

Minding Your Pastor's Mental Health

THE PHONE RINGS at 1 a.m.: a child is in the hospital. Tomorrow is an elderly church member's funeral. Two evening meetings are scheduled this week. Two sermons to prepare for Sunday. The pastor is always on call for the congregation's sorrows, troubles, conflicts, and yes, sometimes, joys.

Over time, though, the demands of pastoring can create a strain on pastors and their families.

Clergy health studies show that ministry stress is causing a decline in the physical and mental health of pastors. The reasons are complex. One study found that one in six pastors showed signs of distress with levels of isolation, loneliness, fear, anger, and boredom. Forty-five percent of pastors report having felt burned out to the degree that they had to take a break from ministry (London and Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk*). An increasing number of pastors are on antidepressants. One denomination discovered that disability claims for clergy listing mental health reasons were higher than in an average workplace setting.

To combat this, pastors need to practice mental health self-care by developing healthy supportive relationships, managing stress, and practicing Sabbath rest.

Pastors often feel isolated in their ministry, even though they are surrounded by people. Those who are primarily in a caregiving role may have few relationships where they are supported. Regular meetings with fellow pastors can provide a confidential and safe place to discuss the demands of ministry.

Some churches provide a small group chosen by the pastor to offer support and encouragement. That can be helpful, but it is not always easy for pastors to move from caregiving to receiving care from members of the congregation. So one of



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the best practices is to nurture relationships outside of the congregation where the pastor can be authentic and vulnerable.

Ongoing stress is one of the biggest reasons pastors leave ministry. Over time, such stress may cause a pastor to lose the ability to function. Relationships may become strained. Writing sermons, attending meetings, and making visits become more taxing. Self-awareness and perhaps feedback from a skilled observer can help a pastor examine his or her gifts, ministry routine, and personality traits. One pastor said, "When I stopped to learn more about myself, it became more clear how I could have a sustained ministry."

Faithfully observing a time for Sabbath rest is an important way for pastors to care for their mental health. Too often congregations expect pastors to be on the job 24/7. Unfortunately, pastors who do overwork are often rewarded with admiration and love. Going beyond what is expected and needed may feel virtuous, but it leads to a misperception about serving the Lord in which taking care of one's self appears selfish, while constant self-sacrifice is equated with ultimate servanthood.

In contrast, observing boundaries allows pastors to establish a healthy rhythm of work and Sabbath rest. This, in turn, can encourage the congregation to build in times of rest for their own lives. Sabbath rest is part of God's creational norm for everyone.

Congregations and councils can significantly empower pastors to maintain their mental health. They can do so by encouraging regular vacations and periodic Sundays off. By expressing words of appreciation and encouragement to the pastor on a regular basis. By not scheduling meetings on the pastor's day of rest. Elders can inquire about the pastor's habits, support the pastor's practice of self-care, and give constructive feedback when appropriate. Offering a sabbatical after a number of years of service will refresh the pastor, and the congregation will benefit. An emotionally healthy leader thriving in ministry can impact the overall ministry of the church.

After all, answering God's call shouldn't be bad for a pastor's mental health. ■



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