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SPEAKERS

Stephanie, Jim, Joe

Jim 00:03

Hello and welcome to Table Talk. This is a place where United Methodists across Tennessee and Western Kentucky can connect with one another in deeper conversation around life and faith. My name is Jim Hughes and I am an ordained elder of the legacy Tennessee conference for 48 years, currently serving in the congregational care area at Brentwood United Methodist Church, and I'll be your host for today's conversation. Caring for clergy and ministry leaders is an essential part of caring for congregations and communities. clergy and ministry leaders are living and serving in complex times. The hours are long. The work requires emotional labor and interpersonal skills. The tasks range from the theological to the mechanical. The outcomes are often ambiguous, with few projects seeing finite endings. And yet as clergy people, we are often witness to incredible beauty and grace. Today we're talking with Reverend Johansson and Reverend Stephanie Dunn, about clergy well being, what it means and why it matters. Stephanie, let's start with you. Can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and who you are? Ya.

Stephanie 01:12

I grew up in Carthage, Tennessee, which is about an hour east of Nashville. My parents landed in the United Methodist Church, the local United Methodist Church. My mom was raised Catholic. My dad was raised a Presbyterian and there are not that many options in rural Middle Tennessee for those two traditions. So they landed in the United Methodist, local United Methodist Church. They're from Carthage, went to Lambeth University in Jackson, Tennessee and met my husband there and then we moved to Atlanta where I went to Candler after Candler, we moved back to Middle Tennessee where I served an appointment for 12 years. And in 2001, I left the local church and am currently coaching mostly clergy, women who have experienced burnout in some capacity. So yeah, this is a topic that is near and dear and very personal to me. Great. Thanks, Stephanie. Yeah,

Jim 02:19

Joe, tell us a little bit about you.

Joe 02:23

Well, I have Roman Catholic background, as well. I grew up in the St. Margaret of Cortona. Parish in Cincinnati, my mom and dad, and my five brothers and sisters, very devout Roman Catholic family, and went through confirmation was baptized as an infant received my first Holy Communion and had a lot of really profound experiences of faith. But I also suffered with recurring nightmares when I was a young kid, really, really troubling ones one. So later in life, I really, I've had to process and deal with some of the trauma that came from just those dream experiences. And then I realized as a kid, I struggled some with depression, graduated from high school and went to Morehead State University, where I got involved with a bunch of United Methodist kids at the Wesley Foundation, which was really my first experience, in depth experience with Methodist. And then at the Wesley Foundation, I felt a calling into the ministry. And so a real long story short, I went to three seminaries after graduation. And at the end of 10 years, the last seminary United seminary and Dayton Ohio said it was nice to meet you now, please go away and do something else. So in the meantime, I've been helping to start a new church in the West Ohio conference, I was ordained elder there, served in pastoral ministry in the West Ohio conference, until we moved to the legacy Memphis conference after my wife's Other died. She is from Paducah. So we've served mostly in the purchase district over the years of our ministry, most recently at Reed Lind, United Methodist Church. And then I became the project manager in the purchase district, with the primary objective of providing encouragement to clergy and their families to take care of their mental health. Along the way, I became a licensed pastoral counselor in the state of Kentucky. So I really feel like this is a conversation that I've been kind of moving toward for a long time, because I continue to experience what my doctors call treatment resistant depression, and have been hospitalized twice because of it. And I've really struggled and it and it's an ongoing battle for me. So I'm very, very pleased to be part of this conversation today.

Jim 06:01

you, Joe. Stephanie, let's get back to you for a second. Can you share a little bit about your own journey in self care? Where have you been? And how did you get to where you are now?

Stephanie 06:12 –

Yeah. I am someone who moves at a really slow pace. And I grew, I came into ministry, in a really fast paced hustle culture, I remember, I was 25, when I took my first appointment. And my first six months, probably I was at the church five nights a week. You know, attending committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, all the things and after about six months, I stepped back and I said, Whoa, I got to slow this down. And pulling back is really hard. And I remember in those early days, that there weren't a lot of women, clergy, women, in their 40s, around, there seemed to be like a major disappearance of this group of people. And I thought we were these people. So I, and there was just a real, it was really quiet about where these people were, because over my half of my ordination class for women, so it just seemed like an odd missing piece. So from the beginning, self care was really important to me. I have always been pretty good about finding spaces that are quiet, and that I can connect with myself and with God. And even so, the hustle was real. And the being pulled in 100 different directions all the time, really wore on me. In about 2019, I started to explore the possibility of taking a sabbatical. And because I knew that I really needed to do some deep discernment, and also to establish some practices that were going to keep me afloat. So it took a couple of years to pull all that together. And in January of 2020, has started my three month sabbatical. And my stated purpose of that was to establish practices that would set me up for long term ministry. And when I came back from

