to help us recognize and engage actively in the ongoing healing of our wounds so that we might see how we courageously enact healing in our churches.”

—Mihee Kim-Kort, copastor of First Presbyterian Church, Annapolis, Maryland, and author of *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith*

To our fellow wounded pastors

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Introduction

When I (Carol) wrote a previous book titled *Healing Spiritual Wounds*, I focused on helping people who had been wounded by the church. I hoped that people who had been raised to understand that Christianity had a vengeful, anti-science God who celebrated misogyny and homophobia would be able to embrace a God who is a loving Creator, delighting in all expressions of humanity and affections. I wanted to have a resource for those who had been wounded by Christian nationalism, religiously fueled racism, or pedophile priests. I geared the book toward laypeople, including those who tried on atheism but kept feeling drawn back to God and needed a healthier view of religion to support their spiritual longings.

The book frustrated many of my clergy friends because it didn't talk about the wounds that *pastors* experience in the church. So I began a book that would address that particular perspective.

When I (James) transitioned from congregational ministry to working as a psychotherapist, I discovered a commonality in my clergy clients. Story after story included the wounds they had received while serving in their vocation. During the pandemic, and especially during lockdown, clergy suffered. I quickly learned telehealth and sat in my home office busier than ever doing essentially the same job, only now through a screen. My clergy clients didn't find this an easy transition. Clergy had always lived with unreasonable expectations, but now the demands were impossible. As clergy tried to navigate

this new isolated landscape, they paid an enormous price and had the wounds to show for it.

We (Carol and James) worked together creating online services during the pandemic. As we set up teleprompters, adjusted cameras, and arranged backgrounds, we talked about what we heard and experienced. The stories of churches wounding their leaders flowed. We sensed a general longing for someone to name the challenges that ministers face, not so that we could wallow in self-pity and bitterness, but so that we could diagnose the problem and heal.

So we wrote this book on what we saw from our various roles—as pastors, as a therapist, as consultants, as lecturers, and as friends. James talked about systems theory that helped explain the experiences we shared. We listened to people and collected stories. We tried to get a variety of perspectives from pastors in different racial-ethnic groups, with different gender identities, abilities, and sexual orientations, although we confess that there are inevitably blind spots in our observations.

This book is for and about healthy pastors. Unfortunately, narcissistic or sociopathic pastors exist and cause great damage to congregations and their members. Carol addressed the damage that those pastors can do in her previous work. However, in this book, we want to talk to pastors who don't have a major personality disorder, even though they might struggle with anxiety, addiction, or depression.

We also assume that the pastors reading this book will have a basic, healthy theology. We believe that God loves us. There are no barriers to that love; no gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or disability can keep us from the love of God. God does not discriminate.

As we interviewed people for this book, some asked if we would address the churches that wound pastors, if we would write to the pastor's family, and if we would talk about what other church professionals (music directors, Christian educators, youth directors, etc.) endure. Of course, all church leaders are welcome to read the book and pass it along. Professors who have never served a parish and members who only know church from the perspective of the pews could have a lot to learn. But at some point we must acknowledge that every subject matter creates a chain reaction of curiosity and

that no book can be exhaustive. This subject is no exception. So we write to pastors while we hope that this book can give insight to others also.

We include reflection questions and prompts in each short chapter that you might use with a clergy group or at a retreat, or journal through individually. Feel free to pick and choose between the exercises or to skip them altogether.

This is an incredibly important time to be a pastor. The world needs the tools and gifts that healthy ministers can bring. To that end, we cannot ignore what pains us. We must speak to the hurt and find healing.

Part One

Identifying Our Pain

Starting Our Journey

The COVID-19 pandemic was raging when I (Carol) signed up for a clergy trip to Israel and Palestine. The newspaper's daily CDC maps mutated from a dangerous red to an appalling purple as the Omicron variant proved its dominance and took hold of the world's hospitals. I imagined being trapped in a metal tube, flying with hundreds of people and no social distance. Then, while holding my breath, I paid a deposit, purchased airline tickets, and bought trip insurance.

