

Combating the Inherent Loneliness of Pastoring

One of the most significant dichotomies of clergy is the relational nature of pastoring. On the one hand, pastoring is all about community, a congregation of fellow believers, and relationships. On the other hand, clergy often find themselves feeling very alone and isolated, unable to develop deep, meaningful personal connections that feel totally safe. Seventy percent of pastors report not having a close friend¹ and more than one-third of pastors indicate they are at least moderately socially isolated.² The isolation rates among younger pastors and those of smaller churches is even more pronounced.³ In one survey, over half of pastors who left local ministry (51%) said they felt loneliness or isolation was either greatly or somewhat important to their decision to leave the ministry.⁴



Loneliness and isolation is an inherent byproduct of leadership, and is a particular issue for clergy. More broadly, leaders are naturally set apart or divided from others. As Dan Allender notes, “a leader is not an ordinary person because other view him or her through a lens of heightened expectations and desires. No matter how hard a leader wishes to be a regular person, it is just not possible.”⁵ The burden of responsibility, the potential for critique and criticism, and the need for emotional and relational boundaries between the leader and those being led all contribute to feeling separated and alone.

Clergy have a number of unique elements to their role even more isolating. The unique nature of being called to ministry or to a particular church or role carries with it unique relational and emotional challenges. The combination of being called to do God’s work and leading a volunteer-based organization can create a feeling that “I am in this alone” (which I will label as a “Lone Ranger” mentality) which can lead to further isolation. In addition, there are the questions regarding relational boundaries within the church (is any friendship within the congregation truly safe for the pastor?) as well as the impact that itinerancy can have on relationships for the pastor and his or her family.

Loneliness has been tied to a wide range of health issues including emotional health and wellness (including exhaustion, burnout, anxiety and depression), relational and familial health, physical wellness, addictive behaviors, and spiritual health. Moreover, these negative impacts can tend to “spiral” or compound on each other – causing us to feel even more isolated and making the impact more destructive.

So where do we take the loneliness and isolation that we may feel? How do we deal with these feelings constructively? A first step may be just to recognize and acknowledge that you feel alone – being honest with yourself about how you feel. As Charles Kettering famously said, “a problem well-defined is half solved.” Author Sue Magrath encourages pastors to use the acronym HALT to notice when they are feeling relationally empty: “notice when you are feeding your emotions rather than your body... Think HALT – which stands for hungry, angry, lonely or tired.”⁶ Given the tendency for feelings of loneliness to spiral and impact other areas of our lives, it is an important first step to notice that these feelings exist and prevent them from creating other self-care challenges in your life.

Another important question to ask is “could this feeling of loneliness be driving me closer to God?” Feelings of loneliness or isolation might be an opportunity to open ourselves to God’s gracious presence and to remember and embrace His sustaining love. As Magrath notes, “Scripture makes it clear that the life of a prophet is one of peril, loneliness, hunger, thirst and fatigue... Throughout the droughts of body, mind and spirit, God brought refreshments to them (the prophets).”⁷

It also may be helpful to reflect on what factors might be contributing to our feelings of isolation. Are we feeling loneliness from a lack of support or as a result of a specific problem or issue? Is our self-care lacking and impacting our sense of loneliness? How might our shadow motivations (our over-desire to be loved, to succeed, to accomplish, etc.) be adding more “juice” to our sense of being alone? Facing our shadows can free us to pursue relationships from a more healthy and more sustainable basis.

Being intentional in how you approach relational health strategically can also be beneficial. How do you engage in your hobbies? What service or cause-related efforts are important to you? What areas excite or interest you intellectually? Each of these areas may provide social or relational opportunities over time. What implications does your personality type have on your relational wellness (particularly introversion vs. extroversion)? What limitations or constraints might exist in your life right now that are hindering your relational health or limiting your time, energy or ability to invest in others relationally? How might you adjust or manage these limitations? What opportunities might exist for mutually supportive relationships with fellow clergy? Covenant groups with other pastors can provide meaningful support and valuable accompaniment to help combat the isolation clergy face.

While the nature of a pastor’s work and calling may bring with it a sense of loneliness, being honest about these feelings and intentional in approaching your relational health proactively can make a tremendous difference in your overall wellness and self-care.

Reflection Questions:

- What situations or circumstances tend to correlate to a feeling of being lonely or isolated as you lead or as you pastor others? What factors might be at play? How might your shadow be contributing?
- What limitations or constraints are negatively impacting your relational health? How might you relieve these constraints or reduce their impact?
- What strategies to strengthen your relational health seem to hold potential for you? What steps might you take to be more intentional about your relational health?

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as “The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health” through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.



Notes

- ¹Fuller Seminary 1991 Survey, cited in Meek, K. R., McMinn, M., Brower, C., Burnett, T., McRay, B., Ramey, M., Swanson, D., & Villa, D. (2003). Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31(4).
- ²Proeschold-Bell, R. J., & Byassee, J. (2018). *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis*. Baker Academic. 67.
- ³*Pastor Protection Research Study: Survey of 1500 American Pastors* (p. 20). (2015). Lifeway Research.
<https://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Pastor-Protection-Quantitative-Report-Final.pdf>.
- ⁴Hoge, D., & Wenger, J. (2005). *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Ministry*. Wm Eerdmans Publishing. 237.
- ⁵Allender, D. (2006). *Leading With A Limp: Take Advantage Of Your Most Powerful Weakness*. WaterBrook Press. 109.
- ⁶Magrath, S. (2019). *My Burden is Light: A Primer for Clergy Wellness*. Cascade Books. 60.
- ⁷Ibid. 109.

Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about loneliness and relational self-care, I recommend the following resources:

- *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness* (WaterBrook) by Dan Allender.
- *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (InterVarsity Press) by Ruth Haley Barton.
- *My Burden is Light: A Primer for Clergy Wellness* (Cascade) by Sue Magrath.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics, including loneliness and relational self-care. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in possibly joining a pastoral self-care cohort or if you are interested in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.

Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your ability to set and manage expectations or to strengthen other leadership and management skills, please contact Chris Clark of Northern Elm Mentoring Group (email to ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

