

PC(USA) MINISTER SURVEY

Letters to My Younger Self

A selection of letters from
Presbyterian Ministers of all ages
and places of service.



Why conduct a SURVEY of all PC(USA)ministers? Why now?

Research Services regularly receives questions from members, congregational staff, mid councils, and PC(USA) leaders about ministers that cannot be answered with the data that available to us. As data was not available, I decided that a SURVEY should be developed to answer many of these questions and asked Perry Chang, PhD to lead this work. This report is one portion of what has been learned, yet many new questions have been formed. New SURVEYs will follow focusing on clergy of color, retirement, bi-vocational ministry, commissioned ruling elders, and “part-time” ministers.

The success of this first ever SURVEY of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister would have been far less if not for the support our many partners. Here are just a few of them.

- Call to Health, the Board of Pensions’ wellness program that offered points toward the minister’s wellness goal for participation.
- Presbyterian Publishing Company offered a discount for a future purchase for all who completed the SURVEY.
- Communication’s staff from the Office of the General Assembly, Mission Agency, and Presbyterian Foundation who wrote several stories that included the SURVEY link.
- Office of the General Assembly Mid Council relations staff that regularly promoted the SURVEY in its newsletters
- Several denomination-wide committees that shared the link with their constituencies.
- Members of the all-agency data group who regularly meet to discuss and improve data and data reporting for PC(USA) and open doors for new partnerships.

Throughout this process ministers expressed their gratitude that these questions were being asked and that they are long overdue.

Susan Barnett, PhD

Director, Research Services
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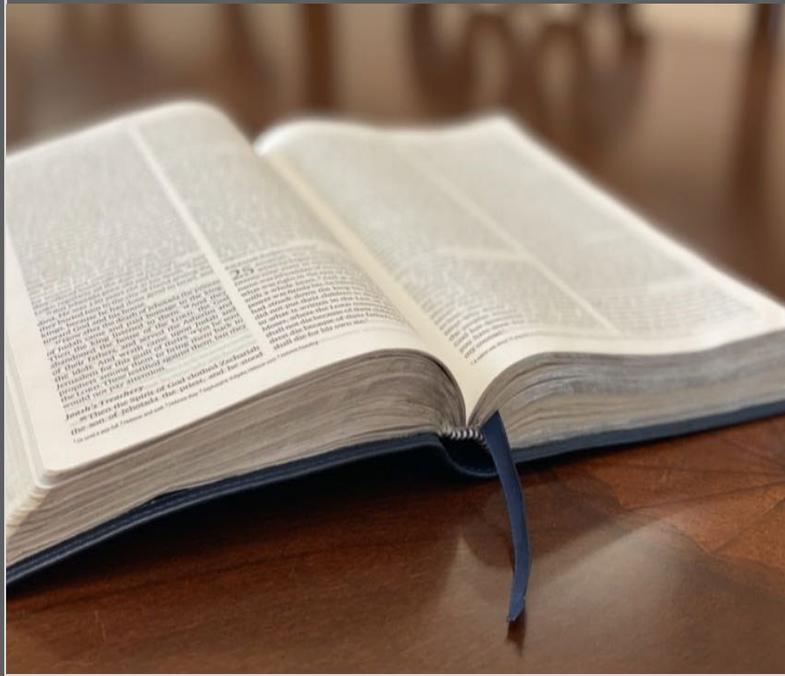
Introduction

The PC(USA) Minister SURVEY was a massive 110-question SURVEY which fielded from September to November of 2019.* Invitations were sent by postcard to all ministers for whom we had an address. In addition, an email invitation was sent to all PC(USA) congregations for whom we had an email. The SURVEY was also one of the Board of Pensions' Call to Health challenge.

23% of the denomination's 19,243 ministers (n=4,507) responded to the SURVEY.

Remember a SURVEY is a slice in time, for that moment.

Ministers were asked, "If you had the ability to talk with your younger self, what would you tell your younger self about ministry?" This report shares a portion of those letters written by ministers.

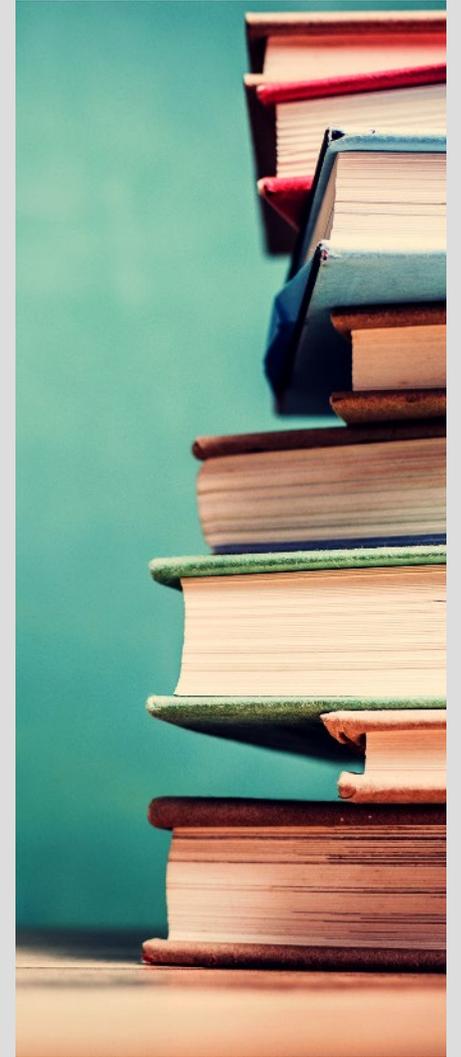


Definitions

The minister of Word and Sacrament is ordained and may work in many different places

These positions include pastors, but ministers are also ordained into other forms of specialized ministry such as mid council leadership, national agency leadership, chaplaincy, faculty/educators, or staff at a religious non-profit. In this report, we will be using these categories to examine differences in minister wellbeing. This report examines results by the following calls and employment status:

- **Ministers** – all ministers of the Word and Sacrament
- **Pastors** –installed pastors and co-pastors, as well as associate, interim, supply, and organizing pastors
- **Specialized ministers** –serving in another form of ministry other than leading a congregation, such as chaplaincy or pastoral counseling
- **Bi-vocational ministers** – those who are in a call while also holding a secular job
- **Honorably Retired** – those who report being an Honorably Retired member of their presbytery (and may or may not still be in a call)
- **Secular job** – those who are ordained to ministry but not currently in a call



A man in a blue suit and patterned tie is shown from the chest down, holding a white letter with both hands. The letter has some faint, illegible text on it. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting with wooden furniture.

Letters from Ministers

Age: 20s

“Always take the long view. Stay calm. You're ultimately not in control.”

28 -year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry



To my younger self,

As a new pastor I can remember many of the things I thought ministry would be - it is all of those things and none of those things at the same time. First and foremost, I would tell myself to be open-minded. Be open-minded to both God and people. Second, it is okay to not have the answers all of the time, but you better know how to find the answers or be okay with the mystery. Third, start living the ordination vows before you get ordained. Fourth, discover who you truly are, write it down, and remind yourself frequently who your soul wants to be in the midst of ministry woes. Finally, I might tell myself to go into architecture or something else entirely because being a young woman in ministry is exhausting, especially in a small town. I would tell myself to fall in love with something else for my career and follow God elsewhere. But I also know that my younger self would have ignored that advice and gone into ministry anyway - and that is the blessing of a young person's call to ministry.

26-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

Take initiative, offer yourself and others around you grace, don't expect perfection from people who don't have the theological training that you do, and find people who can mentor/support you. Your continued education and spiritual development is something YOU have to prioritize, because it's likely no one else will. No call that you take will be perfect, but it is your job to love those you serve unconditionally and commit to your call.

29-year-old Specialized Minister

To my younger self,

Ministry is a hard and beautiful calling. Establish boundaries, they are key to your 'success' in ministry and life. But be willing to bend them for moments of true pastoral needs-- like death and trauma. Take care of yourself, otherwise you won't be able to take care of anyone else. Invest in your spiritual practices so that your spirit is growing constantly.

27-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry



To my younger self,

You could spend all of your time at the church; don't. Full time ministry is draining and you need to find ways to actually balance church work and family life / community involvement. Take all the vacation offered to you, and ask for more time away to reinvigorate yourself. It is not a gift or a favor to the church to fail to take time away. It is not noble. Self care and time away is a necessity. Also, work intentionally on cultivating spiritual disciplines early in your ministry. They might have to change from what you used to do. Let go of the fantasy that church ministry is all about sitting around studying the Bible and talking about God, or that you will always have the time to commit to an hour of prayer. Sometimes ministry is catching bats in the hallway and working on website content.

29-year-old Pastor, 3 years in ministry



To my younger self,

You might be called to something you think is beneath you. Sometimes God draws you back like an arrow so you can farther overall. And sometimes an opportunity just sucks because it sucks. If you're thinking of an opportunity as a backup plan, it's not your call. Discern everything in prayer and you will be okay.

*27-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
2 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Don't try to measure success exclusively in terms of numbers. Be patient. Find others who are also excited about their ministry (don't let folks drag you down). Remain open to new/unexpected possibilities and trust God. Recognize the weight and importance of this work and strive for excellence, but remain humble and know that you're not perfect.