I was just *that* desperate for a break.

I had started a new position during the pandemic. I dropped straight into difficult discussions about sanctuary gatherings, mask mandates, and vaccine requirements. The social settings where ecclesial bonding would ordinarily take place no longer existed. So I navigated a myriad of tricky situations with no social capital to spend. With that came the stressors of moving across the country, selling a home, and transitioning back into a settled pastorate. I also had the personal heartaches of a family death and a newly empty nest.

The congregation didn't know me. We tried to bond as members called and left lasagna on the porch. As the pastoral honeymoon quickly dissolved into a harsh reality, the pandemic kept us distanced. There were no lunch appointments, dinner parties, or choir.

I had few professional friends in the area. COVID put a halt to the denominational meetings and clergy gatherings that had given me

life during my ministry. Instead, I greeted my new colleagues through postage-stamp boxes on Zoom. We stared out of our flat screens with our dead eyes, with no chance for small talk during breaks.

Conferences had been canceled. In previous years I had traveled and, while keynoting, had been able to connect with pastors, authors, and editors. But those engagements vanished as the virus surged.

Social media, which had provided a wonderful source of community for fifteen years, had become dangerous. After a group of clergy coordinated an intense Twitter attack that raged far too long and ended with a rape threat and a police report, I had to step away. That meant I cut myself off from the constant comforting chatter that had allowed me to maintain loose social connections with people around the world.

I felt isolated. I was a clay vessel—dry and brittle, chipped in places, and utterly empty inside.

That's why even a global pandemic couldn't keep me from attempting some sort of spiritual renewal. Plus, I knew that Abbie Huff and Ryan Larkin, a couple of pastors who always made me laugh, had not yet backed out. With them around, it would be a good trip. In Tel Aviv, I met another minister, Penny Hogan, who traveled with us. Within a few hours, I realized that pandemic pastoring had worn out other clergy as well.

We had a short worship service every day. Our leader, Rev. Anne Weirich, designed the liturgy, readings, and meditations so we could move through the settings on a deeper level. Aware of our fragile states, Anne never forced the pastors to become the designated liturgists. She allowed the clergy to lead but took care not to put us in charge when we didn't have the spiritual stamina.

We traveled to Magdala, home of Mary Magdalene, the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, anointed them with her perfume, and dried them with her hair. One of the twelve disciples became annoyed by the extravagant gesture, but Jesus explained that Mary was preparing him for his death. He said that whenever we told the good news, we were to do it in her memory. The gospel should always include the story of Mary, who took care of her teacher, who somehow knew that friends would betray and deny

him. Mary poured out her tears, and that gave Jesus the strength to face his devastation.

Of course, the acknowledgment didn't happen the way Jesus instructed. The Gospel writers didn't remember Mary well. Her bio is sketchy at best, and her name is completely left out of one account. Our traditions offer conflicting narratives, as if we can't figure out if Mary was a demon-possessed sex worker or a woman from a loving and stable home who became Jesus' top student (the one who sat at his feet), or all of the above. Now we must make do with this fuzzy amalgamation of various women with no clear identity.¹

Understanding the two years that the clergy had gone through, Anne remembered Mary. She took us to a church by the Sea of Galilee that had been built in Mary's honor. We gathered in a room that had a giant mural of Jesus' feet. Echoing Mary's care, Anne asked the group of pilgrims to surround Abbie, Penny, Ryan, and me. They laid hands on us and prayed for us. She anointed us with oil. We felt a little guilty, like the gesture was too extravagant. We knew the people surrounding us also needed prayers; they were all church leaders, mission directors, and college administrators. But we received the gifts.

With our heads bowed in the center of extended arms, muttered blessings, and flowing tears, I broke. Every dry and brittle piece of me crumbled and turned to dust. I started crying. It was a big, ugly sort of release. I couldn't get ahold of enough tissues to maintain any composure, so I just gave up.

After I loosened that rusty tap of tears, it kept flowing. The next day I stood in a garden, and water began streaming down my face. I walked into a church, and it happened again. I began to cry at lakes and rainbows, at ancient walls and new barriers. I began to feel the sorrow of that holy and fraught land, where blood had spilled and seemed to scream out from the ground. The heavy sadness of so many pilgrims pressed down on me.

