

Pastoral Care for the Lake Huron Presbytery

A Report and Proposal

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1. About Us



Joseph Novak

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Novak currently serves as the Senior Pastor and Head of Staff at First Presbyterian Church of Flint and has been in full-time pastoral ministry since 2012, all of which has been here in the Lake Huron Presbytery. He is an alumnus of Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div, Ph.D) where he focused on liturgy, preaching, and church ministry. Here in Lake Huron, Joseph has served on the Committee on Preparation for Ministry and the Nominating Committee and has been a participant-leader in Region 3's weekly coffee fellowship for pastors. Joseph is married to Katie and they have five children—all boys. They reside in Flushing, Michigan.



Brenna Overland

The Rev. Brenna Overland (M.Div) currently serves as the Head of Staff at First Presbyterian Church in Bay City and has been in full-time pastoral ministry since 2016. She previously served in the Presbytery of the Redwoods in California, and Seattle Presbytery in Washington State. In her time as a minister she has served on CPM, helping candidates navigate the call and ordination process and served on a special committee focused on connecting pastors to one another and welcoming new pastors to the presbytery. Brenna is married to her husband Aaron, and they are expecting their first child this March.

2. Our Vision: Flourishing Pastors in the Lake Huron Presbytery

The Presbytery of Lake Huron has determined that its next missional priority is to hire two local pastors on a part-time basis to coordinate the pastoral care to the clergy, CREs, and Presbytery staff here in our region.

Given the numerous stresses facing our pastors we believe this to be a vital and necessary act, and we are thrilled by our recommendation from the Personnel Team and Presbytery Council to serve as the inaugural co-pastors to the Presbytery. In our own ways, we both earnestly desire the Lake Huron Presbytery to be a place known for how it practices radical care for its pastors—both ministers of Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Ruling Elders.

For the past few weeks, we (Brenna and Joseph) have been exploring what we think it means to provide spiritual care for spiritual care providers. How *does* one help the helpers? What does pastoral care look like when it is applied to pastors? What does it mean for pastors to flourish as pastors and how might mid-Councils support such effort?

As an aspect of pastoral ministry, ‘pastoral care’ covers a wide set of terrain, including crisis care in times of sudden medical, personal, or family emergencies. Indeed, this is perhaps the type of care we most often associate with the work of pastors. Sitting beside bedsides, praying in hospital rooms, reading Scripture before surgeries, listening to a weeping parent whose son was just arrested—these are the crisis moments and they are important moments for pastoral care.

Both of us have faced various personal crises in the midst of our vocation as pastors which required direct acts of care and compassion.

Just a few months into my current pastoral call, I (Joseph) found myself floundering and at a loss when my wife, at a routine ultrasound at 22 weeks was informed there was no longer a detectable heartbeat and my wife would have to immediately deliver our stillborn child. In that moment and in the aching hours that followed, I needed a pastor, someone who could help us pray, someone who would help us process this loss, someone who would be available to us, and who would offer to read us words of Scripture when, for grief, we could not.

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In a similar way to Joseph, I (Brenna) also found myself in a place of deep grief and needing support a few months into my call here in the Lake Huron Presbytery. My husband and I had gone to our first ultrasound at 9 weeks to see our baby's heartbeat for the first time only to find out that I had had a missed miscarriage. I had to have surgery 2 days later and had no idea who I could call to help process my grief. I had to be in the pulpit two days later and desperately needed a person who could act as a pastor to me, help me hold space and tension between who I was as a person and how to keep serving as a pastor in the midst of deep sorrow. I needed someone who was not there with me because of my congregation or job title, but because they cared about my loss as a human being.

Both of us believe that sitting with the grieving and hurting is an important and vital aspect of pastoral care. However, we also think that at the Presbytery level, providing pastoral care for pastors requires more than providing crisis responses. Providing pastoral care to spiritual care providers requires a multi-dimensional approach, one that, in addition to crisis care and response, also includes categories such as:

- Spiritual Care
- Financial Stability
- Mental Health
- Physical Health
- Professional Development
- Social/Community Participation

When these six dimensions of care are being tended well, we believe a pastor or CRE will be fully equipped and made ready to serve their congregation with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Conversely, when pastoral burnout occurs, it often is the result of a combination of a few of the above dimensions, and, given its severity, may manifest in a perceived inability by the spiritual care provider to continue in their current congregation. Worse yet, the burned out pastor can begin harboring deep resentment toward their congregation for, in their estimation, failing to do or help enough. Such resentment can boil over and permanently scar both pastor and congregation for years to come.

For me (Joseph), serving a smaller congregation for four years opened my eyes to the importance of a wide-angle view of pastoral care. The church I served was lovely and beautiful and filled with eagerness and joy, yet due to personal financial instability, lack of physical fitness, and prolonged isolation from colleagues or partners in ministry, I found myself languishing. Left unchecked, such a reality nearly always will lead to pastoral burnout.

