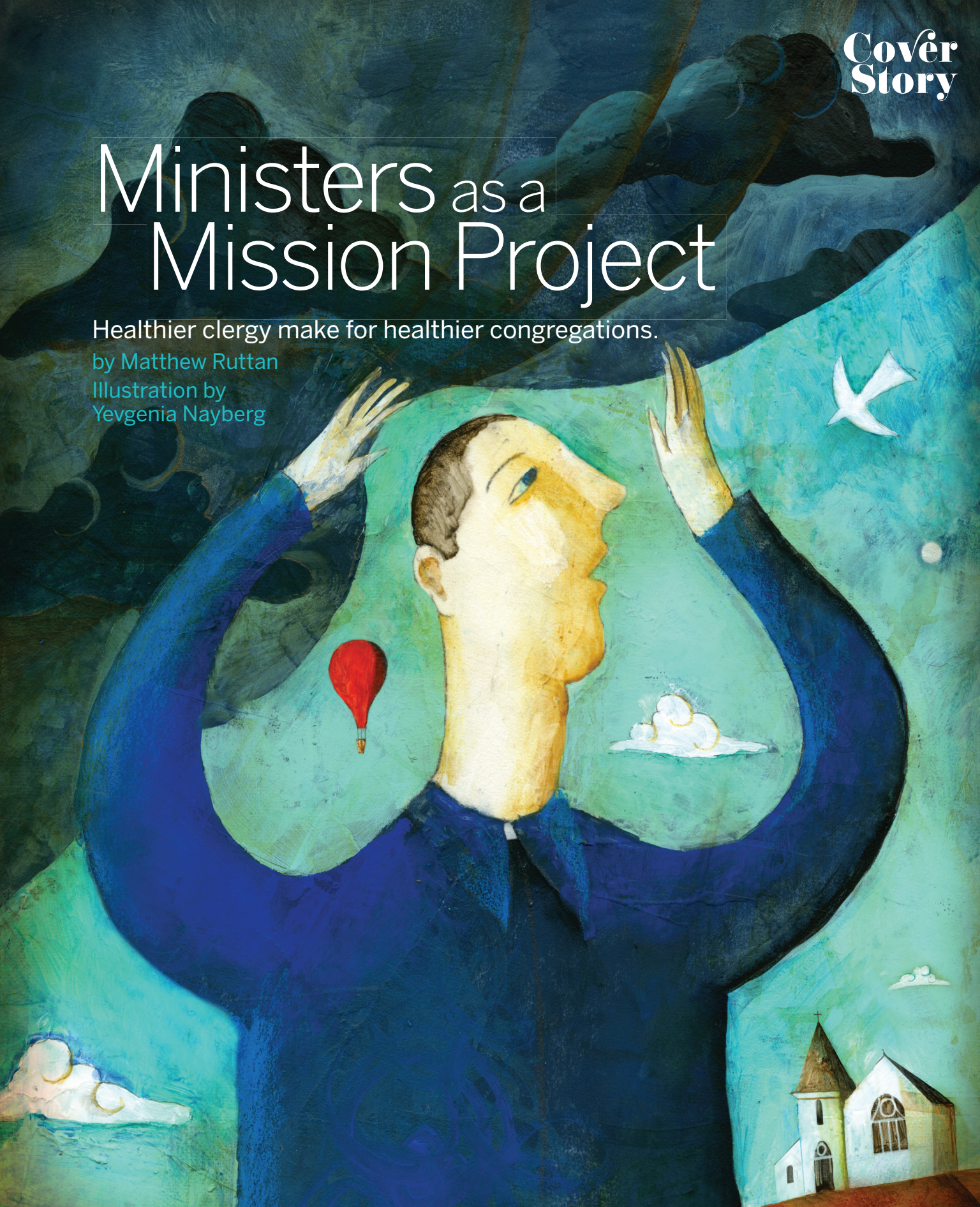


# Ministers as a Mission Project

Healthier clergy make for healthier congregations.

by Matthew Ruttan

Illustration by  
Yevgenia Nayberg





**M**inisters need to make themselves a mission project. Here's why.

In *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, rabbi and leadership consultant Edwin Friedman argues that the nature of the leader's presence, their emotional health, and their ability to communicate and take care of themselves is a major factor of influence in any organization.

A healthy pastor can send a ripple effect through the church. So can an unhealthy one. No pressure, right?

Wrong.

**WE LIVE IN A TIME OF HIGH ANXIETY FOR CLERGY.** There are unhealthy pressures to perpetually perform, please and produce. And in the midst of it all, pastors are called to bring a fresh word from God every week. If you are truly called, there is no calling it in.

Plus, many churches are shrinking and there's confusion about what's happening. At a recent workshop, our synod's congregation consultant John-Peter Smit said: "Thirty years ago there were about nine things you needed to do to grow a church—if you got about five of them right, the church would grow. Now you need to do 11—and your church might still not grow."

There's also momentous cultural change. I think everyone can agree that we're not in Kansas anymore. Mark Twain wrote that to be a pilot one needs to know more than one ought to know, and you have to learn it all over again every 24 hours. That seems to be the case with modern leadership, too.

