

Editorial: Funerals can wear a pastor out, but don't have to

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We don't like to talk about funerals because, well, they involve death. And we like talking about death even less than we like talking about funerals.

But death is the natural result of living long enough. So, we need to talk about it and prepare for it.

In the church, that preparation needs to include provisions for pastors, since they are performing more funerals these days. We need to give more attention to what this means for them and not just for the church.

Funerals 'these days'

By "these days," I don't mean during the holidays, though pastors long have known to expect more funerals at the end of the year and beginning of the next. Despite how cheery we try to make the holidays—Thanksgiving through New Year's—they perennially see an uptick in deaths and subsequent funeral or memorial services.

[An explainer](#) on an Australian website for creating wills describes this annual occurrence in both frank and euphemistic terms:

"The Christmas Holiday Effect, the Holiday Death Spike—whatever you wanna call it, the spike in mortality rates during the festive period is a documented phenomenon first observed by sociologist [David P. Phillips](#) while analysing death certificates. Subsequent studies have corroborated this finding. This pattern is consistent across all age groups, except for children, and encompasses various conditions such as heart disease,

respiratory issues, and cancer.”

No, I’m not referring to the “festive period,” though I may begin using that phrase in place of “holidays.” Please don’t send me letters about that.

By “these days,” I am referring to the latter years of the Silent Generation and older Baby Boomers. Until Millennials surpassed them, Boomers were the [largest generation](#) in history. With the sharp decline in church participation among younger generations, however, Boomers still are the largest generation in church by a wide margin, followed by members of the Silent Generation.

Congregations aren’t just aging; they are aged. This means not only are pastors doing more funerals these days, but that number will be high for a while. We need to pay attention to what this means for pastors, not just for the church.

More funerals

For many pastors, funerals have outpaced weddings and baby dedications—much happier occasions—for a long time. That was true of my pastorate from 2010 to 2018, and it was true in the church I served before that.

Two of my friends who are pastors told me, independently, they either are doing or feel like they are doing more funerals than before—including during the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic. They sometimes officiate more than one funeral a day. Though anecdotal, I doubt these two pastors are an anomaly.

The weight of funerals

Pastoral ministry surrounding death seems to run in the opposite direction of “church growth.” By “church growth,” we tend to mean adding people to the church. Death and funerals tend not to do that. We also mean providing an attractive air of excitement and forward movement. Again, death and funerals rarely provide such an air.

By contrast, death and funerals are not attractive or exciting. They are things we want to avoid. They also send us backward in remembrance, forward only in the hope of resurrection.

When a death occurs, a pastor will spend time with family and loved ones to comfort them and to prepare for a funeral or memorial, will work with a funeral home, likely will attend the viewing or visitation preceding the service, will officiate one or more services, and will provide follow-up grief care. All of this will be in addition to weekly responsibilities.

Some days, pastors will go from a party to a funeral and then maybe to a committee meeting or another party. To do so, the pastor will need to flip the magic switch that turns happy to sad, sad to business, and business back to happy or sad—all without making it obvious. But it rarely will be obvious to most, because most will not be in all the places the pastor goes in a day.

The more funerals a pastor performs, the more times the pastor will need to run this course. The more times a pastor runs this course, the more fatigued the pastor can become—probably will become. Plenty of pastors who throttle between happy and sad ministry eventually experience [compassion fatigue](#) or even burnout.

Helping pastors minister

Sports is an apt metaphor here. Stressing the body and mind come with the territory in sports. We want our teams to win, and to win, players need to be at their best. To be at their best, players need proper rest, nutrition, physical therapy and health care—and they need it regularly.

Death and funerals come with the territory in ministry. Pastors want to be at their best when they provide that care to others. To be at their best, churches need to do for their pastors what team owners and management do for athletes—ensure their pastors get proper and regular holistic care.

As the number of funerals increases and/or remains high, churches need to build even more care for their pastors into their budgets and compensation packages. After all, that funeral will be ours someday, and I’m willing to bet we’re going to want a pastor to handle it. Let’s not assume a pastor will. Let’s ensure a pastor will by making the necessary investment now.

This sounds self-serving—investing in our pastors so they’ll take better care of us—until we remember when a pastor buries someone, that someone is often a person the pastor loved and cared for, too. The pastor has lost someone, too, and shouldn’t have to grieve alone any more than the rest of us.

Pastors are doing a lot of funerals these days, and they’re going to do a lot more in the days ahead. Funerals can wear a pastor out, but they don’t have to. If we really are concerned about “church growth,” then we need to pay attention to the weight of funerals on our pastors and help them bear up.

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