my sabbatical, we were in lockdown, I had two small children at home. There was an image that was floating around and those really for a couple of years during the payment pandemic, where it was two circles that were intersecting with one another in it. One of the circles said in person ministry, the other one said virtual and then there was the hybrid stuff that intersected in the middle and they were like, This is what ministry looks like today. And I hated that image. Well, one was hard enough, and now we're doing three. And it was really, it wasn't impossible. But I also knew that I was really suffering and my mental health was really struggling. So we were in those days, this was not isolated to me at all, where it was not uncommon for my kids to have to just randomly be home for a week from school because of an outbreak in a classroom a COVID outbreak or and also, there were those three different types of ministry where we're supposed to be doing time so For me, in the fall of 2020, I started to discern that it was time for me to step away. And so I left ministry in the local church in June of 2021. And didn't really know where to go from there, there was a long season of just asking lots of questions of myself, asking lots of questions of God and where this was going to go. And I have always really loved being with people. And with asking questions, asking people questions about how they can you know, what, what are their values? And how can they live into them as much as possible. And so I found in coaching, a really beautiful way for me to be able to engage my call, with specifically clergy, a group of people who really need to be able to have those conversations more often.

Jim 11:54

Joe, tell us a little bit about your journey to self care.

Joe 12:11

Well, I've been inconsistent, a lot of times, you know, I describe my self care journey as a kind of a roller coaster. I know, things that are important to me. But then I became a senior pastor, and I felt it was all consuming. And I think part of that just to kind of anticipate a question you might ask, part of that was external, you know, the church saw that I was willing to give it, they were willing to receive it, then they came to expect it. And so I hadn't established boundaries early about time. And I know that for self care time, to yourself, and Sabbath time for yourself is very, very important. So I did not pay attention to either one of those very much when I was trying to win the approval and affirmation. And along the way, I was a very successful senior pastor at that church for six and a half years before my wife and I moved, as I mentioned earlier, to Western Kentucky. The same kind of pattern continued for me and my self care was inconsistent, not just in terms of taking time for myself, but also the seasons of depression that I would go into that were bad. You know, when I experienced a season, a bad season of depression, I have a lot of the classic symptoms of depression, that make wanting to take care of yourself. Really a low priority, you know, like not, not wanting to clean up not wanting to leave the house, unless it's absolutely necessary. Not wanting to pick up a musical instrument that I've loved all my life, those kinds of things. So the things that were good for myself care. I turn away from when I'm going through a bad a dark time. So self care has been a challenge, you know, in that way. I also know that my relationships with family with our children and grandchildren with my siblings who are still living with my mom and dad at the time, those were important to my self care, but but I was very encouraged. isn't about maintaining healthy levels of communication, because we're in different time zones and all of that sort of thing. So yeah, self care, time to myself time to actually dedicate to being in devotions and paying attention to my spiritual life when I wasn't doing sermon preparation or Bible

study preparation. You know, I found that all of my, all of my spiritual thoughts had to do with what I was getting ready to do at work. So that's part of my self care journey.

Jim 15:37

Yeah, I think most of us who have been in the church share those kinds of things. So I appreciate that. And you mentioned Sabbath, which I think we all would agree is really, really critical to this. How did you achieve Sabbath, Joe?

Joe 15:54

Well, I'll come back to the word inconsistency, just because I want to be truthful. I've done well during certain seasons. And at other times, I've just sort of figured, well, Sunday is about as close as it gets, you know, and if I'm, if I'm preaching to sometimes three times on a Sunday, taking care of things in the afternoon that I feel need to be taken care of, you know, I know that's not a Sabbath rest day for me. So I will try really hard and have done very well, sometimes at keeping Saturday, Friday or Saturday, as a protected day that I would try to rest, spend additional time with God, perhaps take on the take on fasting, or at least for one meal of that time. And really, my bishop in the West Ohio conference, Bruce Oh, Bishop, oh, used to say, one hour a day, one day, a week, one week, a year. And he's kind of talking about Sabbath. And I tried to do that. But But I do admit that, that I continue to be pretty inconsistent. I

Jim 17:12

appreciate that. Stephanie, what about you? How did you? Did you find Sabbath? And if so how?