28-year-old Pastor, 2 years in ministry



Letters from Ministers

Age: 30s

Guard your self-care relentlessly. That is how you will stay healthy in ministry. Find colleagues who are safe to be totally open with. Invest in something totally non-ministry related that you are passionate about.

31-year-old-Pastor, 3 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Try to understand that you have expectations of others that you aren't even aware you're imposing on them. They cannot and will not meet those expectations, even the ones you think are part of basic human and Christian decency. You will be discriminated against, constantly criticized because of your age, gender, and ethnicity. Don't take what they say to heart. They speak from their own pain and need healing. You'll find that most of the people you encounter in your congregation don't read the bible or pray. They are in serious need of a connection to God. You'll get push back when you try to give them the tools to equip them. You **MUST** rely on God solely and God's promises. Please remember this and turn to God immediately when you find yourself feeling drained from all the work of ministry. Know that you aren't alone. Find friends in and outside of ministry. Get a therapist. Take care of your health. Stop doubting your call. **YOU ARE CALLED** by God.

30-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

You cannot compare yourself to your colleagues, both in seminary and in ministry. The Call process is different for every person, and it should be treated with the reverence and discernment it is due, rather than setting boundaries in place as to when a Call must be accepted by (e.g. graduation). Similarly, in ministry, there will be internal and external comparisons--those serving in multi-pastoral staffs cannot compare their work against another pastor's work, and those in a solo pastor positions cannot allow the comparative words congregants might speak as to defining their success. Playing comparison games is the quickest way to find your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health fall apart. By acknowledging your gifts and talents, and tending to your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, the desire to compare yourself against others decreases and increases a sense of purpose and fit.

30-year-old Pastor, 4 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It's going to be hard, and it won't necessarily get easier with time. Learn to set boundaries (with time off, sabbath, family time, etc.) immediately, and hold onto that. You, your mental or physical health, and your family are probably not going to be anyone's priority, so you have to insist that they be made a priority. Seek out relationships with other pastors that you can share with. Find things completely outside the church and your ministry that bring you joy and find ways to explore those interests. Allow yourself comp time if you have to work on your day off. See a therapist BEFORE things get overwhelming. Learn how to ask for things that you know you deserve, and don't settle for less than you are worth. All that being said, ministry is incredible and amazing and can bring joy and purpose to your life in a way that nothing else can. If you feel called to it, truly called, and can't imagine yourself doing anything else in life, then go for it!

36-year-old Pastor, 6 years in ministry

To my younger self,

That we serve a denomination where being a person of color works against you. Make sure you have a signed contract before you start your new call and that the terms of the call are clearly laid out. Seek support from colleagues. Go to counseling. Double standards regarding race and gender are true.

38-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You will struggle to disengage from the work of ministry. It never turns off; there will always be thoughts of what you didn't do or what more you can do for the people you serve. It's mentally and emotionally exhausting. Boundaries are so very important, because without them burnout is inevitable. I would also say, there is some very serious trauma that you have not yet dealt with, and ministry can and will open that up. It's painful, but you can and will get treatment. It will get better.

*35-year-old Specialized Minister,
10 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Ministry will probably not go how you expect and God will probably not lead you where you expect...it's good to be open to possibilities beyond what you can imagine. Also, SELF CARE! Never feel guilty about setting boundaries and taking time for yourself. Having peers and other colleagues in ministry is VITAL to health in ministry, as is having peers and friends outside of ministry who you can be open and honest with.

32-year-old Pastor

To my younger self,

Don't fixate on the grades, Ords, or learning the languages of seminary. Those are important, but in real-life ministry, you do more listening, building relationships, & being the one everyone looks at for answers & activities. Some days you'll look at your M.Div and wonder why you didn't just become a party planner for God's people. Other days, you wish seminary included more spiritual practices & prayer time, because in the hustle of the church, you don't know how to take care of yourself.

32-year-old Minister, 5 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Commit to setting healthy boundaries early in your ministry. Maintaining boundaries is always important, but will become especially important when you decide to have children. Seek out mentors and nurture those relationships. It's challenging, particularly as a woman in ministry, but it is important to advocate for yourself and to practice having difficult conversations that will lead to healthier working environments.

33-year-old Pastor, 7 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Make sure you have a backup plan, or look toward bivocational ministry. The reality of ministry going forward is that there probably won't be enough adequately-paying, full-time positions to go around, especially if you're a woman, and definitely not if you're geographically tethered.

*35-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
9 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Do your best to seriously prepare for an alternate career. Having other real options for your financial future will allow you greater freedom to find and fulfill only the kinds of ministry roles that best suit your skills, abilities, gifts, personality, and interests. Work in the church is hard, painful, and often disappointing and lonely (even with good clergy friends, meaningful congregational relationships, and lots of denominational support), as much as it can be meaningful. While I don't regret the ministry I've done, I'm not sure I would choose this path if I were emerging from college again right now. Not that I wouldn't serve in ministry in some way, but maybe not in a traditional full-time primary-income situation.

*33-year-old Specialized Minister,
7 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

It's the hardest thing that you'll ever love. It takes continual self-examination (therapy, mentoring, peer groups, spiritual direction, coaching, etc.) and growth. Build a strong and secure support system-- both those that are geographically close and those who are not and communicate regularly.

33-year-old Pastor, 6 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Cultivate skills to allow you to have external sources of income so that you are not entirely dependent on the financial health of your ministry. Remember that 'call' comes in many forms and may not always be in the form of ministry within an established congregation. Always maintain a posture of humility, but as a woman, do not hesitate to be assertive in your ability to lead. Use whatever 'power' you find you have wisely, and always for the benefit of others. Memorize some large chunks of scripture so that in seasons when daily bible reading just isn't happening, you can still meditate on the scriptures.

*38-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
12 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

I would say you're lucky to get to do this work, if you get to do this work in a good place. If you're in a bad place, move on the moment you know it isn't healthy. I would also say to my younger self that men are ridiculously patronizing no matter what you do, how much you fight back or stay silent. There is no winning against the way men will speak to you like you're a child or like you might just not quite understand--it doesn't go away even after you're older and have a stellar resume. So, don't ever stay silent, at least help them see--and then say calmly, 'would you have said that to another man?' It took me about 5 years to get to that one line. And, it really works, it has only pissed off a few men, most are actually thoughtful about it and realize what they've done. I would also say you can't fix all the crazies. But, you can listen. I would say to spend more time with family.

34-year-old Pastor, 4 years in ministry

To my younger self,

This work is very draining, both emotionally and physically. You will be called upon to use more patience and bite your tongue more often than you ever have before. You will have to learn to engage conflict without getting defensive, and to set boundaries so that you can have a life outside of your job. You will have to be vulnerable in ways that will make you uncomfortable and confront bigotry and close-mindedness in ways that will leave you exasperated. You will not always get the positive feedback and affirmation you crave. Frequently, you will wonder what on earth you are doing this for. This will be exceedingly difficult. However, you will genuinely enjoy your ministry, you will find some spark of knowledge or self-awareness in it everyday, and you will come to feel as though you are making a difference in spite of everything.

35-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

I would like to tell myself to dive in and let God take hold. I'd also share Phillip Gulley's *Harmony and Home* books with the encouragement to read and realize the crazy situations in the books are possible. Ministry is fun, wacky, screwed up, challenging, disheartening, engaging, energizing, and needs to be centered in hope. Never loose the sense of hope and belief in the resurrection.

36-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

The seminary has not prepared you to do or lead Evangelism - you need to learn this. The seminary has also not prepared you to lead the Administrative life of the church (finances, human resources, even stewardship) - the sooner you acquire proficiency and the ability to lead in this areas of church life with knowledge and theological commitment, the healthier the churches you serve will be.

39-year-old Pastor, 10 years in ministry

To my younger self,

People suck sometimes, but they are inherently good. When they aren't at their best, it's usually from a place of pain or mourning, etc. Give people the benefit of the doubt. But don't be surprised when they hurt you. Don't take it personally. You are good enough and your ministry is good enough. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise just because you aren't a straight, white male. And those other ministers who spit in your face, literally, are scared of change, and you represent change. Don't back down. Bullies shouldn't win, don't let them. People will have your back. Just keep using your voice. They can't ignore you if you make noise.

36-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

Some people truly are gifted with a calling to go into toxic, broken systems and be a change agent. You, younger self, are not one of those people. Pay attention to the health of the system you are about to devote yourself to. Look for the healthy church, with strong leaders, trust your gut, don't ignore the red flags.

36-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Hey kid! I know that you are an atheist right now, but just know that God has a sense of humor. You are going to enter into ministry. It's going to be challenging, difficult, and even painful. But it's also going to be enlightening, beautiful, and joyous. Be gentle with yourself. And trust that God's got this.

39-year-old Pastor, 4 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You are called to love humans. Love will hurt because it is humans with whom we are dealing. Love anyway. You are not called to save the church. Love the church. Jesus has already done the saving. You are not called to judge the church or the persons in the church. Love the church and the persons. Jesus will do the judging (he's got perspective you don't). Don't be novel. Be loving. Love is not always nice, but it should never be cruel. Love is shown in doing, not in feeling. The feelings will come and go, and they will often hurt. Decide to love.