I don't cry often, so each time it happened I felt bewildered, looking down at another wet tissue and saying, "I—I don't know where all of this is coming from."

"Your tears are precious," Anne told me. "God is storing them, keeping them in a bottle," she said, echoing Psalm 56:8.

I am used to containing experiences with words, organizing them, and making sense of them through the complicated rules of syntax and grammar. But this was something different. The events from the past year had traveled from my brain to that emotional pool in my gut, and it needed release. With friends around, I had enough security and support that I could finally let go. With the tears, the dust was restored to clay.

Through the next year, as I built relationships with members of the congregation, I ventured to heal and decided to keep working as a pastor. The experience led me to wonder, *How have pastors handled this collective trauma? What do we do when we've been wounded by the church? How do we recognize the pain? How do we rebuild and find wholeness? How do we grow after the experience?*

As I asked these questions out loud, I found other ministers dealing with the same issues. With the pandemic exacerbating normal church tensions, making them feel insurmountable, many began to leave the pastorate. When I spoke with the fleeing clergy confidentially, they cited toxic work environments as the reason.

As I mulled over concerns with my friend and colleague James, we each mentioned that we were writing books on the subject. So we decided to write a book together. We are both pastors, and James has additional experience and expertise as a judicatory leader and psychotherapist. We figured that our different experiences might help clergy who are traveling this path toward healing, because while I decided to stay in the pastorate, James made the decision to leave.

My phone rang at 6 a.m. When I (James) reached for the receiver, the caller ID information fully roused me.

“Good morning, Bishop,” I said.

“Yes, James. I just learned some disturbing news. I heard from one of your colleagues that you are getting a divorce. I must say, I’m very disappointed that you didn’t share this with me.”

“Bishop, I . . .”

“No, no, no. I want you and your wife to be in my office on Wednesday morning at 10 a.m.”

“Bishop, I’m not sure she’ll agree to come.”

“You make sure she’s there.” And with that, he hung up.

I looked around the room in dazed confusion.

It wasn’t the first time our marriage was on the brink. Before I had been appointed a district superintendent (a mid-judicatory leader in the United Methodist Church), we found ourselves in crisis. At the time, I had blamed myself. I had worked as the senior pastor of a downtown church and studied as a Ph.D. candidate. I had been so busy that I held myself responsible for neglecting my wife. I had thought, *Why didn’t I see this happening?*

We had worked hard to salvage the marriage. We had both agreed that we wanted to stay in the relationship and recommitted ourselves to each other. We hadn’t shared our struggles with anyone, just wanting to put them in the past, and that’s what I thought we had done. I wasn’t trained in psychotherapy at the time; still, I had known intuitively that keeping things secret and burying our deep wounds was probably not the best approach. But that’s what we decided.

I worked as a district superintendent for a few years, then planned to return to pastoral ministry. I was appointed to a wonderful progressive congregation and looked forward to the transition. A few weeks before I started the new church, I discovered my wife wanted out. We again talked about what we could do to salvage the marriage, but it didn’t work. She planned to divorce me and soon had the papers served. I walked around in shock, trying to figure out what to do next. This time I reached out to friends, family, and colleagues. The next day I received the call from my bishop.

I assumed the bishop would be offering counsel to help us stay together, so I was surprised that my wife was willing to go with me to his office. After driving two hours in silence, we arrived. My new district superintendent greeted us and explained that he would be present for the meeting.

I suddenly realized that my bishop had not orchestrated a pastoral care moment. He called us here to find out what I did to mess up my marriage so he could bring charges against me.

The bishop asked me why I was divorcing my wife. I glanced at her. She looked at me, then looked at the floor. Then with evident pain and embarrassment, my wife explained that I didn’t want to end

the marriage—that it was her decision. The bishop paused, processing this information. The awkward and painful silence that followed was probably only a few seconds long, but it felt endless. He closed the meeting with a prayer and abruptly sent us off.