Stephanie 17:18

I think that inconsistent is a word that I that really resonates with me. And I also think of just different things have connected with me in different seasons. Sometimes I do a really good job at keeping up with my upper room disciplines, and then it will switch to for about a year there. I was doing daily watercolors. And I think that has been a way that Sabbath has really been built in and a really useful, helpful tool for me. Questions about Sabbath are a special art. I have felt like it's a really hard thing to do with small children at home. Yeah, just building in. It's hard to figure out exactly what Sabbath looks like.

Jim 18:17

And you know, we've talked for decades about spiritual disciplines. And we they say things like study and prayer and fasting, but I rarely remember Sabbath being included as one of those core spiritual disciplines that we better attend to. And every year that goes by, it seems as though it's more needed than it was before. I was curious, too, about something you said a minute ago, Joe, and that was taking an hour a day where you might be in some sort of meditation. I was really fortunate in my career to be the recipient of a Lilly Foundation grant for sabbatical, which was three months. And that's just off the chart. And I understand that. One of the things I remember the most about it is that for those three months, they really didn't want you doing anything terribly churchy. They wanted you to get completely away from your job, so that you really could decompress. Were either of you. I'll ask you both. Joe, I'll start with you. Did you find or have you found that walking completely away from it is an effective way to achieve self care?

Joe 19:34

Oh, absolutely. I have found that to be the case. I think when Bishop o recommended the hour a day we were talking more about the the disciplines of reading and studying and praying and meditating. But I've found in other places in my life that getting totally away is just absolutely necessary. You know, so you have the time when you're paying attention on purpose to spiritual disciplines and then there are other times when you're participating in a spiritual discipline, and you're not aware of it like hiking, appreciating creation, going fishing, you know, just being out. So yeah, I try to do some of those things, especially things that involve being outdoors because I really need the vitamin D. I mean, we all do we all do. little sunshine helps during dark seasons, but yeah, just being outside and, and being free. And then also just, you know, like taking your vacation and making sure that you, you take the vacation that you're entitled to take and protect that time and enjoy that time. And, you know, I I know people who do pretty churchy things on their vacation, I would have to pat my wife Liz and myself on the back. Because when we go on vacation, we go to church, usually on Sunday mornings. But we are not doing churchy things. Most of the time. Yeah. Right.

Jim 21:06

That's very helpful. Stephanie, do you? Do you resonate with any of this? Yeah,

Stephanie 21:10

absolutely. We, it's, it's so interesting. And it's kind of challenging to think about, because I think that there's been a significant cultural shift in terms of church attendance. And I know that that's a really, that's a podcast on its own. And alongside that, I in my own burnout journey, I was out out of the church for three months when I went on blood pressure medicine, 37 year old woman. So leaving and stepping away, my body really settled. And I think started absorbing a lot of the stuff that I had been guarded against for a while, which I think is pretty common. So yeah, so completely stepping away, extended the possibility for more healing than I realized that I needed. Also in when, when I was preparing to step away for a season, in 2021, my family bought a little 20 foot travel trailer, and we are weekend warriors with that thing. We are at state parks, that Corps of Engineer campgrounds we are we're enjoying just one another in this really sweet season that we're in with my family and being being able to have time away for that is really precious. And I will say that I have connected with my charge, which is connection, United Methodist Church. And it's made reconnecting with the local church. So sweet and special. And I feel like I have a just a much deeper understanding of the theology of what it is to be in community. Having had the opportunity to really step away from quote churchy things.

Jim 23:24

Yeah. Well, both of you have a wealth of experience about dealing with the St. Joe with your counseling. And Stephanie, with your coaching, what? What would you say to clergy who are struggling with this issue?

Joe 23:44

Well, one of the first things I think is important both in that counseling or coaching relationship with a client or a friend, and also just in life in a clergy meeting, or an accountability group that includes other clergy is that someone has to be real enough to share, you know, their story, the power of someone

else's lived experience, that assures a person you know, it's okay. You, you are not strange. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Here, we're creating a safe place for you to be honest, which, let's face it many times, being able to really be honest about what we're going through, frightens us, sometimes even to express that to a family member or a friend but I think the pressure around honesty gets even higher. When you're talking about speaking with colleagues and talking to your district superintendent and talking to certain people, perhaps you feel that way about a staff parish relations committee. So I think the first thing is to try to create a safe place where someone also hears a story that lets them know, they're not alone. They're not bizarre and unusual, because they're going through a struggle, mental health challenge or some other kind of struggle. They're, they're on our road that many other people had been down before. And God has helped many, many people, to have victories in the midst of their struggles and to be overcomers, as the Bible Promises we will be. So I think those two things, creating a safe place and having a story that helps to assure a person there. They're not alone. And they're not. They're not unusual. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Yeah,