Remember that ministry is second to family. Marriage and parenthood are higher callings than ministry. Discipleship is higher still. Rest. Really rest, in ways that restore you in God's Kingdom. Escape is easier, but totally useless. Stop and rest in the Lord. Finally, struggle. Struggle with the Bible without casting it away. Struggle with humans and their messes without casting them away. Struggle with the politics of church and presbytery without casting them away. Struggle with God, and you may just prevail.

39-year-old Pastor, 10 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You are good enough, don't anyone tell you that the work you do is crap. Weed out the statements that are NOT about you - and learn they only reflect who the other person is as if they were looking in a mirror. Also hold up a mirror to yourself and know yourself well enough to how you react in certain situations that will help you adjust your responses and deal with your triggers. See a therapist even if you feel ok it will give you someone to whom you can vent and not worry about anyone finding out.

36-year-old Pastor, 2 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Never, never, never take a job because you 'need' the money. Talk to people in the presbytery, talk to your head of staff, be open and honest, be vulnerable and you will find help. Never take a ministry position ever because you are chasing a paycheck. It was the worst decision I have made in my life and led to three years of ministry from hell.

35-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

The idea you've been raised with, that being a pastor is about giving good sermons and visiting people, is not what a pastor is. The image given to you in seminary, that you are the congregation's 'resident theologian,' is also not what a pastor is...and is not what the pastor is viewed to be by congregants. In my experience, being a pastor today functionally means being the CEO of a small non-profit. Or maybe even being the CEO/COO/CFO of a small non-profit all at once. Thinking of ministry along those lines will help you navigate ministry greatly. Also, when people disparage you, it's usually about them.

39-year-old Pastor, 13 years in ministry

To my younger self,

One secret is: no one knows what they're doing. You probably won't serve the church you imagine in your head, but there is fruitful ministry to be done. Disappointment is real, but hang in there. Don't be afraid to ask for help and ask questions. Take seriously your pastoral authority and what people entrust to you. Go ahead and start going to therapy regularly. Just because you're a woman doesn't mean to you have to take the minutes in a meeting.

37-year-old Pastor, 7 years in ministry

To my younger self,

The structure of the church is still designed to support a full-time parish ministry by a white, straight male, whereas more and more ministry positions are part-time and non-traditional. If you are not a straight, white, male, full-time parish minister, be prepared to be frustrated by the religious establishment. Don't give up on it, but try to reform it to more accurately reflect the realities of ministerial life today.

38-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Regularly ask others in ministry to pray for you, and mean it. Regularly ask others in ministry what they need prayer for, and pray for it. The needs of the congregation and community will seem to be endless at times, but your energy is not. The timing of pastoral emergencies will be beyond your control, but a regular bed time, wake up, time to watch a funny video with your wife, time to pray, and regular exercise are all within your reach. Make time for these things. Make time for God daily beyond the sermons, session prep, Bible studies, emails, visits, and property headaches of the church building. Seek first the kingdom of God. Have strong mentors and mentee relationships in the faith. Build and receive accountability from others in the faith and in pastoral ministry. Journal weekly. Review goals weekly. Find opportunities for play and invite others to join.

34-year-old Pastor, 5 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Ministry is not a call to find happiness in serving the church. It's a call to deny yourself and find meaning in loving others the way that Christ loves us. It is hard, but hard doesn't mean bad. Life was never meant to be easy. Your heart will break a million times and be overwhelmed with joy a million and one times. Stick with it, and pace yourself. Never quit your job when what you really need is a nap.

39-year-old Pastor, 6 years in ministry

To my younger self,

What you learned in seminary and what your congregation needs/wants/expects are rarely aligned. Don't take on too much for yourself right out of the gate, but also don't let yourself just become assimilated into the culture of your congregation if it's unhealthy just because 'don't change anything for a year' is the advice you got going in. Some changes are necessary for your congregation's health!

33-year-old Pastor, 6 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Ministry is much more about working with people than it is about theology or programming. People/relationships are messy. Read, re-read, and read again Friedman's *Generation to Generation*. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there and create new ministry opportunities in the community. Have fun with it and see what happens.

*33-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
7 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Go to counseling prior to getting ordained. Start building up emotional resiliency because this job is going to attempt to take every bit of your emotional and spiritual life. Have a strong sense of self and know yourself well enough to know where and how you are revitalized. Be forgiving with yourself. Prepare to have your character questioned in ways that no other profession permits. Have at least 2 other pastor friends to care for you. Prepare your wife.

*37-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
5 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Have a backup plan, the church is unlikely to support you in the ways that you will need. It is better to do something other than ministry unless you are willing to put in the difficult work every day and be willing to watch many of your dreams die or be sabotaged by well-intentioned and misguided people. There are some joys, but there are many more struggles. If you don't think you can deal with that, find another path. Also you aren't going to make much money.

38-year-old Pastor, 10 years in ministry

Letters from Ministers

Age: 40s

Follow your heart. Life is a journey filled with twists and turns, ups and downs, joys and disappointments. Follow the path carved out for you and embrace change.

*40-year-old Specialized Minister,
7 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Ministry is a tough calling. For the time, energy, and money we put into our education and training, we are barely paid a living wage, if that. The stress of changing ministries and the lifestyle is hard to cope with for the long-term. If you can find a vocation to use your gifts, skills, and passion for ministry while getting paid decently and receiving full benefits, do it; you can always volunteer to preach, teach, and lead in a congregation.

45-year-old Pastor, 18 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Much of ministry is learned on the job, not in seminary. Take the time to get to know the congregation or call where you would be serving and make sure it is the 'right fit' for you, insofar as that is possible before taking the position. Issues will come up in every setting, but if you have good relationships with the people in your congregation, you will get through them together.

40-year-old Pastor, 14 years in ministry

To my younger self,

The hardest thing was to understand that a lot of conflict comes from people putting their own stuff onto me, rather than anything I did wrong. Many times, bringing conflict into the light so it can be resolved hurts the one who brings it because people prefer to keep it in the dark. Developing a thicker skin was what saved me, because people are still people underneath it all.

45-year-old Pastor

To my younger self,

Your gifts, skills, and abilities can be used in different ways, parish ministry is one way but so is nonprofit work (faith-based or not.) God is calling you to be you and to use your gifts, but the way you do that will vary over time. Your gifts with people can be used in pastoral ways without being a parish minister.

*44-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
19 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

I would seriously reconsider whether I would join the PC(USA) church. I find our denomination struggling to be creative, spirit-filled, and adaptable. Again and again I have found local congregations who refuse to change. The leadership at the top and the creativity there doesn't seem to easily filter into the average congregations. As a whole our form of government in practice is often rigid and stale. We have become gatekeepers instead of dreamers, and we have quenched the Spirit in our quest to do things decently and in order. We 'do business' but don't create the space to vision, dream, and move forward.

46-year-old Pastor, 21 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Don't go into ministry. Find another way to serve the church. There is great opportunity in ministry to do good, but greater opportunity as a clergy person to experience harassment, workplace abuse and discrimination, with no opportunity for legal or financial recourse, and little emotional/spiritual recourse as well. As a woman, it is not a safe experience and there are far better ways to live out your call and build stability for your family. I love the church, but the lack of ability for clear, standardized personnel rules for clergy is an ever-growing problem with no end in sight and I wouldn't recommend any women go into ministry at this point until this is resolved. It is simply not worth the hassle and there are other ways to live out your call. I would have still done the Mdiv but gone a different path from the beginning that didn't prioritize ordination.

*43-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
18 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Intentionally seek out positive and encouraging people who can support you in ministry-- a trusted other pastor, or spiritual guide, or even a trustworthy parishioner (of your church or another). You will need someone who can listen and pray with you! And try to keep some semblance of balance and healthy boundaries! It's so easy to get totally sucked in to ministry-- make friends outside of your congregation, guard time with your spouse and children, exercise and take care of your body...

46-year-old Pastor, 20 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Know that a ministry setting will never be 'perfect' but trust your gut and your feelings about where God might be calling. Remember that you are a beloved child of God and your wellbeing (all facets) is an important consideration for taking and staying in a specific place. Stand up for what you need and what you deserve.

48-year-old Minister, 11 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Love the people, and let them love you. God is at the heart of this love, so it will often surprise you how much better things go than what you or the congregation put in, but that is because Jesus multiplies and expands. If you ever get off track praying, it will show everywhere in your life. Stay on it.

46-year-old Pastor

To my younger self,

Don't worry about what or where others think you should go. Follow the calling in your heart. Larger salaries do not always a better call make. Smaller congregations can be as healthy, if not healthier, than larger ones, and being smaller it can be easier to affect positive change in them. Remember: ministry is not a climb up a ladder, but rather a commitment to go where you're sent.

47-year-old Pastor, 18 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It is more wonderful and humbling than you can imagine to walk with people in the joys and sorrows of their life. It is harder than you can imagine to balance family and church so be intentional. It is more fulfilling than you can imagine to teach, preach and provide pastoral care that make a real difference in the lives of the congregation and community.