Additionally, I (Brenna), can remember my time serving as an associate pastor where it felt like all the resources of the presbytery and the church were only focused on the head of staff. The sense that only some kinds of pastors were able to access help or support leads to burnout for associates and CRE's at a faster rate. We see the value and importance of making sure that everyone in the Lake Huron presbytery who is serving in a pastoral role has the same level of access to support and burnout prevention from the presbytery; whether they are solo, head of staff, part-time, designated, or CREs.

Commenting on the recent Barna report about the rising rates of burnout among younger pastors, Anglican priest and writer Tish Harrison Warren writes "Ministry in America is not sustainable if nearly half of younger pastors feel burned out and are considering leaving their jobs. To move forward and heal, pastors need rest. They need support. They likely need access to therapy. And like all of us, they need kindness and grace."¹

Pastoral care is multi-dimensional and the role of mid-council bodies such as the Presbytery is first to recognize this reality and then, secondly, to do whatever it can to resource its pastors in holistic ways. Hiring two Pastors to the Presbytery is an excellent way to begin this process, and as the inaugural candidates here in the Lake Huron Presbytery, we believe that the only way we can be successful is if we begin working in a comprehensive way to establish holistic pastoral care across these six areas.

Our vision for this position is to help transform the Lake Huron Presbytery into a place of personal and pastoral flourishing, where pastors—both Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Ruling Elders—operate with joy, imagination, and love as they exercise their call to ministry. We believe this can be possible through designing and curating opportunities and resources to address the holistic needs of contemporary ministry.

¹See Tish Harrison Warren's opinion piece entitled, "Why Pastors are Burning Out" published August 2022 in *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/28/opinion/pastor-burnout-pandemic.html>. For the data behind this opinion article, see Barna Group's 2022 report: "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year" (<https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>).

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Will this be easy? Will it be straightforward? Will the ideas and resources be acceptable to every pastor in every call? A resounding 'no!' is in order for several reasons.

First, many pastors in our presbytery have been in ministry for nearly a decade or more; they have seen and witnessed much in our Presbytery that would lead them to be suspicious or skeptical of new ideas for development. Secondly, other pastors, like myself (Joseph) have only labored here in Lake Huron and as such we lack the wider vision of what other presbyteries are doing and how creative ideas might be implemented here. Finally, many pastors have become so rigid in their imaginations about what pastoring means that the idea of changing or growing or developing feels impossible. Providing pastoral care for such pastors may be challenging.

And yet, the need still stands no matter how many challenges we may face. Having served in multiple presbyteries across the country I (Brenna), know that this need for pastors and CRE's to be cared for as human beings first and pastors second is not an isolated issue. Our friends and colleagues around the country are struggling with the same kinds of issues we are here in Lake Huron Presbytery. We are pastoring and living in challenging times and the reality is that something has to change before it breaks.

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We all know that we follow a God who does big things, who is up to the challenges and the pain that life presents to us. We believe that no matter what challenges might lay ahead for this new role, that it is worth it to face them, the benefits of trying something new far outweigh the risks.

We know that good things, that change takes time, and we don't expect everyone to be on board over night, but it is our hope and goal that over the next year we will be able to connect with you a person, as a friend; that we will be able to listen and hear your feedback, needs,

hopes, dreams for what it would look like for you to feel like your supported as a child of God, as a human being in your the midst of our call and work. I (Brenna), am personally so excited about the possibilities that this opportunity opens up for our presbytery. We are grateful for a chance to be proactive about seeking the welfare of our colleagues, to grow relationships and support, indeed, to make sure no one has to feel as alone and unseen as we have in the midst of our personal pain and loss as pastors ever again.

We are committed to serving this presbytery, and you as our colleagues, to the best of our ability, so that those who serve here know they are seen, valued, and cared for as the valuable children of God you are, no matter the congregation you serve, the title you carry, or the work you do.

3. Dimensions of Pastoral Care

As we have suggested, we believe that caring for pastors includes, but also eclipses, care in times of crisis or emergency. To become a presbytery that actually cares for the *whole* pastor means creating resources or systems of care in several areas. What follows is a cursory list of possibilities, not presumptions. These are our “throw it on the wall” list of ideas which may become realities. We provide them to illustrate our wide-angle vision for pastoral care and to spark the imaginations within the presbytery.

Crisis Care

- Initially the PTTP position will be set up to receive intake calls from pastors who may require immediate or urgent pastoral care. Google Voice numbers will be set up to receive calls so those serving in this role will be able to prioritize and respond to pastors in crisis situations.
- Following an initial call, the PTTPs will assess if and when an in-person visit is required.
- The PTTP will also coordinate with COMMP and other regional pastors to be sure the pastor in crisis is networked in with local support systems.