Jim 25:46

that's good. I appreciate you saying that. One of the things that I remember as a part of, of my career, we talked a lot about this in the annual conference, and that was issues of trust, even among clergy, and that, do I trust my superintendent enough to tell him or her that I'm struggling? Am I even trustful enough of my colleague to do that? Because one, one bad comment to the wrong person affects your career, because suddenly, there's a story behind your weakness. And so I resonate with that, and I hope we've come far, far beyond that trust issue. Steph, how would you help a young clergy person to deal with?

Stephanie 26:36

Yeah, I think, I think that their, their responsibility lies in a lot of places. I think a clergy person has some responsibility over their own boundaries. Let your yeses, be your yeses and let your nose be your nose. And one of the things that gets really tricky is that, like I said earlier, people love it when you don't say no. And if you're able to have a yes that goes with your no. And your no is a boundary, then that will help create more of a system of trust. I think, I think that that builds on that, that rather than you saying, Well, I'm not going to be there because I'm on my third week of vacation for the year, which, by the way, is normal and healthy. And in a lot of ways completely necessary. Rather than saying, No, I'm not gonna be there, framing that in terms of like, my, my body, and my spirit needs this. That's, that's the why of taking time away. And, you know, spending that hour a day with your phone turned off and unavailable. I think that it's, I think that it's really important for, for all of the different parts of our network in our system, to really understand what's at stake in the trust issues. Because it's not just your job, it's your spouse's job, and it's your house, and it's your doctors, it's your entire life. So trust is really hard to it's a very fragile thing. And so for, for all of the different parts, whether it's a clergy person, or their SPRC, or a district superintendent, I think it's just really important to hold that so gently. Because it's, it's so hard to trust when your entire life is wrapped up in, you know, that one little comment that you make.

Jim 29:13

And I guess, again, in my career, and I'm just I'm one of the old dogs. But thinking that I've been fortunate enough to have covenant groups that I found the trust there, and these are not six month covenant groups, one I've been involved for 35 years. And so to develop that, and to have a safe place

to go, it has been really valuable to me. Are we still in a time where the covenant groups can work? And perhaps that covenant group looks different and for one person than it does for another, how often they meet and who's involved but is that still viable for self care? Absolutely,

Stephanie 29:50

I think it's **it's** so necessary in our, our work can be so isolating. You know, I think of have folks who are serving in very rural communities where they're the only United Methodist minister in their county or, you know, it just you can feel so alone and to have those relationships. I mean, honestly, I think you have to have those relationships to make it. I have been in a group for 10 to 15 years. And we, I mean, we met weekly, even through the pandemic, over zoom. And one of the strengths of our relationship is that we're consistent that we show up weekly. And I think you you've got to have that in the book burnout by Emily and Amelia Nagurski. They call it the bubble of love, like, you've got to have people who are going to come around you and take care of you and that you take care of when when we need it, because we all need it. Lots more than we realize,

Jim 31:08

I think yeah, thanks for that. Joe, what about you? Are you are you a part of a covenant group? Or have you been?

Joe 31:15

Right now I have an accountability partner, which I don't think is as effective as having a slightly larger group. My my best times in terms of accountability are covenant groups have been when there have been three or four other clergy persons, and we've had the time to get to know one another, to feel safe with each other. Right now I just have a buddy, a clergy person who I feel like I can absolutely be myself with and tell the truth, and he feels the same way. And so we meet weekly, but I've I've probably benefited even more from the seasons when I was in a group with a with several more people that also met regularly. And and I think weekly is, is probably the ideal model for that. Great, that's

Jim 32:41

yeah, that's helpful. And Stephanie, I appreciate you mentioned the book that you were reading. So let me put you on the spot. If you had one resource that you would recommend to a ministry leader, or clergy or lay ministry leader, could you name one that you really feel strongly about?

Stephanie 32:59

Yeah, um, a book that changed my life is an old book, and and it's, I can't remember what the author's name is, but it's nonviolent communication. He connects. It's, it's very much like basics for social emotional learning, you know, naming your feelings, and what needs are being met or not met, when you identify what a particular feeling is about. And I think that bat resource it honestly, I picked it up a dozen times, in just really struggled to get through the first few chapters. But once it got rolling, I was rolling in it. It's one of those books that I'm like this, this one would change everyone's life, the world would be a better place. The author is Marshall. Rosenberg. Yeah, so definitely recommend that one. Excellent.