47-year-old Pastor, 18 years in ministry

To my younger self,

If you find books more helpful than the internet, go ahead and use them and don't feel bad that your exegetical work does not involve much work at the computer. Keep looking for people with whom to meet regularly for prayer, other pastors, it is worth the effort to pray with and for each other regularly.

49-year-old Pastor, 22 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It's harder than you will ever imagine. People will spread rumors about you, hurt you, lie to you, and undermine you. These are the people you are sent to love and lead. Make sure it is a true call from God or you will burn out and become cynical. Keep your relationship with God strong, deep, alive, growing. Find healthy ministers in the Presbytery and build good relationships. Go where God sends you. Love whom God gives you. Know that Jesus was also hurt, betrayed, and undermined so you are in good company. Don't give up. Take care of yourself and your family. Take all your time off, vacation and continuing education. Get a spiritual director who will walk with you in your ministry and relationship with God. It's the most difficult, rewarding, sacred profession there is. When you are called and created by God to be in life-long ministry, it's an amazing and fulfilling journey.

47-year-old Pastor, 20 years in ministry

To my younger self,

I know God is prompting you into ministry. Don't be afraid to go for it. God won't leave you hanging. It will be hard but very rewarding. It will challenge, inspire, push, and stretch you in ways you will not believe. It will include tears and heartache. You will not be rich. Remember to take enough time for yourself so you don't burn out. And don't over function, which is your go-to solution when you feel stressed. It's okay if some things fall through the cracks. It's a marathon, not a sprint. Keep these values in your heart: faith in God, creativity, compassion for the other, fervency in integrity and speaking bold truth, and remember to find joy in all things.

49-year-old Pastor, 4 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Do not be afraid. God has got you. Pray constantly to be reminded of that. Ask God to help you find where you are injured spiritually and emotionally and get treatment. Go to therapy often. Go to spiritual direction often. Exercise as much as you write. Take management courses and learn the details of administration. Learn how to do and store paperwork/records. If you can do anything else and be happy, do it. If not, learn how to find contentment wherever The Spirit has lead you. Find gratitude and surrender completely to God and all will be well.

47-year-old Pastor, 20 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Delegate. Delegate. Delegate. You are a minister of word and sacrament. Stick to those two tasks and let the elders be elders, the deacons be deacons, and the laity be the body of the church. And, most importantly, let Jesus be the head of the church. It's his project, not yours.

40-year-old Pastor, 15 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Never discount the support of a healthy ministry setting (parish or presbytery) and be VERY careful of toxic settings (parish or presbytery). Gaslighting is alive and well in the church, so love wholeheartedly but keep a wary eye open. There ARE good people who can help you in tough situations if you cultivate good relationships and can/will ask when needed.

40-year-old Pastor, 13 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You can do this. God has called you and equipped you to do this. Don't doubt or downplay your gifts for ministry. People need what you have to offer. Be authentically you, and don't be afraid of offending people when you make unpopular choices because you believe God calls people of faith in that direction.

40-year-old Pastor, 15 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Ministry is going to be a much bigger challenge than you think it is, there will be joys such as studying scripture and sharing spiritual life and service with others but moments of great heartbreak, It is a journey, the Spirit will lead you even when it gets tough. Take time to prepare and don't rush the call, it takes a life time of experience and you will use every single bit of preparation and still it will not feel like its enough, but that is when you have to remember that God is the one who will work in and through the imperfect church. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Don't take your eyes off of Jesus for one second. He is the Shepherd. Never neglect your family or friends. You never know how much time you will have with them. Every day is precious. Unless you take up a life of celibacy, they come before the church. Never go at it alone. Jesus sent out the disciples by two for a reason. It really does take a village, a church, a presbytery to do the work of the ministry. Attend a PCUSA seminary.

49-year-old Pastor, 9 years in ministry

To my younger self,

That it will be more rewarding, and also more challenging than you think. That the sacred can seem ordinary because you're around it all the time. And that you will make a lot of mistakes - trust God to give you grace, be gracious to yourself, and learn to say you're sorry to people and mean it. When you know you're not perfect, you discover that you can rely more on Jesus than on your own wits.

47-year-old Pastor, 20 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Don't do it. But if you have to do it, do a lot more CPE, cognitive behavioral therapy, and growing up beforehand. Don't rush into being a grown up. Savor your 20s and 30s. Be a bohemian weirdo longer. Because, when you become a pastor, you will be robbed of many things: youth, individuality, and time, to name a few.

41-year-old Pastor, 14 years in ministry

To my younger self,

First, failure is not fatal. It doesn't really even hurt. What hurts is trying to be perfect. That truly sucks. Second, don't look for accolades. They will find you from time to time, but what you really need to look for is deep meaning. Find honest connections to people and places and the 'atta boys' will follow. Finally, screw the career path! It is crap and it is not worth it. Take jobs you want to take and not ones people or you think you should take. And don't look past this job to the next one. Take a call because you want that call not because it can get you to the next one or the next one. Be honest with yourself. It makes life much easier and more fun.

49-year-old Pastor, 18 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Make sure you learn about your dark side, the shadow self as Fr. Richard Rohr has called it, before entering ministry. Learn why you do the things you do, and often that is rooted in our family of origin experience. Also, I recommend at least a year of personal counseling to uncover this shadow self.

*46-year-old Specialized Minister,
1 year in ministry*

To my younger self,

It's okay to make mistakes. Just try to learn from them. Seek and accept grace from others. Lean into other people. Don't be afraid that they will think you are too young, too inexperienced, too whatever. And know that people appreciate you being involved with them - most likely, you are not bothering them.

40-year-old Specialized Minister

To my younger self,

Whatever you think being a pastor is...it is probably not that. It is hard to understand the toll of being always on takes on a pastor's personal health. As a second career pastor, I have never had a more rewarding professional role or a more demanding professional role (and I was previously a high-ranking executive).

43-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

Don't worry about what you don't know yet. It comes with time and experience. Don't worry about where you will be called to next, God will make it clear. Don't be afraid to set down roots in the community. It's God's ministry to the church and you are not the church. Don't over perform. Always look for ways to empower others to do ministry. Don't neglect the Bible - you need its truth.

44-year-old Pastor, 18 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You don't have to feel a passionate sense of call everyday to be truly called to a ministry. Some days are filled with an awareness of the Spirit. Some days are really hard. And some days it feels like a regular job, with meetings and paperwork. Your job is to be obedient to what God is calling you to do, to love the people in your church, and to continue to listen to where God calls you next.

40-year-old Pastor

To my younger self,

Get a pastor (pastors need pastors)! Better yet, find a spiritual director who specializes in pastors. Therapists help too. I have found a need to heal from my family of origin (gets triggered in leadership), develop contemplation in my overly active Christian leadership, and find help with developing my leadership potential. Nurture family & friendships outside the ministry. Have a life outside of ministry. Go to the beach. Exercise. It all helps.

42-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Go to law school! Go get your MBA! Get your MDiv when you retire. Literally, no one will want you to serve their church. You will be bullied by coworkers, you will be chewed-out by church ladies, you will give up time with family and friends for people who will never be your friend, not even in Christ. You will have more opportunities to serve the church as a lay leader than you will have as an ordained pastor. You will pay your babysitter better than you are paid. The church doesn't need your gifts...professionally speaking.

41-year-old Pastor, 14 years in ministry

To my younger self,

There is never enough time! Work through your issues related to overachievement and working too many hours. Keep your focus on Christ and maintain a healthy personal spirituality (prayer, Bible study, faith formation). Develop pastoral relationships - I miss having a pastor that knows me and cares for me. Don't go to a geographically large presbytery - it won't feel connectional. Seek Christ.

*44-year-old Specialized Minister,
6 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Trust God to guide you. Let go of the anxiety produced by the false assumption that there is a causal relationship between your performance / expertise and the health of the congregation. Learn to love, listen, and compassionately respond to the congregation as a body that contains a culture unique unto itself. Practice appreciative inquiry from the start. Yearn for the Spirit to illuminate the more distant corners of the community so that you can see and love them more. Be diligent and savvy out of love. Laugh and process and metabolize freely the myriad projections you field in your pastoral role. Listen to you life: Jot down regularly your feelings around the four 'P's of your life - Personal. Partner. Parent. Profession. Live in that balance, be not afraid to read and interpret the faces of those four P's at any given time.

41-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

Letters from Ministers

Age: 50s

It is often not about what you plan or want but about just being there. It will be frustrating at times. You will see God in even bigger ways than you did, so stay connected to prayer and centered on the Word. You will not get rich nor be able to pay your seminary debt, it seems like ever--but do it anyway. Remember your wife and kids!!!

52-year-old Pastor, 10 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It will be more demanding and more fulfilling than you can imagine. It will humble and stretch you. You will profoundly experience God's grace because there is no other way to explain your being enough in so many diverse and unexpected situations. You will be grateful that somehow you get to do this work and be paid for it.

*53-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
27 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

If there's something else you feel called to do, go do that. You can love Jesus from any job. If you don't have a call to do this, it will suck the life right out of you. Also, be healthy, have good boundaries, and don't blame all your problems on other people. Yes, the church has people with bad behavior, but if you give them all your energy, you'll miss a lot of ministry.

