

# NAVIGATING RACIAL FATIGUE IN A CROSS-RACIAL/CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY SETTING

As many clergy intuitively know, navigating the nuances of modern-day Christian leadership and discipleship-making is both complex and demanding. More than ever, clergy are invited to juggle a multitude of responsibilities and excel in a variety of competencies, such that many clergy find themselves exhausted and drained to the point of burnout. Clergy who serve in cross-racial/cross-cultural (CRCC) ministerial settings, however, have additional psychological and spiritual stressors that are often overlooked or under-named, such as racial fatigue.

Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) define racial fatigue as “the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, racial fatigue is the process by which an individual or group of people experience microaggressions in the form of a “thousand paper cuts,” small but significant instances of othering or prejudice that inhibit an individual or group of persons from simply existing and dwelling in their own bodies or communities. An example of racial fatigue, within a cross-racial/cross cultural appointment context can be parishioners’ comments during worship on the appearance and presentation of a clergy person’s hair. Comments surrounding a clergy person’s “style” or “texture” of hair, while at times offered in the form of an observation or compliment, can be a subtle microaggression, leaving a pastor to expend emotional labor on an aspect of their personhood that leaves them feeling drained or unseen. Over time, these microaggressions can lead to racial fatigue, challenging a person’s sense of emotional, spiritual, and bodily safety, resulting in mental health problems or burnout.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, William A., Walter R. Allen, and Lynette L. Danley. ““Assume the position... you fit the description” psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51.4 (2007): 551-578.

To push back against racial fatigue within a CRCC context, we can:

- **Protect your peace.** What emotions and bodily sensations are you experiencing as you are navigating your ministerial context? What boundaries need to be established to ensure your peace is protected and your safety is centered as you serve in your setting?
- **Find your people.** To sustain our life in ministry, we need others who can fully see us and walk alongside us as we journey the complexities and challenges of ministry, while also validating our feelings of fatigue and emotional exhaustion.
- **Seek professional support.** Chronic exhaustion or burnout due to racial fatigue can often take the form of a depressive episode. Finding space to grieve and navigate one's experience is vital for a life of sustained and effective ministry.

Serving across difference requires clergy to not only journey alongside others, but also invites clergy to ensure they have the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools needed to sustain one's life in ministry; which includes naming and protecting ourselves from the microaggressions and -isms that we experience in life. Racial fatigue is often a subtle but insidious challenge BIPOC CRCC clergy face in ministry, and by taking a proactive role in how we establish boundaries and identify its presence in our work, we can better find ways to nurture and support our hearts and minds as we journey together in serving across difference.

**For more resources on how to better navigate racial fatigue, check out:**

- [Self-Care for Clergy in Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural Ministry](#)
- [How to Cope with Racial Battle Fatigue: 6 Tools to Try](#)
- [Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights from the Front Lines of Social Justice Advocacy](#) by Jennifer L. Martin
- [The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing](#) by Anneliese A. Singh PhD LPC