

# Pastor, how are you bearing up under grief?

October 5, 2021

My youngest son began his first day as a pastor in summer 2020. He immediately took up the various responsibilities and normal burdens of pastoral ministry at a time of compounded and complex challenges.

As his father and a long-time pastor myself, of course I've had concerns about his launch into the ocean of daily pastoral life at such a time as this—so unpredictable, so intermittently chaotic, so treacherously navigable. Am I being too dramatic? Just ask a pastor.

If my son were not among that group of capable young and clearly called women and men of high character and deep faith, imminently qualified and well-prepared, then I would be overly concerned. He is. And I'm not. But I hold him and a host of my dear pastor friends before the Lord in prayer. It's more challenging to be a pastor now than when I was doing it full time.

And amid everything else, there is grief. Amid all pastors currently are facing is the burden they share with those grieving the loss of friends and loved ones to death and physical and emotional debilitation. As they walk alongside those they lovingly pastor, they turn around to see them dying or falling into one of the emotional sloughs or abysses from which they will not return whole.

I talked one day with a seasoned pastor I much admire about what he called "the cumulative effect of shared grief." It was sobering to hear him describe the toll grief was taking on so many pastors, including himself. He knew I understood and had been there.

How can pastors bear the relentless and ongoing burden of grief and loss?

Before I share what has helped me, let me underscore there has been much good insight widely offered about how to use time away weekly, monthly and yearly. We are seeing more pastors have opportunities to use portions of sabbatic leaves for personal renewal. I hope more pastors will be given such opportunities.

When we can't get much time away, and when we do return and encounter the same stressors, how do we cope? When we have to keep walking amid the grief and loss, even as we still are grieving ourselves, what can we do? What do we do when our hobbies and favorite go-to activities give only fleeting relief?

## **Renewal in increments**

Under the constant demands of the pastoral life, I have found relief and encouragement in narrowing my scope to find more meaning and balance in the incremental unfolding of the daily pastoral life. This especially is true in seasons when grief comes in waves.

Every pastor is wired differently, but the variety of pastoral responsibilities can be divided into those that yield eustress—enriching and replenishing activities—and those that bring distress and deplete our reserves.

The pastoral life improved for me when I learned the rhythm of going from those depleting moments and days into those pastoral opportunities that infused new life and were balm for my soul.

Some enriching experiences include visiting forever-hopeful saints, reading that expands my mind and soul, slow reading of carefully selected psalms of lament that express my own heart cries, spending time with a friend who helps me laugh at the nagging gnat-like trivialities unwittingly unleashed on pastors.

## **Refreshing detours**

Along the path of the daily pastoral journey are life-giving detours where a pastor can find respite. This must be done carefully and wisely, because so many detours can become digressions into ministry-killing traps, especially when we are at our weakest. But learning how to find life amid death and embracing a healthy pastoral rhythm are enhancing arts of the pastoral life.

## **Friendships for resilience**

I also think those of us in pastoral ministry can gain much from what trauma studies and brain science are learning about resilience. We've long known those sustained through suffering can gain endurance (Romans 5: 1-5). So how do we endure? We don't do it alone.

Among a number of insights from current research, we hear of the basic human value of a trusted, caring and insightful friend. Every pastor needs someone walking alongside who knows them well, cares deeply, is available when needed, and can listen with understanding. All of these qualities are identified by research as factors in gaining resilience.

When I have heard pastors tell what it's like to have such a friend, I could hear the sense of relief and gratitude for being heard, understood and encouraged. More and more, I am praying for pastors, "Lord, send a soul friend."

## **Honest lament**

One more thing: There is relief in our own grief. My reading of the complaints and laments in Job, Jeremiah and the psalms of lament gives permission for, and even models, bringing our deepest pain and heart cries before God.

Prying ourselves open to the deepest level of pain and grief allows the Spirit to move into those depths and bring our griefs into healing space. To put words to our grief and pain allows the one who has borne our griefs to take up what we cannot bear alone.

A pastor who knows deeply that griefs are borne by at least one other can walk on by faith and in more strength. A pastor who has a sense of growing resilience has more hope for tomorrow and more readily can bring the hope of our faith to others.

I whistle more these days. I find myself whistling songs about Jesus, and especially “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” That song and others are more meaningful than they ever have been. But I’ve also experienced more pain and grief. And I’ve prayed a lot more. He seems to be familiar with grief, and he’s become more familiar to me.

*Ron Cook is director of [Artios](#), a three-year program of First Woodway Baptist Church to train Christians to be effective ministers of the gospel. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*