50-year-old Pastor, 11 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Find a clergy group that you can meet with regularly - either monthly for lunch or yearly for a week. If you can't find one, create one yourself. Don't wait for this to come to you. Build a network of support. Others need it as much as you do. Be faithful to your commitments to meet with your colleagues. Also, learn not to give an answer right away when you are asked to do something. Ask for some time. Pray about it. Talk to your family, if applicable. Don't say yes too much. It is okay to say no sometimes. Keep your boundaries so that you can take care of yourself. You can't care for others if you are yourself depleted emotionally and spiritually.

50-year-old Pastor, 24 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It's hard and there's great joy. Some days you will feel like you aren't making a difference. You probably are but some days you'll wonder if the difference you are making actually matters to the kingdom. Some days you'll wonder if your gifts are better used outside the church. There will be days of joy too and moments of connection. Find other church leaders to journey with as soon as possible especially if you are a solo pastor. Keep yourself physically healthy and get a good therapist as well.

50-year-old Pastor, 12 years in ministry

To my younger self,

That self-care is not selfish. In fact, it's the opposite of selfish. Taking care of yourself (resting, sleep, healthy eating, non-church relationships, recreation) enables you to be the best pastor you can be for God's beloved children. Think about what you need to be your best self. Establish good habits now. You won't regret it. Also, Jesus did it (look how often he goes away by himself!).

53-year-old Minister, 10 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Churches are both training grounds for saints and hospitals for sinners, mostly the latter. Don't get hung up on fixing anything. Focus on loving, teaching love, modeling love, and being loved. You are loved, respected, and needed more than you realize. You are called. You are powerful. Wield it gently. Be patient with others and even more with your self. Trust yourself, trust God more. Be yourself. Allow others the privilege. Don't accept criticism from people you wouldn't go to for advice. It is important. Listen a lot. Pray more.

51-year-old Pastor, 12 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Develop a sense of humor quickly! Laugh at your own absurd self-righteousness as often as possible. Don't be offended, when people don't really know what they're saying, when they tell you about what they think of you. Spend more time with family, and less time with ecclesiastical gamesmanship and politics. Find a therapist you can trust. Avoid junk food at all costs. Be passionate about selfcare.

58-year-old Pastor, 24 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Take a conflict mediation training. It has been an incredibly useful skill. See a counselor regularly. It really helps to have someone to talk to. Try to be flexible. Things rarely work out according to plan. Be patient. Everything always takes longer than you think it will. But the results are usually better. Be able to ask other people to do things. Get good at delegating and be prepared that the result may not look exactly like you wanted it to. This is not a bad thing!

52-year-old Pastor, 16 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Make sure to see a spiritual director earlier and regularly. Ministry is less about doing and more about being.....Relationships and focusing on the spiritual vitality of yourself and congregants. You can't do it all. Cultivate friendships with your peers. Honor and practice what brings you alive spiritually. Only you can take care of yourself.

57-year-old Pastor, 30 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Isolation or long ranger mentality is a death nail in long term ministry. Your views on many things will mature over time so don't dig in too arrogantly. Get therapy. Therapy is good. Therapy is helpful, don't be so stubborn about getting it. Save money from day one. Ministry positions can end quickly, have savings to bridge the gap. Have a back up plan because, if you don't , your 'desperation to stay' will ruin your ability to be non-anxious. The ability yo walk away from a toxic situation is very freeing and actually enables you to stay longer because your anxiety is lower.

*51-year-old Specialized Minister,
24 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Take time to surround yourself with like minded growing individuals who love God and desire to serve God wholeheartedly with the mind of Christ and the Holy Spirit guiding them in their daily walk. Don't be discouraged, frustrated, disgusted or cynical when others become vampires of your emotional, spiritual, mental and physical energies - just say NO! because you really don't need the apron strings pulled or the need to take care of 'grown folks' who just want to ultimately use you and use you up.

*54-year-old Specialized Minister,
8 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Listen to people different than yourself -- in age, background, current situation; use what you learn to inform your reflections without directing them. God will use you in ways that are similar AND in ways that are vastly different. Believe your sense of call.

*55-year-old Specialized Minister,
1 year in ministry*

To my younger self,

Don't laugh at the exercise in seminary (XXXXXXXX) called 'The Good Enough Pastor' because it's what you should use as your base model for ministry. Do you and don't feel in your first year coming out of seminary that you are competing with other pastors. Find a pastor mentor program and one or two seasoned pastors to journey with and then serve as one after you become a 'seasoned' pastor. Thank people for trusting you enough to tell you you will never be their pastor because you're a woman (or whatever their thing is) and trust that over your journeying time together God will work that all out somehow. Laugh a lot and find the people in your congregation who can journey with you and be laughing/joy companions. If you and your spouse love doing ministry together, don't think you have to do anything different after you're the pastor ... keep doing ministry together and just have someone he can call if he needs pastoral care.

54-year-old Pastor, 9 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Do NOT meld yourself and your life entirely to the church you serve, and never think you have become irreplaceable; otherwise, when inevitably it becomes time to go, you will feel like you have lost everything. Get and make full use of a good spiritual director/therapist. Use every bit of your continuing ed time and money. Spend a lot of time fostering collegial relationships. Don't be disheartened or brought into the tiny orbit of acidic or toxic complainers. Keep on working to learn maturity and ministry--the second half of your career is so much easier and more wonderful if you will. Understand, and behave as if, you do NOT know it all, because you absolutely do not. Be ambitious not for yourself but for good things to be possible, but always remember you are not as smart or knowledgeable as you think you are.

52-year-old Pastor, 25 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Pastoring is more than preaching-- the public parts of the call are not the most important parts of the call. Grow closer to Christ, and get on a path of discipleship that keeps you growing and changing. The more fully you know that Christ loves you, the more love you will have to give to Christ's people. And love is the only thing that really matters-- not being smart, not being right, not being good. Being loved is everything.

55-year-old Pastor, 30 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Get ready to experience the very best and the very worst in people. Get ready for unimaginable generosity and kindness, but also get ready for rejection, cruelty, and pettiness. Get ready for demands that are unreasonable, but also get ready for the privilege of being with people in the holiest moments of their lives. To paraphrase an old commercial: Get ready for the hardest job you will ever love.

56-year-old Pastor, 28 years in ministry

To my younger self,

The Church is changing rapidly. There is only so much one can do to reverse the tide. Be diligent and hopeful, but be ready to get over your savior complex quick. And yes, it is highly likely you have one, whether you admit it or not. Focus on the ministry before you, the real people. Let the broader social trends sort themselves out. Do pastoral care, mission and justice and you will feel good about your work. Take all the pastoral care classes you can, and get therapy.

56-year-old Pastor, 25 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You did what you knew was safe for yourself when the denomination and the culture condemned LGBTQIA folks. You lived far too long not understanding just how strong, brave and intelligent you have always been. You discounted your gifts, you devalued your worth. Despite the inability of the church, God has always loved you just as it was stated at your baptism. The church faltered with your baptism vows. God did not.

59-year-old Pastor, 31 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Don't be afraid of what God is asking you to do. Don't be so hard on yourself all the time. Your job is to create the conditions where people can encounter and commune with the Holy. You cannot control the Holy or your people. Just do your best to plant seeds, create amenable conditions, and then let go. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit to move -- and to the people to respond -- or not. You can encourage that, but ultimately that is out of your hands. (And that is a good thing.)

58-year-old Pastor, 25 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It will be joyful and lonely. You will be injured and loved. Self care is vital. Don't try to be a superstar. It will be harder than you think, even if you're a high achiever. Maybe especially in that case. If you believe you might be / become the sole bread winner with dependents, better to get a higher paying industry job to support the household so you can do good and effective ministry on the side. Ministry is a privilege and might not cover your basic needs. Don't assume it will, regardless of your desire, commitment, skill, energy, passion, etc. Without other resources, your physical, financial, social and spiritual health will be risked. You will not enjoy the kind of encouragers/ promoters to help you grow that you did in for profit industry. Yet, it's a privilege to be enjoyed when you're among a good-fit church. Many bad-fits exist because congregations don't sometimes self-describe well and don't sometimes know what they need. And if you start as an A.P., your call might not be respected by a head of staff who's not a good fit. Be make all the phone calls to understand potential fit. Persevere, and God might eventually lead to a better landing. But poor HOS fits (when you give generously of yourself and get abused, watching your loved ones ache), that kind of stuff hurts deeply and is atypical of for profit industry culture. Hold out, (sometimes you just need to survive just a moment longer) and a good fit provides many freedoms to co create transformation, meaning, healing.

54-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Develop sacred rhythms (regular spiritual practices) early on, including meeting with a Spiritual Director. Always put your family first as an example to your congregation (and for the future of your family's faith). Develop friendships outside of your congregation or called position (this is the hardest of all for some of us).

59-year-old Pastor, 25 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Ministry is complicated. Many people are hurting. Some people will not allow you to pastor them - you have to be okay with that. And you have to pastor them anyway because the one's who will allow you to be their pastor are watching. Get yourself a good coach and a good therapist. Take all your days off and vacation and when you can't take it in the moment, make up the time!!!

52-year-old Pastor, 10 years in ministry

Letters from Ministers

Age: 60s

Be prepared to sacrifice yourself in doing ministry - whether family time, 'normal' lifestyle, hours in your week, and even pain when you are rejected, or blamed for what isn't your fault. There is always new life offered in Christ and you are held in the gracious love of God throughout it all. Take heart. Keep your joy alive. Be of good courage. You are not alone. God is with you always.

