

Did you the hear the one about the UM pastor that went to an ecumenical seminar? Taking a break the pastor was seated in the hall outside the assembly. A Catholic Priest stopped and placed his hands on the pastor's hand and said, ***"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit you will walk today!"*** ***But I'm able to walk,*** the pastor said.

A Baptist came by and laid his hands on the pastor's head and said, ***"In the name of Jesus Christ you will walk today!"*** ***"Thanks, but there's nothing wrong with me,"*** the pastor said.

An Assembly of God pastor walked by, took the pastor's hands and said, ***"by the power of the Holy Spirit you will walk today!"*** A bit less amused the pastor said, ***"but there was nothing wrong with me."***

After the seminar, the pastor stepped outside to the parking lot to discover the pastor's car was stolen.

I'm not going to tell you that you will get up and walk, but I would like to offer you a couple of resources that might improve your quality of life.

Would you agree with me that Conference events like Annual Conference, Clergy Covenant Day & Our Life Together are highlights of our year? There are many reasons for their popularity. The most frequently cited reason is...  
...we get to see our friends and colleagues.  
...we get to renew our personal and professional relationships.

Today we are reminded of our covenant...our connection with one another through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we reflect together on that covenant allow me to encourage you with a couple of resources that may strengthen our covenant relationships with one another.

One of the covenant resources available to all of us (active, retired, full-time, part-time AND our family members) is Clergy Care Services. Recognized as offering 5-star support to our clergy and their families, the service was named a "best practice" by our UM denomination. The General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits highlighted the covenant services of both IN and North AL in a video.

Here in Indiana, CCS provides confidential pastoral care and coaching. There is no financial cost to you. If during our conversation, we determine together that counseling is desired or needed, we can assist you to connect to resources in your area.

You might ask who uses CCS? Since its origination in 2015, CCS has 10,540 contacts, many of whom are returning clients from across the conference. In a bit of a surprise, however we received clergy contacts from other conferences and even other denominations.

You might ask, what kind of issues and trends do you see? The most frequent were...

#### **THEMES/TRENDS**

1. Work Stress
2. Isolation/Loneliness
3. Personal Grief & Loss
4. Strained Marriages/Relationships
5. Life/work transitions
6. Seeking Referral for “long term” therapy
7. Other (Finances, Transitions, Life-Decisions, Calling, Addictions or Addictive Behaviors, Trust, Sexual orientation, or just need a Friend)

Do these frequently identified issue surprise you? Probably not. Many of you live and work in the sphere of challenging issues every day.

As I reflect upon scripture and Jesus’ life, it is clear that Jesus experienced profound stress in the Garden of Gethsemane...as he faced His impending suffering and death. But in the same passage we find Jesus’ prescription to mitigate the stress? In the Gospel according to Mark we read, “And they (disciples) went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, ***‘Sit here while I pray.’*** And he took Peter, James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. He said to them, ***“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch.”*** In His storm Jesus shared his heart and called upon his inner circle to go with him as far as they could...to be with him. We’re talking here about a model for living life...a deep, sharing connection with others in our journey of life.

The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber picked up on this idea. Dedicated to understanding deep intimacy he distinguished between I-It relationships and I-Thou relationships.

You may remember that in I-It relationships we tend to NOT bring our whole self to the relationship with colleagues, spouse, family, neighbors. If we live in I-It relationships says Buber, we hold back, tend to be closed and withdrawn...and if we offer ourselves at all it usually guarded and shallow.

I-Thou relationships, however, like Jesus modeled are personal, direct & often dialogical. They hold nothing back. Buber tells us that I-Thou relationships exist when 2 or more people are totally immersed in their situation, when deep calls to deep...when we offer ourselves up and embrace the other in some total and unselfish way. We can't intentionally command I-Thou moments. We can only posture ourselves by allowing our guard to come down in an open hearted & open-minded act of love.

This is the idea behind Covenant Groups, another resource available to us in the Annual Conference.

In covenant groups we have the opportunity to connect, to go deep, to live out our covenant with one another...

...to share the hard places in life...to share the victories and triumphs.

...to care, pray & journey with another on a level of the I-Thou relationship.

In my opinion it is the way our Lord designed and intended life to be lived.

A great many of us are invested in covenant groups. Others are not so connected.

As for me, I believe so strongly in God's design for us to live in community that I've been a part of covenant groups for over 30 years. Some of them were short term; others span years.

One of the covenant groups in which I participated was comprised of 6 highly diverse clergy from across our Annual Conference. In all honesty, I don't think we could have reached a consensus on any political or theological issue facing our church or nation today. But we had one thing in common...our Lord Jesus. There is a deep love and respect for another...a commitment to caring for one another and journeying through life together. Personal needs are shared with the group, held in sacred trust and confidentiality, prayed about, and lived together as a connected "family" in covenant with one another. All 6 of us shared that we need each other.

Another covenant group in which I currently participate is a bit unconventional. It works for me because of my previous appointment as an active-duty AF chaplain. For about 20 years I've been part of a diverse group of clergy/chaplains from other faith traditions... Roman Catholic, Texas Baptist & Assembly of God. Irrespective of political or theological perspectives, there is deep caring, lively conversation, accountability, and always a fresh perspective on faith and professional issues.

Let me encourage you...if you're already in a covenant group today...give thanks for your group and its members. If your group isn't what you need it to be...consider starting a new one. If you're not a part of a covenant group, perhaps now is the time is to connect. And of course, as mentioned earlier, Clergy Care Services is always available a to serve your needs...recognizing that is a short-term solution.

In light of broader church issues, state and national issues, personal challenges that we face, perhaps there has never been a better time to connect. Said another way, **if there was ever a time that we that need one another...it is now!**