

Why pastors are dying, quitting and burning out, Part 1

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Another pastor died a few weeks ago, this one from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound.

There is uncertainty surrounding Darrin Patrick's death. We do not know if the death was accidental or intentional. Pastors who heard of his death, however, almost immediately assumed it was intentional. Most of them greeted the news of his death in the same way I did: "Oh no. Not another one."

If you are not a pastor, you may not have noticed, but there has been a surge of pastoral suicide in recent years. This is why, despite the confusing circumstances surrounding Darrin's death, most pastors assumed he had taken his own life.

The recent suicides have prompted pastors to huddle and ask pointed questions. Most notably, we are asking: What about our profession is leading us—the ones who are supposed to help heal—to feel such despair?

We must figure this out, or the quiet devastation only will continue to build. I am writing about this because I still am raw emotionally from Darrin's death. I know if I wait until I feel better, I won't write at all.

At the same time, I am afraid of what I am about to write, because I do not want my words to be taken as anger or ungratefulness. I am not angry. I am extremely grateful to have served as a pastor for these 25 years.

I love being a pastor. But I need to say these things.

Some caveats: First, I never have felt the need to take my own life. I have,

however, considered quitting. Second, I do not represent all pastors, but I think I know the hearts of many of them. Finally, I am affected by my particular experiences and personality type, so my comments likely will have many blind spots.

With those admissions behind me, I'll note a few of the reasons I believe pastors are taking their own lives, quitting and burning out at what appears to be an unprecedented rate.

Inability to separate from the office

I am a pastor in Houston. I love the city and the people. But I am not from Houston. Most every person in Houston who knows me has known me only as Pastor Steve. Unlike family and old friends, to my fellow Houstonians, I always have been a member of the clergy.

Yes, of course, they know—theoretically—there was a moment when I wasn't reading theology and writing sermons. They simply never have seen it.

This means when I go out in town, people see me as my office—as a pastor. In one sense, this is like many professions. My wife is an educator, so I have watched small children wave shyly at her in the grocery store for 21 years. She is always a teacher, at least in their eyes.

Somewhat differently, however, when my wife is not at school, she is not expected to be an educator—at least not professionally. This is the way it is for most people. When they are not at work, they are not working.

For pastors, however, we almost always are clergy. I am a pastor, both to those in my congregation and to those who simply know I am a pastor. People approach me in the movie theater, in restaurants, at school events for my kids and at parties.

They have spiritual questions; they need counseling; they want to understand part of the Bible; they want to find out information about the church. This, of course, is separate from the normal “business” of the church, the questions from members, deacons, staff and elders.

Again, let me be clear: I do not begrudge this. I love being a pastor. But a reality of pastoring is that pastors almost always are “on.”

In short: Pastors always are pastors, and over time, it wears many of us down.

This inability to separate the person from the office leads to the next occupational hazard I see.

Inability to make deep friendships

If every person in your relational sphere knows you as a pastor, then it impairs the ability to have deep friendships. It’s difficult to explain this dynamic.

Most everyone likes their pastor. Most everyone wants to be able to have access to their pastor. Most people even want to have the occasional social interaction with their pastor. But most people don’t want to truly know their pastor.

Think about it: If you know your pastor too well, then you will soon discover your pastor is not perfect. And for most of us, we need to maintain the illusion that our pastor is at least a better person than I am. (News flash: We aren’t.)

In most churches the clergy/member relationship is quite complex. It is close enough so we can have a high degree of familiarity, but not so close as to produce intimacy. For this reason, my wife Joy and I may have dozens of social engagements on the calendar, yet few—if any—of them will be by

our design and few—if any—of them will be with the same people.

Different personality types handle such arrangements differently, but for my wife—an extreme introvert—and me—someone who yearns for relational intimacy—social bouncing leaves both of us emotionally exhausted. Joy is exhausted from the unnatural extroversion; I am exhausted from maintaining dozens and dozens of relationships at a level far beyond shallow but never quite approaching deep. I know them; they rarely know me.

I imagine some of you are thinking: “Well, then. Why don’t you just make friends with some of your congregational members?”

Great question. And honestly, I am working toward doing so. Unfortunately, pastors have learned it takes several years in a church to discern individual relational motives within a congregation. I speak from experience.

Over the last 25 years, I have learned the hard way that some church members simply want to feel special. Others merely want some sort of emotional connection many pastors—often more emotionally attuned than other individuals—can provide and that can’t be found at home. Others simply want to be close to the pastor so they can influence decisions within the church.

Blessedly, not every person—nor even the majority of people—in a congregation is like this. But you can see why many pastors move slowly and cautiously. We often are wondering: Where can we be ourselves? Where can we be a normal person and not face reprisal? Where can we take off our pastoral hat, if only for a couple of hours?

Other reasons pastors are dying, quitting or burning out and suggestions for avoiding these outcomes are shared in [Part 2](#) of this article.

Steve Bezner is the pastor of Houston Northwest Church. This article is adapted from the original, which first appeared on stevebezner.com on May 28, 2020. The views expressed are those solely of the author.