60-year-old Pastor, 35 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You need to have a healthy sense of self. If you depend on the approval or affirmation of others, or spend a lot of effort seeking to win or maintain these, you are not likely to succeed in very many endeavors and will likely feel a lot of personal pain. If you can't separate yourself from all the stuff that comes your way -- the good as well as the bad -- your path may not be enjoyable, satisfying, or accomplishful. You need to get a handle on the trauma load you are carrying and get a sense of how it may be adversely impacting your present and develop a plan for strengthening yourself and building resilience. Church people are like any other people. They are a mix of healthy and unhealthy, as well as liberal/generous/gracious and mean-spirited/self-serving/vindictive. And you are likely to encounter elements of all of the above in just about everyone. When people hold onto an idea with the strength of a belief, you are not very likely to persuade them differently. The idea that you are going to make a difference, or help people in really lasting ways, or engage in some sort of 'transformative' activity may be pretty naive and romantic. We are all somewhat wounded. Yet it probably isn't a good idea to remind some folks of this. So much pain. So much shame. And there are as many bullies in the church as there are outside of it. And it is difficult not to become simply sucked into and distracted by church 'stuff' so as to lose track of what is most urgent in your community or even your congregation.

64-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Administration is extremely important. Keep on top of your inspections, summons and violations concerning your building. Note that the ABC's (this is what I call the various city agencies) are looking to see what you have done wrong and not what you have done right. It takes a lot of time and energy away from ministry to the people and the community. Get a grip on the finances and how the money is spent. Note that the older people have a hard time letting go of the power they use to have; be gentle with them.

60-year-old Pastor, 1 year in ministry

To my younger self,

You have wonderful gifts in worship design, teaching, and creativity. You have gifts you will only discover as you jump into ministry - networking, cross-cultural ministry that inspires you, a love of children. But ministry is not just about self-fulfillment. In fact, it often involves laying aside one's own needs and preferences to acknowledge and minister to others' needs. Know what you will stand firm for, and where you can flex. Ministry is filled with both fulfilling moments and hurtful moments. Develop resilience. Strengthen your emotional and social intelligence. Surround yourself with a good support system. Remember to tend your relationship with God/Jesus/HS. This is Christ's church you lead, not your church or my church. These are God's people, remind them of that. You will need the strength and guidance of the Spirit to help them be the church they are called to be.

62-year-old Pastor, 24 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Don't be too hard on yourself or other people. People are not perfect and you don't need to be either. Take care of yourself, take time away from what you do, value your family. If someone gets really ugly with you - it is okay to say that their behavior is not okay. You don't have to take anyone being ugly or threatening to you

65-year-old Pastor, 16 years in ministry

To my younger self,

If God is in this a way will unfold. God can unfold some things that look crazy and impossible. Be gracefully assertive in agreeing on terms of call. Keep God at the center...of preaching, leading and personal life all the time. Stay curious about many topics and integrate the learning with theology and into preaching and teaching

65-year-old Pastor, 37 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Most congregations want to pay you to be their professional Christian. You're not. You are the under-shepherd of God's flock, called by the Spirit to help them grow and mature spiritually. Don't allow the 'details' of being a pastor (administrative tasks, building maintenance etc.) to distract you from that core calling. Consider all that you do as part of being directed by God to engage in his work in your world. Don't lose sight of the big picture for doing so leads to burnout. And don't expect to be rewarded in any significant way for being faithful to your call by your congregation. They want to believe they hire you instead of understanding it was God who brought you together.

62-year-old Pastor, 8 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Pace yourself. Know yourself. Take your sabbath rest every single week! You are not indispensable to your church, but you are to yourself. Take care of your body, making sure you exercise and eat well. Keep your personal devotional time with God separated from your study for sermons, bible studies, classes, etc. Give yourself to God first and you will have what you need to lead his church.

60-year-old Pastor, 31 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Remember in college when you first considered going to seminary and entering the ministry, even though you were majoring in engineering at the time? Your father wasn't enthusiastic about the idea of you going into ministry, and so you decided not to pursue it. Fifteen years later you did enter seminary, and eventually you became an ordained pastor at age 40. Had you listened to that still small voice within you instead of your father, you would have been a pastor 15 years earlier!

60-year-old Pastor, 19 years in ministry

To my younger self,

You don't have to save the world, or do all your ministry the first year. Just be faithful and give everyone the benefit of the doubt. It isn't all about you, and you don't need to take everything personally. Do your best and leave the results up to God!

69-year-old Pastor, 14 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Jesus has already saved the world so you don't have to. Relax, trust, and obey. The One who called you will equip and sustain you. The church can survive without you. Don't do for others what they can do for themselves. Create holy habits. Observe the Sabbath. Find a good spiritual director. Don't shortchange your family.

61-year-old Pastor, 33 years in ministry

To my younger self,

People are struggling with their own issues. When they have differing opinions, most of the time it is really not personal about me, but it is about them. Often grief plays a major part in a congregation that wants to hold on to the ways of the past. Grieving is a process and takes time. The admonition to 'Be still and know that I am God' is a valuable reminder that God is in the healing process, even for those who grieve their losses.

*68-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
6 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Hi! Trust yourself a lot. Notice what draws you and what turns you off, even a little. Spend time alone with yourself and God, quietly. Find what you love at each stage of your life and move toward that, even if it means a lower income for a while. It really is true: do what you love in ministry and everything else will be added unto you.

*69-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
29 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

This will be the toughest job you will ever love. You cannot do it with joy if you are operating out of an ego sense of 'success' or 'reputation'. Love—for God, for people, for creation—must be the only impetus and the only goal. If you can enter fully into that humbling space, then abiding joy, courage, hope and even more love will sustain you. Hallelujah.

62-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Stay as positive, on-fire, hopeful, trusting, open and energetic for as long as you can. Change ministries when you know you should. Forgive all the time because you'll need to. Keep positive people around you for support. Don't carry grudges even when you have reasons to. Love, love, love always.

69-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Love, love, love in all aspects and all people for their uniqueness. Stay disciplined. Depend on the Holy Spirit because it's never about you. Believe how much God loves you and never lose sense of gratitude for God's grace. Take your entire time for vacation and study leave. Take your day off religiously. Take care of yourself because no one else will. Love yourself for by doing so you will be able to better love others. Pray more. Study more. Read more. Practice less anxiety than the rest of the congregation. Stay up on technology changes and utilize the tools available to you. Keep building your tool box. Love the people God calls you to serve in and outside the congregation. Be aware of sabotage. Church is not all nostalgically warm and friendly. They never teach you all you need to know about ministry in seminary. Be open to considering new and different views than your own, they will help you grow either in your own convictions or modify your understanding. There will be trials along the way, but remember that as we depend on God that He will see you through them. Through them, you will be strengthened for service. Read good books on family systems, leadership, and variety of subjects to become the best you can for the glory of God. Maintain good boundaries. Preach the gospel with all conviction and confidence. Serve the people with the eyes and heart of Jesus.

61-year-old Pastor, 36 years in ministry

To my younger self,

I want you to know that there is no more meaningful vocation you could pursue than ordained ministry. It will be incredibly meaningful as you offer Christ's love to the people you work with, and participate in their spiritual formation and transformation, as well as the transformation of the world. I want to encourage you to practice healthy self-care, maintaining a healthy life of spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being. Be sure to set healthy boundaries, and protect the interests of your family and the people you work with. And recognize this: there will be much pain in ministry, in the loss of people you've come to love, as well as misunderstandings, and mistakes you make. You will also encounter some people who are not healthy and will bring you harm. Continue to be loving and faithful regardless of the challenges. And know that God is with you all the way. You are not alone. God's people will be there to hold you up as well. This life in ministry will be a challenging but good life. You will be blessed even as you seek to be a blessing.

63-year-old Pastor, 39 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Be a good steward of your time because no one else will do it for you. The church will always ask for more than you can give if you don't set boundaries. Believe and act as if every member is a minister and you will grow your people and the overall ministry of the church. Praise in public and correct or confront in private. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Live in grace.

64-year-old Pastor, 35 years in ministry

To my younger self,

People will take from you and your family and never realize the cost they are extracting and the damage they are doing to you and your family. Your spouse will feel abandoned, and the people will say mean, cruel and spiritually abusive things to your family. The emotional and spiritual cost, coupled with the financial cost, means ministry is not worth it. If you can do anything else, do it.

*65-year-old Specialized Minister,
39 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Be sure to save for retirement and make a plan so that you can choose to retire early. Find an investment counselor if you do not already have one so you have a plan early in life. Know that church salary will not enable you to live a stable life at retirement. Make wise decisions with any inheritance.

64-year-old Pastor, 38 years in ministry

To my younger self,

People won't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Pay close attention to social trends. Don't be a Lone Ranger, make some close friends. You don't have to, nor can you, fix everything and everyone. Maintain your spiritual life. Be a life-long learner. Negotiate for a higher salary right off the bat. It will set the baseline for your ministry. Don't be afraid to express your own opinion.