I'm passionate about this because it's born out of my own story:

Many planets aligned to seemingly eclipse the sun. "I have entered into a dark tunnel." That's what I wrote in my journal several years ago. I was a new minister with a young family, thrown into the rigor of new ministries from youth to seniors; I was trying to deal with diverse theological views, interpersonal conflicts, threats from a few people to leave if such-and-such didn't happen, financial issues, and a host of other emotionally heavy brain-twisters normally reserved for executives at a mid- to large-sized corporation. The near-eclipse resulted in stress, lack of sleep, poor eating, high anxiety and less (quality) family time. I think I had an ulcer.

It happens. And yet we rarely talk about it. Why not?

Maybe we think any sickness is spiritual sickness. "Just pray harder." Maybe non-visible illness has too much stigma. Maybe we think leaders should be smile factories. Maybe we're living in the shadow of clergy who sacrificed their families to the gods of 80-hour weeks and no days off. Ever. Somewhere grown children silently weep. In his book *Signature Sins*, Michael Mangis writes, "The human heart is constantly tempted to live under the illusion that things are fine just the way they are."

**SO HOW ARE THEY?** I was not well and it affected everything—like carbon monoxide quietly contaminating your house. So I made a decision to become crazy-obsessed with getting healthy and back into balance. Things were not "fine." And fine is a far cry from being fully alive for Christ. Thankfully, hunger is the best appetizer. So here's what unfolded:

I accessed the denomination's Employee Assistance Program. A few phone calls helped me better understand what I was going through and what to do next.

I spoke to my doctor and was referred to a good Christian therapist. The word "good" is important. Therapists are like doctors or pastors—some are helpful, some aren't. That was a game changer.

My church set up a human resources team to meet with me (and others) regularly—to listen, to support, to encourage. This wasn't a direct result of my situation, but it was proposed by a wise congregant who knew how vital it was to the church's strength.

I talked with a mentor with whom I could be open and honest—someone who had been down life's roads and could be a practical encouragement.

I became more rooted in prayer and Jesus. "Matthew, you mean pastors don't have everything figured out by the time they're ordained?" Um, no. I've always had a rich devotional life, but I needed to take it much higher, and quickly. It seems humans do have wings—they're called knees. Plus, I developed a relationship with a prayer partner who brought in more conversation and accountability.

I got back into shape. I started running again and developed a personal routine. Three or four times a week I was working out and it had a brain-lifting effect. Literally. It's not always easy, but you have to borrow some wisdom from Nike and just do it. You're only as healthy as you are today.

I became militant about focusing on the pillars in ministry—teaching/communicating, critical pastoral care and overarching vision. I’m still in the nuts and bolts of a few things, but I became more confident in saying “no” to a lot. It’s amazing how being more effective at fewer things actually means a net increase in overall effectiveness. (And I also learned that people actually want that.) More time in prayer and priorities forces less important things off your schedule. Hmm.

I made near-concrete parameters around my time use—two days off every week and only one night a week doing “church stuff” (except in emergencies). I realized I was often busy because I was being lazy—not using my valuable time on core priorities, or letting others determine how I should spend that time. So changes happened. Prayer, family and rest are important. Our willingness to rest may be the biggest indicator as to whether we really believe God is God. I slowly reduced my work hours to about 45 a week. (To some of you that will seem like winning the lottery.)

**BUT HERE’S THE RUB.** When it comes to a pastor’s health, usually we’re reactive instead of proactive. Can you imagine the impact if that was reversed?

I know it’s hard to make changes. But as a mentor told me, “There are no shortcuts to anywhere worth going.” I also know that perhaps it was (and is) easier for me because Westminster is pretty healthy and our relationship is largely one of trust and moving forward; that creates a spirit of “yes.” But I truly feel that the congregation understands that they’re healthier when I’m healthier. And as for me, I can’t expect the church to be growing if I’m not.




In his book *Leading in a Culture of Change*, professor of policy studies at the University of Toronto, Michael Fullan writes that it is likely someone who is “committed to certain values, but uncertain of the pathways” who is probably well suited to lead. For ministers, those values should be rooted in the message and mission of the Lord Jesus; the uncertain pathways are whatever lies ahead on our moving cultural landscape. Sounds to me like something we need to train for. Things will get harder, not easier. Ministry will become more distracted, not less. Our anxious climate will get heavier, not lighter.

So no matter who you are, why not join me in becoming near-crazy committed to well-being? But you need to live with eyes wide open. As the saying goes, just because you’re not sick doesn’t mean you’re healthy. Humility and bravery are needed in the pursuit of wellness.

Let’s circle back to Friedman who started us off by saying that the nature of the leader’s presence, their emotional health, and their ability to communicate and take care of themselves is a major factor of influence in any organization. I think I’m stronger and healthier today than I’ve ever been. But it’s continual work. You never fully arrive at healthy. But the journey is worth it—for Christ, for his kingdom, for me, for my family, and for the church. The good news isn’t just something you know—it’s someone you are.

Ministers need to make themselves a mission project.

As a friend recently told me, “Anything is possible—it just depends on what you’re willing to pay for it.” 

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