At my weakest and darkest moment, the institutional church gave me no comfort but instead inflicted more pain and devastating wounds.

A few days later, a colleague told me that the bishop was reconsidering my appointment to the nice progressive church. He reasoned that they had accepted a married pastor, not a soon-to-be-divorced pastor. When asked, that wonderful congregation affirmed that they would accept me and then reached out to see how I was doing.

I spent three years at that amazing church. After being deeply wounded, I found healing there. The congregation gave me hope that ministry could still happen within a church. They had some of the usual church problems, but they also loved and cared for one another.

During my time of healing, I realized that I couldn't go through that sort of heartache again. I needed to transition to a role that would allow me to still be part of the church without being dependent on it. So I made the difficult and painful decision to leave congregational ministry as a pastor.

Although one of us has an experience of staying and the other has an experience of leaving the pastorate, we both worked to heal and find abundance. And we realized that part of that process included making meaning out of what had happened. We wanted to trace the steps we had taken. We read books, articles, and journals on family systems, trauma, resilience, forgiveness, and meaning, looking inside and outside of the church for research and support. And we listened to hundreds of clergypersons who were figuring out their own path. We realized that so many of our situations were similar. We experienced many of the same fears, contexts, and characters.

A pastor's wounds can be extraordinarily painful because they collect a particular emotional toll. For many of us, we became pastors because church was a literal sanctuary for us. We found God and healing in that space. We first woke up to the Spirit surrounding us as

the flames crackled at that youth group campfire, as church members lavished love and acceptance on us after a divorce, or as they helped to put us back together after a parent's death. We speak of the church as a beloved community, as the body of Christ. All of these lofty ideals come into play when church members hurt us. Their rejection feels like looking at the back side of God. We feel abandoned. In the worst cases, since God used the church to heal us, it can also feel like the church is throwing punches for the Almighty.

We offer this book to pastors who feel burned-out and wounded, even as we know that we often have the best job in the world.² We must acknowledge when we have a difficult time getting out of bed and putting on our clothes. We feel exhausted, working at maximum capacity, and yet we hear constant feedback that we do not do enough. The endless list of people we should have visited, things we ought to have done, and ways we need to improve looms over us. The work is never complete.

It is so difficult to be a pastor in this particular time. Anxiety levels within churches are through the roof. To minister in these anxious congregations means trying to live up to every congregant's demands of what they think a pastor ought to be and do. If that isn't bad enough, denominations place unrealistic expectations on what the role of a pastor is. United Methodist pastors are familiar with the responsibilities and duties of elders in the 2016 edition of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. It contains a completely unfeasible set of duties that only makes this vocation more difficult. Other denominations may offer similarly fantastical job descriptions for its clergy.³

Sometimes in the midst of impossible demands we need to connect with people who understand and find the balm that will heal our wounds. That is the time when we need to begin this journey.

Reflection Prompts

Buy a journal, notebook, or a composition book. You will need one for the prompts that follow each chapter.

1. *Create space.* Make a small space in your home that feels safe and comfortable. It could be inside a closet, in your bedroom—anywhere you

can feel okay taking time for yourself. Use this space for your journaling, spiritual exercises, and prayer as you work through this book. Make sure that this safe space has a comfortable place to sit with your feet flat on the ground or (if it's comfortable) to sit directly on the floor. You may want to add a candle, printed Bible verses that speak to you, or images of heroes, saints, or God that make you feel safe and loved.

2. *Reflect on the wound.* After setting aside 30 minutes of uninterrupted time, write, "Where does it hurt?" on the top of a page. Answer the question as honestly as you can. Think about the pain in your present call and your past ones. Try not to sugarcoat things or add a spiritual twist if that doesn't feel honest right now. You may not be at a place of resolution. Honor that.
3. *Scan your body.* Be aware of what is happening in your body as well as your ministry. Take a couple of minutes to breathe. Mentally scan your head, neck, chest, gut, legs, and feet. Is there a place in your body where you feel pain? Are you carrying stress in your gut, neck, or lower back? Take notice of what you feel, and write it down.