64-year-old Pastor, 39 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Work at developing reflexes for ministry so that you don't have to think so much what to do when someone dies, is sick, has experienced a life-changing event. Plan ahead so you don't have to plan in the midst of a crisis. Find out the things that you aren't good at, that you're afraid of, and do them anyway. You'll find that you don't have anything to fear. Be glad if you can point to at least one failure a day. That means that you're trying and reaching out to new things!

64-year-old Pastor

To my younger self,

Remember that God has called you. Stay focused spiritually, constantly being refreshed by God in the Scriptures, prayer, worship, and other spiritual disciplines. And set good priorities: God first, then family, then church/ministry. Set aside enough time for such priorities so that you remain well-grounded, because ministry can be tough and challenging.

67-year-old Pastor, 29 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Seminary is fascinating and stimulating, but it is preparing you for a church and denomination that does not exist. No one in the pews cares about the theology you've learned. Very few really want to be taught. And remember: a camel is a horse put together by a committee. These days, the institutional church is as much an obstacle as it is a vehicle for the gospel. The institutional church is preoccupied with institutional survival. It has to be that way, because it is dying. A new Reformation is necessary, and may already be underway. There is very little room for prophetic action on the part of the clergy. Engaging in such a thing may very well get you fired or invited to resign. Consumerism and a misguided patriotism is the Order of the Day, in our times, among too many church-goers. (And they are church-goers more than they are disciples.) Generally speaking, the situation is not so radically bleak in many URBAN centers.

65-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Trust and depend on sense of call. Remain open and seek advice and support from key leaders and colleagues. Maintain regular spiritual disciplines and create covenant group of support among colleagues. Pray and laugh often. Cry when needed. Honor your family with protecting days off and vacations. Honor yourself and church family by making full use of study leave. Remember: priorities should be God - first, family - second and church - third. Be clear and resolute about boundaries and priorities in relationships. You are a child of God First and last. Put your ultimate trust in God. Establish primary supportive friendships outside setting of ministry.

65-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Do not expect those you serve to follow you. Instead, lead them and inspire them to follow Jesus. As for yourself, be willing and eager to follow where the Holy Spirit might lead you, even when it may not be in the direction you had planned. Watch for and expect new 'doors' to open for you in your life and, if you believe that God opened the doors, be willing to take a risk in entering them. Let your prayers be as specific as possible. Don't ask God for blessings in general. Instead, be brutally honest and let God know exactly what you want! Whenever possible, take at least one, if not two, full days off each week for family time and for physical, emotional and spiritual refreshment.

68-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Be a little more kind; we've each got pieces of a larger whole; try something out of your comfort zone; worry less, have more fun; confrontation can lead you to grow. Stay curious, don't take yourself so seriously. The truth is, 'You don't get to write your own legacy'

*67-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
35 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Trust your session. Its members were part of the congregation before you arrived and will (hopefully) be part of it after you leave. As Pastor, you are serving Jesus, the congregation and the session. It is not 'your' congregation. Lead, inspire, advise, and moderate the session. Do not pontificate! Accept their decisions even when you disagree with them. When in doubt, contact your Executive Presbyter for guidance.

68-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

"1, 영성훈련에 매진하라 - 기도와 말씀공부 2.제자훈련을 젊을 때에 철저히 받으라 - 3.할수 있는대로 다양한 공부를 하되, 특히 원어 공부에 정진하라. 4.목양일념으로 나아가야 한다 5.가정사역의 전문가가 되어라 6.거룩한 생활을 영위하고, 매사에 정직하라

TRANSLATION: 1, Concentrate on spiritual training - Prayer and Word study 2. Receive discipleship training while you are young - 3. Study as much as you can, but devote yourself to studying the original language. 4. Must move forward with a focus on shepherding 5. Become an expert in family ministry 6. Lead a holy life and be honest in everything"

64-year-old Pastor,

To my younger self,

When we embrace the poor in spirit, we embrace ourselves. To find yourself, you need to lose yourself and place yourself in the hands of God. To avoid becoming self-righteous, to reflect on the fact we all make mistakes and need forgiveness. To focus more on compassion and tolerance for 'other'. To realize that self-sacrifice is at the root of a faith life and that ministry is a fantastic opportunity for spiritual growth through sacrifice. Diversity is the future of the church.

Interfaith relationships are at the heart of where our culture is going. Collaborating with other ministers and congregations is paramount for survival and as the church downsizes, embrace it as an opportunity, not a failure. Evangelizing the Gospel is at the heart of what we do, and it can be done in a thousand ways. Living the Gospel is the best way to evangelize. Totally trusting that God will provide and having the patience to see it through. Reading and studying daily, and praying ceaselessly..

67-year-old Pastor, 29 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Get over yourself, your ego and pride. The so-called ladder of success gets more and more narrow as you try to climb it. You can break your heart in the process. Consider staying a longer time in a smaller church if it is healthy and has the opportunity to continue to be so. Build your own emotional and relational intelligence. Get good spiritual counsel and pastoral care for your own walk with God. You are not self-sufficient! Just because you are in ministry does not mean God owes you a life without trouble or suffering. A minister is more likely than most to experience such things. God HAS promised to be with you in the midst of whatever trouble you go through. Your own relationship with God is the basis for any and all effectiveness you may ever have in ministry and your satisfaction and sense of meaning in life. Cultivate it vigorously.

69-year-old Minister, 42 years in ministry



To my younger self,

You will not be appreciated in the church because you are a woman and you will not be valued as you might otherwise be. Choose another profession where you can feel more validated and appreciated for your accomplishments and make a better salary and have better benefits.

*65-year-old Specialized Minister,
26 years in ministry*

Letters from Ministers

Age: 70s

Be more aware of self care....55 hour work weeks should be the exception...not the norm. No, you don't have to work twice as hard to get to the goal even if you are the female.

70-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

'It's a good idea to respond to God's call to ministry. It won't be easy. You'll definitely face racism and sexism; but you will live a full and meaningful life filled with the profound joy that comes from a sense of purpose and the opportunity to do love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God.' Above all, don't worry! God will take care of you.

70-year-old Pastor, 16 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Do not make drastic changes immediately. If your predecessor was much loved and still on the scene a great deal, talk with your mentor in presbytery, but also try to be patient. Be as active as you can in the presbytery without diminishing your parish ministry. Some presbytery involvement actually enhances your congregation.

78-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Hang on. This is the best decision you ever made. There are going to be lots of ups and downs, but wow is it ever going to be interesting. There are many people out there who are hungry to hear about God's love and you get to be the one to deliver the Good News. Enjoy every moment, even the tough ones, because there are so many opportunities to learn. You are going to meet terrific people who will join you in your service to God's Kingdom and those who oppose or distrust you are going to have wonderful opportunities to grow in their faith as they you see you practice yours. God is Good.. All the time.

70-year-old Pastor, 44 years in ministry

To my younger self,

It is perfectly fine to be a small fish in a small pond, Jesus only had a congregation of a few. As a young person I dedicated myself to being a person of God and person of integrity. It has let me in many directions, but has given me a fulfilling, meaningful, and happy life. And I am still trying to figure out exactly what it means.

*71-year-old Specialized Minister,
44 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

The denomination that you are ordained by will not continue to exist as you know it now. The 'mainline' Christian faith that the PCUSA represents in America is withering as Christendom withers in the West. The climate apocalypse is upon the world and we are in the end times of petro-capitalism. Expecting 'God' to save the world through 'miracles' is a futile hope. Our whole Presbyterian way of doing church may simply be re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. None-the-less, caring for the least - in a faith community or not - and confronting the principalities and powers is at the heart of Jesus' work. Whether one ought to be 'ordained' to the ministry of Word and Sacrament is an open question. Do not expect to be respected or to valued simply because of the status of 'minister'. As never before your ministry will be a blessing to the creation only if you live out of the great heart of Jesus.

*77-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
41 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Learn from your mistakes; don't wallow in them. Be patient and trust God; He will work things out. Forgive others quickly and move on. Keep a sense of humor, especially about yourself. Don't expect to please everyone; you won't! You may not ever, in this life, see the reward for doing what's right; but the reward is sure! All things (ultimately) DO work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28) Jesus Christ: is the same yesterday, today, and forever! (Heb. 13:8)

70-year-old Pastor, 42 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Things are going to change drastically in the future. The church of the future will not look like the church of 1955 or 1965. The denomination will shrink in size and those churches which you think of as tall steeple congregations will decline numerically. You may not reach your goal of being pastor of a 2,000 member church, because there won't be many left and many people will no longer attend traditional congregations or any church on a regular basis. Traditional worship and music will fade and contemporary style worship and music will become popular. This will create incredible conflict in many congregations. The ordination and marriage of LGBTQ people will also create great conflict and sap the energy of both the GA and local churches for decades. New church development and mission outreach will suffer from lack of energy due to denominational battles over human sexuality. So, get prepared because its going to be an uphill battle, but Jesus is still Lord and, as the Book of Revelation states, God wins in the end. Be faithful, even if you get frustrated.

