

Caring for Ourselves to Care for Others

Rev. Amanda Henderson

Executive Director, Interfaith Alliance of Colorado

Guest Blogger, NBA Mental Health Affinity Group

The Friday after Thanksgiving, November 27, I was gathering my children and our bags, the dogs, stray socks, and toys, to load the car, to head home, after a wonderful visit with family at my sister's house. As I was loading the car, an alert came through my phone from the *Denver Post* that there was a gunman at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado Springs. The situation was ongoing, and there were many questions. My first questions went to wellbeing of the care providers and the community advocates I have close relationships with as a pastor in the community.

I thought of Vicky and Ashley and Cathy. I know the women who put their hearts and souls into caring for others, and now they needed care. I immediately began texting these friends to let them know I was with them. That they weren't alone in their fear in this moment, in their heartbreak and sadness. I told them that whatever they needed, I was there.



In my interfaith work with advocacy partners in Colorado, I have found that so often those working in the community for human rights, equality, and justice are tired, worn out, and often have very little support. Our role as “Pastor” does not stop at the walls of the congregation, but reaches to care for those caretakers and advocates in our community who may not be tied to their own faith communities.

Mental health and self-care is vital for all people, and those who are caretakers and advocates often need reminders to stop and care for themselves. As faith leaders working across the boundaries of church and community, we carry this awareness with us. This way of being that both models this value in our own lives, and encourages those we meet to “take care of their own mental health.” To find moments for silence, and laughter. To schedule exercise and prioritize friendship. To have the awareness to know when it is time to seek help from a professional.

As the afternoon of November 27th came to a close, and the five-hour standoff finally ended, three families had lost loved ones, and an entire community was left traumatized. We in the faith community began to mobilize. I sent a letter to go to the staff of the clinic, who were inevitably shaken to the core and asking questions of meaning and “presence of God” in times of tragedy. I reminded them that they were not alone, that God cried with them, and that their community loved them. A congregational partner pulled together a prayer vigil for the people and community involved to gather and cry and pray.

In these moments, our role as Pastor cannot stop at the church walls. God's presence cannot be contained, and neither can we. As mental health and violence become key questions in public conversation, our role as Pastor becomes that much more important, to be both a model and a reminder to our community partners and friends.

May we take care of ourselves, so that when needs arise, as they inevitably will, we can care for others.

Questions to Consider:

- 1) Why is it so hard for pastors and caretakers to be disciplined in their own self-care? What cultural norms perpetuate unhealthy boundaries for pastors and leaders in our congregations and communities?
- 2) What healthy self-care techniques and relational boundaries have you witnessed clergy or leaders in your community demonstrate?
- 3) Amanda encourages us that “our role as ‘Pastor’ does not stop at the walls of the congregation, but reaches to care for those caretakers and advocates in our community who may not be tied to their own faith communities.” What would it look like if church “membership” expanded to include activist and community leaders unable to come to regularly scheduled church gatherings because they are doing alternative ministry in the community? What types of programs, services, and care could our church give to the activist community?



Rev. Amanda Henderson is the executive director of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, where she works to promote justice, religious liberty, and interfaith understanding. She is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) whose passion is creating space for diverse individuals and groups to grow in vibrancy and opportunity. She sees religious diversity as a great gift of our democracy and seeks to support and protect this vital piece of the fabric of our community through political advocacy and education.

Henderson is a guest blogger for the NBA Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group Research and Design Team. This team is working to define the purpose and goals of a full Affinity Group to launch in early 2016. This is a shared effort with Disciples Home Missions (DHM) and in response to the passing of GA-1523 “Becoming a People of Welcome and Support to People with Mental Illness and/or Mental Health Issues” by the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more information, please email mkilpatrick@nbacares.org.