Spiritual Care

- *Presbytery Meetings:* The PTTPs will be responsible for planning all services of worship at the Lake Huron Presbytery and sharing the responsibility for preaching at all Presbytery meetings. We would like to work to make Presbytery worship less of a performance *for* pastors and participation *by* pastors. Creative liturgical orders, globally-derived music, flexible seating arrangements, and shared liturgical leadership should characterize Presbytery worship.
- *Spiritual Care Resources:* The PTTPs will work to curate seasonal spiritual care resources and opportunities for pastors to participate in exercises, rituals, and routines which may help connect them to God.

Financial Stability

- *Tax Filing Grants:* The PTTPs could work with the Presbytery to establish a partnership with regional CPA or tax-return agencies fluent in clergy taxes to provide a low-cost opportunity for pastors to have someone handle their tax return each year.
- *Church Budget 101:* The PTTPs could work with the Presbytery to establish an annual seminar (Zoom? On Demand) that covers the basics of small or mid-size church budgets.
- *Personal Budgeting + Investments:* The PTTPs could work with the Presbytery to provide an opportunity for pastors to consult with a financial planner to help ensure they are managing their income and investments wisely.

Mental Health

- *Mental Health Partnerships:* The PTTs could work with existing agencies and organizations such as the Gerholz Christian Counseling Center (Flint-First)

Physical Health

- *Fitness Incentive Grants:* The PTTs could work with the Presbytery to establish a partnership program between the LHP and local congregations to cover the costs associated with maintaining a fitness membership for all pastors and CREs in the Presbytery.
- *Annual Fitness Challenges:* Using apps such as Strava, we could create and incentivize fitness goals for pastors and CREs, whether through direct competition or through collective goal-setting. These efforts may assist in increasing the physical health and fitness of all participants. *See the wild success of Flint-First's "PandEpic Fitness Challenge" conducted from May-June of 2020 for the staff of Flint-First which saw a collective 2100 miles walked, run, or cycled.*

Professional Development

- *Annual Conferences:* The PTT position could work with Presbytery Council and COMMP to sponsor participation in an annual pastoral retreat/conference Lake Huron Presbytery pastors can attend together for support and fellowship.

Social/Community Participation

- *Pastoral Networks:* Over the course of the first 18 months, the PTTs could work with pastors to create pastoral networks in each of our four regions. These networks will meet at least monthly for fellowship, food, support, and more. The recent success of the Region 3 "Pastors + Coffee" group may prove helpful to our efforts.
- *Administrative Commission for Installation:* The PTTs could function as the chairpersons of every necessary Administrative Commission to install new pastors to service in the Presbytery. This would especially be a welcome overture for pastors new to the area who do not know who to call to help in this way.

4. Target Milestones for 2023

The following target milestones were created by us to help us prioritize our work in the coming twelve months. For one reason or another we suspect that not all of these milestones may be reached in the first year, nevertheless we found it helpful to develop this list.

→ February-March 2023

- ◆ Prepare an introductory video about ourselves to be included in the Presbytery of Lake Huron's Zoom meeting on March 4.
- ◆ Begin acquiring necessary technology to enable Brenna and Joseph to stay connected and available;
- ◆ Acquire license for Notebird (internal pastoral care database) and enroll all pastors, CRE, Presbytery staff member for milestone tracking and pastoral followups.
- ◆ Establish meeting schedule for Brenna and Joseph to touch base about pastoral care situations developing in the presbytery.

→ March-May 2023

- ◆ Make direct contact with every pastor + CRE (phone, Zoom, in-person)
- ◆ Contact select Presbyteries across the country to assess current pastoral care strategies being implemented elsewhere
- ◆ Begin drafting an annual plan to comprehensively address the six areas of holistic pastoral care
- ◆ Contact mental health resource centers and establish potential pathways for clergy mental health
- ◆ Begin considering what a operating budget for pastoral care and development resources might require for future LHP budget cycles
- ◆ Secure initial year 1-2 funding for pastoral care endeavors from larger churches or request a portion of shared mission grant funds from the Presbytery.

→ May-September 2023...

- ◆ Make direct contact with every pastor + CRE (phone, Zoom, in-person)
- ◆ Hold Regional Town Hall lunch gatherings to explore felt needs in churches and pastoral needs.

→ September-December 2023...

- ◆ Make direct contact with every pastor + CRE (phone, Zoom, in-person)
- ◆ Promote and attend local pastoral retreat and conference (e.g. Western Seminary's 'Doxology' Conference; Calvin University's 'Worship Symposium') and provide opportunities for fellowship, feedback, and deep thinking.