Jim 33:55

Excellent. Joe, what about you? Do you have a resource you could recommend?

Joe 33:59

Well, one of the books I come back to quite often personally and recommend a lot for people just to have a good sense of themselves, and an understanding of who they are as God's child is honoring Allen's book, Life of the beloved. I find that to be really powerful. And it touches on every aspect of how we process things and how we feel and how we live out of those feelings, sometimes, in the best ways, and sometimes in ways we would want to correct but it's a book that's full of assurance, and hope, and helps us to know how treasured and precious we are. And so, you know, I think that's a starting point. You know, when you're helping people who are afraid or don't know that they can trust or may have a secret shame or something that they're carrying So yeah, I love that book.

Jim 35:02

That's great. Let me ask you, what is it about your ministry that you both have unique ministries? What is it about your ministry that excites you the most right now?

Joe 35:15

Well, I guess I would say, you know, I loved, I loved being a senior pastor, and an associate pastor. But I wanted to do more one on one more face to face more places where a person comes knowing that they have a need, and opening themselves to the transformation, you know, that is possible. So it's exciting to me to be able to be a part of that transformation of another person's life. And I know that I've been helped so much, and I still struggle. But I've seen a lot of transformation as well. And I, and I often think about, like, people who work in the 12 steps, and you get to the 12 step. And the 12 step is, you know, having, having benefited from taking these previous 11 steps. Now it's my job to help other people in the journey. It's like a second Corinthians chapter one where talks about the God of all comfort, who comforts us so that you can come for people, you know, who are having the same issue as you I'm, of course, paraphrasing. But yeah, I get excited about being able to be with a couple or a family or an individual who has come saying, I know, I need help. I'm not sure what it is. And, you know, we we work on that together. That's exciting to me. Yeah. And

Jim 36:53

Stephanie, what about you?

Stephanie 37:00

Yeah, I think that two words that I kind of come back to over and over again, are agency and courage. I think that clergy people specifically often are, feel like they don't have agency that they don't have choices, that they just kind of go where they're sent. And, you know, they live in a house that somebody tells him to live in, and, and it can make them feel like they don't get to be a part of their, of their ministry, really, the it can feel very sort of disconnected. And so in coaching, I love that I get to help people discover what they have, how they can move in the world and how they are the decision makers in their discernment and in their work. And there's a lot of sort of self discovery of the courage that a person has to be able to act and make decisions in their in their life. So yeah,

Jim 38:07

cool. Okay. Let me ask, have you got a parting word for us about what it is to have self care? How do you achieve self care? Joe, hello, I'm gonna start with you.

Joe 38:20

Okay. Well, I guess inconsistency is my word. But you know, how you achieve anything, you know, is by being intentional about it, you know, so we have to make sure clergy understand that they have permission to take care of themselves, and that that's a priority. And we, we need to help the churches to understand that that is a priority for them to support. And then to come alongside. So intentionality about self care is probably at the top of the list where I would start saying, hey, you know, you've got to start with that. And, you know, write it down and let other people see it. Not just your accountability group, but if you're, if you're serving as a clergy person, you know, there has to be a group of people that supports your self care. It should start with a staff parish relations committee, but maybe there's an even, you know, like a subgroup that's, that's much more just like a safe place environment where we're really allowed to just be totally, totally real and honest. So, yeah, and to be intentional about saying, the pastor saying to the staff, parish relations committee and to the congregation, hey, I'm going to be paying attention to caring for myself and caring for my family, and I need your support, and I'm going to put some things in place to help the church support myself care. Even better than that would be if the staff parish relations committee were already prepared to say, we want to champion your self care, you know, so that would that would be great. But yeah, intentionality? That's, that's my word. Yeah. And

Jim 40:16

you know, Joe, appreciate the use of the word permission as well, because I think that's a pretty critical piece of this for clergy to give themselves permission to care for their, their own well being, and for churches to understand that it's in their best interest for that to happen. Because if you have a clergy person who's burning out are his already burned out. They're really not good for anybody. And so it's really in their interest to do. Stephanie, what about you? You have a last word, yeah, I

Stephanie 40:45

was gonna kind of go in that direction. That the last word would be that the work is too important, to not be well, and so prioritizing your well being is so important, because you are important, and your work matters. So be Well,

Jim 41:09

excellent. Johansson and Stephanie Dunn, thank you for being with us today. And for those of you who've been listening, we appreciate you being with us and we hope you'll join us again on Table Talk.