

Equip: How we can hurt or help our pastors

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Editor's Note: This article was written in June 2015 in response to the suicide of a prominent and beloved pastor and has been adapted and updated.

This past Sunday, our pastor committed suicide.

Obviously, it was a shock to all of us, and our hearts are saddened and hurting for his family, as well as for ourselves.

In trying to make sense of this event, let's look at some sobering statistics I gathered in 2015 when I wrote this article. According to a [report by the Schaeffer Institute](#):

- "Fifty percent of pastors' marriages will end in divorce."
- "Eighty percent of pastors feel unqualified and discouraged in their role as pastor."
- "Fifty percent of pastors are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living."
- "Eighty percent of seminary and Bible school graduates who enter the ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years."
- "Seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression."

And there's more in the report.

Every pastor surveyed "had a close associate or seminary buddy who had left the ministry because of burnout, conflict in their church, or from a moral failure."

Ninety percent said “they are frequently fatigued and worn out on a weekly and even daily basis.”

Seventy-seven percent feel they don’t have a good marriage.

Seventy-two percent read or study the Bible only when preparing sermons or lessons.

We don’t know what exactly led to our pastor’s suicide, but I do know pastors feel a lot of pressure. They are worn out and dry. This event causes me to worry for the mental health and well-being of our young pastors and their families.

Pressure of the pastorate

Pastors often come home each night bringing the burdens of his flock with him, burdens he has listened to each day for years. His brain and energy have been sucked dry with issues he is not trained to deal with in any sort of in-depth manner. He has been to seminary or undergone theological training, but he is not a financial consultant, a medical doctor or a psychiatrist.

He cannot fix all the things that go wrong in his congregation, but sometimes, he has to hold a flashlight for a plumber in the attic. I cannot fix the things I see and hear about in the news. I can turn it off or not read about it. He can’t. This is his job.

He can listen to our problems and be concerned, but in the end, exactly what can he do about them? For the most part, practically nothing.

He can pray for us, but we can pray for ourselves. He wants to help, but his ability to help is either constrained by the finances of the church or its resources. The more compassionate he is, the larger the load he carries for the things he cannot fix.

There were those yesterday who said: “How could he do this to *us*? To this church?”

But it isn’t about *us* or this church. It’s about him.

How did we fail him by not giving him the support and assistance his vocation requires?

Pettiness of parishioners

We want pastors who have compassion and are caring and have concerns for their members, but at what cost?

Look at the statistics again about pastoral stress, fatigue, burnout and depression.

Who wouldn’t struggle with these if they had to listen to a constant litany from people asking the pastor to solve problems they ought to take care of themselves?

Cancer, death of children, loss of job or other major issues, yes, but taking time to ask the pastor for gas money or finding a job for their kids in the summer or complaining about the sermon this week?

Didn’t like the decorations for the last church luncheon? Don’t care for the food served last Wednesday night? No tables for your snacks in your Bible study class? Surely, the pastor has better things to do with his time.

Some church members treat their pastors as their own personal priests. They look to their pastor as somehow being closer to God. I have had pastors tell me men and women come to them to ask for prayer, because they think God listens to the prayers of the pastor more than to their prayers. They want the pastor to do their praying for them.

Young pastors and their families need to be aware of the dangers of worrying about problems they cannot solve or remedy. They need to focus on the issues they can have some effect upon and leave the others at the steps of the church each night when they go home.

I know this is easier said than done, but adding more and more to the load eventually will cause a pastor to break down.

Spiritual pressure

Believe it or not, pastors struggle to measure up in their own eyes. Pastors feel immense spiritual pressure—from themselves and from their churches.

“The church often forgets ministers, pastors and preachers are under constant attack by Satan to fail. This is a spiritual battle against them,” one pastor communicated to me.

One pastor was particularly transparent with me: “Something I struggle with often, it’s the ‘Messiah’ complex ... me attempting to do what only God can do—be the Messiah. I can’t. I’m not perfect. I’m incapable of this task.

“Sometimes the pastor needs the gospel preached to him,” he continued. “It’s in those sorrowful moments of self-doubt or pity that the grace of Jesus becomes like an awakening again. It’s like a person who had a lung replacement breathing in the fresh air again!”

How pastors hurt

Pastors I know hurt in other ways, too.

Many pastors are bivocational, having to hold down two jobs—one being the pastor—to make ends meet. They feel looked down upon by full-time pastors.

One pastor told me he loved driving a dump truck because it was so much easier having one or two bosses than hundreds.

Pastors fear losing their families, especially their kids, because of ministry, one said. Their families see the church expecting to be first in the pastor's life. Spouses and children feel neglected or pressured by the church to be perfect. They also hear church members criticize and sometimes attack the pastor—their parent.

Another pastor shared how hard it is to have to come home and tell his family they have to move because the church fired him or forced him to resign. He can go on, he said, but his family is ripped from their friendships and schools.

Even Moses asked God to kill him if he was going to be expected to put up with the burden of dealing with the Israelites and their complaints (Numbers 11:10-15), one said.

One pastor wondered: “Where do we go for help? Who can we talk to about our issues and our problems? The church body thinks we have all the answers, that we're indestructible, but we are not. ... We cannot discuss these issues with anyone and show any sign of weakness.”

Knowing even the “Prince of Preachers” Charles Spurgeon struggled with depression is a help to some pastors.

Not all pastors have these kinds of experiences or feel this way, but many do.

How we can help our pastors

Pastors should care—and do care—for the people in their charge, but let's be real. Pastors are human. They have needs, feelings and shortcomings as we all do. We cannot put pastors on such a high pedestal that they hurt

themselves when they fall back to Earth.

There are many ways we can help our pastors. Here are just a few.

We can better assist our pastoral staff by making them—yes, *making* them—take vacations and breaks on a regular basis.

We can ask someone besides the pastor for help with mundane and daily requests—a flat tire, a hangnail or other minor issue.

We can expect—require, even—deacons to be an actively serving body just as they were called to do from the beginning.

We need to pray for God’s guidance and wisdom for how we can help prevent pastoral tragedies from occurring. These men and women of God who have chosen voluntarily to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ need all the help and assistance we can give them. They cannot, nor should they, be expected to carry these troubles and burdens alone.

There are many ways completely within our ability that we can help our pastors. Let’s do our part to make suicide something our pastors don’t consider.

The [Schaeffer Institute report](#) was written by R.J. Krejcir for the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development from research conducted from 1989 to 2006 and published in 2007. While the studies cited in that report are dated, more recent studies can be found at [Barna.com](#), [LifeWay Research](#), [ChurchAnswers.com](#) and elsewhere.

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