

Voices: When staff grieve the loss of a pastor

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Chad Selph passed away Dec. 16, 2023, after a three-year battle with cancer. He was our pastor and friend. For me, Lezah, he was my boss.

I, Joel, realize the loss of a pastor is much more challenging for staff than any other loss. Lezah and I had the following conversation and share this with those who may find themselves also grieving the loss of a pastor.

How did losing Chad affect you?

Pastor Chad was my pastor for 26 years, but he also was my boss for around 15 years. His passing has been a big loss.

There are times I still think, "Oh, I wish I could share this with Pastor Chad."

Chad always was hope-filled, no matter what, because he knew where his eternity would be. I miss him, but I have hope. Hope for First Baptist Church in Allen in the future. Hope in knowing I will see him again in heaven one day. Grateful he is healed. Grateful for the time I had with him.

What did or are you doing to take care of yourself?

I am going to counseling one to two times a month. I also am doing the GriefShare program, which has been wonderful. Also, I took a bereavement day recently and wrote Pastor Chad a letter.

I journal a lot and make time for rest on the weekends. Reading my Bible and praying always has been vital but especially in this season of grief.

As a staff, we are reading the devotional *Streams in the Desert* together. I write down a blessing of the day every day. Even on hard days, I always can find God's blessings.

Another thing that has helped is just having conversations with people. Our church members need to talk, and so do our staff members. It's really rewarding to hear other peoples' experiences with the same person.

How can a staff better accept such a loss?

I think the best thing a staff can do when losing a pastor is to lean deeply into the Lord, lean into family and friends, and lean on each other. Be supportive of one another.

Allow for everyone to grieve how they need to. Encourage one another. Listen a lot more. Give lots of grace.

Limit scheduling a lot of things. Allow for the church and staff to share stories.

Pastor Chad left plans for the staff and had set a lot of things in place before he passed. This allowed our staff to continue moving forward. Preparing for the loss before it happens is hard but helpful. That is something all believers need to do.

We know our eternal home is in heaven, but it's a gift when we have plans in place for when we do leave this Earth.

Pastor Chad wrote a letter to our senior staff. We got it after he passed. Reading it, you could picture Chad telling us these things. It was very uplifting, and I really appreciated hearing from him one more time.

How would you compare the loss of Chad to any other

loss in your life?

Pastor Chad's passing is a loss unlike any other I have had. Like most losses, there always is regret. I wish I would have said this. I wish I could have done this. Like most losses, there always is sadness.

Like most losses when a believer dies, you have the joy of seeing them again one day. His loss was one that really tested my trust in God's timing. I had not lost anyone yet that I had spent so much time with. I found myself getting stuck in a cycle of scenarios, worrying about the future.

The Lord has shown me over and over again the ground isn't shaky with him, his timing and plans are perfect, and we aren't always going to understand it, but we can trust him.

Did you journal or talk to anyone before Chad passed? Did you start grieving before he passed?

I did. I talked to my counselor a lot before he passed. I also talked to trusted friends and family.

Since we knew about his cancer diagnosis for several years and saw him day to day, our grieving process was throughout his journey. We wrestled with it with him, and we prayed with him.

I know everyone grieves differently. I think God allowed us to grieve together with him so we could be strong and prepared for our church's grief.

Why do you think your professional relationship with Chad was so deep?

I think it was deeper because our staff did life together.

Something Pastor Chad started when he came to First Baptist Allen was

our senior staff would go out to lunch together every Monday. It was a way for our staff to get to know one another better. We talk about church things and everyday-life things. You could ask former and current staff members, and they all would say it's one of our favorite traditions.

Our staff knew about each other's families. We shared our prayer requests, our hurts and our hopes.

Chad was our pastor and also our friend. I know Pastor Chad prayed for me and our staff often. Most of his emails to our staff started with the greeting, "Friends."

What else would you want people to know?

Don't leave things unsettled. Try not to have regrets. Our days are not promised. Make peace with your loved ones a priority. Love well. Plan for the future. Be like Chad in sharing your faith even on the worst days. Keep looking up.

Lezah Maitland is children's minister at First Baptist Church in Allen. Joel Blaylock is a member of First Baptist Allen and a friend of Chad Selph. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the authors.