71-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Please. Please. Please. Do not ignore and then lose your ability to translate the Biblical languages. They are the source of material for both teaching and preaching. Always remember that you are called to the ministry of word and sacrament. That's what elders and deacons are for regarding all other matters in the congregation. If you will study. If you will pray. If you will concentrate on translating, you will have something to say your entire ministry.. Now. get me into a seminary for one week where I can teach the graduating seniors how to keep their Biblical languages active for the length of their ministry. No credit for the week. Classes are in the evening so as not to take away from the day's work. No pay or recognition for me.

78-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Emphasize biblical competence (including memorization) Know the creeds and confessions well (esp. the Heidelberg) Learn essentials of pastoral care and counseling and stay competent. Know and pray for your people and visit them (esp. shut-ins). Develop a full plan for implementing Matthew 25 ministries. Know the Book of Order well and follow it faithfully, esp. in presbytery. Learn and apply the essentials of rhetoric and public speaking skills in preaching...and learn from other preachers who have relevance and biblical faithfulness.

79-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Upon entering a new call, take lots of time to just become familiar with your congregation so you understand what they will hear from the pulpit, how you can best offer pastoral care, and just how much you can 'push' (encourage) (grow) them in their faith and in their mission in the world.

79-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Pay close attention and respond positively to the personal needs of your church people, members or adherents. Learn, remember, and use their names and recall their joys and concerns. Reach out to help and support them, no matter what their need. Once these people realize and experience that you are interested and concerned about their personal welfare, your ministry will be very successful. You will have their undying, enthusiastic support, and their positive responsible stewardship both in the time they volunteer for the church's ministries and the financial resources they give for the churches mission and programs. You will feel extremely fulfilled and successful in your work and ministry.

79-year-old Minister, Retired

Letters from Ministers

Age: 80s

Ministry is never over; it just takes new forms and embraces new opportunities. Remember this as you plan for your retirement.

83-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Do not neglect daily prayer and Bible study, along with physical exercise. Take care of yourself by taking your vacations and days off. Try to have fellowship with other faith leaders in your community. Learn to say No and if you say Yes, honor your commitments. Take care of your family ties in creative ways. Learn as much as you can about the members of your faith community. When possible, plan seasons of worship/preaching in advance.

80-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

'The hermeneutic of suspicion should always be at work.' Every congregation, committee, presbytery, etc. has a multitude of ideas about the meaning and practice of being a 'Christian' most of which are only based, in a minor way, in and around the whole of the biblical story. For the most part, even those who claim to have attended church school all of their lives know nothing of what is in the biblical story. Individually many are kind, caring, loving. As congregations they are often a mess.

85-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Learn to network, not only with clergy, but with community leaders, community organizations including the Fire Department, Chamber of Commerce, Educational groups. It takes a village to support a church. Learn to raise funds through grants, both private and governmental, so as to help the outreach mission of the local church and the presbytery.

80-year-old Pastor, 54 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Be sure to always be in a continuing covenant group of like-minded brothers and sisters. Pursue your hobby actively; do not stop pursuing it; make sure the congregations know that you will be putting in some time there. Be sure that your children always respect and support the leadership of the congregation that you are called to; do not let them hear you bad-mouth them

82-year-old Pastor, 42 years in ministry

To my younger self,

Develop a theology of ministry early. Stay grounded in the basic work disciplines of Biblical study, thinking (and speaking) theologically, self-awareness (with attention to interactions with people and situations around you), communication skills (sermon preparation, teaching, pastoral care), issue awareness (for both Church, broader culture, and local community). Pay attention to your family as they grow and develop.

*80-year-old Bi-vocational Minister,
55 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Personal relationships with parishioners and with those with whom you will work as colleagues are the most important aspects of your ministry. Learn how to develop and improve communication skills. Learn how to share positive reinforcement and avoid negative feedback to others. Work on listening skills and let your preaching grow out of your passion for Jesus and your compassion for others.

*83-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
58 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

You have been given an extraordinary opportunity to be with people at the most important times of their lives. Study the components of those events (birth, death, marriage, divorce, depression, joy, etc.) and then listen very carefully as persons relate them to you. Your listening [itself] will be a benefit to them and will enrich your life. And then, rejoice and give thanks at all times and places. This will keep you sane and will provide a small amount of balance to this glorious and typsy world in which we live.

*86-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
61 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

Equip yourself with a genuine desire to honor God and encourage people to be the presence of Christ in the world. Toward the end of your ministry be in a place (church and location) where you will feel satisfied and accepted, especially from the pastor of the church you attend.

87-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Continue learning opportunities. Read materials on time and situations of NT. It will be much appreciated if you can help people gain new insights to scripture and how to interpret positively in sermons. Never settle on one newspaper or TV or any other source. Don't conduct 'Stewardship Campaigns' - Find ways to share Stewardship Opportunity beyond your congregation - Presby, Synod, GA. Don't see stewardship as 'my particular congregation' but as all PCUSA. and world.

*88-year-old Minister in Secular Job,
56 years in ministry*

To my younger self,

When I was in seminary in the early 60s we had a saying: 'You go to seminary preparing to serve God but when you get out you realize you have to serve the institutional church.' The Institutional church exhibits a lot of ossification, power hungry judicatory personnel, and congregations unwilling to act like Christians stubbornly holding on to the past both socially and theologically. I'm sorry I wasn't more aware of the tribes among the ministers and the politics needed to serve churches which would have utilized my skills more appropriately.

80-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Don't give up; seek help when needed; get into a support group; play more; spend time with spouse and kids; read books/literature other than professional books; play; take more time off; exercise; develop a rich spiritual life early on; oh, and play with spouse and kids; and let God be God.

81-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Read and research your theological positions on social issues. Learn the several ways to interpret the Bible. Be flexible, and carefully select the battles you enter. Be gracious, when you lose. Preach and teach about the real world. Wear the yoke of ministry with grace and peace.

83-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Consider carefully how much you base your life on what you believe, since people will base the opinion of your life on what you do. Don't try too hard to gain members for your church. Work very hard in inspiring people to follow Jesus. Jesus never said, 'Worship me.' Jesus said, many times, 'Follow me.'

84-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Be part of a clergy support group that meets regularly. Plan reading and continuing education that challenges your understanding and practice and encourages growth. Maintain a regular devotional time of scripture, meditation, and prayer. Make provision to spend meaningful time with spouse and children. Deal directly with conflict in the congregation or opposition from members, including bringing in skilled facilitators if needed. Give positive reinforcement and thanks (including personal notes and cards) to parishioners. Establish a regular routine of exercise and healthful activity. Get professional help when stressed or depressed. Encourage feedback from members about your preaching and ministry.

85-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Don't expect the church to be perfect. Know that the people in the church have the same sins, the same fears, the same confusions and resistance to new ideas as do the people outside the church. However, faith does make a difference and once you embrace the sameness, you can enjoy the difference.

85-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Seek faith -- you will grow in faith. With faith, this is the greatest occupation in the world. Focus on people; maintain contacts with those you meet and work with. Then look forward to retiring, when you can fully expand in the areas of ministry you enjoy the most. Ora et labora. Deepen your prayer and spiritual life; increase your work to lead people to improve the world with intensity; focus on Jesus and drawing people to Him.

85-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

We are all far more ignorant than we think, so faith seeking understanding is essential. You must always be learning through conversations, study. Search out the ancient paths, but seek the new once. Look into Emergence Christianity. Dialogue with other faiths. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God

85-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

You are dealing with the reality of people who will lie and cheat and disappoint you. There are those who will disagree with your teaching position. Do not expect support from the Commission on the Minister and His Work or the Presbytery Executive. They work for the organization and not you. Stay away from the women. Listen carefully to them. Realize your own self worth in God's sight and realize that on some days Jesus might not have worked out either.

87-year-old Minister, Retired

Letters from Ministers

Age: 90s

Plan on having another profession or skill set that could be an option to ministry or that would enhance your ministry. Know your community and its people well.

*92-year-old Minister,
Retired*

To my younger self,

Immerse yourself in Scripture and preach mainly expository sermons. Let your people become grounded in the Word of God. Then watch the results happen before your eyes as the Great Commission is fulfilled as God honors His Word with conversions and expanding discipleship. Always know the Church is PEOPLE, not an institution. Jesus died and rose again for PERSONS. Above all, 'Whether therefore you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the Glory of God.' It works.

92-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

You will not determine the success of your ministry...God does that. However, how hard you work, how much energy you put in, your enthusiasm for the church as a whole, and your church in particular, will be the motivating force behind your ministry. God is faithful...you be likewise.

95-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Seminary didn't prepare me very well for actually doing the work of a pastor. Because you're a woman be prepared for very limited opportunities because no matter how good you are, search committees will tell you the congregation is not ready. If you survive for a couple of decades in a sacrificial life style for you and your family you may get a decent call before you retire.

91-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Don't expect to experience much difference between culture in and out of the church.

92-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Do not let inter-church irritations affect my ability affect my ministry and remember that in every pew sits a broken heart.

90-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Be realistic, look at all options, know that your faith may change drastically, know that you will not change the world, self-knowledge--what do I do best, what will make me happiest.

90-year-old Minister, Retired

To my younger self,

Find a good friend or confidant, a person you consider wise but in no way involved in the same work you are doing. Share present and future plans with that person in prayer and confidential discussions. Every minister needs such a friend

94-year-old Pastor, 65 years in ministry



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