

Editorial: Pastors have mental health needs, too

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Let's talk about pastoral mental health.

Perhaps this topic seems out of left field. After all, it's not May—Mental Health Awareness Month—and the Baptist conversation seems to be about other things at present—such as women in ministry and where Southern Baptists and Texas Baptists are headed.

It doesn't need to be May to talk about mental health any more than it needs to be Mother's Day—also in May—to appreciate moms. And to think what Baptists are talking about most right now isn't related to pastoral mental health is itself out in left field—says this former pastor.

We need to talk now about pastoral mental health, because it affects our team, every member of which deserves our attention and care. We need to talk about it now, because some pastors are enduring mental health struggles now.

Feeling 'out of left field'

When it comes to our team, are pastors the pitcher, the manager or someone else? Based on the reactions pastors often receive, many feel as though they're out in left field.

We know the expression comes from baseball, and we're pretty sure it means something like “crazy” or “irrelevant” at worst, or “unexpected” at best. A little baseball history enriches the expression.

Center field used to be [much farther out](#) than it is today. If a left fielder was

able to throw to home plate, the runner headed home—whose back is to the ball—could be surprised when the catcher came up with a ball thrown from way out in left field.

According to [Chicago Cubs lore](#), the expression might point back to the Cubs original ballpark—West Side Grounds (1893-1915). At the time, Cook County Hospital was located close enough to that original left field that psychiatric patients supposedly could be heard by fans and players during games.

This second bit of history will not make pastors feel better about their mental health. But the reality is, too many pastors too often don't feel like they're even on the field. They feel like one of the patients outside the wall, while the people around them are trying to drown out their struggle with an afternoon's—or morning's—entertainment.

Struggling alone

Consider the irony. Today, we pay small and large fortunes—with little complaint—to watch a game. Part of that fortune goes to keep elite athletes in prime condition. Meanwhile, we often pinch pennies taking care of those who tend to eternal matters—those who teach us, guide us, baptize us, marry us and bury us.

We hardly expected Nolan Ryan to pitch every single game of even a single season, nor every inning of every game. We also did not expect him to be at the top of his game with every pitch. Or, maybe we did.

Pastors, however, are expected to be strong—mentally and spiritually tough, if not also physically—at all times. We don't expect pastors to struggle with depression, anxiety, stress and other mental health challenges.

We might fear if even those we believe have a direct line to God have these struggles, what hope is there for us? In our false beliefs about pastors, we add still more strain on them.

So, when pastors do struggle, they struggle out in left field, far from the rest of the team. If they can afford counseling, they receive it secretly, because what would the church think? If they take medication(s), it must be more clandestine than their alcohol consumption—if they consume alcohol—because if the church spooks at counseling, it might bolt at medication.

And if a pastor needs more than counseling and/or medication? Well, we're just not going to talk about that.

Providing care for pastors

Maybe your church isn't like that. Maybe your church recognizes your pastor is a human being, with all that entails. Maybe your church is investing in whatever it takes to keep your pastor in prime condition. May your tribe increase.

For the rest, consider another illustration from baseball.

If a pastor is like a pitcher: Every Major League Baseball team knows starting pitchers get a few days of rest between games in which they pitch. Someone else pitches those between games. Even the best pitchers are afforded and take this rest. In fact, the best pitchers don't get to the Hall of Fame without the rest.

Church, we shouldn't let a baseball team take better care of its players than we take care of our pastors. One way we can improve our care for them is by affording them the space and grace to process and heal mental illness.

This space and grace looks like withholding judgment and turning off nosiness and gossip about our pastor's emotional and cognitive condition. Mental health is something to address compassionately; it is not something to stigmatize.

It looks like enlisting a safe, trusted and small group of people who compassionately stay abreast of the pastor's total health—body, mind and soul—pastoring the pastor.

About this group: How much this group knows about the pastor should be judiciously and appropriately delineated in consultation with the pastor, as should the nature and degree of authority the group has in relation to the pastor. The group should not be an ecclesiastical Big Brother, nor should it have power over employment. Its role is to care for the pastor.

Space and grace also looks like allocating resources for the best mental health care the church can afford, and churches can afford more than they think. This care may include professional counseling, medication, retreats and more.

It looks like securing time on the schedule weekly, quarterly and yearly for the pastor to pull back, rest and recuperate—whether anyone, including the pastor, thinks it's needed. Pastors, God love 'em, don't always know what they need—says this former pastor.

Care for your pastor well

Pastors understand leadership requires them to be strong in ways and at times others are not. Pastors don't typically shy away from that. But leadership does not require them to be strong in every way or at all times, and it definitely doesn't require them to be the strongest.

Pastoral leadership also does not require complete self-sufficiency. Too often, our pastors struggle alone with mental health challenges, unsure

how their churches will respond to their humanness. We won't tolerate our pastors treating us that way when we struggle. They shouldn't have to tolerate it from us, either.

Don't go straight from this to your pastor with a bunch of questions about their mental health. Do go from this committed to caring for your pastor as well as you want your pastor to care for you. Giving your pastor a word of encouragement is a good start.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com. The views expressed are those of the author.